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The Current Situation of the Left in America: A Conversation

This conversation took place in May 2003 between three prominent political thinkers: Stanley Aronowitz, Frances Fox Piven and Stephen Eric Bronner. It was conducted by the editor of Logos, Michael Thompson and recorded in the office of Fox Piven at the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

MT: I'd like to talk about the situation that plagues the contemporary left. A broad theme, to be sure, but something that needs to be discussed. You had, with the anti-war movement, a huge outpouring. It was a non-traditional group of people—from the standpoint of demonstrations—who came out for the protests and the marches. It wasn't just the traditional leftist student groups; it was a broad sector of the population who came out, all over the place. And yet, now, after the war's over, you have almost a complete silence about domestic issues. Cities are going bankrupt, states are going bankrupt, there's a broad fiscal, public crisis, but there's no political response from the left. There's no political response even from most of the people who came out for those anti-war movements.

SA: What do you mean by the left? I mean I just attended a demonstration in Albany where there were between 15,000 and 20,000 teachers and other educational people from higher as well as elementary and secondary education and Local 1199 had one demonstration in Albany of 35,000 people. There's been mass union resistance to six hundred million dollar request from the Bloomberg administration for cuts. There's been conferences all over the place.

FP: Well you know, it's not as much as you wanted and it's probably not as articulated as you would like. It's a little spotty. There's enough in New York City from the unions so that the *New York Times* is already complaining that the unions aren't taking their share of cuts from Bloomberg. But you want more; given the scale of the roll-backs that are anticipated and the bizarre unreasonableness of the policies that are leading to these roll-backs especially on the Federal and the state level, but it's really a short time—two or three weeks.

The president declared victory a few days ago when he landed on that aircraft carrier or whatever it was. The triumphalism of the war—which I think is

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very confusing for people at the heart of the empire—has had a dampening effect, but I don't think that means there isn't something happening, there *is* something happening that is real world left. The real world left are the community people who are protesting cuts in community services, the anti-war demonstrators, they're the unions . . .

MT: But does any of this stuff have any political impact. I mean, the Democratic party doesn't seem to be responding to these protests.

FP: That's your idea of politics, the Democratic party?

MT: Not entirely, I'm just saying in terms of practice, in terms of something practical, there's no response, no recognition of those concerns.

FP: In terms of practice I think the practice has to be a social movement. I think that has always been more or less true, but it has been truer than ever for the last thirty years.

SB: It does seem, though, that there has been a sort of collapse of hopes and expectations, just because the demonstrations were so big and seemed just at the point of linking foreign affairs and domestic resistance. I don't think people were ready for the speed of the victory and I think they were sort of genuinely shocked, and I think there were some misconceptions about the whole enterprise of the war that were made that weren't carried out, but I think you see this in a lot of publications now. People talk about how the war was fought for the wrong reason, it doesn't seem there was a genuine threat to America's self-interest and it also seems clear that the type of weapons of mass destruction which were supposed to be found, haven't been found. It doesn't seem to me there's been enough in a number of our magazines. We haven't heard a word of joy about Saddam being thrown out and frankly I think—I made the mistake myself—I think there was an over-estimation of the amount of damage that would be caused and the number of people killed. I think it's really important that people on the left realize why we did what we did.

FP: Alright, but the practical reality of the Iraq war—what you really mean are the costs of dethroning Saddam Hussein since nobody I know of on the left supported Saddam Hussein—the cost you're saying were far lower than we thought, but there are two things about that: one, I don't believe the costs are being honestly reckoned; European reports on the number of Iraqis killed

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are much much higher than they are in the United States. And second, we don't know the costs yet. The thing has only begun to unfold.

SB: But there were expectations; we published in the last issue of *Logos* a UN report where there was talk of over a million and a half refugees and 500,000 dead. That was a common estimate that was going around. People were believing that, even in Europe. Though the costs are high and the cultural devastation is much worse than we thought it would be. There's certainly diseases that are spreading all over Iraq, dysentery . . .

SA: Cholera . . .

SB: . . . cholera, exactly; and this is terrible. I don't want to minimize what's happening over there, all that I'm suggesting is that between the media and our own exaggerated hysteria, we didn't hit this right. We should have been more precise.

FP: Well there was no way to be more precise . . .

SB: . . . maybe that's true.

FP: . . . and I don't think it's fair to call it hysteria; there was a lot of hyperbole, but there's always a lot of hyperbole when you're trying to foment a movement.

SB: In terms of the general perception, there's a sort of lack of fit that took place and also you know with regard to this triumphalism we haven't pointed out how disgusting it is in a very simple way: you know the United States defense budget is 400 billion dollars. It's bigger than the next seventeen countries put together. Iraq's defense budget was one billion dollars.

FP: Well we don't know what happened in Iraq that led to the quick collapse, but what we did, I think, before the war, or what many anti-war people did, was they tried to develop a portrait of what would happen which emphasized the costs not only to Iraqis but also to an invading army and in a certain way that was silly, not only because the Iraqis had a billion dollar defense budget. It turned out to be not so silly, but wrong because they apparently didn't have weapons of mass destruction and they had been under

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sanctions and also disarmament inspections, there's something sort of ludicrous about all this.

SA: I'd like to return with your permission to the original conversation that you opened up with concerning the lack of resistance on the budget cuts and the states and the rest of all of that. Well, there's two things that have to be said just so we get it out of the way so we don't put too much value on it. Bush has had trouble with his 750 billion dollar tax cut and he'll probably get 350 billion and maybe a little more, but it's being widely perceived as a defeat for the administration although I think it's a scandal.

FP: I think some people are interpreting it as a defeat, but I think he'll get more than 350 billion. What some journalists say is a defeat is the fact that he has to shift from cutting taxes on dividends to cutting taxes on capital gains and I think Paul Krugman was right when he said that makes it even more inegalitarian.

SA: The first thing is that there is a debate on his judicial appointments. I mean there's something in the way of some resistance by the Democratic Senate and that should be disposed of, but there really is a serious problem and it's the kind of problem that we were talking about before informally: that there's an erosion of the political culture in this country in a very serious manner and what I mean is there's no general evaluation of public goods and as a result of that the cuts that are taking place on the state level. I mean, it's affecting whole sections of the population, New York State being one example, but certainly not the only place which has not really invested in public goods in a very long time.

SB: Stanley, why do you think that you can't get that message across?

SA: Private schooling both at the elementary and secondary level and private schooling at the university level—I'll get to that in a minute, Steve, I just want to describe it because it's really important. We have a three tier health system in this country, it used to be that working class people, as well as middle class people, had rough equality in pre-paid health care and you had a two class system, but now you have a three class system. I today took a physical for which I paid \$630 and I'll get back from GHI about \$150, that's all; this is a union plan, so I'm in the private sector 'cause I won't go to the list of participating providers and I can afford not to go to the list.

It's a really serious problem because large numbers of people are not in health care; they're not in public or even this strange kind of private welfare system and they're not in the public schools. And you ask why, Steve. Part of the reason is because of the roughly thirty-five years of starvation of public goods by the Federal administration; people think it's the Reagan revolution, I think it begins earlier; we can have a debate about that. I think it begins with Nixon. I think it's after the poor people's movement on the one hand and on the other hand it corresponds with the decline of the labor movements which really never made a fight.

Now, I think underlying that are the unions themselves, the unions which lost medical care for the aged, and they lost national health insurance, they lost a lot of stuff. They developed a private welfare state, put themselves in a position where they were no longer relying on our universal healthcare, in fact they were no longer relying on universal *anything*, and basically they became—unwittingly, I will say that—complicitous to all of this privatization. So we had the most reliable mass force in the country for equality—not to say it's good—but it's a fact that the unions were a mass movement for that; they were cut off, then you had this long period where the discourse of public goods was devalued and now we're in trouble and there's no social base to fight from. There was a social base objectively, but movements do not have that as a perspective.

I have to say (and maybe this will be controversial), I did my marching, but Fran and I did a little thing on CUNY day where we agreed that the second front, her language about these issues is really the main task of the left—the war yes, I'm interested in the war, please let's not make it either/or—but this is where politics is made and this where these unconventional constituents who came out against the war might not agree, but this is an important question.

SB: I think they'd agree that it's an important element, I mean that's part of all the marching. One of the things that I thought was really interesting was when Fran spoke at the Socialist Scholars' Conference was that she drew a distinction between the way in which domestic policy was handled in other wars and the way it was handled in this war.

FP: Well, it's an observation provoked by the historical theory that when regimes make war they have to extract resources from their populations; they have to extract lives, limbs, blood, and they also have to extract wealth, the

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harvests or the taxes that they rake up and because they become at times of war so dependent on their underlying population they also, at those historical moments, are more ready to make concessions in terms of democratic rights and social welfare rights. This is a theory that has been put forward by Charles Tilly and Reuschmeyer and Stevens, and there's some evidence for it because the Revolutionary War army did get land grants, Civil War soldiers and their families got pensions. The veterans of WWII got what was probably the most advanced social welfare program until that time in American history—the veterans' benefits. We can also see in each of these periods expansion of democratic rights. The fact that slaves in the south were not only emancipated, but were then granted the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments could be read as a concession to them for fighting in the Union army . . .

SA: Plus the Freedmen's Acts.

FP: . . . and the Freedmen's Acts and perhaps turning the course of the war. Blacks were very important in the Union army. Or in England after World War I they passed really a universal franchise, which they really didn't have until then.

SA: And after WWII also.

FP: But also in the Vietnam War the eighteen-year-olds got the vote, so you can see that there's an historical pattern where democratic rights expand and social welfare rights expand during periods of war, but this regime is doing the opposite and that's kind of interesting. They are certainly contracting democratic rights with the roll-back of civil liberties and the stripping away of union rights; I think it's a fundamental aspect of democratic rights, the right to organize and to speak collectively, exercise voice and weight, and the attacks on unions by this administration have been horrendous. In WWII the unions were given protection by the government. It's true they had to sign a no strike promise, but . . .

SA: And a wage freeze.

FP: And a wage freeze, although they made back part of the wage freeze afterwards, but their numbers were protected, union membership was protected by the Federal government during WWII. This time the unions are getting badly battered by the Bush administration on a number of counts. I

mean, Bush is turning out to be the big strikebreaker among presidents and in the area of social welfare, not only Medicaid down, Medicare down, welfare policies worse than ever, school lunches, pathetic little programs, like programs for the kids of prisoners are getting eradicated and they're cutting veterans' benefits—so maybe this is the vulnerability of the administration.

But it's not a vulnerability unless we can raise these issues and we have to raise these issues in a way that I don't think the candidates from the Democratic party can raise these issues; they're too timid, especially so long as Bush continues to be this big macho hero.

SB: It seems to me also, just in talking about salience of foreign policy—of course you're right; this is in a certain way stuff that hits more directly the domestic agenda—but I'm struck also how the general situation has changed: we think of the Iraq war as part of a general policy and that's probably right, there have certainly been attempts made all over to intimidate countries like Iran, North Korea, Syria and so on, but there's something else that the war showed and that something is potentially more dangerous, perhaps. It showed in the lack of solidarity of other Arab nations in support of Saddam, which is in a certain way understandable—it seems to me now that with this kind of bellicose foreign policy it is in the interest of each nation to try and set up a separate deal with a hegemon. The idea of a simple multilateralism, the way we laid it out, may not be the primary driving force anymore and what that means is that there's a sort of incentive for every country to try and strengthen itself militarily to bargain with the hegemon, which means an increase in nuclear weapons.

SA: The problem we've always had is how to connect the international situation which conditions, and in some respects frames, a lot of the domestic agenda. With this radical shift in the domestic situation in a whole variety of ways, the problem is serious enough because now that Bush is running high and the Democrats are timid, and there's no end in sight at this point.

I think about where the motion is going to be and clearly when you use the word "left," Michael, at this point I'm reminded of James Brian Conant's speech which I saw on the web today. In 1943 he says the only way we're going to maintain a democratic post-war period is if we have a strong extreme left—and you won't believe this, but it's there, it was in *Harper's Magazine* and *The Atlantic*—he says the usual thing which is that unless you have a

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non-compromising extreme left willing to lay things out in a very blunt way, then the mainstream of American society will never move.

FP: Was he talking about the Communist party?

SA: I think he was. This was a piece that he wrote upon the assumption of the presidency of Harvard University.

SB: This would provide a certain legitimacy for actual protest movements in the way that Fran laid it out. It's exactly here, but it seems to me it's not only coordinating the international movement with the domestic agenda. It's too hard to say how you coordinate different groups to work together, but I think it's time for some further coordination for people like ourselves between intellectuals who align themselves with the left. It seems there's a greater fragmentation than before.

FP: Fragmentation? Between what and what?

SB: Among intellectuals working with different groups. Not necessarily between the different groups themselves. I think we need stronger cultural arenas and we have to figure out how to do that.

SA: Sometimes—I'm not saying that I'm wedded to this formula—but sometimes I feel that one of the problems that we have right now is that we do not have a grand alliance where people agree to disagree, but also to agree on certain things and develop this. Now what the grand alliance was in Britain was the Labor party. What it was in France after Second World War was a combination of the Communist party and a certain segment of the intellectuals—Sartre and so on—and there was a split then, but basically the anti-Communist intellectuals were not particularly powerful for a very long time.

FP: I don't agree. I think you're being nostalgic for a history you only read about, that we all only read about, but that you're not paying enough attention to the forms of alliance and integration and coordination that have actually multiplied in contemporary movements. That fragmentation is not necessarily bad if the groups that are fragmented also have the capacity to come together, communicate with each other, coordinate and coalesce.

SA: Yes, around something beyond marching against war.

FP: I don't think there has ever in history been an anti-war movement of scale and spread of the anti-war movement that rose up before Iraq and it did it through its own really very new contemporary forms of communication and organization. You have to be very cautious about drawing on historical ideas about how groups should work together and how groups should be organized. I think that something miraculous is happening, and it is the capacity for communication and coordination and the capacity to agree to disagree.

There is a reason that everybody is so vague about what the goals or values or programs. Take economic justice; economic justice is a slogan that is inclusive because all of the groups that are on the move and are doing different types of things. They're all economic justice of one kind or another, so I think that something very big and historically transformative is happening and it's in the area of social movements, it is indeed a social movement. We're never going to have social movements like the grand alliance, or whatever, because we don't have workers organized in stable life-long employment.

SA: No, we don't have any of that.

SB: Or the parties or the ideologies.

SA: Yes, but there's a difficulty with that formulation—I felt that way strongly, exactly as you described it, during the anti-globalization movement. Take the global justice movement: I felt that was a very big breakthrough and I still think the global justice movement is going to be one of the major contexts within which people make these changes. What bothered me was the absolute, how shall I put this, *simplicity* and *reductionism* that was involved in the anti-war movement and the lack of real conversation about what was going on. Now, for example—and this is a counter-example to what you're saying, Fran—what do we do now? If you say as one of my colleagues on the executive council of the professional staff congress said at a meeting yesterday that we ought to be demanding workers' rights in Iraq. She wants to send a delegation of trade unionists to go to Baghdad and say, "Where are the worker's rights? Are you going to guarantee the worker's rights?" We meet with [General] Tommy Franks, we meet with whomever. People say that's not our business; our business is get out of Iraq fast. I said

that's the Bush program, let's get out as fast as possible and do nothing, except, you know, the kind of reconstruction that Haliburton would provide.

SB: On one level that's part of the character, the purpose of the movement itself: it was directed against what was seen as American imperialism. There was a certain simplicity about it, but I think that may be in the name of the movement. It was an anti-war movement, that's what it was about. It didn't have a longer-term goal and I don't think there was much of a discussion at all about what would happen later, I think you were right about that. It seems to me also for America simply to get out, that's no way to proceed. There is also, I think, an obsessive and very simplistic idea of what national self-determination is about. I think we've never gotten that monkey off our back.

FP: Well that ought to be connected with the predatory contracts that are being given out. I mean, if American companies are in there, that gives us a certain kind of legitimacy for this kind of position.

SB: But I think the legitimacy goes beyond that, I think that in principal Stanley is right, that one of the things that's most crucial is to reassert the internationalism that has always been a part of the left and that was the great thing about the anti-war movement, just how international it was. I think the principle itself is of value and I think that we have to be clearer about our principles.

I'm not opposed to the idea of covering categories or vague principals that allow different groups to do what they want or different groups deal, let's say with economic justice, in different ways, that's totally reasonable, but there has got to be some sense of where we divide ourselves from mistakes made in the past and the national self-determination idea is just laid out without a commitment to republicanism and internationalism which is the way the idea originally formed during the age of democratic revolutions, as R.R. Palmer called it. I think that's one place to start.

SA: There were groups that were arguing that they thought the job of the liberation of the Iraqi people was the job of the Iraqis themselves and their for national self-determination and against any kind of intervention. I mean there's something that's very old-fashioned about this.

SB: And it's so provincial in a planetary world.

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SA: Do human rights, I mean just putatively, do human rights trump nationalism? Serious question.

FP: A difficult one . . .

SA: I don't disagree.

FP: I don't think there is a black and white quick answer to that.

SB: No, but there is what Dewey called a "warranted assertion," which you can make that usually it probably should and probably does.

FP: Yes, but the Bush administration used the justification of human rights to invade Iraq. They resorted to this one rather frequently, especially when they couldn't find weapons of mass destruction.

SB: Exactly. I mean, the unfortunate truth of that is that it is not without justification; I don't agree that it's totally without justification. I mean, getting rid of Saddam's regime, it may not have been what used to be called the "concentration camp universe," but it was sure bad enough and to have gotten rid of that, I think, any leftist should take that as something positive.

SA: Well look at the question of Bosnia and Rwanda. In both of those places there was evidence of genocidal ethnic cleansing. The Clinton administration hesitated on the brink of engagement for a very long period of time and human rights advocates said, "You've got to go in there, you've got to intervene." You remember this? And the debate went on about whether we should be intervening, and of course you had the anti-imperialists saying, "We can't intervene because this is an imperialist country, blah, blah, blah," and the motives of the Clinton administration would be likely wrong and people like me said: no, we have to intervene because this is a matter of human rights. People are dying and there's nobody doing anything about it.

FP: But it's not a clarification of principle so much as it is a kind of judgment, an assessment of the concrete case.

SA: But that's politics, right? If you take principled attitude.

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FP: But we started this particular line of discussion when Steve said that we have to clarify our principles and I'm merely saying that clarifying alone is not enough.

SB: I agree, and I would even go further to say that one of the ways you clarify principles is by linking them with *interests* and seeing their connection with interests. I think that's certainly right, but what I guess I wouldn't agree with is simply saying, "well we have a case by case situation that manifests itself and we don't need any sort of general principle at all." I think you do have to privilege in some way rights claims—I mean it sounds awfully old fashioned and I admit that rights claims can always be manipulated—but I don't think that changes the value they retain because it's still from the standpoint of rights and from the standpoint of human rights that there's always the lever to criticize the arbitrary exercise of power.

SA: In one case there's a thirty-year dictatorship, that is Iraq. I mean, there have been rumbles and all that, but basically nobody thought to intervene to break up that dictatorship until the first Bush administration found them going into Kuwait, and this administration said weapons of mass destruction; nobody raised the issue for thirty years that we had a right to intervene on the grounds of human rights and indeed if we started the human rights discourse as a general principle, then what would happen is the United States as well as the United Nations would be involved in perhaps fifty or sixty different countries at any given time. You can't do that, so you have to have something *beyond* human rights to be able to intervene if you wanted to intervene.

FP: No, this is sort of a crackpot way of thinking because *we're* not intervening, *they* are intervening—when I say "we" I mean Stanley, Stephen, Michael, and Frances. We want them, the cabal that's running the government of the United States, to intervene; we're talking about them intervening and no matter what principles we evoke in coming to a conclusion about what we would like them to do, they are going to act on different principles and different interests, so we have to take into account the instrument that we are hypothetically expecting to implement our principles. Human Rights Watch is not going to do it, it doesn't have an army.

SB: That of course is true, but it is also true that the left has to criticize the regime trying to do the implementation with some terms, with some categories in which they believe and in some principles that give them a lever

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of criticism and, let me make a suggestion, I think that in what both of you raised there's a way of thinking about it. Camus had what he liked to call a "principle of reasonable culpability," and what he meant by that was that any move you make in terms of what would here be bald intervention or something like that; there has to be a degree of *culpability*, yet the judgment is about whether the cost you pay the culpability to which you identify yourself is going to really outweigh what you might get at the end—in other words, the extension of rights—and I think that is the judgment call. It can't be that we say no to any form of intervention nor can we say go into sixty different countries.

SA: Let me just raise the issue, many people on the left were willing to see Rwanda and/or Bosnia as an arena for the Clinton administration's intervention. Is the problem in the case of Iraq, and putatively anywhere else that the Bush administration wants to go, a case of not trusting the interest of the Bush administration? Do you see what I'm saying?

FP: It is for me.

SA: I understand that, so that's really a political judgment and that's not a matter of a principle of political theory.

FP: That's what I'm trying to say.

SA: I know, and that's a serious problem.

SB: I don't see why it would be mutually exclusive though.

SA: What do you mean, "mutually exclusive?"

SB: In other words, one of the reasons you don't trust the Bush administration is because you think what they're going to do is undermine the type of rights that you want to see realized, they may use the term, but they're not going to realize the term or advance the term.

SA: But suppose you had a movement that actually took foreign policy seriously.

FP: What are we discussing now? It seems to me to be a thought game: what if we had power, what principles would guide us in using that power?

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SB: No, no, what principles would guide us in *making a critique* of those in power.

SA: Wait, wait, no there's something else, Steve, if you were in an anti-war movement, no one challenged the fact that the anti-war movement was likely [going] to fail. I never thought for a moment that the anti-war movement in the United States was going to divert the Bush administration from what it did.

SB: I didn't think so either.

SA: We had three, four million people out there, there were people all around the world, this administration has a different notion . . .

FP: I thought the scale of the movement around the world might have given them pause in contemplating any extensions of their military program.

SA: But let's assume, Fran, that what we're talking about here is not the four of us, but a movement that takes globalization seriously and all of the issues of globalization. The World Social Forum, for example, all these institutions, the Italians in Genoa, etc., etc., so that the argument and the conversation is valid, it cannot simply be that we are talking about ourselves. What should people do in these kinds of situations is something that hasn't been figured out and is not being discussed in any kind of a broad way; I mean, it's being discussed by political theorists, but what political theorists do, it seems to me, that's valid is they link themselves as intellectuals to social movements, then as you did, Fran, when you worked with the welfare rights movement that had always been involved in the pro-public welfare movement, is that you actually help set certain kinds of criteria for action and that's what we're doing.

SB: One of the most remarkable things about the right, when you think about it, is this connection that existed with some of the most arcane figures like Alan Bloom and Leo Strauss and the influence these guys had on people who were actually political actors.

FP: Well, Leo Strauss influenced people who acquired positions of power and authority. I think the relationship of political theorists to a movement is somewhat different. One of the reasons for overstatements about Iraq that you discussed earlier had to do with the dynamism of movements. They do

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that: hyperbole, exaggeration, filling in the unknown with broad sketches, but to say, well, we mistrust the Clinton administration, we think its intentions are imperial albeit multi-lateral, nevertheless we want this administration to go into Rwanda to disarm the Tutsis . . .

SB: But Fran, isn't that exactly why you want, general principles to obey? I mean, exactly what you said before, exactly for this reason, you have a movement that is going to engage in hyperbole and that's part of the dynamism—all that's true—but in some way you want to channel that, at least intellectuals have to verify it.

SA: I just want to give an historical example of what you're talking about. It's one that I have been studying fairly deeply and it's something that I think is very helpful in this conversation. Between 1933, 1934, 1935, the insurgent labor movement, black movements, almost everybody that was in motion, deeply distrusted the Roosevelt administration; the evidence is overwhelming. And then comes the Wagner Act, National Labor Relations Act of 1935, after the strikes of 1934, and two organizations of this movement take on the Wagner Act's intention and that was the ACLU which opposed it and the Socialist Party which didn't, but everyone else was willing to suspend disbelief and support the act, that's really true. I mean, Roosevelt was wobbling in '35.

And so here we have the suspension of disbelief even though the administration is not trusted. Now, I think that's the situation we're always in; are we willing to suspend disbelief when we call upon an administration to take some kind of an action that we think is in the popular interest?

SB: And of course there is no answer in advance.

SA: No there isn't, and that's what Fran has been saying, it's always got to be situated and it's got to be situated someplace. Now, I think, just to get to this example, I think our forbears made a terrible mistake in supporting the act, but that's a late judgment on my part.

FP: There was no way; they had to support it. It was, in some ways, a horrendous decision, but that's what their people wanted.

SA: I think that there's an argument that you can make for that, I don't disagree; nevertheless, we're always in that situation where we are not in

control of the situation. I'll give you another example: in retrospect, was the movement right to oppose the guarantee of Daniel Patrick Moynihan under the Nixon administration in the early '70s on that grounds that it was inadequate?

SB: Well, I mean, what you're saying is at some points—whatever the extreme moment of critique or that you spoke about before there's going to be some kind of overlap—if the left is not setting the agenda, we have to, in some way, think about relating to those who are, and all I wanted to do by raising this principle question—I didn't want to simply divorce it from interest—but if you genuinely think about political realism, that's always talking about, I think what it means is there is no theory for international relations and there are no principles for international relations; everything is just ad hoc, and to a certain extent that's true, but if you just go into that in that way with calculable interests that shift over time, you get lost, and the only way to check that kind of, put it this way, ambition of interest, is to talk about principles of theory. In fact, if Frances is right and we don't have much of an impact on what's being decided . . .

FP: I didn't say we don't have much of an impact on what's being decided, rather I think we can only have an impact on what's being decided through movements, through pressure, through trouble, and I'm not sure that parsing the principles involved in the decision is—it may be fun—but I'm not sure it's our first task. I think in both of your examples, Stanley, I would guess the issues, and I can certainly speak with authority on the family assistance plan, that the issues were strategic, not issues of principle. I would guess that in 1935 even the most militant and movement-oriented labor leaders knew that since under the rank and file believed in organization and that government protection would make organization possible. In a certain way, they, I think, they had no choice at that moment in time, but I know that was true for the family assistance plan, that when the family assistance plan was first announced, oh, that's the guaranteed income plan that was put forward by Richard Nixon in the beginning of 1969 and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, wasn't a big income to be sure, but it was a guaranteed income of \$1,600 going as high as \$4,000 when you included additional monies they could make through work. Now at the outset, George Riley and welfare rights, they were going to support the proposals and the question for them really was how they could position themselves so that they were an important party to the development, 'cause this was sort of our theory that if you created enough trouble in welfare, you would get a guaranteed income proposal.

What made it really impossible was the strongest welfare rights groups, the constituency of the welfare rights movement were in the big northern cities and they were getting much higher benefits, so the proposal ran the risk of lowering their benefits, and they protested it. The movement wouldn't let its leadership support the family assistance plan and so strategically it was impossible.

SB: Probably all three of us would agree on one premise that Fran always makes, which is when the state is strong then you push the movement, so to speak, to radicalize the state; when the state is weak you try to strengthen the interventionist state. What are the problems, so to speak, of communication or consciousness that has led to this kind of radical distrust of the state of organization that existed, let's say, in the '30s?

SA: I think we have to separate that. I think I agree with Fran that people want organization and I think what we have is a new communication medium, namely the Internet. Even a lot of younger people. I mean, if you asked: do you want guaranteed income? Yes, we want guaranteed income. Or how do we get guaranteed income? Do you want higher minimum wage? Yes, we should have higher minimum wages. Do you want living wage legislation through the council? Oh, sure. But of course it's through the council, it's through organs of government. But they don't want traditional forms of political organization, they are tremendously leery of this kind of strategy.

FP: Well they have an analysis actually about the way in which such traditional forms exposed them to co-optation and manipulation, and that's not wrong.

MT: Let me swing it back to the broader theme that we started with. It seems there's two kinds of divergent positions that you've been discussing, going back to Stanley's point about the shrinking of the public sphere, the discussion about principle as well as Fran's emphasis on movements. Are these dilemmas, are these problems caused by institutional considerations more than say a shrinking public sphere? Is it about a shrinking of our overall political culture, a shrinking of the concept of what the state can do or is it more or less tactical and strategic problems of social movements, or is it a combination of both? With a degenerated political culture, how will

movements form? What will inform them? It seems to be a cycle trapping the left.

FP: Well, in part at least it's the rise of neo-liberalism, both as a kind of philosophy and also itself as a social movement spurred by the elite that is rolling back a particular kind of government, the social democratic governments, or at least partially social democratic governments that were created in response to a labor movement in the early part of the century. It's not the public sphere in general, it's a particular kind of set of public services, public protections, public discourse that resulted from the interaction of labor and capital in the industrial era, that's what being rolled back, I think.

SA: Well one of the problems we have is that we're still wedded to the old social democratic program and the social democratic institutions that we created as Fran says in response. I think the task ahead to create a vision of new kinds of institutions—and sometimes it's called radical municipalism, sometimes it's called worker's councils—I mean there's a lot of different ways in which this gets framed, and I don't want to pre-figure any naming, but we can't anymore defend, I mean, we can have centralized financing, but we can't have centralized control. It just won't work because people now realize you can have right-wing control or bureaucratic control and that's not very good. If we had a new sense of what community politics were and what the relationship is between social movements and community politics it might be easier to avoid what I consider to be a relatively un-thought-through anarchism and abstensionism that is going on right now, both about electoral activity, as well as about thinking about politics in general, so I think that's a serious problem. So, although what I just said may not be agreed to, at least it's a conversation that ought to be going on. It's not good enough any longer to be talking about the old formulas, the new deal formulas in the United States or the social democratic formulas in general, to many problems with that.

SB: See, I think, I guess I would do this a bit differently, I think it's a very similar question we've had for maybe a quarter of a century now, which is how does one link up the new left, or the vision of the new left with the vision of the old left and it seems to me one can talk about councils or radical municipalism. Karl Kautsky the great theorist of orthodox Marxism used to speak about municipalism all the time and I think this is very important. It expands democracy, it deepens democracy, but there's going to have to be

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some kind of linkage asserted with the state, you can't have something like national health insurance without the state.

So it seems to me that it's a question of linkage. It seems to me with the question of principle and interest it's a question of linkage too since it seems unclear, by the very example you gave with these young kids, would in a certain way would attest to that and I think that—and here I think that Fran is right—that the linkage can't come simply from the word above, but from a genuine interchange with intellectuals in a movement, and the movement has got to be a point of reference. That has got to be a standard.

Drucilla Cornell and Philip Green

Multilateralism: For a New Political Enlightenment

by
Drucilla Cornell and Philip Green

Even if the realization of this goal of abolishing war were always to remain just a pious wish, we still would not be deceiving ourselves by adopting the maxim of working for it with unrelenting perseverance.

-Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical Principles of Justice*

I

The war in Iraq, having been publicly declared as an example of our new foreign policy and its commitment to pre-emptive strikes against anyone who gets in the way of the U.S., the threats to Syria and Iran, first put forward by Secretary Rumsfeld after their incursions into Iraq, are already being ratcheted up. At the same time, the landing of our ever-more precise cruise missiles in both Iran and Saudi Arabia angered the leaders and the people of both countries, but none of this bothered anybody in charge. Killing had become a sport with the media cheering on the administration, producing gleeful headlines about “Smoking Baghdad” and “Blood in the Sand”: Iraqi blood, not ours. As for what is to come, the fall of Saddam Hussein may well come as a liberation for most Iraqis, but still the foreseeable future of Iraq is a prospect about which the administration seems utterly indifferent: tens of thousands of casualties that will never be counted, possible civil strife, starvation, the collapse of public health and the economic infrastructure. The U.S. has made it clear that the world community, in the form of the United Nations, will not be allowed to help with the occupation and restructuring of the desert we will have created. As with everything else, the U.S. intends to do this unilaterally; not even the faithful ally Britain will be allowed to bring its prime minister’s moral concerns to a table at which corporate greed will be the main principle of distribution. How did such a political, moral, and human disaster come about? For us, the answer is simple: the unilateral desertion by the United States of all established

principles of international law, together with its administration's contempt for democratic standards of justice and fairness at home. Liberation, though welcome if it really comes to pass, will not be welcomed for long if it is brought about only by extending the rule of lawlessness and caprice across the globe.

According to Vice President Dick Cheney, he is proud rather than insulted when he is called a gun-slinging cowboy; proud both because he is a Westerner and because such gunslinging is what we need right now. The gunslinging cowboys of the administration don't have any other ethic than might makes right; as has been said of various tyrants of the past, they understand only force. However, even though the invasion and conquest of Iraq continues in this vein—with all its attendant destruction as seen by the rest of the world if not by us, given the new system of embedded reporting—we now more than ever need to fight against the adoption of this ethic. Although alternative ethical and political ideals have been made to seem impossibly distant, we must not surrender to the administration's political "realism." On the contrary, we must salvage such ideals, for they are crucial to building movements and institutions for abolishing lawless violence—what the United States has unleashed on Iraq in the horrifying name of shock and awe.

But we also need to develop a political analysis that transcends the rhetoric of the good, democratic United States and its few unquestioning allies, versus a world of evildoers and their witting or unwitting collaborators, the world of "with us or against us," that characterizes the propaganda of the Bush administration. Crucial to the complexity of this analysis is the recognition of two salient points. First, the legitimacy of U.S. unilateral mobilization of force anywhere abroad at any time is shored up domestically by the systematic undermining of our most basic constitutional liberties and by the growing militarization of our culture and economy, to say nothing of the attendant demolition of civil society, public education, health care, social services, public safety, and the basic needs of anyone other than billionaires. Second, the only foreign policy compatible with the recovery of our precarious democracy is a true multilateralism, rather than American imperial dominance, as the governing principle of international politics.

II

By multilateralism, we mean that each nation-state as a matter of right should be accorded the dignity of its sovereignty by other nation-states and thereby

deserves the same respect that the U.S. demands for itself and for its laws. Of course, in an age of nuclear weapons, international terrorism, genocide, and state torture, the principle of multilateralism must be subject to reasonable objections. A state that engages in “ethnic cleansing,” invades its neighbors, sponsors terrorism, or refuses to accept internationally sanctioned limits on weapons of mass destruction, becomes an outlaw state. However, except on the most extreme occasions, a state’s moral wrongdoing enters the international political arena by masquerading as self-defense, deterrence, and cultural preservation. Over and against such a state, some other political entity must assert the rule of law, pronounce the sentence of outlawry, and, if necessary, legitimize the use of counter-force. But who can legitimately do this?

By itself, no single nation-state has the moral authority to play that role. Therefore, true multilateralism is inseparable from recognizing the centrality of the United Nations, an organization that since its inception has had as its major long-term goal collective security, defined not only as the full termination of particular wars, but also as the end of war as a means of resolving conflicts between sovereign nations. This ideal presumes a form of federalism that secures the freedom of each state in accordance with international law and right, and affords each state an equal voice in the federation. To be sure, the UN’s actual practice over the last few decades has lagged far behind its stated ideals; it is, after all, a bureaucracy, often no better than any other. On the other hand, its record in food aid, refugee relief, and the provision of children’s health needs and even peacekeeping is impressive compared to that of most nations—especially the U.S. And we must remember that, to a large degree, the UN’s well-publicized shortcomings in its peacekeeping role are due to the U.S.’s refusal to commit its economic power to keeping efforts in the way it has unilaterally used its military might toward destructive and violent political ends. Truly supporting the UN would require helping it to obtain the resources necessary to enforce its charter, not making it beg for its yearly dues.

What does multilateralism look like, then, under the current UN charter? First of all, “humanitarian” invasions must always proceed under the authority of the UN Security Council, and they must be based on cooperative efforts among nations, since by definition they deal with collective causes—human rights violations, genocide, civil wars and so on. To say that, it must be emphasized, is not to say that we ought to give a blanket endorsement to the practice of invasion for allegedly humanitarian purposes,

even were it to take place under the auspices of the UN. That a regime treats its inhabitants horribly can not be made the occasion for aggression, or perpetual war would be the principle of human affairs. The world is and always has been full of tyrants and torturers, and the list of nations, past or present, whose inhabitants, all other things being equal, would probably be or have been better off under a different regime is potentially endless, depending only on one's point of view: Syria, Cuba, China, Nigeria (the regime of woman-killers), Algeria, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, South Africa before the end of apartheid, the Sudan, Myanmar, Argentina under the generals, Chile under the colonels; and there are those who, as we know, would add say Venezuela today to the list, or Israel. The point is not that any item on this list is defensible, but that none is. All other things are never equal. On rare occasions, as was almost certainly the case in Rwanda/Burundi, and may have been the case in the former Yugoslavia, the utilitarian calculus of lives likely to be saved by armed intervention, versus the unknowable future costs of a supposedly beneficent but humanly destructive intervention, may be overwhelmingly clear and unarguable. Iraq was no such occasion. Though we in the United States must in some sense rejoice at Saddam's absence from the lives of the Iraqi people, we should not in any way rejoice at his overthrow; for there is no possible way in which that calculus, applied to Iraq, could justify having our contemptuous subversion and perhaps subversion of the fundamental principles of international law, that national sovereignty is to be respected, and that aggressive warfare for any reason must always be an option of last resort.

In any event, we know that prior to the fateful night of March 19, George W. Bush did not proclaim that the war in Iraq was primarily to be a humanitarian intervention seeking a regime change in the name of freedom and democracy, no matter whose auspices were going to justify it. Rather, throughout the fall and winter, after the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1441 the administration's rhetoric focused chiefly on whether Saddam Hussein and his regime had refused to comply with the UN demand that they completely disarm themselves of weapons of mass destruction. Only after March 14 when Hans Blix argued with full documentation that slowly but surely Saddam Hussein was being disarmed and that his government posed no serious threat to the United States, did the administration return to its earlier, occasional rationale for a unilateral invasion. This should not be an occasion for surprise; the historical record is full of interventions undertaken for "humanitarian" reasons (e.g., the U.S. invasion of Grenada, or of Panama) that disappeared from sight the day after victory.

In the same way, the political discourse of security and self-defense has also been cynically deployed by the Bush administration ever since September 11. Shortly after September 11, in Security Council Resolution 1373, the Council recognized that the kind of terrorism perpetuated against the U.S. by al-Qaeda presented a difficult problem of enforcement to the UN: how could it proceed to defend not just the U.S. but the countries of the world from what Richard Falk has called mega-terrorism, and at the same time allow the U.S. to defend itself, given that terrorism of this magnitude could not be addressed by means of traditional political negotiation? An earlier Security Council Resolution 1368 was used by the Bush administration to justify its attacks on Afghanistan in the name of U.S. self-defense, even though self-defense had already been expanded beyond its traditional definition, since the war was declared against the Taliban regime for harboring and funding al-Qaeda. This definitional expansion was widened to include George W. Bush's bellicose condemnation of what he called "the axis of evil"—an axis in which any nation that defied U.S. military or economic operations could be condemned as a threat to U.S. security, thereby justifying a retaliatory attack precisely as a matter of self-defense.

This paradoxical expansion of self-defense can only be offered in the language of just war theory because nothing in the language of the UN charter could accommodate or justify it. Just war theory, however, turns on two basic moral principles: proportionality and discrimination between combatants and non-combatants, both of which purportedly limit human suffering by making war, as we have said, an absolute last resort. Resolution 1368, conceived as it was to deal with more traditional threats of one nation to another, thus had to be stretched even to extend to the U.S. pursuit of al-Qaeda cells in Afghanistan. It was certainly not meant to justify the aggressive foreign policy of the United States, because it has to be read against the basic presumption of the UN that war, as the *last* resort, is justifiable only when all other efforts at collective or national security have failed. Nothing, then, in the implicit UN endorsement of the U.S. bombing and invasion of Afghanistan undermined the fundamental fact that only the Security Council should have decided if and when military action against Iraq was necessary. Indeed, the General Assembly held an emergency meeting in the first week after the war began—a meeting not televised or reported widely by the U.S. press and media. Resolutions decrying the war as illegal and shock and awe as a crime against humanity were brought to the floor of the Security Council, though they were not passed. But the very fact that the meeting occurred illustrates that, by its actions, the U.S. has significantly undermined the UN

as an international institution designed to promote the ideal of peace and collective security.

In any case, let's assume that a material breach of the UN's post-Gulf War resolution on disarming Iraq's weapons of mass destruction had been brought to light by the UN's weapons inspectors. Of course, no such breach has yet to see the real light of day, despite the most feverish investigation, accompanied by "revelations" that have disappeared by the next day's headlines. This fact aside, though, what should have been done in accordance with the ideal of multilateralism during the past few months amid increasing U.S. war-mongering and boorish threats of U.S. unilateralism? Very simply, the governing resolution ought to have been followed, and the ultimate decision as to what means of enforcement should be used against Iraq ought to have been made by the United Nations and not by the United States. But this did not happen precisely because the U.S. counted votes and realized that it could not win, despite its unsuccessful (though clearly cynical) attempts to gather votes by arm-twisting, bullying, leveraging, and bugging the phones of Security Council delegates (as reported by *The London Observer* on March 2). Indeed, in retrospect it seems likely that the Bush administration (or elements within it) never intended to win UN sanction for an invasion, but rather preferred to both make war and discard the UN's pretensions to be a force for collective security at the same time. In this respect it is apparent that the supposed treaty that ended the Gulf War was not a genuine treaty but rather a mere temporary suspension of hostilities in the name of an imposed "truce." Because of the horribly punitive sanctions to which the people of Iraq were subjected, this "truce" was really a continuation of war by other means. Thus, the ostensibly new war against Iraq actually began years ago, and that treaty itself should have been impugned, because the U.S. clearly intended to strike again at Saddam Hussein under its very terms, as soon as it could find an excuse (weapons of mass destruction) and muster enough international support—or at least establish a pretense of having tried to do so.

Arguments that national sovereignty is a thing of the past are thus beside the point. No one, after all, can pretend that U.S. sovereignty is dead and buried. This is all the more reason why the U.S. should be accorded full respect like any other state—nothing less, but also nothing more. Certainly one doesn't need to be a cynic to know that weapons and money ultimately make the decisive decisions in world politics. Nevertheless, it is also true that naked power can abjure coercive rule precisely in order to gain moral authority for

its actions. An enlightened superpower would be a state that seeks to establish on the level of international relations the respect for the political dignity of all other states, dignity normally provided to individuals by modern democratic constitutions (though admittedly constitutions may take as many different forms as democratic regimes themselves). In the first instance, such a state would seek forms of conflict resolution consistent with international law through means other than war, rather than militarily defending its own naked economic and political interests. For the U.S., this would mean, first and foremost, that it must join an international criminal court (something it has consistently refused to do) and thereby show its commitment to the political enlightenment represented by international law. Instead, the U.S. quite clearly pursues what Joseph Stalin would have recognized as a doctrine of “sovereignty in one country.”

Of course, international laws and institutions are only as good as the nation-states that abide by and support them, since the particular mechanisms of enforcement within individual states are not powerful enough to enforce them worldwide. The nations of the world, then, are responsible for strengthening these laws and giving them political reality by respecting them. After September 11, some Americans on both the left and the right argued forcefully that the bombing of Afghanistan was unnecessary, devastating to an already devastated country. We are among those who would have supported, as an alternative, police action and a criminal investigation culminating in an international criminal trial. Both courses of action would have been in full accordance with international law. Moreover, they would have been the most effective means of actually bringing the perpetrators to justice. The bombing of Afghanistan caused severe harm to the people of that country, and yet for all the political bombast, cultural invective, and military zeal that accompanied it, Osama bin Laden remains at large and, today, seemingly almost forgotten. Even pursuing a goal most of the world endorsed, the U.S. managed to subvert the only principles that could legitimize a long-run counter-terrorist policy. That is not surprising—by now it is all too clear that even “counter-terrorism” has only been a fig-leaf to cover the administration’s real goal, the pursuit of empire.

Of course the disarmament of states with nuclear power, whether or not they belong to an arbitrarily constituted “axis of evil,” is also central to multilateralism—perhaps the most crucial goal of all. But if it is going to have legitimate status as one enlightened nation among others, the U.S. must be the first state to throw down the gauntlet, and begin the disarmament

process. For if the U.S. is to be just one nation-state in a federation committed to peace and collective security, then it should have no more need than any other nation for nuclear weapons—weapons of terror designed only to kill mass civilian populations. The U.S. does not need, under its own totally recalcitrant control, what is many times over the largest and most threatening military force in the world.

III

This is yet one more reason why, at home, we must oppose an ever-expanding debt economy capable of financing an infinite war. “There is no cause for suspicion,” Immanuel Kant wrote in his famous essay on perpetual peace, “if help for the national economy is sought inside or outside the state. But a credit system, if used by the powers as an instrument of aggression against one another, shows the power of money in its most dangerous form. For while the debts thereby incurred are always secure against present demands (because not all the creditors payment will demand payment at the same time), these debts go on growing indefinitely.” Kant’s point was not that all debts are bad, but that the running of an ever-growing military debt cannot but undermine the state’s capacity to maintain basic institutions that meet the needs of its citizens and promote democracy.

Thus we are returned to the question of democracy at home. More and more it is becoming apparent that the administration’s ultimate goal is the destruction of democracy as we have known it, and its replacement by a permanent regime of oligarchy. As we have said, our own civil society is steadily weakening, and some of its institutional necessities—equal economic opportunity, care of the poor and the helpless, equal justice in the courts, maintenance of cities and their infrastructural lifeblood—are threatening to disintegrate. Democracy must begin at home. The ultimate American political fantasy is that a regime that trashes equality at home has *carte blanche* to spread it abroad. So we must pay close attention to the fraying domestic fabric of democracy, while abroad we must replace the discourse of “democratic” liberation—in truth, a discourse of *novum imperium*—with a more properly political discourse of mutual support and reciprocity. As the strongest among equals but nonetheless still a moral and legal equal, the U.S. must involve itself in transnational agreements and accords that seek to solve problems clearly unsolvable by any one nation-state. It is both unrealistic and normatively undesirable for any state as powerful and wealthy as the U.S. to

be isolationist. Historically, isolationism has always been super-nationalist and opposed to collective security; today's imperialists, then, are but the old isolationists in a new context—new emperors, as it were, in the same old clothes.

An archetypal example of what a real attempt at mutual support might look like is the recent international support behind the Kyoto global warming treaty, a treaty the U.S. refused to sign, arguing that it was unfair because it used a point system that required the wealthier countries of the world (the wealthiest, of course, being the U.S.) to assume a greater responsibility for curtailing their burning of oil than other poorer countries in dire need of industrial development. This point system was eminently realistic, and unimpeachably fair, about how much burden some of the poorest countries in the world could shoulder in the name of a world problem—the gargantuan hole in the ozone layer. In the name of respect for a long-term goal of reaching a more egalitarian distribution of the world's resources, reciprocity must take into account different levels of responsibility. Another example of a world problem that can only be addressed by transnational accords and agreements is the AIDS epidemic currently ravishing whole areas of Africa and Asia. Millions of people around the globe are dying on a weekly basis from AIDS. We will need to seek a world solution to that problem because no nation or individual—even one as wealthy as Bill Gates—is up to the task. But even after verbally committing a relatively paltry sum to that end, the administration still allows economic blackmail and political scare tactics to keep sex education and the distribution of condoms from being implemented in nations that desperately need them. What kind of nation among nations marshals virtually infinite resources to fight a war against one hideously brutal tyrant but turns its back on much less expensive, less interventionist, and less destructive policies that might avoid hundreds of millions of hideously brutal deaths?

Criticizing U.S. policies in this way, it is necessary to keep in mind two things: first, that endless imperial expansion in the name of democracy is not taking place as the democratic will of the American electorate; second, that we are referring to the newest phase of U.S. imperialism, not to the political novelty of American imperialist dominance (for such dominance has been on-going and, *pace* Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, threatens to continue untrammelled). Because an out-of-control executive branch currently fuels the reckless use of unconstrained power, we remain committed to the claim—at once historical and political—that the U.S. Constitution is a document that

reflects a deep and profound suspicion of unchecked executive power. For the Constitution not only establishes checks and balances between the major branches of the government; it contains a bill of rights that defends the freedom of individuals against abuse by the U.S. It thus should protect U.S. soldiers from the abuse of fighting an illegal and unjust war. The best way to have supported our troops *and* supported democracy was to demand that Resolution HJ20 in the House of Representatives, which would have stripped Bush of his right to continue to wage the war, be removed from committee and brought to the House floor. Genuine American patriotism and multilateralism need not be at variance. After all, patriotism must begin with a defense of the Constitution—a political reclamation of the very political rights upon which the USA Patriot Act is trampling.

We have all heard the language of freedom and rights replaced by the language of security. No one would deny that a certain amount of security is necessary to live. This does not mean just security against terrorist attacks. It also means that we need the security of knowing that we will not be spied on in our own homes. We need the security of not being thrown in prison unless we have committed an actual crime. We need the security of dissent in all forms—the dissent necessary for individual citizens to defend what they understand to be the values of their country. We need economic security, in the form of jobs, healthcare, and decent school systems for our children.

As crucial as it is, then, the question concerning how we can be safe from terrorism can only be answered through a resolute commitment to law, right, and equal justice—in other words, through a commitment to multilateralism as the guiding principle of international politics. That is the only way that the U.S. can become a nation-state that respects international law, the UN, and the sovereignty of other nation-states—an enlightened nation-state.

Dick Howard

Twenty Years After September 11, 2001:
Toward a Decline in American Power

by
Dick Howard*

From a cynical point of view, President George W. Bush's current foreign policy could appear to be the fruit of a strong desire for reelection. Indeed, he is a non-elected president wishing to avoid the fate of his father, who despite his popularity after the Gulf War was not reelected in 1992. What is more, Bush can be seen as both little experienced and insensitive to nuances, having a Manichean view of the world. These qualities were in fact very useful to him, in the first weeks that followed September 11, when it was a matter of rallying the American people and rebuilding their confidence. However, since then, showing himself to be little capable of accepting compromises, Bush has turned the affirmation of American values into a moralism that becomes an anti-politics, resulting in a Manicheanism without vision of a future.

The interest of a prospective analysis of this type is to imagine the various scenarios through to translate a decline in American power—in other words, an isolation of the country on the international stage—by 2021, or twenty years after the terrorist attacks of September 11.

Indeed, the intervention against Iraq, increasingly probable and increasingly desired by those advisers close to Bush, could in the future translate into a weakening of the army, the economy, but also of the power of appeal, or the “soft power” essential to maintain and spread American influence. Nevertheless, independent of these conjunctural hypotheses linked to the war, the country will have to face a possible drift in the democratic dialectic that is at the heart of American politics.

Let's assume that there is an intervention against Iraq. This decision could prove to be decisive for the future of American power. Indeed, two different scenarios could emerge from such an intervention.

First of all, take the case in which military intervention is concluded with a swift victory for America. The question of reconstructing the region is raised, with speculation and doubts as to whether the political will exists for it to take place. The United States will then have to juggle between, on the one hand, choosing a policy of interference at the risk of numerous hostile reactions from the Arab world, and on the other, a policy of withdrawal, then leaving the situation in the Middle East to degrade even further. Europe would then have a central role to play establishing its diplomatic power in the region at the expense of the United States. Whether it is capable of doing this is another question. The possibility, however, cannot be neglected.

In the second scenario, the United States finds itself embroiled in a conflict without end in Iraq, without the support of allies. American power will find itself incontestably discredited from this, without considering that the war, presented as one against terrorism, could then become a pretext for enacting a rather repressive domestic policy.

In each of these two hypothetical situations, the general situation deteriorates and leads to the decline of American power, notably in its economy. Indeed, the intervention in Iraq will probably engender, at least temporarily, an oil price hike, which will bring a serious blow to an economy always too dependent on Middle East oil and already heavily damaged by a year of scandals related to deregulation. And the worst-case scenario, bringing symbolic stigma to this real damage would then be the euro supplanting the dollar as the currency used for cash-reserves, making it impossible for America to continue to accumulate a deficit that is never repaid. As a result, the U.S. would find itself incapable of continuing to finance a military budget—both present forces and future research—of the current size (which, it should be noted, is superior to that of the total expenses of the next fourteen allied countries), relegating it little by little to the status of “a power among others.” Following this scenario we can also predict a further drop in the stock market, which in time will have a negative impact on free trade zones such as NAFTA and its eventual extension, Mercosur. Europe, united on the commercial level, would, under these conditions, have every opportunity to establish for itself a key position on the international stage.

Nevertheless, in spite of these possibilities, we can suppose that the U.S. will continue with heavy military spending. And the spending will continue without giving the citizens the opportunity to debate the choices at issue (and

accept this financial sacrifice) such as he would probably have done on the eve of September 11, if Bush had been capable of taking democratic initiatives involving the actors of civil society. Domestic needs, investment in infrastructure, education, civil research, etc., would be neglected to the point that America would find itself becoming incapable of matching Europeans in the economic arena. Indeed, the Europeans, benefiting from the American military umbrella, would have devoted far superior segments of public spending on their cultural and economic influence. This would happen in such a way that over time positions of power would be reversed, with Europe assuming the world socioeconomic leadership left unattended by the militarization of American politics.

There is even a further possibility on the horizon. The U.S. could have to face an emerging populism as a factor in domestic political instability, the public not being prepared to accept such a situation, and international glory not compensating for sacrifices imposed on, rather than consented to, by the people.

The decline of American power would be the result of a drift away from the American tradition in foreign policy. These various scenarios given here are, of course, purely hypothetical. Notwithstanding, independent of the intervention in Iraq and all of its implications, the decline of the U.S. by 2021 could be the consequence of a long term cause—which is forgotten by those that are dominated by their fears and bereft of historic vision, because as they emphasize the necessities that seem imposed by current problems without taking political culture into account. The result would be a drift away from an American foreign policy tradition that has been in place for more than 200 years.

This tradition, which can be described as the result of the interaction of four orientations—Hamiltonian, Wilsonian, Jeffersonian, and Jacksonian—has produced what can be called a dialectic of democracy. Such a dialectic avoids the commonplace attribution of a congenital isolationism to American foreign policy. Contradicting this stereotype, a recent book¹ shows that foreign policy has always been the object of debate among these traditions. It should be emphasized that this typology does not coincide with current partisan lines.

American foreign policy was first marked by the priority of commercial relations with other nations. Alexander Hamilton, secretary of the Treasury

under George Washington, counted on the alliance of the government and the economic elite to assure stability within the young country and its integration into the global economy. But this commercial orientation was faced from the outset with a rather moralistic orientation which would find its identifying theme with the entry of America into WWI under the Wilson presidency. The result is Wilsonism emphasizing the moral dimension, and hoping that American values would spread (yes, internationally) so as to create a peaceful world, subject to the rule of law. But this utopian moralism tended to place too much power in state institutions. It is here that the orientation represented by Jeffersonians enters the debate. They wanted to protect democracy domestically, and consequently, avoided the risky commercial alliances of the Hamiltonians and the risk of utopian wars engendered by Wilsonian politics. But America is, after all, part of the world. Thus, the populism symbolized in the nineteenth century by Andrew Jackson comes to the rescue by affirming that the sole purpose of interior and exterior politics is to assure the safety and well-being of fellow citizens.

My thesis (which is not that of Russel Walter Mead) is that only the coexistence of these four tendencies in foreign policy will allow for a non-Manichean coherence and therefore an adaptability suited to facing a world that is increasingly interconnected and dynamic. Therefore, the American power could find itself in difficulty if, in the future, one of these orientations were to overwhelm the others in an absolute way. American foreign policy currently seems to be the product of a delicate cooperation between the Hamiltonian and Jacksonian currents. However other scenarios could present themselves, for instance, a Jeffersonian isolationism following a long and costly intervention in Iraq (such as was the case after World War I when Wilson did not succeed in his attempts to convince the U.S. to join the League of Nations).

In the event that, for example, the Hamiltonian tendency became dominant, commerce and industry would prevail over everything else in country. On the other hand, the Wilsonian view would be that of a pacified world in which law would reign and would be applied automatically with no concern for political considerations. Or, in the case of the Jeffersonians, the priority would be the protection of domestic democracy at the possible risk of isolationism. Finally, the Jacksonian tendency would lead to the establishment of a “bellicose and unpredictable protectionism” to which would be opposed by the Jeffersonians allied to the Jacksonian populists and

supported by the Wilsonians of the Democratic party, that for the moment is suffering indecisively from its own divisions.

In the context described here, two points should be kept in mind. Assuming that the democratic character of American foreign policy depends on an ongoing interaction of these four tendencies, then Europeans should ensure that their intentions and actions do not contribute to the hegemony of one of the tendencies over the others. That American foreign policy should be democratic is good for Europe as well. Second, the fact that these different tendencies are flexible enough to result in different alliances depending on the historical circumstances, should indicate to Europeans that American foreign policy is not the expression of a single voice that is the unified, constant, and inflexible expression of something called the "National Interest." America's actions are the result of a multitude of interactions; protectionist tariffs for steel, massive subsidies for agriculture . . . or the decision to intervene in Iraq are not the product of any sort of predetermination; they result from political coalitions in a framework of temporary political alliances always liable to dissolution and re-emergence in new forms. In short, Europe should not forget that in spite of temporary appearances to the contrary, America remains a democracy, that it is pluralist in its values, and that its future remains open.

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Notes

¹ W. R. Mead, Special Providence. *American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World*, Knopf, New-York, 2001.

Values and the Environment

by
Andrew Feenberg

My purpose here is to consider the relation of values to the environment. This is a subject that has been much discussed in philosophy in recent years. Philosophers are interested because they hope to justify environmentalism and doing so raises new philosophical questions. Environmental values have to do with the health and well being of nature. Nature is enhanced where conditions favor the complexity, diversity, and some would add, the beauty of ecosystems. It is diminished were massive human interventions simplify and destroy the living tissue of the planet. Judgments such as these belong to a new class of values that must now be considered alongside more familiar aesthetic values, economic values, religious values, and so on. Philosophers have considered two fundamental approaches to the nature of these values. The first and most discussed concerns their source or foundation. The second, which interests me more, has to do with the relation of environmental values to other types of value.

Although the first question is not the one I'm going to address, I want to explain briefly what the issue is. There are two positions on the nature of nature's value. First, there is the biocentric position according to which nature has intrinsic value. According to this view, we ought to protect nature because it is intrinsically valuable. The idea of intrinsic value is usually associated with persons. As a person you don't have to justify your existence by showing that you're useful for something, or beautiful, or intelligent. You have intrinsic value apart from any socially desired quality you might exhibit. If you are a bio-centrist you would say that nature has intrinsic value in pretty much the same sense in which we're used to saying that people do. You don't have to justify the existence of a tree. It has a right to be there just because it's a part of nature.

In opposition to this view there's another view called anthropocentrism which holds that only human beings have intrinsic value. In that case the value of nature must be derivative of the value of human beings. The derivation is easily demonstrated. We are a part of nature and it's prudent to protect the only planet given to us to live on. Since we have a lot of biology

in common with birds, there's a fair chance that we will poison ourselves if we poison them. We have a long-term interest in the protection of nature as a part of it. And thus insofar as human beings are valuable, nature too must have value as the basis of their life.

These are the two competing views that have occupied most environmental philosophers for the past ten to fifteen years. Personally I do not think that biocentrism versus anthropocentrism is the most important debate. It is far more interesting to philosophers than anyone else. It simply lacks significant policy implications beyond the assumption we all make today that the environment has value of some sort. I think it's far more important to understand the status of environmental values relative to other types of values such as economic values. Recall that this is the second big question I mentioned in the beginning. Crudely put, assuming that the environment has some worth, then the next question is, how much is it worth? What is it worth relative to other things that we value? As we will see, this question leads to another and more interesting way of posing the first question concerning the nature of environmental values.

The question of the relative importance of environmental values matters whether you are a biocentrist or an anthropocentrist. On either account it would lead to absurdity to claim that nature's value is absolute. Here's a case in point. The biocentrist organization EarthFirst! once published a letter in their journal from a member who signed her name Miss Ann Thropy, as in "misanthropy." She explained that the AIDS virus is a part of nature and as a natural mechanism of population control might be doing a good job from a biocentric standpoint. This is crazy. Why shouldn't we, as natural beings, also fight for life just like others? It seems absurd that the only species on the face of the earth without the right to defend itself, would be the only species that can conceive of the problem of defending itself. But in that case nature cannot be an absolute value to which we would have to defer in every case. Thus, question two concerning the relative worth of environmental values is going to be relevant no matter what the answer to question one. Even a biocentrist needs to know just how valuable nature is.

This second question has major policy implications. At first it was thought that the way to affirm nature's value was to establish standards based on medical or scientific evidence of damage to human health and the ecosystem. The standards-based approach worked well in certain cases, for example, automobile exhaust. However, it came under attack in the Reagan era and

today is largely eclipsed by a new approach based on cost/benefit analysis. In terms of this policy debate, this paper represents an attempt to provide a new defense of the standards-based approach drawing on philosophy of technology for an answer to certain objections that have been considered decisive in recent years.

Cost/benefit analysis depends on viewing environmental regulation as a matter of trade-offs. A trade-off is a forced choice between alternatives. If the federal government spends its money on guns, it can't buy as much butter, and vice versa. The same applies to our personal budget. So, how much should we spend on environmental protection? For example, how much is cleaner air worth? Cost/benefit analysis of regulations is supposed to be able to answer this question. Each incremental increase in the cleanliness of the air produces an incremental decrease in the number of respiratory illnesses due to pollution. Estimate the cost of improving the air, for example by tightening the standards for automobile exhaust, and then estimate the benefits of reduced medical costs, compare the two figures, and you've got the answer. And indeed, it does seem obvious that there's a trade-off between environmental and economic values and that we need to choose the right mix.

But note the rather conservative political implication of this approach. It has been used to argue that if we emphasize environmental values too much we will end up impoverishing society. Here we move from cost/benefit analysis as a pragmatically justifiable procedure to an economic philosophy with far more sweeping claims. But how credible are these claims? Not very. The current value we place on the various elements of trade-offs may not make much sense in scientific or human terms. Organizations tend to hide or minimize costs that might interfere with their plans, and it is difficult to know how to place a monetary value on such things as natural beauty and good health. But these values must be translated into economic terms to enter the calculation. Here's where politics enters, most obviously. When non-economic or so-called "ideological" values are imposed by standards regardless of cost, they are said to interfere with economic performance. The trade-off approach is thus often invoked to resist environmental regulation.

The question I'm going to pose is whether economics can supply us with an environmental philosophy. Do we really understand the environmental issues when we start out from the notion that there are trade-offs to be made between environmental and economic values? While there are obvious

practical applications of cost/benefit analysis, I'm going to argue that it fails as a basis for environmental philosophy.

Behind the economic approach lies a specific philosophy of technology. I'm going to challenge that philosophy of technology, and once its weaknesses are made clear, the limits of the economic approach become apparent. That philosophy of technology assumes two connected principles: technological determinism and the idea of the neutrality of technology. I'll discuss them next in relation to several historical examples. In my conclusion I'm going to try to show that environmentalism is not ultimately a matter of trading off economic for environmental values, but that it is really about a choice of civilization, about the choice of a way of life. The philosophically significant question is what kind of a world do we want to live in, and not do we want more or less of this or that.

The idea of trade-offs belongs to economics, the science of allocating scarce resources. Economics is based on the proposition that one can't optimize two variables. Optimization means getting the maximum of your target. If you optimize A, you can't optimize B at the same time; you have to let some of B go to get more of A. In simple terms, if you want a big screen TV, you'll have to hold off on that ski trip.

While this seems clear enough, there are several background assumptions that economists make when they talk about trade-offs, and these assumptions are not so obvious. In the first place, it is necessary that the options in a trade-off be clearly defined. But defined by whom? There is an unfortunate ambiguity on this point which is fairly typical of economics in general. The trade-off concept has an obvious source in common experience where the definition of the options is the job of the agent who chooses between them. But when it is incorporated into economics, it borrows plausibility from that experience while overstepping its limits in important ways. Thus few of us would consider our failure to earn income through prostitution or the sale of organs as a trade-off of moral principles for money for the simple reason that these are not live options for us. Yet economists sometimes extend the notion of trade-offs to include purely theoretical alternatives that figure in no actual calculus of well being. There may be good reasons for this extension in some cases, but we will see that it turns out to be very important not to confuse the ordinary and this technical sense of the concept of trade-offs.

There's a second background assumption we need to make explicit.

Economists assume that all other things have to remain equal for it to make sense to talk about trade-offs. This assumption is called *ceteris paribus*. If laws change, if prices change, if the relation between goods changes, then what looks like a trade-off may no longer be one. One specific type of change that interests us involves cases where obtaining A turns out to be a condition for obtaining B. If you learn that you'll receive the big screen TV as a prize for winning the skiing contest, you no longer have to worry about trading it off against the ski trip. You can have both!

Ceteris paribus is certainly plausible in most short run economic decisions. When you're making up your personal budget and deciding what you can afford, it makes sense to assume that all other things will be equal, that you won't win the lottery, or get struck by lightning, or discover unexpected mutual dependencies between the goods you covet. But if you extend the time span enough, if you talk about history and not about ordinary economic life, it doesn't seem to all plausible to assume that things will remain equal. When we look at historical cases that might be taken as parallels to the environmental case we will see that the economic approach doesn't apply. You just can't understand the changes involved on the model of an individual working out his budget.

In order to maintain *ceteris paribus* in history you have to exclude cases like the big screen TV/ski trip case in which apparent trade-offs dissolve as it turns out that A is a condition of B. In technological terms, the equivalent would be the emergence of a new path of development made possible and necessary by regulation. Applied to history, *ceteris paribus* thus implies a simplistic philosophy of technology in which progress proceeds along a fixed track from one stage to the next and cannot switch tracks in response to new constraints. This is called technological determinism, the view that there is one and only one line of technical development.

Determinism is often accompanied by the belief in the neutrality of technology. Means are simply means, ways of doing things, and don't tell you what to do. They have no implicit value content except in so far as they can be judged more or less efficient. The neutrality thesis is familiar to us from the gun-control debate where it is expressed in the slogan: Guns don't kill people, people kill people. Guns are neutral and values are in the heads of the people who choose the targets.

The neutrality thesis is necessary to make the distinction between

technological imperatives and ideology presupposed by the trade-off approach. If we are going to argue that environmentalism is ideological interference with technology, we need to be able to claim that technology itself is nonideological.

Together, technological determinism and the neutrality thesis support the idea that progress along the one possible line of advance depends exclusively on rational judgments about efficiency. Since experts are alone qualified to make those judgments, ideologies can only obstruct the main line of progress. In every case where economic values compete with other values for our allegiance, a trade-off must take place. If we want a cleaner environment, we must accept a decrease in production, and so on. To refute this approach, I want to discuss two historical examples in some detail.

The first is the case of child labor. It's fascinating to go back to the British Parliamentary Papers and read the debates of 1844 on the law regulating the labor of women and children. The issue arose because with the development of manufacturing more and more children were taken off the land and put in factories. No one ever worried about children working on their parents' farms or in their parents' shops, but when they worked in factories, big anonymous institutions without parental supervision, the morality of child labor was questioned.

Lord Ashley was the leading speaker for regulation in the parliamentary debates. His arguments were completely ideological. He didn't refer to any economic benefit of abolishing child labor or limiting the labor of women but instead emphasized the moral importance of motherhood. He worried that the factory system would result in a generation growing up without the tender care of a mother.

The response to Lord Ashley came from Sir J. Graham who worried about inflation, international competition, and technological imperatives, just like people today resisting environmental regulation on economic grounds. Those guys back in 1844 knew everything! Why inflation? Because children cost less to feed and therefore can be paid less. If you replace their labor with adult labor, costs and prices go up. And who will that hurt? The poor, the very people you're trying to help! So Sir J. Graham said that the abolition of child labor is based on "a false principle of humanity that is certain to defeat itself." What about international competition? Regulation makes no sense in a globalized economy. If other nations continue to employ child labor they will

put us out of business. And technological imperatives: this is the most interesting point.

I recall seeing a famous old photograph of a little girl standing in front of the equipment she used in a North Carolina cotton mill. It looks like she's ten years old. She's standing there in a white dress in front of ranks of machines going back into the distance. At first you look at the picture and you don't realize that there's something strange about it. But then you notice that those machines are built to her height. The whole mill has been designed so that someone who's about four feet tall can tend the machines. Industrial technology was designed for children to operate. If they get rid of child labor the machines will have to be replaced. You can't have adult laborers bending down all day. So technological imperatives require child labor.

Doesn't this sound familiar? We have all heard about environmental Luddites out to destroy industry. Well, it's an old refrain. But what actually happened when they passed legislation regulating the labor of women and children? In fact, child labor was phased out gradually in all the industrial countries. Regulation and economics did not conflict as factory owners feared. They found ways of doing without the little workers that were more economically productive. The intensity of labor could be increased and productivity went up, more than compensating for the higher wages paid adults. As children went to school for longer periods, they came back into the labor force with more skills and more discipline, which also improved productivity. And so you had a whole process which was partly stimulated by the ideological debate over how children should be raised, and partly economic. It leads eventually to the current situation in which nobody dreams of returning to cheap child labor in order to cut costs, at least not in the developed countries.

This picture of the elimination of child labor in the developed countries might be contested on economic determinist grounds. Isn't it possible that it was the evolution of technology and labor organization that made the employment of children unprofitable, with regulation appearing only after the fact to consecrate economic necessity? Then ideology would have no causal role of all in the history of child labor. A rather crude interpretation of Marx is the obvious source of such arguments, although I hear that one finds them also in Milton Friedman. They sound good—the explanation is elegant in its simplicity—but historians and sociologists have been invalidating this type of explanation regularly for a century now. History is just not subject to such monocausal accounts. The news has long since reached theoretically

sophisticated Marxists, if not Chicago.

What is more, there is a hermeneutic or cultural dimension to historical change that is lost in economic determinism. In developed countries, child labor violates fundamental cultural assumptions that we make about the nature of childhood. Today we see children as consumers, not as producers. Their function is to learn, insofar as they have any function at all, and not to make money. This change in the definition of childhood and what it means to be a child is the essential advance that has occurred as a result of the regulation of labor.

In sum, although the abolition of child labor was promoted for ideological reasons, it was part of a larger process that redefined the direction of economic progress. In the child labor case all other things were not equal because a new path of development emerged along which regulation actually contributed to increasing social wealth. Technology was not neutral in this case either. It established the meaning of childhood and embodied that meaning in machines. The low machines suited to operation by the ten-year old girl make a statement about what it is to be a child. The value society places on childhood is embodied in the design of the equipment.

Let me give you a second example. Steamboat boilers were the first technology regulated in United States. In the early 19th-century the steamboat was a major form of transportation like the automobile or airplane today. Steamboats were how you got around in a big country with lots of rivers and canals and few paved roads. But steamboats would blow up when the boilers weakened with age or were pushed too hard. After several particularly murderous accidents in 1816, the city of Philadelphia consulted with experts on how to design safer boilers, the first time an American governmental institution interested itself in the problem. At the request of Congress, in 1837, the Franklin Institute issued a detailed report and recommendations based on the rigorous study of boiler construction. Congress was tempted to impose a safe boiler code on the industry but there was a lot of resistance from boilermakers and steamboat owners and governments hesitated to interfere with private property.

It took from that first inquiry in 1816 to 1852 for Congress to pass effective laws regulating the construction of boilers. In that time, 5,000 people were killed in accidents on steamboats. Once Congress imposed a better way of making boilers with thicker walls and safety valves, the epidemic of

explosions abruptly ended. To us it seems obvious that regulation was needed. But there's a kind of paradox here because consumers kept on buying tickets despite the rising toll. The steamboat business expanded as more and more people traveled. At the same time people voted for politicians who demanded regulation. So what did they want? Did they want cheap travel or did they want safety? That is truly a trade-off. But there was another issue in the background.

The basis for government regulation is the commerce clause of the Constitution, which gives the government the right to regulate interstate transportation. This is not just a matter of the economic value of transport but concerns national unity. The canals and rivers of the early 19th century were like the highway system today. They integrated and unified the territory of the United States. The movement of people and goods, the movement of troops, all the things that define a unified nation depend on transport and in that period most especially on steam transport.

Now national unity is not an individual economic matter but a political matter for government to decide. Safe transport had obvious individual benefits, but it was also a legitimate national concern. From the individual standpoint, the imposition of regulation traded off ticket prices for safety, but at the collective level something quite different was going on. Regulation of transport still today is also about insuring national unity and that is not something that nations trade-off because it's not an economic matter. The infrastructure of national unity lies beyond the boundaries of the economy.

The steamboat case shows us another way in which shifts in economic boundaries cancel the *ceteris paribus* clause. Once security of transport is treated as an essentially political matter, it ceases to figure in routine economic calculations. It no longer makes sense to worry about the trade-off of ticket prices for safety once the principle of national interest in transportation is established. Just as we don't consider it an economic loss that we don't market our bodies, so the cost of insuring a certain minimum security of transportation figures in no one's account books.

Of course a zealous accountant might still insist that we monetize all these considerations and mark them down as debits. But once the boundaries of the economy shift, so many cultural and technical consequences follow that it makes no sense to look back with an eye to costs and benefits.

Individuals no longer consider the excluded option as a factor in their personal well-being and so the only trade-off in which it plays a role is in the economist's head. In his opinion we are less well off than we might be because we can no longer trade off A for B in optimal amounts, but what has his opinion to do with the wealth of society? In the sense in which it's significant for policy, social wealth must be measured with respect to the fulfillment of actual desires, not theoretical constructions. At most we might be interested in the economist's opinion regarding the known value of options of which we are temporarily ignorant. Since it's impossible to say how we'd evaluate vast civilizational options in monetary terms, cost/benefit analysis is irrelevant in such cases.

Thus, when we're told we're spending \$100 billion a year on environmental protection and that this expenditure replaces goods we might have bought with our money, watch out. Most of that \$100 billion went into improved design standards we now take for granted, for example, proper toxic waste disposal, safer automobile interiors, and so on. Economists may regard these as "goods" we've bought but we do not think like that any more than we conceive of Central Park as a piece of real estate we've acquired and could sell if we wanted something else for a change.

One might object that in failing to appreciate such theoretical trade-offs, we ignore economic realities, but that is not in fact the case. This type of cultural change is eventually locked in by technical developments. For example, in the abstract one could try and redo all the calculations of labor costs taking into account the savings that might be made with cheap child labor, but that is an economic absurdity to the extent that the entire modern economy presupposes the educated and disciplined products of schooling and could not be operated by children. This sort of abstract attempt to save the trade-off model is irrelevant to actual policy issues.

The steamboat case suggests another kind of problem with determinism and the neutrality thesis. This case shows how economic considerations are sometimes undercut by the instability of the problem definition associated with particular technologies. For there to be a trade-off account, the options must be stabilized. But in the steamboat case the options are not stable. There are two slightly different and competing problem definitions, one at the individual and other at the collective level and it's not clear what the problem is until it is finally settled. Individuals are concerned with the problem of the cost and personal safety of transportation; the problem of

national unity is posed at the collective level. The decision about what kind of technology to employ cannot be made on the basis of efficiency because efficiency is relative to some known purpose. If you don't know what the purpose is, if you can't decide what problem you are trying to solve, you can't judge efficiency. The judgment has to come from some other source, in this case the political sphere.

There is a philosophy of technology that acknowledges these difficulties. It's called constructivism. Constructivism argues against technological determinism that there are many paths of development and that the choices between them are social and political and are not simply matters of efficiency. A whole social world is expressed in the technology that is chosen. Values are thus embedded in technology. We're going to come back to the environmental question from a constructivist perspective in the conclusion to this paper, but let me first tell you a little more about this alternative in philosophy of technology.

Constructivist technology studies grow out of an earlier revolution in science studies. Science and technology are similar enough that some of the insights and methods used to study the one could be transferred to the other. The basic figure in this history is Thomas Kuhn whose famous book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, attempted to explain why scientific progress looks purely rational when in fact it is under-determined by reason and embodies fundamental social and cultural values as well as evidence and arguments. This parallels our problem with technology.

It looks like the technological development of the boiler is purely rational—surely a safer boiler is better from an engineering standpoint. But when you actually study the history you find it took them forty years to come to the conclusion that they had to make safer boilers, and then the moving force behind the change was political ideology and not engineers guided by considerations of efficiency.

So we have the same kind of problem Kuhn had with science in understanding technological development. Kuhn's solution was a very interesting and exciting idea, the notion of paradigms, referring to a model for thought and research. Such models have tremendous influence on people who come afterward and who can be said to work under the paradigm or within the paradigm. For example, the paradigm of Newtonian mechanics dominated physics research for several hundred years. In Newton physicists

had not just a correct theory of gravitation, but a model of how to do physics. What does a physics book look like? Something like Newton's *Principia*, with mathematical demonstrations, and so on.

Scientific revolutions occur when paradigms change. Normal science, Kuhn argued, is the kind of science people do when they don't challenge the paradigm but just follow-up on its conclusions. Our parallel to technology would be what I call technical codes, the codes that govern technical practice. These incorporate value decisions that are embodied in technical disciplines and ultimately in technical designs. For example, the technical code of the North Carolina mill dictated certain height specifications which corresponded to a decision about who can work, whether they should be children or adults. Our technology includes a height specification for people our size, the adult size. That presupposes a different decision about the age composition of the labor force.

Similarly with the boiler code. It looks merely technical but it actually embodies a decision about security of life and national security; that's there in the technical specifications. Normal progress in technology would be the pursuit of efficiency within a paradigm. Once you decide on the boiler code, then you can make all kinds of refinements that improve efficiency. This is the normal technology that corresponds to normal science. Revolutions in science and technology both involve fundamental changes in values reflected in the paradigms or codes that control the normal pursuit of truth or efficiency by researchers or engineers.

This constructivist approach has consequences for our understanding of the rationality and autonomy of the technical professions and for the idea of progress. Experts at every stage in the history of their field inherit the results of earlier controversies and struggles, earlier revolutions. To them it looks like they inherit the product of a purely rational process but the actual story of their paradigm is more complicated. Engineering students do not have to learn how this or that regulation got embodied in the design. The results are rational in themselves and presented as such. This gives rise to an illusion of autonomy that's built into technical disciplines. In fact, their autonomy is more limited than they think. What they take for their own rational decisions about the best way to do things is in fact often socially influenced. There's a kind of technological unconscious in the background of technical disciplines.

If values enter in this way into the evolution of technical disciplines, major

civilizational changes are going to be reflected in technological changes. Withdrawing children from the labor process and putting them in school is an enormous change, a change of civilization. Such a change is bound to show up in a different path of technological development.

Technological revolutions look irrational at first but in fact they simply establish another framework for rationality, another paradigm. Thus it's neither rational nor irrational in some absolute sense to build a boiler that won't blow up. Constructivists would say that the decision to build a safer boiler is under-determined by pure considerations of technical efficiency because you also need to know how important it is that the boiler not blow up. As we've seen, that's a value question that's settled through political conflict.

Each framework sees itself as an advance over the previous one it replaces. So, for example, we consider our society to be a more advanced than nineteenth century society because our treatment of children is more humane. Our advance appears to us to be both moral and technical. In both respects we are better than our ancestors who didn't know how to do without child labor and therefore could not appreciate the importance of childhood.

Of course our perspective is what you might call chrono-centric in the sense that it is prejudiced by our situation in time. While relativists may challenge our self-congratulation in the ethical realm, technical progress looks objectively real from a backward glance at the sequence of developments of particular technologies such as the automobile or the airplane. But in reality we can only constitute such sequences in the function of goals we take for granted in the present. For example, the path of aviation progress seemed to be defined by increasing speeds until the day when the Concorde ran into the barrier not of sound but of OPEC's oil prices. At that point we discovered that progress in this domain involved increasing the size of airplanes rather than their speed. The 747 and not the Concorde represented the next stage in the sequence. This kind of variability in goals introduces relativism into technical progress as well.

Nevertheless, it does make some sense to think in terms of progress in cases like the ones we've considered. In our own lives we often feel that we have made progress over time, that we've matured. Perhaps we can judge the continuous development of societies as a process of maturation, at least in some important respects and instances.

But note that this kind of judgment only applies internally to our own life process and that of our society. It doesn't allow us to judge other societies that are not on the same temporal continuum as ours. And, of course, on constructivist principles, one would have to admit that an entirely different path of development was possible that would also have seen itself as an advance over 19th-century conditions even though it was quite different from what we've done in the 20th century.

Now let me return with this constructivist argument in mind to the question of environmental values and the economy. We have identified several problems with the economic approach that should now appear clearly from a constructivist perspective.

First, as we have seen, the economic approach has to assume the fixity of the background, the *ceteris paribus* clause, but technological change over the long time spans of history invalidates that assumption. All things are not equal in history since technological advance alters the terms of the problem. Second, the economic approach fails to appreciate the significance of the shifting boundaries of the economy. We don't mourn the cost of using adult labor instead of child labor for the simple reason that child labor is no longer an economic issue. Third, the economic approach confuses short run economic considerations with civilizational issues. The civilizational issues concern who are we and how we want to live. This is a different question from the question of do we want more of A even if it means we will have less of B.

Here is a contemporary example that concerns a current environmental issue, the case of clean air regulation and asthma. Currently, asthma attacks are treated as a cost in order to be plugged into cost/benefit calculations. One economist's study of the revised clean air act valued asthma attacks at \$25 apiece. This must have been an average. Some asthma attacks are worth more, others less. Although this is offensive to anyone with asthma, it makes sense to the extent that our society is not fully committed to the struggle against this disease.

But it's entirely possible that we will respond to the rapidly rising incidence of asthma and the rising death rate associated with it by attempting to clean the air to the point where pollution is no longer a factor in causing this disease. If we were to rule asthma out of account in this way by setting health-based standards and place it beyond the boundaries of economic

calculation, we would eventually arrive at a state of affairs which would seem obvious and necessary both technically and morally. It would not occur to our descendants to think about dirtying the air in order to cheapen industrial production or transportation. This would be a civilizational advance in the environmental domain.

This leads to a consideration of the question of why environmental values appear as values in the first place. Indeed, why does environmentalism appear as an ideology intruding on the economy? This is explained by the fact that our civilization was built by people indifferent to the environment. It's this heritage of indifference that makes it necessary to formulate concern for the environment as a value and to impose regulation on industry. Environmental considerations were not included in earlier technical disciplines and codes and so today they appear to come from outside the economy.

This need not imply an overly harsh judgment of our predecessors. Not only are we richer and better able to afford environmental protection, but the immense side effects of powerful technologies that have come into prominence, primarily since World War II, have made environmental regulation a necessity for us.

From this standpoint it seems that the ideological form of environmental values is temporary. These values will be incorporated into technical disciplines and codes in a technological revolution we are living unawares in today. Environmentalism will not impoverish our society. We will go on enriching ourselves, but our definition of riches will change and become more rational in the future judgment of our descendants who will accept environmentalism as a self-evident accomplishment of industrial advance. Just as images of Dickens in the bootblack factory testify to the backwardness of his society, so will images of asthmatic children in smog-ridden cities today appear to those who come after us.

Although its progress is slow and measured, environmentalism has the temporality of a revolution. Revolutions represent themselves to themselves as fully real in the future and look back from that imagined outcome at the limitations of the present. The French revolutionary Saint-Just asked what "cold posterity" will someday have to say about monarchy even as he called for its abolition. With history as our guide, we too can overleap the ideological obstacles to creating a better future by realizing environmental values in the technical and economic arrangements of our society.

The Long March of Brazil's Labor party

by
Michael Löwy*

Brazil: A Country Marked by Social Apartheid

According to megaspeculator George Soros in a press statement some months before the October 2002 presidential election in Brazil, financial markets make today's presidential elections and, therefore, a leftist candidate would be unable to win in Brazil. An erroneous prediction. It was the Brazilian people who voted and their choice was not in line with the New York Stock Exchange. The elected candidate was not the one who Soros preferred, and neither did many other speculators, bankers, investors, financial agents and directors of multinational corporations. It was neither the favorite candidate of the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Economist*, the IMF nor the U.S. Federal Reserve. Nor was it the preferred candidate of the Brazilian oligarchy: large property owners, right-wing capitalists, neo-liberal economists and reactionary politicians. The candidate who did win was a worker, unionist, and former political prisoner: Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, the candidate of the Labor party. It is the first time in the history of Brazil and the Americas that a worker was elected president of the Republic. This spectacular electoral victory—more than sixty-one percent of the vote was garnered by da Silva—might very well open a new chapter in Brazil's history.

Brazil is an immense country by means of its sheer population (170 million inhabitants), land (it makes up the majority of Latin America), and natural resources. However, it is a country where the majority of the population lives in the worst poverty. In fact, in a recent international classification by the United Nations, Brazil came up as the most inegalitarian country on the planet; a country where the gap between the privileged minority and the impoverished majority is one of the greatest in the world. According to some observers, Brazil is a kind of "Swiss-India"; the wealthy live as those in Switzerland, the poor as those in India.

This inequality is particularly evident in the countryside where a minority of great rural property-owners monopolize most of the land while the majority

of the peasants have only tiny plots, or no land at all. With the development of capitalism in the countryside and the replacement of alimentary cultures, or grain crops, with the extensive grazing of cattle—destined for export to McDonald's stores—the peasants have been expelled from the land by *pistoleiros*, henchmen of the land owners.

With the worsening of living conditions in the rural hinterlands—most notably in northeast Brazil—thousands of peasants fled to the cities and great metropolitan centers such as Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paolo. Some found work in industry or in services, but unemployment rates were greatly elevated and the majority remain excluded and crowded, and the *favelas*, the miserable shantytowns that surround the cities where there is no electricity, running water, or sewage system and where one could only survive by performing marginal activities—street trade, prostitution, or even simple criminal acts like drug trafficking.

There also exists a real *social apartheid* throughout the country which is seen in big cities through the physical separation of mansions and the wealthy quarters, surrounded by walls and electric barbwire and guarded by private armed guards who carefully patrol all entrances and exits. It is social discrimination which also has an implicit racial dimension where the great majority of the poor are black or half-caste.

After twenty years of military dictatorship which ended in 1985, Brazil has seen a return to democracy and civil government. This undeniable political progress has not been followed by effective social change. Every government, to the right or center, which has been in power since 1985 could only apply the neo-liberal politics of structural adjustment advocated by the IMF: the privatization of public services, the reduction of spending on public health and education, and, above all, the payment of extreme debt which has reached astronomical numbers and absorbs the entire surplus gained from exports. This is notably the case with the center-right government, in power for eight years, lead by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a former leftist intellectual who converted to neo-liberalism and who has become one of the best pupils of the IMF in Latin America. Thanks to Cardoso, the last existing publicly owned enterprises, such as the Electric Company, have been privatized and sold to foreign corporations many of which have not wanted to make the most basic and necessary investments. Brazil has been plagued over the years by *apagões*, sudden ruptures in electricity that plunge cities or even entire regions into darkness.

However, democratization has allowed progress throughout the whole country with the emergence of a new labor movement, both peasant and popular, which fights for the poor and their rights against the neo-liberal policies of the government. Part of this movement of the new class-based and independent unionism which surged at the end of the 1970s and organized the Central Labor Union with its six million members—in addition to the Rural Landless Workers Movement which mobilized thousands of peasants for agrarian reform—was the Labor party.

Brazil's social and economic situation is dramatic. The only hope is the vitality of social movements and the desire of the population for radical change of which Lula's victory is an expression. At the time of the recent 2001 poll organized at the request of a proprietor's association, fifty-five percent of men interviewed said that Brazil needed a socialist revolution. When they were asked what they understood as "socialism," they responded by citing a few values: friendship, community, distribution, justice, and solidarity. These are the values that the various social movements, as well as the Labor party, have referred to.

The Long March of the Labor party

The founding of the Labor party in 1979 marks the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Brazil's labor movement: the construction of a mass party, the expression of the political independence of workers from within a democratic, pluralist and militant party and inspired by an anti-capitalist program. The Labor party represents the crowning achievement of a century of efforts by Brazilian workers to attain political self-expression. At the beginning of the century, the anarcho-syndicalists struggled for an independent proletarian orientation, but their ideological orientation rejected the very idea of a political party with a mass base. The Brazilian Communist party has probably been the most important attempt at constructing a true workers' party in Brazil. But, despite the abnegation and spirit of sacrifice of the militants and their plan, the Stalinist logic led it to adopt a politics of subordination to the "national" bourgeoisie. This orientation, combined with an ideological dependence through its relation with the USSR and the absence of any internal democracy, engendered a series of splits which, from 1962 to the present, divided and weakened it (the majority of their historic directors had abandoned it during this period). With regard to the Brazilian

Workers' Party founded by Getulio Vargas in 1945 and led after that by João Goulart and—under the new name of the Democratic Workers' Party—by Leonel Brizola, it never represented anything more than a populist movement without organic, political or programmatic engagements vis-à-vis the working class. In the end, the small groups of the “armed left” from the 1960s and 1970s never gained any real presence other than within the interior of the proletariat and they met one tragic end after another owing to their practices. The result was an isolation of city and country workers. But with the Labor party there appeared for the first time a mass party which was the expression of workers themselves, a party organically rooted in the working class, the peasantry and the intelligentsia.

The formation of the Labor party during the years 1979-81 was due to a confluence of diverse currents each of which brought its particular sensibility and contribution to the construction of the party. First, there were the “authentic” syndicalists, initiators and directors of the process of building the Labor party, an expression of a new worker syndicalism of the masses, combative and class-based, the symbol of which is the region of the ABC (the industrial suburbs of greater Sao Paulo, where the “new proletariat” is concentrated); second, those from the rural unions and peasant leagues, frequently of Christian inspiration; third, those from grassroots ecclesiastical communities, rural workers and other Christian sectors of socialist tendencies; fourth, those from the old militants from the Communist party or the “armed left,” which had quit their organizations; fifth, some groups from the revolutionary left of different tendencies—notably Trotskyists—which had split, with arms and baggage, from the new party; and sixth, some intellectuals: sociologists, economists, teachers, writers, journalists, interested researches in the workers movement and Marxist theory (or, occasionally, of a Christian education). To a certain extent, one could argue that the creation of the Labor party had been *the historic confluence between the (working) class and “their” intellectuals*, two social forces which until now had followed parallel paths, sometimes converging, and frequently diverging.

The formation process of the Labor party presents some specific characteristics quite peculiar to contemporary Brazil. For example, the important role of the communists at its foundation. In another way, it resembles an example taken directly from certain “classic” texts from Marx and Engels: a workers' movement rises up in the great modern industrial centers, a movement that discovers, through the course of its economic struggles, the necessity of a political party of workers, a party which

combined the most diverse classes of society, all under the leadership of the working class.

The diversity of the various sources which gave birth to the Labor party have translated themselves into the very foundations of the party, in its leadership. Among some of them one finds, for example: Luis Inacio da Silva, “Lula,” a settler descended from the miserable rural regions of Brazil’s northeast, a labor organizer and president of the metal-workers union of São Bernardo, imprisoned by the military dictatorship in 1979. Olivio Dutra, president of the Labor Union of Banks, first Labor party mayor of Porto Alegre, later governor of South Rio Grande. Apolonio de Carvalho, an old communist leader, fighter in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War and in the French Resistance (he had led the liberation of many cities by mid-1944). Mario Pedrosa, founder of the left (Trotskyist) opposition from its beginning and on through thirty years, animator of the United Anti-Fascist Front from 1934, a founder of the Fourth International (1938) and later a socialist militant inspired by the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg. Jose Dirceu, leader of the student movement in 1968, imprisoned by the military, freed in 1969 in exchange for the American ambassador kidnapped by Brazilian guerillas. Exiled to Cuba, he returned in secret to Brazil to try once again to start up the armed struggle.

This diversity also appears, in the *pluralist* character of the Labor party, that admits in its heart a variety of currents and tendencies, where some are strongly structured, with their own press, etc. These tendencies are far from being set, and over the twenty-two year span of the Labor party’s existence, many regroupings have taken place. This brought a great vitality to the internal life of the party, the opposite of the grey monolithic quality of those bureaucratic parties reminiscent of Stalin. All together, this diversity has not been a factor of division or source of weakness of the party—despite a minimal amount of splits—but rather a source of enrichment and reciprocal learning.

One of the specific aspects of the Labor party is its narrow link with the most radical sectors of the “Christian people.” It is said that Brazil is the Latin American country where Liberation Theology has had the deepest penetration and where the movements of the base ecclesiastical communities have been most developed, gathering millions of Christians (above all among the poorest) in the cities and the countryside.

But now, a significant portion of the most active and engaged militants from the CEBs (country workers of the land and in the urban areas) and peasants are found completely naturally in the ranks of the Labor party. One of the principle organizers of these communities, the Dominican Friar Betto (imprisoned for five years under the military dictatorship) has played an important role in numerous radical Christians joining the party.

In reality, without the existence of this culture of Christian contestation, sermonizing (even lecturing) self-organization at the base of the emancipation of the poor, it is not likely that the party would be able to form itself, and above all, to rapidly win any mass influence. That being said, the Labor party is no longer a confessional party—it does not submit to the views of the Church, and it does not espouse any Catholic social doctrine: in a word, it bears no resemblance to the Christian democracies of Latin America.

How was the Labor party born? Since 1978, the year of large labor strikes on the outskirts of São Paulo, many “authentic” radical leaders began to put into motion the idea of an autonomous Labor party; probably as a response to the reflection on the experience of the strike itself, of its confrontation with the military-police apparatus of the state, and for some, one of the premier liabilities of social struggle in the recent history of the country (since 1964). For example, in December 1978, when one of the Meetings for Democracy protected by the liberal opposition and the left in Rio de Janeiro, da Silva, sustained by other radical leaders who were present, rejected the predominant theory of the Meeting: to gather around the resistance a “large democratic front” to face the military regime. Significantly, it refers to the experience of 1964 as an argument against the workers’ movement’s traditional politics of subordination: “If we, the workers, are not vigilant by relating the unity of the oppositional forces, we will suffer defeat like that in 1964, when the bourgeoisie broke with the workers, turned their backs and left them behind.” Without denying the necessity of the solidarity of all those against the military regime, Lula insisted on the importance of an independent workers’ politics: “The working class follows the irreversible path for the conquest of its objectives. It will create sooner or later a political party . . . It is necessary that the working class not be only an instrument. It is fundamental that it participate directly in manifesting the force that it represents. And, the participation, in the political field, implies that class constitutes its own party.”¹

In October 1979, at the first National Meeting of the Labor party in São Bernardo do Campo, there was a stronghold of workers from the Lula faction and it is concretely the moment of the founding of the new party. A brief political declaration was approved at this conference which clearly affirmed the aim of the Labor party: “The Labor party aims that all economic and political power be exercised directly by the workers. It is the only way to put an end to exploitation and to oppression.” At the same time, the document calls upon “all the democratic forces to constitute itself as a large front of the masses against the dictatorial regime.” The Labor party also proposed to fight for the formation of a central union of workers, in emphasizing that “its construction passes, necessarily, by the reversal of the actual union structure submitted to the state.”

In April and May 1980, a mass strike of 250,000 metal workers took place in São Bernardo; following police and military intervention—the arrest of Lula and his principle leaders—the movement was stopped; but it had revealed, through its exceptional length of time (forty-two days) and through its ability at mass organization (daily meetings of tens of thousands of workers), the surprising force of the new union whose leaders were taken partly from the formation of the Labor party.

Between May and June of that same year, a new National Conference of the Labor party was organized with delegates from twenty-two provinces of Brazil representing approximately 30,000 members of the party. A manifesto and a program were approved which defined the Labor party as “the real political expression of all those exploited by the capitalist system,” and as a mass party, large, open and democratic. Its aim was to dismantle the repressive machinery of the existing regime and to create “an alternative power for the workers and the oppressed . . . which advances down a path toward a society without both exploiters and exploited.” However, at this time, the Labor party was still far from having elaborated a “doctrine”: many questions and programmatic definitions were deliberately left open to permit a larger debate and a progressive “ripening” of the mass of militants.

A bit after its founding, the Labor party experienced spectacular growth: at the end of 1982, it already had 245,000 members throughout the country. But the result of the legislative elections of 1982 were quite deceiving: they garnered three point five percent of the votes and only eight Federal Deputies. The press declared that it was the end of the Labor party. On the other hand, with the founding of the Central Union of Laborers in 1983, the

first central mass union in the history of modern Brazil, the Labor party found a powerful ally in the workers movement.

In 1984, the Labor party actively participated in the campaign for direct presidential elections which mobilized millions of citizens in an unprecedented mass movement and also practically put an end to the military regime. Loyal to the democratic demands of the population, it refused to confirm the “indirect” election of a new president (Tancredo Neves, of the moderate opposition party) by the House—an illegitimate solution negotiated by the liberal opposition with the military.

With the elections of November 1986, the Labor party doubled its electoral score passing six point five percent and extending its influence well beyond Sao Paulo, its traditional stronghold. But the first great leap was the municipal elections of 1988 which saw the Labor party win mayorships in most cities, some regional capitals such as Porto Alegre and Sao Paulo, the biggest industrial town in Brazil and in Latin America. In the end, when direct presidential elections took place in 1989, Lula came in ahead of his “leftist” rivals—the populist Brizola and the social democrat Covas—and regained in the second term elections opposite the conservative candidate Collor de Melo (broadcast by “Globo TV,” the most powerful media machine in the country). Although he was not elected, Lula gathered an impressive percentage (forty-seven percent) of the vote.

During its seventh National Convention in 1990, the Labor party approved a document which gathered together and systematized, after a long internal debate, its conception of socialism:

The socialism that we want to construct can only be realized by establishing a truly democratic economy. It must therefore be organized around the social property of the means of production—which should not be confused with the property of the state—which will take the forms chosen democratically by society.

This democratic economy must go beyond the perverse logic of the capitalist marketplace as well as the autocratic command economy of the numerous economies that call themselves “socialist”; the state’s priorities and objectives come under the

control of society and not the supposed “strategic interests” of the state.

If the left was, as it was in Brazil and other places, historically divided between an anti-capitalist yet authoritarian strain and a democratic, reformist one, one of the novelties of the Labor party was precisely its transcendence of this false set of alternatives:

Our commitment to democracy makes us militant anti-capitalists—this choice has profoundly marked our struggle for democracy. The discovery (empirical, before becoming theory, for many of us) of the structural perversity has constituted, for most of the militants in the Labor party, a very powerful stimulant for the organization of a political party. We have represented—and we always represent—an indignant response to the useless suffering of millions of individuals which flows from the logic of capitalist barbarism. Our concrete historical experience—the dark side of the “Brazilian Miracle” and of numerous other national situations and international tragedies—we have been taught that it is a material force, unjust by its very nature, which marginalizes millions of people and opposes the equal redistribution of social wealth—the activity of any democratic reality.²

This type of formulation, charged with an ethical radicalism, is characteristic of the political culture of the original Labor party, produced by a fusion of Marxist theory and sensible Christianity. This radicalism worried the élites, the press and the media, which would have liked to have accepted the Labor party on the condition that it become a party “like the others,” a “normal” party, not unlike a social democratic party.

Elected in 1989 on a populist platform of “chasing out the corrupt officials,” Collor de Melo was going to practice a typical neo-liberal brand of political economy, systematically brandishing public enterprises in privatization without end. But very quickly the pretended champion of anti-corruption found himself seriously compromised in an enormous scandal of embezzling public money for private concerns. Through a Labor party initiative, joined later by other political forces, an immense popular mobilization developed throughout the entire country. The pressure of popular opinion—and in particular of the youth, who were omnipresent in the streets—finally obliged

the majority of those in Parliament to vote for the impeachment of Collor de Mello (he would be replaced by Vice-President Itamar Franco).

During the following two elections, those of 1994 and 1998, the winner—thanks to strangulating inflation—would be Fernando Henrique Cardoso, former Marxist sociologist and theoretician of dependency theory, who converted to IMF principles and doctrines, the candidate of a coalition between the Brazilian Social Democratic Party and the Party of the Liberal Front, a party of bankers and members of the rural oligarchies formed out of the “moderate” wing of the old military dictatorship. Cardoso would lead for eight years with typical neo-liberal policies favorable to financial capital which considerably aggravated social problems throughout the country and deepened its dependence on markets.

Despite these defects, the Labor party gained many important mayoralities in the country and state governments in the Federation. It also put into practice, in the localities which they managed, democratic forms at the base such as the celebrated “participatory budget.” Here one begins to see a certain institutionalization of the party and, departing from the mid-1990s, an increasingly powerful tendency in the majoritarian current of the direction of the Labor party toward pragmatism and political and programmatic “deradicalization”—not without powerful resistance from diverse tendencies on the left (between forty percent and forty-five percent of the vote during party conferences), the most important of which, the Democratic Socialists (tied to the Fourth International), gathered in 2000 nearly seventeen percent of the votes for its candidate for the party leadership, Raul Pont, the ex-mayor of Porto Alegre.

The two defeats facing Cardoso had convinced Lula to change his strategy and present a more moderate face during the elections. In 2002 he imposed on the Labor party broad political alliances with bourgeois forces, in taking as his partner and candidate for vice president José Alencar, leader of the Liberal party.

Electoral Victory and the New Government

Lula’s victory is not only the victory of one man, of an individual, of a charismatic leader. It is also the victory of a mass party, of both the militants

and sympathizers that poured into the streets, submerging the streets and the public places of major provincial capitals within Brazil with hundreds of thousands of people dancing, singing and waving red flags with the five-pointed star of the Labor party. But it is even more than the victory of a party, it is the historic return of the exploited and oppressed after twenty years of military dictatorship and another seventeen years of the neo-liberal "New Republic." Or again, if one counts back even further, after 400 years of oligarchic rule under the designers of Brazilian capitalism and colonial dependency.

From this joy of the populace came hope, the immense popular hope that comes from radical change, from a new departure, from a break with the political past. Hope that another Brazil may be possible, where the working classes, the landless, the homeless, women, blacks, the indigent, the unemployed, and the poor, can at last be heard. The hope that, for the first time, a government will not be the instrument of the privileged, of exploiters, of the propertied, of the corrupt, or the millionaires. A government that will put more importance on combating hunger, enacting agrarian reforms and the rebuilding of public services rather than answering the demands of international financial institutions. The hope of finally seeing realized an alternative social project than neoliberalism and another economic model, seeing job growth and the equal distribution of income and wealth.

It should be said that none of this will be easy. The obstacles are immense, the adversaries innumerable; the difficulties, the threats, the contradictions, all are evident. To begin with, a group of institutions have escaped the control of the Labor party. Although Lula and the Labor party have won the presidential election with crushing majorities, they do not possess the majority in either the House nor in the Senate. Most of the regional governors are hostile to the new project. The elected vice president himself has little in common with the working class (and that is a euphemism). Parenthetically, if by accident or illness Lula were to lose power, the country would be left with a politician from the right, a "liberal," as president, elected with the voice of the left and the workers.

Very quickly, Lula and his government will be subject to the classic chanting of market financiers: any deviation from neo-liberal orthodoxy will, they will argue, provoke the retreat of volatile capital, the result being the probable fall of the currency, the real, followed by inflation. The government will be subject to enormous pressure from the IMF, the World Bank, the Federal

Reserve Bank, the U.S. government itself, of “friendly” governments in Latin America and in Europe, of the dominant classes within Brazil and the media which they control—as well as from their “political allies”—in order to make them accept moderating their aspirations; to forget their “radicalism”; to pass a “reasonable” compromise, to accommodate “reality”; to accept, as all others have, the rules of the established game; of not touching the interests of national and international capital; of respecting agreements, as exorbitant as they may be; of no longer opposing the American Free Trade Zone in exchange for some concessions on tariffs; of religiously paying external debt; of putting off agrarian reform; of curbing the “illegal” occupation of land. And to top it all off, to give autonomy to the Central Bank. In other words, to abandon their program of government and become a variant, a bit more social, more prone to assistance, a bit less corrupt than those governments that preceded it in the “New Republic.” That is to say, to transform itself into a “liberal-socialist” government like all the others in Latin America and Europe that have existed for the satisfaction of capital and the despair of the electorate.

Lula and his economic advisors (such as Antonio Palocci) have already made many—too many—concessions to markets. They have promised to respect economic agreements—draconian agreements—with the IMF and they have opened themselves up to alliances with center and right parties. But this is not sufficient to satisfy the interests of capital: these representatives require that it is in fact the continuation of the economic policies of the previous governments. Will Lula and his supporters bend to this pressure?

The formation of the government in January 2003 was the first indication of the intentions of the new president. The Labor party acts as a coalition government where certain key posts have been given to representatives of the dominant élites, but the left wing of the Labor party is not absent. The leadership rests in the hands of the moderate wing of the party, represented by Antonio Palocci. Most alarming is the nomination of Henrique Meirelles, a deputy of the PSDB (the party of Cardoso) and former president of Boston Bank with a key post as the director of the Central Bank. This is a gauge of the (neo-liberal) economic orthodoxy given to market financiers. The left of the Labor party has protested, and senator Heloisa Helena, from the “Democratic Socialist” wing, has refused to endorse this nomination. One might also be curious about the designation of the conservative entrepreneur Luis Fernando Furlan as Minister of Industry and of Roberto Rodrigues,

president of the Brazilian Association of Agribusiness, as the Minister of Agriculture.

By contrast, we find Olivio Dutra, former governor of South Rio Grande and known figure of the Labor party's left, as the Minister of Cities, and Miguel Rossette, former vice-governor of South Rio Grande (and a Social Democrat) as the Minister of Agrarian Development, with the task of starting agrarian reform—a nomination saluted with joy by the MST, but denounced as dangerous and counter-productive by the National Association of Rural Producers and but the Rural Democratic Union (RDU), the powerful (and reactionary) political organization of landowners. In the end, the senator Marina Silva, old comrade of the struggles of Chico Mendes in the defense of the Amazon forest and declared adversary of the OGMs, has been designated Minister of the Environment.

The president of the Labor party, José Dirceu (a former guerilla) has been named Chief Minister of the House—that is, Secretary General of the government. In his speech on investiture, this aide of Lula, an able political negotiator, explained that the objective of the new government is to allow the Brazilian people to occupy what he sees as their rightful place: “That it is possible to obtain this through a great social transformation, by a veritable social revolution. I am not afraid of using that word: a veritable social revolution. We must do this for our people. We will be capable of attaining our goals,” he added, saying that “if there is social participation, there will be national mobilization.”

The first positive sign given by the new government—chosen, it should be said, by Lula himself, after consulting his aides—was the decision to put off the purchase of fighter planes to modernize the Brazilian air force. Lula decided that this \$800 million would be devoted to a program combating hunger, an issue he had made a center piece of his campaign: “if, for these four years, each Brazilian will be able to eat three meals a day, I will have considered my mission complete.”

But it is also too early, as of January 2003, to judge what the politics of the new government will be. Will it be capable of resisting pressures and be able to carry out its program of the redistribution of income; enact real agrarian reform; reorient production toward internal markets; support an economy of solidarity; fiscal reform; priority of investment in education and health; fight corruption and fiscal flight? To apply these measures requires a strong fight

against some powerful enemies and the need to be somewhat disposed to making some concessions. Without pressure “from below” from the popular movement, some worker and peasant organizations, some from the subaltern classes, counterposing the pressure exerted “from above,” from the privileged class, the battle for this change of political and social direction will be lost.

The position of the Landless Rural Workers’ Movement seems to me to be an example:

Our role as a social movement is to continue to organize the poor in the countryside, to make them conscious of their rights and to mobilize them to struggle for change. We will maintain the necessary autonomy in our relation with the state, but we will cooperate as much as possible with the new government so that agrarian reform can be realized, something for which we have dreamed for a long time.³

If this position is also adopted by the Central Union of Workers, by the Homeless Movement, by the Central Popular Movements, by the feminist movement, by the progressive churches—which has taken some very clear positions against the ALCA and against the payment of external debt—and by the militants within the Labor party, one could create a coalition of forces favorable for the realization of change promised by Lula’s program.

Nothing could be more injurious to the popular interests than to “wait” for the government to solve its problems. As the words of a song that greatly inspired the movement of struggle against the dictator in 1968 said, “He who knows the reality of the hour, he does not wait for something to arrive.” The mobilization of social movements and some of the left parties is an indispensable condition to obtaining significant advances in the struggle against neo-liberal logic, the tyranny of markets, the parasitic nature of financial capital, of inequalities, and the exclusion and historical injustices which characterize Brazilian society.

A person cannot predict what the future will be of this government formed by Lula. Optimists are confident in the former combative and militant workers and unionists to pursue their interests whereas pessimists enumerate the concessions made to the IMF and to economic élites. The sober optimists (*peptimists*), like me, think that the game is hardly over and that many different options are still open. In fact, one could advance some conditional

hypotheses. Here are a few which seem to me to be important. An active intervention of social and political actors favorable to “another Brazil” must assure:

- 1) that the project of the ALCA—an attempt by North America to recolonize Latin America by destroying all attempts for economic autonomy—will be conquered and not only “transported” by these tariff concessions from the U.S. on corn and wheat or the juice of Brazilian oranges.
- 2) The IMF cannot impose its regulation on Brazil, as was the case in Argentina during recent years, with the well-known, tragic consequences.
- 3) That it can have fiscal control of the entrance and exiting of foreign capital, part of a national plan of defined definite democratic development.⁴
- 4) That Brazil tries to associate with other countries from the South to impose “an audit process and renegotiation of external public debt” (Program of the Government of the Labor party for Brazil, approved when the twelfth National Conference, December 2001).
- 5) That the state may effectively democratize, among other things, “the investment in participatory budget practices at the central level.”⁵
- 6) That the program of privatization may be “suspended and reevaluated with an audit of the operations already realized.”⁶
- 7) That a broad fiscal reform program will be put into action with the objective of reducing taxes on wage-labor and, in exchange, “tax the wealthy” and “reduce the gap for fiscal relief.”
- 8) That an effective rupture has occurred with the neoliberal economic model “founded on the radical de-regulation of the national economy and therefore, on the subordination of its dynamic to the interests of global financial capital.”

In other words, only effective social and political mobilization at the base will permit Lula’s government to surpass the limits that the interests of capital are trying impose upon him and to assure the realization of the promise of changing the direction of the Party and the state—approved by the Labor party in the twelfth Conference of December 2001—without losing sight of the historical project which is the accomplishment of the Labor party’s 1990

program: the movement beyond capitalism and the founding of a new, socialist society, democratic and free.

Translated from the French by Michael J. Thompson.

Notes

¹ From the journal, *Em Tempo* no. 42, December 23, 1978.

² “Petiste Socialism,” *Inprecor*, no. 317, October-November, 1990.

³ Resolution of the Landless Rural Workers’ Movement from November 8, 2002.

⁴ See the interview with Paul Singer, economist and Labor party activist, in the journal *Em Tempo*, September 2002.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

Martin Washburn

Bourne-Again Art

by
Martin Washburn

When American abstract painting was hailed triumphantly in the sixties, the mantle of the avant garde passed from the School of Paris to the School of New York. Or did it? The second-most important element of the School of Paris, the virulently hostile French bourgeoisie that formed its easily-provoked early audience (there were riots at the first Paris performance of *Le Sacre du Printemps*), was long gone; and even if it had still existed, the avant garde, like the gothic style of the late Middle Ages, was a local wine that traveled poorly. They did, after all, call it the School of *Paris*. Since the avant garde left such a rich inheritance, acknowledging this doesn't detract from the importance of subsequent modern art—it merely acknowledges that claims to rival the School of Paris were doomed. Early American vanguardists, for instance, from Dove to Hartley, encountered withering isolation of a sort unimaginable to European artists for trying to introduce avant garde content to a society that was so different from that of Europe.

One of these differences was the American social dynamic created by successive waves of massive immigration. Early in the twentieth century, several writers grew concerned about the too rapid vault toward assimilation by immigrant groups. The social critic Randolph Bourne in particular worried about individual ethnic mores that, he wrote, somehow failed to influence America's traditions and expressions. Over these bearers of ancient vital cultures fell, he thought, the pall of a conformist, shallow Anglicization.

The Anglo Saxon element is guilty of . . . the imposition of its own culture upon the minority peoples. The fact that this imposition has been so mild, and indeed, semi-conscious, does not alter its quality.

Bourne urged

an examination of what Americanization might rightly mean.
. . . It is apparently our lot to be a federation of cultures. . . .

we find that we have all unawares been building up the first international nation . . . America is already the world federation in miniature.

Bourne's vision of open cultural federation, however, was not to be realized. The nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century was an age of Anglo-melt, and the price of joining was ethnic concealment. Newcomers anglicized the names of their children, aped Protestant attitudes and manners, and spoke English in public. To display ethnic character invited derision; the melting pot was based on emphasizing apparent similarities and suppressing obvious differences. The process of assimilation and the world it created are at the core of the American aesthetic in literary no less than visual art, and has often been written about. One especially poignant book, *Call It Sleep*, Henry Roth's 1930s masterpiece, uniquely describes growing up in a New York City ghetto near the turn of the century.

Roth's novel explores some of the forces that powered assimilation and the price young immigrants had to pay to survive (surprisingly, Roth's model for immigrant assimilation would also come to serve Abstract Expressionism). Roth's main character, the young, sensitive, Lower East Side-dweller David Schearl, is supported by a protective mother who transmits to him a world of culture. In a book with great feeling for language, English, the tongue of the New World, is rendered in a butchered speech without nuance, while the translated Yiddish David speaks at home is rendered as elegant, delicate and complex. Isaiah Berlin, speaking of the eighteenth century German philosopher, poet and historian Johann Gottfried Herder, exactly captured this culture formation in his description of people's urgent need to retain their sense of place:

Herder virtually invented the idea of belonging . . . just as people needed to eat and drink, to have security and freedom of movement, so too they need to belong to a group. . . . To be human meant to be able to feel at home somewhere, with your own kind. Each group, according to Herder, has its own . . . set of customs and a life style, a way of perceiving and behaving that is of value solely because it is their own. The whole of cultural life is shaped from within the particular stream of tradition that comes of collective historical experience shared only by members of the group.

Roth, seen through Herder's lens, is carefully delineating how the only route to full culture can be blocked by American mores that require a path which suppresses open acknowledgement of one's own culture.

For David, the contrast between the delicacy and considerateness of his home life and the brutality and indifference of the world around them is overwhelming, and eventually the delicacy and structure of his internalized immigrant world is destroyed. He becomes overwhelmed by the frustration of his childish efforts to understand his situation. When his world finally tears apart, he too is torn, and David experiences, in an uncharacteristic outpouring—almost like speaking in tongues—a raw energy that pours through him in a wild flow: “He fled through to the street, one wild glance at his house and he scurried west. A strange chaotic sensation was taking hold of him. . . . I'm somebody else . . .” David experiences a remarkable surge in physical energy in the context of his self-negation, and the invulnerability it bestows on him is striking: “Ain' even tiad! Ain' even me!”

But the point is clear: a child has made a sacrifice that has wiped out much of his identity, in the process releasing an energy that makes the melting pot work. American subjugation of self to public identity was aggressively spelled out by the young Richard Rodriguez, a writer with what one might call a combination of overseer's complex and Stockholm Syndrome. Like Roth, Rodriguez focuses on themes of American acculturation in an autobiographical narrative called *Hunger of Memory*, published in the 1970s. Young Rodriguez, like Roth, speaks of the social self-obliteration and self-surrender of a sensitive and shy Hispanic child in the parochial school system, but unlike Roth, Rodriguez embraces and celebrates it.

Only when I was able to think of myself as an American, no longer an alien in gringo society, could I seek the rights and opportunities necessary for full public individuality. . . . despite the fact that the individuality I achieve in public is often tenuous—because it depends on my being one in a crowd.

For Rodriguez, who attacks the “brazen intimacy” of teenagers speaking black English to each other, the outcome of the war between public and private is an emptying of a once-privileged realm. Bilingualists, he declares,

do not seem to realize that there are two ways a person is individualized . . . while one suffers a diminished sense of private individuality by becoming assimilated to public society, such assimilation makes possible the achievement of public identity. . . . only in private . . . is separateness from the crowd a prerequisite for individuality. . . full individuality is achieved, paradoxically, by those who are able to consider themselves members of the crowd.

Public space, the neutral area in which Americans interact away from the precincts of intimacy and their private lives, continues to be a social and political necessity, despite the truth of Bourne's insights, because—in this Rodriguez was right—our heterogeneity necessarily defines the place where we meet almost as if we were all strangers. Up until the sixties and seventies, the sobersides business culture, tonally void of character save for echoes of its long-gone WASP founders, served as an inert behavioral model for the more expressive subcultures. Rodriguez's idealization of public space as a value in itself and an eradicator of the cultures for which it stood in as placeholder exemplified assumptions that came to be destructive both to the cultures under attack and to public space itself. This idealization ended the taken-for-granted neutrality of public space. Later on, it also stimulated a resistance that led to activist agendas and ultimately to the landmined PC mentality of identity politics. Bourne's vision of America as a nation of many strong cultures could ultimately be a recipe for political disaster (as it has been in the Balkans), but it is achievable microculturally. Rodriguez's solution, to take away from people what can't be taken away—their identity—and replace it with whatever gives us presence in public space, was an attempt to substitute crab apples for oranges.

Nothing could have been further from the European avant garde experience than that of Roth and Rodriguez. The School of Paris successfully attacked the larger world with eccentric individual vision and style, not the other way around. Ambitious European outsiders like the Fauvist painters didn't need mass support—they could arm themselves with theories and produce manifestos to justify their surprising art. They established themselves through the strength and definiteness of their ideas, which needed to resonate only in a few appropriate places in their class-structured world to achieve a degree of security and recognition.

In America, by contrast, the Fauvists would have had trouble registering. As a fascinated and somewhat alarmed de Tocqueville put it in the early nineteenth century, “No longer do ideas, but interests only, form the links between men, and it would seem that human opinions were no more than a sort of mental dust open to the wind on every side and unable to come together and take shape.” In the New World, dissenting thought, even robust social experiments, would arise but tended to disappear, leaving scarcely a trace. Commenting further on the way ideas lost their status in the American climate and were replaced by the power of consensus, de Tocqueville wrote that “the idea of rights inherent in certain individuals is rapidly disappearing from the minds of men; the idea of the omnipotence of the authority at large rises to fill its place.” In a rather chilling assessment of these developments, the historian John Patrick Diggins, author of *The Lost Soul of American Politics*, has written that “society [was forming] as a self-regulating entity whose laws operated not only independently of the political state but [was] held together by unconscious needs and desires, society as something alien to the self.” Rodriguez’s violent self-cleansing was performed in the name of this society.

Early vanguardists were required to enter our society of strangers and create an aesthetic to fit, not challenge, the vast, neutrally-defined arena of public space. Abstract Expressionism sought to move the capital of world art from Paris to New York. But to be a Frenchman in Paris, the hub of centralized French politics and culture, is to be at the center of a cultural orchestration that never misses a beat. From Alsace to Normandy, identity in this Herdorean universe is simply a fact; each Frenchman’s political and cultural birthright, locally and nationally, are seamlessly one.

To watch a busy Paris street is to watch a rhythm. The processes of acculturation are profound—so profound that a French painter’s own taste could become the national style, as Jean Renoir reports his father’s did. By comparison, New York City has rhythm, but not a rhyme: it is always thrilling to come back to the city after an absence and with a fresh eye encounter the unanticipatable melee of styles that a New York street affords—a near chaos in which each citizen is working out his own pursuit of happiness in his own way and at his own pace, just trying not to bump into anyone else. The Founding Fathers, who bestowed on us the right to the pursuit of happiness, left the individual relatively disconnected and without context. The early removal of the capital of the country to out-of-the-way Washington, D.C., to preserve the federal government from local political

influences, cut the individual off from a sense of participation in central decision-making, leaving an apolitical, unmoored citizenry and making federal power seem remote and irrelevant to local interests. Abstract art played a significant role in the expansion of idealized public space. The European tradition of an art that established niches and boundaries needed to be transformed into an art of identification in which boundaries dissolve. The two traditions are profoundly different: the former often involves respect for what you can't identify with. When in the nineteenth century Oscar Wilde addressed American coal miners wearing velvet knee britches and they cheered him, Wilde's audience was accepting, not identifying with him. When the identity of a community is secure enough, as in Herder's universe, it is possible for it to accept an alien element, as the coal miners accepted Wilde for his guts, his performance, and his britches. When gay theater, the most original theater in the 1960s heyday of Off-Off-Broadway, finally emerged from midnight, out-of-the-way performances, it engaged in a debate about self-presentation. The decision was made by key players like Charles Ludlam and the general gay community that their theater should not publicly formulate its aesthetic and worldview as one openly different from heterosexual theater's, but present itself more as an already included, attractive ethnic group, as in, "There's a little Italian in each of us." The proffer of identification, unlike that of acceptance, means that the audience is being offered more social and personal space to expand into. This form of art, which expands public space, helps explain why in America cultural innovations that start out with considerable character rapidly turn into mere trends once the move toward "the center" is made. The center, rather than being a location equidistant from two extremes, as is invariably represented, is actually a loose puddle that erodes structures which express character.

Abstract Expressionism was well on its way to a rendezvous with public space long before the gay theater. Its avatars too had their own strategies. In a world where society itself pre-empted alienation, the alienation of the artist, foundation of the European avant garde, couldn't register. So would-be American vanguardists did not attack their equivalent of the bourgeoisie—the middle class—but worked to convince Americans that modern art was not as far from middle class interests as provincial reactions of rejection might lead one to think. The author of *How New York Stole the Idea of Painting*, Serge Guilbaut, noted that in 1943, in an effort to help gain acceptance for their painterly convictions, two painters—Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb—wrote to *The New York Times* to explain that their movement (Abstract Surrealism, which was to become Abstract Expressionism) sought

“simple expressions of complex thoughts.” Their ambition—to field a “just us folks” version of abstract art—is telling. First, as an aesthetic posture, it’s more than a little condescending—a hypocritical tone invites the audience to participate in its own dumbing down. Second, their formula may set a limit on accomplishment—in a discipline like art, whose high achievers have always been famously single-minded, a calculating preoccupation with packaging complexity to look simple risks having marketing considerations interfere with artistic interests. Practically, however, Gottleib and Rothko weren’t misguided; they were merely seeking to broach an American resistance toward abstract work whose intensity sometimes masked a certain empathy. As an example of backhanded appreciation, consider the words of a disapproving Chicago critic who wrote of Duchamps’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*: that “it looks like an Omaha lumberyard in the tornado season”—a brilliantly empathetic image that suggests the painting had struck home. But even when abstract painting struck a responsive chord, the road to acceptance was rugged.

Abstract Expressionism overcame these obstacles by changing the tentative explorations of Abstract Surrealism into an intellectually unthreatening form that Americans could identify with—painting that emphasizes itself as an act (in fact dubbed Action Painting by the critic Harold Rosenberg). A material gesture in paint is an incontestable material fact that could serve as the simple expression Rothko and Gottleib sought. Difficult to unpack and as incontestable as a small avalanche, gesture could compellingly stand as a force whose literal actuality could override and mask whatever it carried along. Action Painting’s immediacies, in other words, grow from an impressively physical style that foreclosed interpretation while encapsulating the emotive resonance of the broken-surface brushstroke of, for instance, Rembrandt, Velazquez and Rubens. These seventeenth century painters confirmed and celebrated the European tradition that the freely released painterly gesture can bear with it not just material, but feeling. The European painterly gesture created elements of an image into which feeling had been infused by virtue of the hand of the artist, expressing, sometimes miraculously, both his body and his mind. In this way, the School of New York, offering the same tradition in a wholesale form, in an instant stroke delivered to the emptiness of public space the fullness of culture.¹

¹ The Abstract Expressionists had major differences, and statements about the movement may not apply equally—or at all—to every painter. (Hans Hofmann, in his preservation

The contradictions inherent in this posture were as massive as the paintings themselves, since it was a question whether painterly values could be detached from European contexts hardly reflected in American experience. For the most part, the American aesthetic for which physicality is deliberately central, for instance, is a hand-me-down from the era of the Genteel Society in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when, as Santayana observed, men took on the bully work—continent taming, exploring and building a great nation and great business empires—“The House of Will,” as he put it—while women, in control of manners and morals, controlled the arts and writing—“The House of Culture.”

In the nineteenth century the thought and writing of the American Renaissance bloomed with Emerson and his contemporaries, and the rise of magazines, as the more softly surfaced Genteel Tradition began to rule in place of earlier, male-oriented Calvinism. Though the majority of the new voices were still male, men in the new context experienced frustration over the difficulties of putting forward any aesthetic that expressed male roles and a male authority that shared characteristics with the purposive Calvinist model. Complaining about the imperviousness of American cultural thought to critique, Henry James, a beneficiary of the new climate and himself preeminently genteel, writing in frustration in *The Speech and Manner of American Women*, complained that this unapproachable style of cultural authority

defies the criticism and the criticism, gasping at the impunity, is reduced to the impotence of the traveler, waiting, carpet bag of notes in hand, at a by-station, for the train that whizzes past without stopping. Whence the wondrous vicious circle—the train ignorant of a goal, but never so much as slowing up, the traveler conscious of a mission, but never so much as making a dash. Whence, in other words, the rare perfection of the impunity, assured *in advance* of the non-intervention of criticism.

of the German color tradition, was most in a class by himself.) For the purposes of this essay, de Kooning is in the forefront.

American male writers of the day—Twain, Thoreau, and Melville, who were also beneficiaries of the new society—were frustrated and reactively wrote books in which women have no place (Huck Finn has no mother; *Moby Dick* is virtually womanless). *Moby Dick*, a masterpiece, was an early project of wounded masculinity, which itself became an aesthetic as the struggle to make art out of the man's cultural portion of triumphal, often physical work went on in the writing of Hemingway and a multitude of others. Abstract Expressionism, an art movement that barely included women and fielded a massive, violent art with concealed content, eminently belongs to this tradition.

With their unfancy housepainter's brushes and Duco, the Abstract Expressionists associated themselves with everyday blue collar journeymen and their unexceptional materials, appropriating a democratic status that seemed to bypass complex ideas and was very different from the status European movements derived from structured thought. Abstract Expressionists, who were often indifferent to the impermanence of their materials, abjured the craftsmanship whose skills had conferred traditional status on objects in Europe. In America, the values of the craft tradition, suitable for limited production of articles of quality, were obliterated by the need for objects in quantity and the pressures of technological change—the American designer of clipper ships, when asked why his vastly superior vessels weren't put together with greater care and so didn't last, answered that it was because builders knew that within a few years even better-designed ships would be replacing them. The continent's apparently endless resources promised a vast flow of unspecified materiality that could be directed to manufacture whatever object was desired. This river of fluid materiality was the New World's democratic response to the crafted, niche-creating status object, and it was to this vast potentiality that Abstract Expressionism turned, rather than to the precision and specialized knowledge of the craftsman.

One all-important aspect of the new role of the artist as unintellectual aesthetic athlete was Abstract Expressionism's near total abdication to critics. In absolute contradiction to the tradition of the European avant garde, whose members were in control of their own theoretical destiny and were witty, sharp-tongued and feared, Abstract Expressionists handed over their voices to critics, especially to Clement Greenberg. An arts impresario almost without peer, Greenberg wrote for *The Partisan Review* and worked in the 1930s, '40s and '50s to make America the center of advanced abstract art, engineering, as Guilbaut has described, the shift from the School of Paris to the School of

New York. But the demand on artists to represent themselves—a group of mature men who had mastered one of the most difficult disciplines of the century—as exuberantly witless, if occasionally oracular, cowboys, was only one of several sleights of hand required.

Given the differences between Paris and New York, Greenberg had his work cut out for him in creating a marketplace for American abstract painting (which had been frozen out by European work), leveraging the leap from third-rate to world leader status in painting and displacing the French-oriented galleries that then reigned in New York City. First, he winnowed the number of artists to be called Abstract Expressionists, much as Dutch explorers when they discovered a Pacific island of nutmeg trees immediately cut down three-quarters of them, ensuring the scarcity that a strong market requires. (For instance, an artist named Janet Sobel made drip paintings before Pollock, which the artist saw and admired—and though Greenberg admitted they were the first “allover” paintings, he pruned her from the canon.) He also insisted, in the very political aftermath of the Depression, that the artists divest their work of political intentions. Then he put abstraction on a weight-loss program that roughly paralleled the one endured by American women since WWII. On this artistic journey, art would shed its “expendable conventions”—all components of a painting that did not point to its material elements as paint and canvas—in order to arrive at a perfect, irreducible, inherent flatness. Using technical language to apply this highly selective reading of European aesthetic developments that began with Cézanne (“I am the primitive of a new art”), Greenberg claimed to be able to identify the steps to the ideal of flatness that he advanced as painting’s all and everything.

In doing so he designed a historicist criticism that, like the stance Henry James complained about, was able to bypass and ignore the content of individual works—the sites on which painterly value is actually created. In contemporary formalist criticism, the critic Leo Steinberg wrote, “The criterion for significant progress remains a kind of design technology subject to one compulsive direction: the treatment of ‘the whole surface as a single undifferentiated field of interest’. . . there is rarely a hint of expressive purpose, nor recognition that pictures function in human experience.”

Easter Monday

The School of New York can be said to divide into three parts, the more buttoned-up, “uptown” artists (Gottlieb, Motherwell, Rothko, and Newman), the “downtown,” bohemian-seeming expressiveness of de Kooning, Kline, Gorky, and Pollock, and the explosive, color-saturated work of Hans Hofmann, who wedded the German painting tradition to American abstraction. Willem de Kooning was the most central figure of the downtown group and probably the painter who most justified the movement’s second defining term, “Expressionism.” De Kooning’s *Easter Monday*, painted in 1955-56, has shallow space, powerful brushstrokes made with housepainter’s brushes, traces of newsprint, and ranks with masterworks of the School of Paris. It is deeply anti-conventional in its indifference to elements that hold a painting together, like internal reverberations and echoings of color and shape; de Kooning’s painting not only doesn’t cultivate such connective harmonies, but seems to turn against them. The openness and vulnerability of the painting seem to contribute to a mood of ambivalence, even apathy. It is a powerful and physical performance somehow laced with torpor.

Easter Monday, as if it were made of debris and litter, the continuous grinding of impacting edges and pulverizing pressure, seems to suggest that in the gutters of the urban mind all consciousness is degradable. It is, incidentally, an extremely difficult painting to hold in memory, in all likelihood because the principles of its formation seem to violate principles of coherence that help us recognize landmarks and make the world seem familiar.

A painting by de Kooning can brim with assertions which never quite reach the level of full articulation; the energy and tension of the work come out of a ferment that generates an almost insurrectionary overtone of part to whole. We would anticipate imminent riots were it not for the densely shifting connections which recalesce just in time to avert bloody hell, but which offer no more sense of permanent coalition than flotsam. In fact, there seems to be an unusual relation between the energy of the surface and the passivity of its elements. *Easter Monday* recalls Bourne’s earlier, rather black vision of aspects of America, which he said, are “centrifugal, anarchical. They make for detached fragments of people. . . . they become the flotsam and jetsam of American life, the downward tow of our civilization . . . the cultural wreckage of our time . . . America has as yet no impelling integrating force. It makes too easily for the detritus of cultures. In our loose, free country, no constraining national purpose, no tenacious folk tradition and folkstyle hold the people to a line.”

Easter Monday manifests an extraordinary American artistic vision, an accomplishment of the first order even though it offers us no way to cope with the condition it creates beyond a relentless jockeying and parrying. Much of its greatness, and for that matter the power of Abstract Expressionism's high aesthetic, comes from faith in American ideals—like its use of the material as a metaphor and a medium for universal, egalitarian sharing. De Kooning's work shows us how painting that embraces and embodies the character of a remarkable society can achieve great art, however peculiar that society's limits and the strictures placed on artists; if Abstract Expressionism, like *Moby Dick*, has at its heart a tragic misconception, it is not one that barred the production of masterpieces.

Abstract Expressionism's aesthetic of what-you-feel/see-is-what-you-get can't help but involve a kind of oblivion. For the benefit of Everyone, the artist, as a somebody and as a class, was to surrender his or her irritating separation, which normally has been sustained by insider knowledge about the means, history and tradition of the practice of painting. The cost of Abstract Expressionism's appearing to relate so directly to the public, as if Greenberg's dictatorship of the aesthetic proletariat had already succeeded, is that it circumvented the reality of the special knowledge, traditions and even the existence of the artistic communities from which painting springs. This more direct relation to the viewer was occasionally asserted in various ways by different artists, who attempted to articulate the authority of their art. Their comments stood, if without much force, against the historical imperative promoted by Greenberg's criticism. Greenberg might be guiding painting toward ultimate simplification graspable by all, but he was doing so by manipulating the esoteric technicalities of historical aesthetic process. In his resistance to critical authority, Rothko could sound wistful ("I'm not an abstractionist . . . I'm not interested in the relationship of color or form or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on. And that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions. . . ."); Newman fielded muscular and feisty bluster (the artist declared that he preferred questions about content, which he called "subject matter," to those about technical fact, which he dubbed "object matter"); and de Kooning's defense of his deeply contradictory style was magisterial (he had, he dismissively said, no interest in "abstracting or taking things out or reducing painting to design, form, line and color").



Willem de Kooning, *Easter Monday*
1955-56; 96" x 74"



Willem de Kooning, *Woman I.*
1950-52; 76" x 58"

The idea that a triumph over our external enemies in World War II was to be followed by a triumphant struggle within our own culture that transformed the discomfort of our own alienation was a uniquely American fantasy—a notion that Melville, for one, would have appreciated. With the artist as a touchstone and exorcist, the alienation of the artist could substitute for the alienation of the society. Unfortunately, the social alienation of public space only superficially resembles that of the individual.

We can see the results of this confounding in the ambivalent *Woman* paintings of de Kooning, executed with characteristics that appear at first glance to be the essence of individual alienation: impassioned brushwork, powerful color, exaggerated emotion, obsession with the subject. De Kooning, however, especially in this series of paintings, remained locked in the bounds of public space, rather than seeing his own alienation through, and he specifically rejected catharsis. To challenge catharsis as the engine of a too-comfortable humanistic art is understandable; to reject connection is not. Catharsis remains a part of the process by which individuality comes to terms

with its own alienation. There is no entity, after all, to be made whole in the realm of public space, and no one's humanity to confirm; de Kooning's Women paintings (which should rank high among the projects of wounded masculinity) have much heat but little warmth. In this they are entirely different from the works of one of de Kooning's masters, Soutine, who (by Greenberg's account) used paint with a powerful physical expressivity that makes a positive, even Rembrandtian connection with the subject. In de Kooning's Women paintings, by contrast, the emotionally violent painterly releases are combined with a *lack* of connection or identification with the subject. De Kooning's deep knowledge of painterly traditions notwithstanding, the alarming image keeps looking not like a vision of humanity that has achieved emotional reality, but like the portrait of a panic attack that is not being dealt with.

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, behind which Picasso is reported to have sat on a chair for three days "in horrible moral isolation," embodies the fruit of individual alienation—daring risk, idiosyncratic vision that reveals a challenging and surprising version of reality, a need to visibly connect with the past (if only in reaction) and to reconcile vastly different forces (in this case the psychological power of African masks, the classical nude that echoes through the treatment of the figures, the Mannerist skies of El Greco); it also shows a desire to arrive at completion and closure. Public space lacks a context for fathoming the urgency of the artist's need to make contact with traditions, or the meaning of a statement like Kafka's that the artist's work should be "the axe that destroys the frozen sea within us." The works of public space, in other words, like the artist in a recent exhibition who shows himself idly drinking a Coke before Buchenwald, can't entirely grasp the character of crisis or morality. Warhol's electric-chair and suicide paintings reassure the consumer society that no matter what human horror threatens, Pop's aesthetic quotation marks can restore the interests of the consumer to center stage.

Abstract Expressionism stabilized, if at an ultimate price for some of its members, as an unrepeatable moment in art, forming a fulcrum between two worlds—Europe and America—and two epochs (the mid-20th century and previous abstraction). But in practical terms, what it had to offer would be confined to its own generation. The Abstract Expressionists were terrible parents.

The Sixties and After

What became of this uniquely American movement over the next decades? Something quite strange: in the early 1960s, without explanation, American culture began its 90-degree turn into Pop Art. For the many serious younger artists whose artistic life was bound up with Abstract Expressionism—and most serious young artists in New York City then were—it was as if, without any public announcement, a large cruise ship bound for the Riviera suddenly began steaming toward Nome. Astonishingly, the movement that put America on the art map simply dropped away after one generation. Although its artists continued to work and their paintings appreciated in value enormously, they left no path, and showing space for Abstract Expressionist-influenced art began to dry up.

Abstract Expressionism's abrupt short-circuiting was due both to the working out of Greenberg's legacy, and the Faustian bargain the movement made with his theory. Greenberg's reasoning masked several fault lines—to begin with, the extreme heterogeneousness of the movement's members, who, because of differing artistic intentions, would not have been called a movement anywhere else in the world. Thanks to Greenberg's suppleness and determination, that issue never even came up. His theories also conveniently skirted issues of vanguard obligations on which they reneged (for example, conforming to the standards of reigning power, democratic or otherwise—though their swagger and intransigence always made them seem rebellious). Politically, his doctrine, claiming to shape painting's march to its ideal state, retained Marxist elements that he deliberately concealed as the country geared up for the Cold War. Guilbaut noted the strong links between Greenberg's theories and

the powerful Marxist movement of the 1930s, to the crisis of Marxism, and finally to the complete disintegration of Marxism in the 1940s. . . . Greenbergian formalism was born from those Stalinist-Trotskyite ideological battles, the disillusionment of the American left, and the de-Marxification of the N.Y. intellectual.

That many of the artists developed in a leftist context was rarely mentioned. Abstract Expressionism's burden of obscurity was heavy.

The surrender of Abstract Expressionism's artistic critical voice to theoretical handlers was a disaster. Failure to coherently express its artists' views contributed to the suppression of similar ideas in the next generation. And while Abstract Expressionism's strategy of injecting a kind of orphaned high art without name or reference into public space was effective, the shock tended over time to wear off. As the '60s approached, even Greenberg could not alter the fact that his theory of "expendable conventions" had run out of gas. An art was about to appear for which the purity of the physical act would be irrelevant. In December 1959, Frank Stella presented a largish canvas with regularly spaced dark diagonal black stripes at MOMA. The work was applauded by Greenberg's critical acolytes. With artists now recast as "practitioners," the "vanguard" had turned into scribes whose mind experiments formulated reductive theories and decided which paintings fit them. Ultimately, these critics would insist that their prescriptions were not just guidelines for art practice but were in some sense art itself.

Or such was their fantasy. While it is impossible to say what art is or predict what it will be, we can make one rule for what art is not: when you get no more from a description of a painting than you do from the painting, it falls short (Stella's painting fell short of art, a blank canvas also isn't art). Greenberg the art critic, who spoke often of "quality" and would anoint a painting with a cryptic "It's good," knew this perfectly well, but Greenberg the art-theoretical *macher* had to accept his own logic, even though it had led painting to the dead end of literalism. He theorized that Colorfield painting was the successor to Abstract Expressionism, but his absolutist reign was over, and Greenberg was sidelined.

Aesthetics of the American Center

A neutral arena for public encounter is so necessary for our ethnically varied mass society that it deserved to be better protected, even from the ambitions of its champions. But American victory in World War II and the Cold War's fierce competition so intensified the urge toward an assimilationist make-over that this aspect of our culture took on imperial overtones; in 1961 the social critic Dwight MacDonal characterized the new American center:

Masscult is a dynamic, revolutionary force, breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, and taste, dissolving all cultural distinctions. . . . For the process destroys all values,

since value-judgments require discrimination, an ugly word in liberal-democratic America. Masscult is very, very democratic; it refuses to discriminate against or between anything or anybody.

Greenberg's theoretical arrogance, minus his love of quality, was communicated to the Minimalists. Donald Judd simply dismissed past art—his work, he said, entailed “getting rid of the things that people used to think were essential to art,” and “all the structure, values, feeling of the whole European tradition. It suits me fine if that's all down the drain.” To Minimalist theorists and many of their contemporaries among the dizzying array of movelets—OP, Pop, Pattern, etc.—the implicit connection of Abstract Expressionism with European advanced painting had become irrelevant. Robert Morris wrote that “the sensuous object, resplendent with compressed internal relations,” the result of a process of artistic empathy that empowered an artist like Renoir when he sat before his subject, whether a nude or a bouquet, “has got to be rejected.” Some Minimalists, it should be said, like Tony Smith and Anthony Caro, exhibited work with a broader, more complex and engaging aesthetic. But with Judd and Morris's new, openly negative vanguard, which aggressively defined itself more by what it wasn't than by what it was, the art scene engaged with what could be called a Public Space Movement.

If every art movement seeks its own audience by selectively cultivating some aspect of the fluid, morphologically varied individual persona, then at the heart of the Minimalist universe dwells the normative self. Judd and Morris's choice, the quotidian, unremarkable normative self— Minimalism's definition of order was “just one thing after another,” practically a definition of the normative—was an original one. Ubiquitous and unsung except in focus-group circles and by market researchers, our normative capacities, necessarily on auto-pilot and not derailed by thought or sunsets, had never been grist for an aesthetic; they are designated merely to effectively get us through daily tasks, from reaching for the OJ to dealing with insurance documents. Tamped-down subjectivity allows us when in person-as-statistic mode to move fluidly through the crowd; such normative preeminence, which art and especially the avant garde classically challenge, wavers as soon as it loses its focus. Morris's Minimalist prescriptions train the viewer to preserve the sense of routine.

Of course subjectivity plays out in all human situations, but it plays out differently; in public we are more buttoned-down and guarded. But if, by virtue of a condition everyone automatically fulfills—physicality—the normative self could ignore art's challenges and become art's constant and unchallenged subject, Morris's "non-personal or public mode" would expand mightily. Behind such expansive social friendliness, to which an aesthetic such as Morris's contributed, lay a rather aggressive spirit. Claiming to overflow all boundaries, it became programmatically impervious to culturally dissenting voices within the indefiniteness that summed itself up as the American middle class. The wave of narcissism that swept over American arts and letters (Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself* was published in 1959) for forty years persisted so long because it supported the process with an insouciant accommodation posing as dissent and dressed in sporty radical clothes.

The ideas that accompanied the idealized melding of American society may not have brought the art scene to the pinnacle of art history, but came close to establishing one landmark: world-historical mindlessness. On the high end, critics, mostly in the universities, were conducting an art dialogue of such rarefied acceleration that artists might well have thought, as some did, that to paint they needed first to master Kant and then set forth on the slippery slopes of deconstruction. On the other end, art that asserted a degree of separation from social pressures encountered a sea of feeble, uncritical opinion that swamped serious thought. There was no way—echoing Henry James, one might say no occasion—to contest, explain or demur; many culturally oriented intellectuals, convinced that the field of engagement had moved from the canvas to the domain of their own thoughts, were content to let the market be the test of ideas. The function of galleries was to intrigue a curious, often barely involved audience that was shopping for spectacle but was also hoping that the rumor that their personal lives were being enhanced was true. Rivers of money were pouring into the art scene, and for artists to be granted a stall at the art market was to be granted validity, period—the vision of salesmen needed no other standard. Art also fit well into the age of therapy, as one more mode of expansion for the citizen consumer. Internationally, American art encouraged other cultures to believe that the most insignificantly minor and trivial aspects of their lives, soup cans for example, elevated to the iconic, were every bit as important as the pleasures and tribulations of the kings and saints whom art once commemorated.

Despite the continuing enthusiasm of the curators of major American museums, in terms of any implicit claim to be the cutting force of history, the

aesthetics of Dwight MacDonald's Masscult have expired. As a *New York Times* art critic wrote in April 2002,

What little good can be said about the 2002 Whitney Biennial has been said. It has been called noble, eclectic, generous and inclusive—not inaccurate characterizations from certain angles. But the latest version of this major showcase of American art is also bleak, pious, naïve, monotonous, isolated and isolating.

This assessment suggests that if the Whitney curators were looking for art that in any sense still honors avant garde ideals, they didn't know where, or perhaps how, to look. But the exhaustion of officially sanctioned advanced trends is only one marker of an era's end. The resistance to admitting the existence of repressive and limiting boundaries within our society has been idealistic and understandable, but by the late '90s, really, the unraveling of the aesthetic behind an all-inclusive expansiveness was complete. The social structures that supported it were no longer there:

- The American middle class has no longer been expanding, but shrinking, as rapidly mounting disparities in income reveal a class system. We are galloping toward oligarchy. To protect itself the middle class will openly define standards and make exclusions (of many kinds—standardized tests, for instance), which cancel the universality that the indefiniteness of middle class boundaries was intended to sustain.
- The generation of the '30s and '40s, which championed the virtues of idealized public space and brought to the table—and to the Depression and World War II—a desperate energy to succeed and a way to set the American stage, has now passed. Its views and strategies look as dated as an Odets play.
- Pure populist values, valid as they may be, have failed to include everybody. Specifically, though it enthusiastically made use of black and gay mores and attitudes to recharge the blankness of the cultural center, American middle class omniverousness has only been able to partially digest the interests and the identities of blacks and gays. Serious limitations also continue to be placed on women's interests.

- The blithe assumption that all people and cultures want to be like Americans, and the effort to include them by acting oblivious to their stated differences is increasingly risky in a world of dangerous realities. We have to understand people whose outlook is different from our own.
- New immigrant cultures are not being broken down, or are only partially going through the Rothian dynamic. Their home cultures are only an airflight or e-mail message away, and new cultural forms are necessary for their assimilation.

Re: Bourne

It . . . becomes easier to see that . . . some artists have carried on trying to do what the first generation of Abstract Expressionists attempted: they have tried to find the forms through which they could bear witness to lived experience with its present pleasures, frustrations and potentialities. . . . when the surveys of modern American art are written, the art-historical tree is pruned in such a way that they are eliminated. . . . the true history of art in postwar America is yet to be written.

—Peter Fuller

That Abstract Expressionism was an implosion, curling away from the future as well as the past, was revealed in the issue of succession: Diana Crane's *The Transformation of the Avant Garde*, published in 1987, chronologically charts Pop, Minimalism, Figurative, Photorealism, and Pattern. (Colorfield should be added, and why not throw in Trash painting like Schnabel's?) The succession of small movements that followed Abstract Expressionism's ascendancy, and the critical ink on which they floated, seemed made to illustrate Yeats's canny observation that "reality is not logical but can be made to seem so if logical refutations are discovered of the writer or movement going out of fashion." Nowhere in Crane's book is there any indication of Abstract Expressionism's most obvious successor—a line of exploratory abstract painting investigating abstraction in the expressive tradition of the School of New York; as the polar opposite of Minimalism, it could be termed Maximalism (today it could be referred to as the "Slow Painting Movement," like Slow Food and Slow Cities).

Crane, however, was responding only to lines of painting that fit the culture of public space. These movements, where they drew critical attention of any substance, were often supported by the same academically oriented critics who continued to address art issues as if they were philosophical arguments, usually against a historicist background that displaced or ignored the role of the individual artist and ruled out expressive content.

In an unusual article in *The New Republic* in October 1992, the art critic Jed Perl spoke of the collapse of the American art community, pointing out that in the past art and artistic standards have been maintained by the relationship between the “private art” world shared by artists and the “public art” world which more directly creates the art economy and reputations. (“In the studios of New York—and, for all I know, across the country—artists in their 30s and 40s and 50s and 60s are making the incremental developments that are what art is all about. . . . The support system of galleries and grants and collectors and curators and publications that makes it possible for artist to have slow-developing, serious careers is in a state of near total collapse. . . . There is simply no longer a support structure that nourishes these incremental developments.”) Perl believes that “as the public art world has become self-perpetuating, the private art world has become increasingly isolated, fragmented, frozen . . .”

To paint in a non-homogenous culture with egalitarian ideals is a messy proposition; aesthetic values aren’t particularly concerned with fairness. Most aesthetic values are by definition shared within particular groups and are, however informally, institution-creating, since values establish choice and hierarchy, and this can always be interpreted as unfairness—but what, for art, can be the alternative? Despite its inegalitarian aspects, we inevitably see with our values—and therein lies the value of seeing. Artists who have made a success in the content-undifferentiated contexts of public art as Perl defined it have often fielded art that works *against* openly displayed value, as does that of David Salle, the leading “post-modern” painter of the ’80s. One Salle admirer, Janet Malcolm, saw his work as “an art that refuses to be any one thing or to find any one thing more interesting, beautiful, or significant than another.”

Salle’s painting, which can look peculiarly tepid to other viewers for its very choicelessness and lack of passion, Malcolm declared to be a “melancholy art of fragments, quotations, absences” with “an appearance of mysterious, almost preternatural originality,” even though “nothing in it is new,

everything has had a previous life elsewhere—in master paintings, advertising art, comics, photographs.” This is an original use of the word original: Salle’s is different from the startling originality of El Greco, for instance, who, with genius, wedded two very different traditions, the iconic and the Spanish. The effectiveness of Salle’s art, its ability to surf what Salle termed “the din of the moment,” lies in the contrast of its deceptively undefined qualities to the more characterizable work of his contemporaries, which then look passé to Malcolm. Of course the shelf life of such art lasts only as long as it takes for familiarity to set in. We can’t help but contrast El Greco with other painters, admiringly, but not because his work diminishes, eliminates or replaces theirs. Broadening and intensifying Malcolm’s kind of quest, Leo Steinberg in his essay “Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Audience” attempted to canonize painting that treats human and aesthetic values negatively (his example is Jasper Johns’s *Target Painting*, which casually chops off the tops of a row of heads), for the purpose of divorcing from them. He declares that the resulting shock in the mind of a knowledgeable viewer creates a valuable sense of dread—but then so does bankruptcy.

Even when not being so obliquely or directly hostile to values, other critics, like Arthur Danto, focusing on the logical outcomes of artistic trends and history as they see it, have been unsympathetic to the process of slow development Perl describes as sustaining art. By itself critical analysis is a powerful tool, but can become an arid, unfriendly environment for the contexts of intimacy that contribute real value to art. And when (despite Mailer’s wish-fulfillment remark that “Democracy is culture”) an accomplished and idealistic liberal society fails to admit that it can’t satisfy its hunger for a rich psychic existence through direct pursuit of its own conscious goals and its sense of justice, an acute sense of starvation amid plenty can result. (Such is the undernote sounded throughout Trilling’s melancholy *The Liberal Imagination*.) Far from isolating experience and demanding an ever more purely physical aesthetic (Sontag’s “Against Interpretation” comes to mind), an art that can entertain suggestiveness, even seduction, is closer to desire and its goals than the relentless definition and stripping away of affect that our society compulsively associates with freedom and truth.

Yet as Fuller protested, art with the contrasting values of Maximalism has consistently been produced over the last forty years—and it has sought, without special drama, to grow into itself and move art forward. It would be tempting to pick among Maximalists with a list of examples from back when

to now—say, Alan Kleiman, Ray Spillenger, George Dennison, Angelo Ippolito, John Evans, Liz Yamin, Peggy Jane Smith, Lieby Miedema, Jan Sunderland, Nancy Storrow, Larry Warshaw, Marty Greenbaum, Kim Tieger, Nora Kersh (and one could go on)—but any one list can't be typical of Maximalism's many scarcely known painters, who as a whole seem to function something like a network of participants in a SETI-like operation; geographically separated though they may be and different as their solutions may be, the consistency of the problems they work on turns out to be surprising. We can't catalog with much accuracy the themes of artists we don't, as Peter Fuller pointed out, even know about, but we can make a prediction—that Maximal art will turn out to have been interested in personal as well as formal discovery, seeking to extend and comprehend abstraction through an art of exploration and play, and that it built on precedents *and* innovation. (For instance, the painterly impulses of Arshile Gorky, informed by the traditions of the past and reaching toward flight on a flat surface, introduced a warm abstraction that grew out of an intimate frame of mind and his unabashed identification with the artistic traditions of his native Armenia.) As Peter Schimmel wrote about the Abstract Surrealist model that has frequently been the jumping-off place for Maximalists, they worked with

a multifaceted, multi-perspectival space in which images of the unconscious, the sublime, the primordial and the sexual could be suspended. . . . The figure/ground relationship was constantly explored and a tension created between the linear elements that rest on the surface and the vague illusion of a third dimension. . . interweaving line and color, foreground and background in a metaphorically rich primordial brew."

Maximal art doesn't offer itself as the solution to the problems of the century. It isn't opera, chanting, sculpture, sociology or an ethics class. It does value pleasure. What especially fueled Maximalist art at its outset at the end of the '50s was the fact that beneath the relatively taut skin of its well-run commercial networks, post-war America was a cultural free-for-all with many competing groups and zero orchestration. The United States had arrived at the pinnacle of nations. For the first time, a plurality of its citizens contemplated lifestyles that had previously been the province of playboys. America was waking up to the possibilities of life free of WASP repression, and to be a Maximalist was to sense that as a culture America was a global village in pieces that needed to be sifted through and put together, patiently

and by organic process, by synthesis and cultural bridge-building, in a Bournean spirit.

At the beginning of the '60s, a page had turned in the book of Modernism: for artists entering early adulthood, abstraction was in no imaginable way an act of rebellion against long-vanished bourgeois reality, and, no matter how much art critics demanded it in order to make an impression on readers, little valid ground remained for the drama, claims and swagger of breakthrough art. No one knew what abstraction divested of rebellion could mean or be—was it necessarily neutral and technical, or could it be as hot as a nude draped over a lusty bull? Was abstraction suited to reach out to the global feast that anthropology had revealed? What would be the final destiny for the abstract ideas created by the School of Paris?

The problems might be daunting, the palette vast, and the precedents few, but the prospects were great. Even taking into account the appeal that self-isolation had for Abstract Expressionism, so great was the promise of the era that the movement's infertility and (nearly uniquely among significant art movements) its failure to bond with young artists who sought to develop its expressive content remains mysterious.

For the full art that public space can't produce, much less sustain, we need forms that are complex, split, double, that connect overarching American mores with our many cultural communities, freeing public space from the damaging burden of claiming to be everything for everyone. Maximalist paintings poke around, establish surfaces in the absence of pressure (a nearly insurrectionary act in America), and even challenge Maximal painterly intentions. While it may invite analysis, Maximalist work seems to also call for critical language shaped, like that of wine aficionados, to communicate sensory experience.

Art that caters to the normative, aside from risking sycophancy, too greatly narrows imaginative realities that, by definition, aren't normative. Whether or not art harbors elements of representation is a red herring—Hofmann's great abstractions, among others, have taught us how our immediate grasp of the visual world can become the basis for a mature abstract art—abstraction doesn't necessarily begin by rejecting what we think we see. Maximal art over time is capable of establishing viable new artistic conventions, in pursuit of a spirit that was, sunnily and curiously and at a moment of pressure when his career was flagging, well expressed by David Salle: "To go against the tidal

wave of literalism and literal-mindedness—to insist on and *live* the life of the imagination . . . to be the experience, instead of pointing to it . . . to have and give *access to feeling*.” Salle’s naked, if boilerplate, expression of optimism about what lies at the heart of painting describes the very spirit that his style of painting attempted to freeze—the embalmed quality of his work triggered excitement in some post-modern minds because of its imprisonment of content. For these critics the attraction was hardly aesthetic: Salle’s art offered the charm as well as the structure of a hand grenade.

Mature work establishes a less hidden relation to an artistic optimism that may not be voluntary and not in the power of the artist to withhold: an optimism that blooms whenever the hand of the artist handles the materials of art. The impasses of art in the face of the radically open artistic possibilities of our time means that our lease on the models through which we expressed that optimism and the myths it gives rise to has expired. But the prolonged delay in the reformulation and discovery of new models isn’t entirely the fault of the artists. Art doesn’t go on in a vacuum; the developing kind of work that Salle so enthusiastically if belatedly endorsed has crucially lacked support in American culture. In fact, confirming Jed Perl’s fears, the forty-year combination of market forces and Cold War ambitions, along with a mighty boost from deconstruction and Marxist criticism, may have desiccated the landscape of art so thoroughly that repair is very difficult.

Over the last few years theorists lost control; we have been left with a welter of unrelated art styles that, added together, approach William Empson’s definition of democratic art: “One note each and the tune goes out free.” Unfortunately, even good painting when stripped of context may turn into mere cultural litter—each painting, good or bad, becoming one more grunt added to the infernal, moronic din. Paintings to be seen need contexts the way fish need coral reefs, because contexts provide expectations which are the basis both for public participation and artistic production. Hope is imaginable when currents—not movements, which are exclusivist, but currents—begin to form. Of course, paintings don’t create contexts by themselves—there is the audience. It would help if lovers of art could develop a degree of immunity toward the kind of art that claims to celebrate free-radical individualism with no earthly ties—the very definition of freedom in the society of strangers—because that’s what puts all the eggs in the basket of public space. And we know where that has brought us.

Despite the insistence of a previous generation, America has never and will never provide the comparatively seamless cultural/social/political, wrap-around world of Paris—the sort homogenous societies enjoy. But however complex the hand we have been dealt is, the cards we hold are our own. We can, with a less buffered and sometimes wry consciousness, while honoring the overarching neutral culture that we all share and fully appreciating the level of culture it can attain, experience through our Bournean cultural federation a view of life and art that—like our democracy—is unique and unparalleled in history.

Peter Singer

Practicing Ethics in the New Millennium: A Conversation with Peter Singer

Conducted by
Michael J. Thompson

Peter Singer is unquestionably one of the most controversial philosophers in recent memory. Currently the De Camp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University, his ideas about human beings, the right of animals and the value of life have severely altered the debates within the sphere of bioethics and have also, through his persistent public presence and lucid style of argumentation, had an impact on more popular concerns as well. Controversy is, at times, more a product of misunderstanding than of reasoned analysis, and it is this that characterizes the kind of reception that Singer and his ideas have had from both academics and in the more popular media. Singer forces us to question some of the most fundamental aspects of human and animal life by arguing that there exists a false tradition of sanctifying human life. Singer's project is therefore one of *de-sanctification* of seeing human beings within a larger ethical sphere with animals. His books have had an enormous influence within the ethics and bioethics communities and they have also had the effect—after the publication of his *Animal Liberation*—of being a cornerstone of the modern animal rights movement.

This interview was conducted in July 2002 in New York City by the editor of *Logos*, Michael Thompson.

* * *

Q: Your ethical theory can broadly be defined as utilitarian. For you this means, if I understand it correctly, that one takes a set of axiomatic principles and then rationally develops ethical positions from that basic set of principles. But, would it not be more practical—say when discussing the ethical treatment of animals—to utilize a set of ethics that does not rely so much on rational principles that are in some ways not a part of common, everyday

discourse but instead utilizes some a point of view characterized by sentiment?

Singer: I've got nothing against people having emotional attachments to animals, I think that's fine but at the time I began thinking about the treatment of animals, in the early 1970s, there was actually plenty of sentimental literature out there. If you looked at what the Anti Vivisectionist Society was putting out—I was in England at the time, there was more going on in London than there was here—it was totally sentimental; pictures of cute puppies and kittens and saying “stop torturing them,” or whatever. It was totally emotional and it wasn't getting anywhere. There was no thought of serious change, and I think in this case, putting forward a rationally based moral argument, could appeal to people that did not identify themselves as animal lovers and was very important in getting a broader section of the public involved and getting politicians and others to take it seriously. Otherwise, it was all too easy to get people to say “that's for the animal lovers and we're not animal lovers so it has nothing to do with us.”

Q: So, beyond that, just as a philosophy of ethics, one has to constantly reflect on an abstract rational argument.

Singer: But utilitarianism doesn't say that you have to constantly reflect on an abstract argument. Utilitarianism is perfectly compatible with the view that there are different things appropriate at different levels so that philosophers, in working out basic principles, should deal in abstract arguments, and anyone making everyday decisions should refer to some easily applied principles or rules which will have the tendency toward producing the best consequences.

Q: But doesn't this, in itself, assume a cohesive, perfect sense of rationality? In other words, the professional philosopher makes it his or her job to construct rational argumentation, if I'm on the street, is it realistic to assume that I will think rationally and act ethically as you describe it?

Singer: No, I think we have a culture that is very much prone to debate, it may be at a simplistic level at times, but it goes on in the newspapers and the television all of the time, there are different ideas floating around. And I suppose I think that the contribution of philosophers is to improve the level of this debate, to intervene in various ways—and some of this eventually trickles down to the thinking of everyday people. They may not have gone

through the philosophical literature, but they'll become more aware of certain issues because of what philosophers and others have written about it.

Q: So you do think that these rational ethical principles will embed themselves into the norms of culture and society. In other words someday it will be more widely accepted to treat animals humanely.

Singer: Well, I think it already is more widely acceptable to treat animals humanely, certainly than it was twenty-five years ago. So yes, I do see signs of that happening and hope it will continue to happen.

Q: What about, with respect to bioethics and humans, is it possible that, with respect to your own ideas of euthanasia and disabled children and their treatment, that there could be errors in the application of these ethical ideas?

Singer: Well there are errors in application all the time in what happens now, and they go both ways. Sometimes there are errors on the side of preserving life and sometimes there are errors on the side of shortening life. Accepting my views isn't going to change the fact that there are going to be errors and there will still be errors going both ways and life is always about—especially in that kind of area—probabilities. So, yes, sometimes you're going to end the life of a child who could have had a reasonable quality of life and if you'd known that you would have kept the child alive. Sometimes you're going to prolong the life of a child who is going to have several months of horrible suffering and is going to die and if you'd known that you wouldn't have kept that child alive.

Q: So if probabilities always factor in, what, in that case, is the role of ethics? To reduce these probabilities or to give some kind of insight?

Singer: Yes, to have more of an insight into what the values are that you're trying to achieve and to avoid the simplistic adherence to simple rules which don't produce good consequences.

Q: So then how should these ethical prescriptions be translated into practice? Through the dissemination of these values through culture or should they also be articulated in certain kinds of political institutions, say the law?

Singer: Both, depending on the stage of acceptance in society. What I write can be read by an individual doctor who might change her or his decision in

an individual case because of what they've read, I would say that's one possibility. It would be amazing if that hasn't happened considering the readership that I've had. On the other hand—and here you could look at the animal [rights] issue—there are laws that have changed in certain countries, and fairly explicitly because of the things I have written which have improved the protection of animals.

Obviously this is part of a larger movement as well, but the most explicit example occurred in New Zealand a couple of years ago where members of the Great Ape Project, which started from a book that I co-edited, lobbied the New Zealand Parliament to prevent the experimentation on great apes for the benefit of humans. That was successful and the New Zealand Parliament amended the Animal Welfare Act and now experiments on great apes can only be done for their own benefit and not the benefit of humans.

Q: But at the same time, to take the ethical prescriptions even further, there is a certain saturation point beyond which people's lifestyles aren't, at least within a certain time frame, going to change.

Singer: Yes, but I'm glad you said "within a certain time frame" because none of us can see what's going to happen in fifty years let alone a hundred. But if you're talking about ten or twenty years, well, I'm sure there's still going to be a lot of meat eating in this country for the next twenty years. I hope certainly that some other reforms will occur; I hope, for example, that there won't be hens kept in cages with only forty-eight square inches of space per bird, but the further vision is going to take a lot longer if it's ever going to be achieved, and I don't know whether or not it's ever going to be achieved.

Q: This brings me to another point about ethics. There is a multiplicity of ethical discourses. Yours may run counter to, say, libertarianism or some other form of radical individualism that says that I can do just about whatever I want as long as it does not harm other *people*, not animals.

Singer: Sure, and in a democracy you argue them out. I mean, libertarians don't really have a big following at this stage, but if they did, society would be rather different.

Q: But there is a strong liberal discourse of rights, it may not be libertarian, but it doesn't really have much room in it for giving rights to animals.

Singer: I think that it doesn't because the idea of animal rights is relatively new and people are still thinking about it. I would actually say it's making some headway in those areas, but again, over the course of twenty-five years or so. It may take another twenty-five years before it gets as far as I would like it to.

Q: The distinction you make between "personhood" and "non-personhood" is central to your ethical theory and it essentially assigns individuals to a hierarchy of moral value. But what arguments can you provide to say that the categories of personhood and non-personhood are universally valid, or should be accepted by everyone?

Singer: Really what I say about persons is a proposal to base distinctions about what makes it particularly wrong to take the lives of some beings rather than others. There's essentially two elements of it: one is a critique of the current standard view that it's membership in the species *homo sapiens*, and I'm pretty clear that there are powerful arguments against that being the basis for saying which beings have a serious right to life and which do not. And then the question is, if it's not membership in the species *homo sapiens* that really matters, what is it? And my view about the beings I call "persons"—that is, beings that are aware of themselves and have an awareness of their existence over time—is really just a proposal, it's really just something that is saying: it seems to me plausibly relevant when considering the wrongness of killing beings. If you don't think it is, tell me what you think does a better job of marking out those beings whom it is less serious to kill from those who are not. And basically, I haven't had any good counter-proposals.

I talked about this just last month at an animal rights national conference in Washington. There were a number of people there in the audience who were saying that just the fact of being sentient ought to be enough. I think that's a *reasonably* plausible alternative, but it's actually more at odds with mainstream views than my own view. So the question is, is there something that's more compatible with mainstream views than my own view that looks like a more defensible candidate than membership of the species *homo sapiens*? I don't know, but I haven't really seen it. This is certainly something that's open for debate and discussion.

Q: Let me return to the issue of error in application and also to the culture. Is it possible that when one talks about, say, disability or the inability for the capacity to live a full life—which you've mentioned is a distinction of

personhood—is it possible that, culturally, these ideas could themselves shift in their meaning and a slippery slope situation arises? I'm think about how fifty years ago, our ideas about mental impairment were different than they are today. Is there some degree of cultural relativity to certain ideas of impairment which can blur the distinction between personhood and non-personhood?

Singer: I don't think it's totally culturally relevant, no. I mean I don't know of any culture where children with serious disabilities are not a cause for regret, that they'd have preferred that the child was born without them.

Q: Right, but cultures in western Europe or the Unites States may be more tolerant of certain kinds of disabilities than other cultures.

Singer: They *are* more tolerant, but nevertheless, eighty-seven percent of women told they are going to have a disabled child terminate the pregnancy. So we're still pretty much against having those children.

Q: I'd like to talk a little bit about your book dealing with Darwin and Marx, *A Darwinian Left*. I'm not sure whether you are taking up a critique of Marx *per se* or a critique of Marxism when you talk about the idea of human nature. Your contention is that social policy should be predicated on the cooperative aspect of human nature rather than some individualistic aspect of human nature. But it seems to me that Marx defined the idea of what is essentially human as a *social being*, which is almost the same thing. Why should we accept Darwin as a leftist paradigm over that of Marx?

Singer: I don't think the issue is how you define human beings, or human nature, the issue is how changeable human nature is and the extent to which human nature will change if you change the economic basis of production. Marx thought that is would change enormously. Darwin's line of thinking, and more modern evolutionary thinking, suggests that it will change much less. That's really a question of fact on which all we can do is gather the evidence, and I am suggesting that the evidence strongly points to the evolutionary conclusion rather than the Marxist conclusion.

Q: The conclusion that if you change the economic institutions of society that human nature . . .

Singer: . . . will remain essentially the same. It will change a little, of course, but it will basically stay the same.

Q: But isn't it also possible to change the economy to the extent to which it—and I think this is where Marx was going—is more compatible with human beings as social beings? In other words to be less alienated from self and society?

Singer: If you're talking in terms of the language of alienation you're talking about the early Marx and I think it's fairly woolly what would actually satisfy that. There's no indication of what unalienated production would really be like, so I can only say I don't know.

Q: What I mean is that doing a swap of Darwin for Marx should not be done solely on the basis of human nature. It seems to me that Marx took from Hegel the idea of any individual's social nature rather than an individualistic one, but also that the institutions of capitalism do not favor that social cooperation, they favor individualism.

Singer: I think both Hegel and Marx are both saying that in certain cultures people will behave as egoistic, self-seeking individuals whereas in other cultures they'll behave as more social beings. In Hegelian terms, he thought that in Greek society you have the social human being but not the critically self-aware, reflective human being. Then Protestantism develops that individual self-awareness, a self-awareness of the individual's autonomy, and so on, and what you need is the synthesis that will reconcile the self-awareness and autonomy with the sense of community that you had in Ancient Greece. And I think that Marx, in some transformed sense, is looking for the same thing. But, if the evolutionary theorists are right, we're never actually going to get to that reconciling synthesis. There's always going to be both a social tendency which is certainly there—we have, after all, evolved as social beings—and a strong self-centered pull to further your own interests and basically do things that have for most of our evolutionary history maximized our chances for reproducing and leaving descendants in future generations.

Q: It sounds to me that you're saying that ethics and politics are grounded in biology.

Singer: I think ethics has a biological basis, yes. You can find the roots of a lot

of human ethics in the behavior of other social mammals, in particular our primate relatives.

Q: In what sense?

Singer: In what sense? In the sense that key ethical ideas like the protection of your kin, or returning favors for those who do favors for you, and paying back with something nasty those who do something nasty to you, can be seen as basic practices of primate society.

Q: Couldn't this be seen as moral instinct?

Singer: Sure, it is moral instinct, that's where I'm coming from.

Q: So you think that apes would feel a moral push to do those things? There's a *normative* sense there? Or are there certain rules of the group that govern behavior.

Singer: Well, I think that an ape who does a favor for another ape and then certain circumstances arise when that same ape needs a certain favor done in return and the ape that was first favored doesn't do it, I think there would be something very close to our idea of resentment and is likely to attack the ape for not having returned the favor.

Q: But this seems a bit coercive. Ethics seems to me more about the discussion of value, of self-regulation.

Singer: Right, well, of course because we're rational beings who use an abstract language so naturally it takes a different shape than the shape it takes in beings who can't do that. But I think that—and Darwin saw this, it's in a chapter in *The Descent of Man*—the roots of our moral behavior are still there in our biological nature. It's just that we engage in a whole level of discussion which requires our abilities to reason and to speak. But it's layered on the biological roots that are still there.

Q: I also wanted to ask about the role of the philosopher, and not necessarily the professional, academic philosopher, but the role of free thought, even radical thought. Is the role of the philosopher becoming increasingly professionalized and academic or is there still a critical role for the public

intellectual. You say there is debate, maybe in the university, but at the level of popular culture do you see this to be the case as well?

Singer: Well, occasionally, I mean I was on *60 Minutes* a few months back. That's reaching a big audience. Of course, that's grossly oversimplified because of the eighteen-minute time slot that they've got, it happens a little, not that it happens at all.

Q: True, but it seems that you have to be controversial even to get on 60 Minutes in the first place.

Singer: Yeah, that's a pity.

Q: It seems to me that there is a crisis of public intellectualism, or a crisis of culture, I'm not sure which . . .

Singer: Well, there are a few outlets for serious debate that reach outside of the academy, that's really true and it's more true of the US than in the European countries like France, Italy or Spain or England, to a certain extent. So, yeah there is a problem. What can you do about that? I don't know the answer; all I can say is that I can only keep trying. You might say: look, you're bashing your head against a brick wall, and maybe you're right, but I can't see anything else to do.

Imre Kertész

Jerusalem, Jerusalem
Reflections sparked by the sight of a war-torn city*

by
Imre Kertész

On the evening before last I saw the sunset from my balcony at the Renaissance Hotel in Jerusalem. The sky was dwarfed by the white hills across the distance. A light wind wafted in from the old town and suddenly broke the light and the approaching twilight was like a melancholic cease-fire—Camus' *The Stranger* came to mind. But the bus from Haifa to Jerusalem flew in the air. The impact of the detonation swept the vehicle upward. Severed body parts flew through the air.

I'm trying not to order my muddled and scattered thoughts at the sight of the city at dusk. I came here with my wife to attend a conference, to which I never would have gone had it not taken place in Jerusalem. I don't like fruitless conferences. Especially those that bear titles such as *The Legacy of Holocaust Survivors: Moral and ethical Implications for Humanity*. April 9th stood out in my planner for months. And although I acted as though I would seriously consider the urgent advice of my friends from Berlin and Budapest—most of them advised against it—in truth I stood under the spell of my original plans. We'll fly back to Budapest from Berlin, I'll vote at the elections there—giving a vote that is more than likely superfluous, and two days later we'll leave for Jerusalem. The only question that really presents itself is whether or not I should travel alone. But my wife would hear nothing of that. Together or not at all. After some reflection it became clear to us that we have to fly there, just because afterwards we'd have to live with the thought that we were called and never went.

I Understood Why the Gods Were Born Here

Imre Kertész

Now I am here on the balcony on the seventh floor and am having the same difficulty judging what's going on here as in Berlin or Budapest. I am not thinking of the local situation at this moment, but of the European reaction. It seems as though the anti-Semitism that was long behind bars, is bubbling up again as out of the recesses of the subconscious like a sulphurous outburst of lava. On the TV screen I see demonstrations against Israel in Jerusalem as elsewhere. I see synagogues set on fire in France as well as desecrated cemeteries. Only several hundred meters away from my Berlin domicile, in Tiergarten, two young American Jews were attacked and beaten up in the street. I saw the Portuguese writer Saramago on TV, how he bent over a sheet of paper, compared Israel's line against the Palestinians with Auschwitz—proof that the author did not have the slightest idea of the scandalous irrelevance of his comparison. Even worse, he did not know that the concept represented by the term Auschwitz has long had a fixed meaning in Europe's cultural consensus and can be used indisputably in a populist way and for populist purposes.

I ask myself if one should not distinguish between an anti-Israel attitude and anti-Semitism. But is that possible? What is one to make of the fact that two continents away, in Argentina—where people have enough problems notwithstanding—it can come to anti-Israel demonstrations. Probably because, I think, that the over 2,000 year old perpetuating animosity toward Jews has solidified into a worldview. The object of hate is a people which is in no way ready to disappear from the face of the earth. I try to think clearly and honestly about this and to push aside every taboo clearly and sincerely and to speak out about this in my own voice. That young people blow themselves up in the air for sheer pleasure (in addition to this I read in the papers that the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein pays their families 25,000 dollars for this) points to the fact that it is not only about whether or not the creation of a Palestinian state takes place. These suicide bombers all prove to be fundamental losers. Their actions express a bitterness that do not allow themselves be explained by nationalist feelings alone.

During a previous trip to Jerusalem, in its subtle light in its golden-hued evenings among these picturesque hills inhabited by olive trees, I understood why the gods were born here in this very place. Now I need to understand why they are being slaughtered like bloody human sacrifices with self-exhibitory readiness. I admit that I don't understand it at all and I don't like to believe that this is only a political question and that I am simply a victim of manipulation. Yet, while millions fall victim to this manipulation, the

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character of this manipulation changes. It becomes internalized. Many people start to believe all of a sudden in all seriousness that their madness is not attributed to outside powers, but that it bursts out of their own souls and out the torments of their souls. And then the irreparable evil sets in.

I openly admit it: the first time I saw the tanks roll into Ramallah, a spontaneous and uncontrollable thought came over me: my God, how fortunate that I'm seeing the Star of David on Israeli tanks and not on my chest as in 1944. I am not uninhibited and couldn't be so even if I wanted to. Never have I played the role of the impartial hangman. I leave that to those Europeans—and non-European—intellectuals, who play this game so brilliantly and often damagingly. After so much authentic and false solidarity a new leaf has been turned over: the bureaucrats have turned against Israel with a harsh face. In certain questions they might even be right, except for the fact that they still have never redeemed a bus ticket from Haifa to Jerusalem.

The Cool Judgment of European Bureaucrats

Here in Israel, metaphorically speaking, everyone carries this ticket in his or her pocket. And this fact slowly brings everyone to sober understanding. The cool judgment of European bureaucrats is experienced here as a burning existential question. A friend captured this inner turmoil most succinctly when she told us at Yad Vashem, this horrible cemetery for those murdered in the Holocaust: “first we go to an anti-war demonstration with our families and then we enlist in the army.”

I have—at least here, at this conference—met no Israeli intellectual who doubts the importance of a Palestinian state. “The Israeli settlements there must end,” said a leading historian from Yad Vashem, “this will lead to a mini civil war but one we must fight.” The isolation, the lack of solidarity generates psychical pain. It is not possible to endure terrorism without acting and impossible to respond to terrorism without terrorism. A torturous predicament, agonizing questions with which everyone is alone in coping. “One locks us in a moral ghetto” says my friend, the writer, Aharon Appelfeld. By glancing around here, I see fear, helplessness and determination. Just as David Grossmann describes it in his dramatic contribution in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: today's Israel is like a

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clenched fist but also like a hand that falls as if weakened by desperation.” The city is like a ghost town. The cab drivers circle around the hotels like avid hawks. As soon as one steps out of the door they land on him or her. Mostly in vain since there is hardly anyone else here other than those who conducted official business and is waiting to be picked up officially. We have breakfast in our hotel, in a half empty room. The tourists stay away, even the usual business people—the gentlemen donned in ties, the ones who read the newspapers with their coffee.

I almost forgot that I also came here for a conference and have to present the text I prepared. “When I say that I am a Jewish writer I am not saying that I myself am a Jew,” I read. “For what kind of a Jew is somebody who never received a Jewish upbringing, does not speak Hebrew, barely knows the sources of Jewish culture and does not live in Israel, but in Europe? Someone who derives his primary Jewish identity perhaps exclusively from Auschwitz, in a certain sense, should not be called a Jew. He is the ‘non-Jewish Jew,’ of whom Isaac Deutscher speaks, the uprooted European variety who barely finds a personal connection to their imposed Jewishness.”

I am almost ashamed to read these lines. I am almost ashamed to lay my existential conditions bare and the subtle problems of uprooted Jewish intellectuals and their homelessness. At once I see through the unbearable irony of my role: as a survivor of the Shoah I hold a lecture on Israeli soil, an Israel at war, and explain basically why I cannot demonstrate my solidarity with a people to whom I do not belong. My solidarity in any case consisted in the fact that I dared to board a plane to Tel Aviv. I am a visitor who collects useless impressions, and continues in vain to pose questions to people he will never understand because he did not share the burden of those to whom he actually belongs.

I’ve never felt as decisively about this. Now I am filled with compassion, involvement and anguish, and it is as if I were still a stranger here. Not a single Israeli neglected to thank us for coming here. This is how almost every conversation ends and my strangeness emerges even more prominently from this. I ponder why this is so and as I look more closely at the faces at the automobiles decorated with flags and this difficult to define, excited and yet closed atmosphere that dominates the city, and suddenly become aware of the change that this country has been through. The French historian Ernest Renan maintains that neither race nor language define a nation: the people supposedly feel it in their hearts that they are connected to one another

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through thinking, feeling, memories and hopes. This country which, was until recently for its founding fathers, its European survivors, the shelter seeking, militant Zionists, rigorous soldiers, mild musicians, for northern White and African, Arab and Levitananthian Jews of many colors, the most diverse cultures and the most diverse people an incoherent land has shaped itself now in the course of this desperate and inexorable war into a nation. I don't know whether one should be pleased about it or curse the fact that the time of nations is now nearing its end. But it's a fact and it no longer admits approaches with certain reservations, characterized by smiling sympathy, sometimes with superior irony nor the ambulatory behavior with which European and American Jews attempted to get closer to Israel. It is a peculiar transformation and this transformation will—at least in Jewish-Jewish relations—have its effects undoubtedly.

I would serve this best by not seeking after the truth but seeking after the so-called objective truth. And “if the “truth” is not one that is valid for all times, but one that is mutable, the more deep, conscientious and sensitive the care of the intellectual for it must be. His or her attentiveness to the stirrings of the world spirit, to the changes of the representation of truth,” as Thomas Mann formulated it in the critical years of Europe are crucial. It is perhaps precisely because it is so mutable that the “truth” is presently so visible in the foreground and incessantly demands a current definition. The wars of our epoch are, in perhaps never before seen proportions, always morally tinted wars. In our modern—or post modern—world the boundaries don't run so much between nations, ethnicities or confessions as much as they do between world views and world dispositions between reason and fanaticism, tolerance and hysteria, creativity and destructive thirsts for power. In our secular world epochs biblical wars take place, wars between “good” and “evil.” In this secular age of ours, biblical wars are taking place—wars between “good” and “evil.” Even these notions need to be put in quotation marks because we simply do not know what is “good” and what is “bad.” Our notions of these values are too diverse, too divergent and will remain debatable as long as a fixed system of values of a collectively structured and collectively supported culture does not emerge.

This is only a utopia, particularly here in the Near East. I continue to brood over how active and energetic young people decide to commit suicidal acts of terror? Their acts make clear the value they ascribe to the lives of others. But how do they measure the value of their own lives? A friend explains to us that they are told that “over there” in the harem on the other side 72 virgins

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would be awaiting them and would pamper them there. And what does one tell the women, I asked. Our friend shrugs his shoulders laughingly. I have always perceived hatred as energy. Energy is blind, but paradoxically its source is the same vitality that nourishes the creative forces. The European civilization to which the people here still and in spite of everything refer, holds the perfection of human life as a most noble value. Fanaticism holds the exact opposite of this. On what basis can humanity and trust be engendered here? Meanwhile fear and hatred predominate. "Words like peace, reconciliation, coexistence ring like the last signs of life from a ship that has already sunk" writes David Grossmann.

In this region darkness comes down suddenly. On the streets below, beneath my balcony the lamps fire up. Cars race down streets fading in the distance—down streets that take to orange groves and universities, to well built cities and well situated fields. Many have told of how they came here after the Shoah in the hope of finding peace and security. This land was built with hard work. Its residents had to defend it in difficult struggles while its right to exist was questioned in neighborhoods near and far. When this doubt—coupled with the feeling of abandonment also plants its roots in this place, then it can fall in deepest despair. At present, at least in my experience, the vitality of this country makes self reflection still possible: if of course not the resistance to terrorism, then the type of defense, the fruitless campaign for revenge that is passionately criticized by the majority of intellectuals in the country. But if the world's hostile indifference really leaves this country to despair, it opens the road to catastrophe; and in this world filled with hatred, fanatical paranoia and powerlessness the catastrophes will not only apply to the Near East.

**I have Not Been Properly Understood,
Perhaps This Is Really the Case**

IT IS WITH A HEAVY HEART that I leave the balcony and the view of Jerusalem at night. We are leaving tomorrow morning and I'm taking a special gift from here with me. Nation, homeland, the feeling of being at home—these were inadequate concepts for me up until now. The harmony of the citizen, who identifies unconditionally with his homeland, his nation is unimaginable for me. My fate brought with it that I would live in a self-chosen and accepted minority situation and if I wanted to define this minority situation even further, I would use no racial, ethnic and also no confessional or

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philological concepts. I would define the accepted minority situation as an intellectual life form, which is based on experience of the negative. It is true, the experience of the negative was bestowed upon me by my Jewishness. I could also say that I was initiated into the universe of negative experience through my Jewishness; because everything I had to experience because of my Jewish abstraction I view as an initiation, an official opening into the deepest knowledge of the human being and his or her contemporary situation. And because of the fact that I have experienced my Jewishness as a negative experience in a radical sense, in the end it led me to my liberation. It is the only freedom that I, during my life spent under various dictatorships, have conquered and which I guard up until this day, precisely for this reason. Now, during my sojourn in Jerusalem the earnest and uplifting feeling of *national responsibility* has touched me for the first time. And if I should become aware of the fact that I don't know what to do with this feeling because my life was decided long ago, it has moved me deeply nevertheless.

Stirred by this feeling, I board the plane to Budapest. The security officer, a young lady, thanks us, after posing the mandatory questions and inspected our luggage, for coming here, "to us, in Israel." This thank you is like a meager discharge from further duties, and I see that it hurts my wife as much as it does me, who is not bound to this country through blood ties, or through religion, but is tied to it only through love.

Happily, our plane lands in Budapest. As I exit I cannot refrain from saying "God save Israel!" to the service personnel at the door. But I probably pronounced the words wrongly or omitted one. In any case, I heard foreign questions behind me: "What did he say?" Before I can turn around I am pushed farther out to the outside.

I have not been understood. Maybe it's better this way. I exit the plane and step on Hungarian soil.

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Istvan Eörsi

The Legacy of Survival*
A Response to Imre Kertész

by
Istvan Eörsi

If someone who belongs to a persecuted minority has survived a tragedy of world-historic dimensions and with these images of horror in mind decides to continue his or her life, then he or she has to take into account that these experiences will gradually lose their original meaning for others and possibly even for him or herself. Slowly they add to the sediment in the riverbed of history, be it as a memento, a pretext for or against a political belief or as kitsch, even the person bearing them has a hard time keeping his or her sovereignty when confronted with them.

The famous among these people meet from time to time at scientific conferences in order to debate how to go on living. Such a conference took place in Jerusalem in April in order to examine what moral conclusions for mankind the survivors of the Holocaust might draw from their experiences. The Hungarian writer Imre Kertész took part in this conference. He described his experiences in Israel in *Die Zeit* (No. 18/02). I do not know whether I have ever been so irritated before by an otherwise moderate article displaying humanist education. To characterize it I say in advance that apart from suicide bombers, there aren't any dead Palestinians in that text. The report gives the impression that in said region only the lives of Jews are threatened.

I am writing all this by the banks of Lake Starnberg in an art patronage institution. Currently, the Israeli author Benny Barbash, a former commander of a paratrooper unit, works there as well. In his article "It is a war crime," which he wrote one and a half months before the Jerusalem conference, he tells us that his eighteen-month-old son Assaf had such a high temperature that he had to rush him to the hospital. He made it in time; the child was saved. At the same time, two Palestinian newborn children—

Suleiman Abu Hassan and Mahmut Zahkin—also needed urgent medical treatment. However, they and their mothers were not allowed to pass at an Israeli checkpoint. “Both babies died. Or should I say, were murdered.” Barbash contemplates what he would do if his son had died, if someone had hindered him from getting to the hospital. He does not give an answer to this question, but I think the logic of this question does not exclude the possibility that he would blow up that checkpoint.

Intentionally I mentioned these babies even before the victims in “normal” everyday life and I point only after that to the extraordinary horror that hold the ruins of Jenin. Bulldozers tore down the camp a few days before the Jerusalem Holocaust Conference; on April 7 the bombs dropped by planes razed the ruins to the ground. Photos and mutually corroborative on-site reports confirm the existence of the rubble. Jerusalem-based journalist Amnon Kapeliouk quotes a young woman in *Le Monde Diplomatique* who is yelling in the middle of the rubble in Jenin: “By this insane operation Sharon made all these future suicide bombers!”

In the light of the remarks of the Israeli writer and this survivor of the horrors of Jenin even reading becomes painful if Imre Kertész finds in his meditations on the suicide bombers in total two possible reasons for this gruesome movement. Saddam Hussein used to pay \$25,000 to each family of a suicide bomber and one makes these unlucky people believe that seventy-two virgins are awaiting them in the harem of the hereafter. Although Kertész emphasizes himself that he does not know a lot about this field—these kinds of intellectual confessions which are suitable to learn about the aesthetic soul of the originator are for me comparable to Don Juan bragging about impotence—it is baffling that this afflicted author comprehends the fundamental social and moral problem of our times less than an uneducated woman in the desert.

Central to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the question of terror. Israelis answer the individual terror operations with official terror operations. To be exact, the retaliation attack by definition can only be of terrorist nature. Since the official actions do not reach the ones who carry out or commission terrorist attacks but mainly civilians, which means that in terms of human rights we find here the principle of collective punishment, those who are reprimanded in this fashion feel a moral justification for using terrorist means. For the torn out eyes, however, they do not tear out the eyes of those who tore out their eyes but kill innocent people in cafés and on buses. And so

on, ad infinitum. The official terror operations are only more devastating since they destroy the lives of whole sections of the population. An example is the fate of the Gaza Strip. In September 2000 the second Intifada began, and this twenty-eight-mile long and four-mile wide area where one point two million people live was completely shut off from Israel. People who had worked there lost their jobs. So now sixty-five percent of those of working age in Gaza are unemployed; more than half of the population have to get along with less than two dollars a day. The region was split up into tiny sectors, at the borders of each sector checkpoints were erected. All this happened for the benefit of the 7,000 Jewish settlers, who call more than forty percent of the Gaza territory their own. The occupation here has been going on for thirty-five years. Neither Saddam Hussein's worldly money nor the hope for the marvelous charm of the virgins in eternity is capable of encouraging these young people to carry out extremist acts as much as the desperate hopelessness resulting from their life conditions does.

i do not want to say at all that the autonomous Palestinian authorities or even Arafat are not responsible for this themselves, that the proliferation of inhuman behavior has planted itself into the flesh of the people who live there. As an amateur psychologist I imagine Arafat as someone whose existence is rooted deeply in war conditions; whose relationships and skills developed under these; who rose to become a leader of the people under them and who because of that has no desire for peaceful, consolidating conditions since there would no longer be a role available for him. The current crisis, which will not be solved in the foreseeable future, however, cannot be blamed on him. And neither can it be blamed on Sharon. About Sharon we can certainly say that he is responsible for numerous war crimes: from the Qibya massacre in 1953 to the Sabra and Shatila bloodbath in 1982 to the destruction in Jenin. Therefore even reputable intellectuals are looking hard for metaphors to characterize his actions—from Auschwitz to the attribute “fascist”—that equate Israel governed by him with Nazism. It is correct that Kertész criticizes the Portuguese writer Jose Samarago for this comparison. Nevertheless, between Hitler and a humane policy there are numerous levels; and someone just because he is not Hitler or coming even close to his cruelty can still be a monster. In my view Sharon has done incredible damage, but he did not create, and I repeat this, the current crisis.

Among its numerous causes there is the failure of the previous negotiations, for which in not inconsiderable degree Arafat's “all or nothing” attitude is responsible. But the crisis intensified in this fashion since the Bush

administration gave a one-sided and distorted answer to September 11. You can and should announce a crusade against terror, but on the world stage this war cannot be won solely with military means. This war cannot be won at all without eliminating penury in the Third World or without removal or at least relieving the variety of national oppression. There are not as many al-Qaeda fighters in the whole world as penury and oppression can bring about. Any presidential advisers may compile their list of rogue states and arrange them in axes, but the constant war threat with the prospect of millions of dead will not silence the murmur of poverty and the woe of the oppressed. These law-and-order fanatics breed again and again new forms of terrorism. Without Bush's political turn Sharon's politics would be hard to imagine.

This turn does not even stop in front of the century-old achievements of civil democracy. The anti-terrorist crusade requires from us that for the protection of human rights we have to renounce our view on human rights. Since terrorism recruits its ideological basis and its human resources from the impoverished and underdeveloped regions in Africa and Asia, the achievements of human rights have to be suspended in order to protect our values. *Double standard*—this innocent sounding term was made up by Robin Cooper, Tony Blair's foreign policy adviser, in order to correct the perspective on human rights. According to this, the norms of a state under the rules of law are still valid within our culture group. Beyond this region, however, one has to resort to the violent methods of former times. In jungle warfare the laws of the jungle were to be applied. Andrea Böhm, who presents Cooper's theory in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, points out to the already noticeable impact of this thinking. In 1994, the U.S. ratified the Convention Against Torture, so recently al-Qaeda fighters were transported to friendly countries like Egypt or Pakistan where confessions under torture are legal. With respect to this topic: common sense allots Israel to the developed and civilized countries and the Judeo-Christian cultural realm; the Palestinians, however, to Third World pariahs.

This theory leads me back to where I began. I was lucky: unlike Imre Kertész, I was not abducted to Auschwitz, I had never left the Budapest Ghetto. However, my father's whole family, as well as my grandmother, my aunt and my uncle vanished. So I, too, have to ask myself the question of the Jerusalem conference: what are the moral conclusions we can derive from the Holocaust? What do I consider part of the legacy of survival? Definitely not the same understanding as Imre Kertész, whose most important sentence to this question I quote without turning red through embarrassment: "When I

saw the tanks rolling into Ramallah for the first time on TV one thought came undeniably and irrefutable to my mind: My God, how good it is that I see the Star of David on Israeli tanks and not on my chest.” It was terrible to perceive the yellow star on my chest, but to see it on these tanks rolling into refugee camps, this symbol is also terrible. I derive from the Holocaust the moral obligation that I continuously have to show solidarity with the persecuted of the present, with ethnic, religious, cultural and gender/sexual minorities as well as with those who are socially discriminated against. So there is no Jewish solidarity in me except for the opposition to the anti-Semites; after the Holocaust all varieties of racism are intolerable. But the Israeli policy I strictly detach from the Jewish question. Those who denounce the critics of the current Israeli policy as anti-Semites legitimize those Arab youths who desecrate Jewish graves worldwide.

Since I just mentioned the term identity I can hardly evade defining my own identity when contemplating the moral inferences of the Holocaust. I am forced to do so also because I see myself as a Hungarian due to my education and cultural impact, whereas a portion of the Hungarian public opinion never wanted to accept this and has not done so until today. Let that be their problem. For their sake I will not construct a new “Jewish” identity, for this I would lack the historic and educational background and the need for God. And why should others define who I am as long as I am capable of doing so on my own? So I am Hungarian, but I notice that I find it increasingly harder to bear the epidemic-like fetishizing and mythologizing of “nation” in Central Eastern Europe. “*To thine own self be true!*” —with these words by my talented colleague Shakespeare I can summarize best the legacy of survival for my household use.

Istvan Eörsi was in born in Budapest in 1931. His last publication is Der rätselhafte Charme der Freiheit (“The mysterious charm of freedom”) (Suhrkamp).

* *This article originally appeared in the German language weekly, Die Zeit on July 11, 2002, and was translated from the German by Kai Artur Diers.*

Fred Camper

Three Myths About Brakhage

by
Fred Camper

1.

In an obituary for Stan Brakhage, P. Adams Sitney states that the filmmaker had requested that a loaded movie camera be kept by his hospital bedside as he was dying.¹ This story is consistent with Brakhage's own well-justified self-image as a filmmaker who simply *had* to make films. The only problem with it is that, as Sitney himself now acknowledges, it's not true; he was misinformed by someone who told him this story shortly before Brakhage's death.

Last year, Laura Mulvey asked me about a tale she'd heard about how I had once brought a projector to Brakhage's New York hotel room to show him a Douglas Sirk film. According to this account, he hadn't liked it at first, but when the projector jammed, and I had to run part of it in reverse, seeing it backwards changed his mind. This is related to an earlier story that Brakhage hadn't liked Warhol's early films at 24 fps, but was convinced when he resaw them at their intended projection speed of 16 fps. Both stories play on Brakhage's well-known sensitivity to a movie's formal elements, as expressed, for instance, in his advocacy for seeing certain films out of focus to better appreciate their rhythms. But both stories are myths. I remember well the time I showed Brakhage a Sirk film. Not only did the projector not jam, but the projector I was using then, an RCA 400, didn't even *have* a reverse. One suspects that Vasari's great *Lives* is constructed out of similar fabrications—entertaining stories almost too perfectly apposite to be true.

Because, as I have explored elsewhere,² Brakhage's work and thought are riven by contradictions, and almost any grand thesis one can offer about his work is also accompanied, in the *oeuvre*, by its antithesis. The maker of almost 400 films spanning fifty years and representing a compendium of the formal techniques, possible subjects, and major themes of experimental or avant garde filmmaking in America, Brakhage offers an achievement so synoptic, even prodigious, that virtually any single claim for it represents an oversimplification. There are at least three major misunderstandings that

have dogged his work for decades: that most of his films purport to represent the pre-linguistic seeing of children; that his work was primarily a representation of his own affective life; that his work was socially disengaged from the American culture of which he was a part.

2.

Brakhage's most commonly quoted statement, the opening paragraph from his first book, *Metaphors on Vision*,³ asks the reader to "imagine a world" in which objects aren't known by their names but as "an adventure of perception," and invites a consideration of the possibility that pre-linguistic eyesight might have been different: "How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green?'"

But only a few paragraphs later, Brakhage acknowledges, "One can never go back, even in imagination," and as P. Adams Sitney has written, "He was not naïve about the contradictions of this goal; his films always acknowledged the material limitations of cinematic representation."⁴ It is also the case that many of his films with images of children are chronicles—dramas, even—of the filmmaker's abject *failure* to enter into their world. The filmmaker-protagonist represented only via his shadow in *Anticipation of the Night* remains hopelessly, even violently, apart from the children seen in an amusement park, who seem spinning in circular traps of their own. The children that inhabit *Scenes From Under Childhood* gradually lose their innocence. The aging filmmaker in *I . . . Dreaming* appears pathetically alienated from the children around him. A case can be made for some of Brakhage's abstract films, the "Roman" and "Arabic" series in particular, as reflecting the aspiration to create images not inflected by language, but the shifting forms and profoundly destabilizing compositions of these films reflect the terror of the unknown as much as the free play of some imaginary childhood. And not insignificantly, the related works that followed these (*Egyptian Series* and "Babylonians") interrelate abstract images with glyph-like shapes. Many subsequent "abstract" (a word Brakhage hated) films contain explicit references to language via words scratched directly on the image or titles that suggest a scenario—*The Lion and the Zebra Make God's Raw Jewels*, for example.

The quest for a "moving visual thinking" that doesn't depend on language is more an aspiration underlying Brakhage's films than something fully and

finally achieved in any. Brakhage perhaps comes closest in the nineteen “Arabics,” in which shifting shapes and light seem to owe little to linguistic structures. Images don’t control or modify or interpret each other in the way the words of a sentence do; shapes seem to be barely aware of each others’ presence, almost as if existing in parallel universes. But these deeply unsettling films that constitute arguably his greatest achievement don’t achieve greatness by resembling anything a child might make, or imagine, but rather by balancing the sense that the lights and shapes are disconnecting from each other in near-infinite space with an exquisite formal control and precision that reflects Brakhage’s lifelong study of classical music, poetry, and painting.

3.

Brakhage is also seen as a poet of personal subjectivity, the filmmaker who most established the viability of the first-person mode in cinema, marshalling all the techniques of film to express his innermost being. Sitney has identified Brakhage’s “project” as “the representation of a lyrical self.”⁵ This is a truth about his work, but it’s often too narrowly understood. Specifically, one characteristic of the arc of his career is a continual broadening of his own notion of the “self.” As David James points out,⁶ following his marriage to Jane Collum, Brakhage began to claim himself, Jane, and their children as vehicles for his filmmaking, and the “ego” constituted in his works seemed more dispersed. Indeed, the first-person, expressionistic camera movements and montage, the visions of a loner lurching about in the world, that characterized early masterpieces such as *Sirius Remembered* and *The Dead* are found only infrequently in his films of subsequent decades. But the dispersal of self was to continue further, and it has always seemed to me a mistake to identify Brakhage, even during the three decades of his first marriage, as primarily a poet of family life.

By the time of his first completely “abstract” films in the mid-1970s, the sense of an individual will traversing and transforming the world starts to become replaced by the sense of an individual being overwhelmed by an onrush of images that, though he may have created them, take on an autonomous life. One notes that closed-eye vision, one kind of non-functional seeing Brakhage sought to emulate, is largely beyond the control of the conscious will. The “self” of the Brakhage’s last three decades of work is one that is simultaneously expanding to encompass the seen and unseen,

the real and the imagined world, and dissolving before it. It's not that Brakhage's films become impersonal so much as that they chronicle the broadening of the narrow, affective self as reflected in his signature embrace of human physiology (tiny camera movements reflecting pulse and heartbeat and nervous system) by way of an almost out-of-body aspiration suggested by images that are utterly distanced from dailiness through their defiance of conventional compositions, avoidance of easy unities, and the way they seem to sprawl beyond their borders.

4.

Finally, Brakhage is often seen as typically American in his lack of social engagement. This view has been articulated most eloquently by Annette Michelson:

It is a tragedy of our time (that tragedy is not, by any means, exclusively, but rather, like so much else, *hyperbolically* American) that Brakhage should see his social function as defensive in the Self's last-ditch stand against the mass, against the claims of any possible class, political process, or structure, assuming its inevitable assault upon the sovereignty of the Self, positing the imaginative consciousness as inherently apolitical.⁷

One problem with this thesis is that Brakhage has made films that engage directly with social issues. He showed, and lectured around the U.S. on, his deeply disturbing, horrifyingly powerful meditation on war as perceptual violence, *23rd Psalm Branch*, at the height of the Vietnam War. Re-editing film images of World War II, he made war as a media event part of his subject. *The Governor*, in which he filmed Colorado's then-governor Richard Lamm, was a study in the exercise of power through physical gestures and body placement. *Murder Psalm* engaged with way mass culture reduces people, and even thought (personified in actual models of the brain taken from an educational film about epilepsy), to objects.

But *Murder Psalm* is the rare case in which Brakhage engages with the negation of his central aesthetic. Perhaps more to the point, the main line of his masterpieces, particularly those of his last three decades, offers an eloquent—and ecstatically beautiful—answer to the whole object-oriented

ethos of American consumer culture, the fetishization of possessions and possessiveness, the location of pleasure in the world of manufactured things, by creating insubstantial patterns of light that seem engaged in an eternal dance. As well, his complex mix of techniques and use of irregular forms make the viewing of each film an “adventure of perception.” Is forging a cinema that seeks a more active, thoughtful, and even participatory role for the individual viewer “inherently apolitical?” To the manipulativeness and star worship of mainstream movies, Brakhage counter-offers films that distance one from both affections and objects, that turn the by now ritualized movie-viewing process from an answer back into a question, a question directed at each spectator. And in so doing, he becomes a poet of freedom.

Notes

¹ *Cahiers du cinema* 578 (April 2003) pp. 50-1; the English-language original is available at <http://www.fredcamper.com/Brakhage/Sitney.html>.

² *Brakhage's Contractions*, *Chicago Review* (No. 47:4 & 48:1, Spring 2002).

³ Originally published as the 30th issue of the magazine *Film Culture* in 1963, its opening sections are most readily available in *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking* (see <http://www.mcphersonco.com/mcphersonco.com/document/essbrak.html>)

⁴ *Cahiers du cinema* 578 (April 2003) pp. 50-1; the English-language original is available at <http://www.fredcamper.com/Brakhage/Sitney.html>.

⁵ *The International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers* (Chicago: St. James Press, 1984), p.61.

⁶ James, David E., *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), chapter two.

⁷ *Camera Lucida/Camera Obscura*, *Artforum*, January 1973, p. 31.

Bruce Elder

Stan Brakhage: A Reflection

by
Bruce Elder

Sometime around 1989, during one of my telephone conversations with Stan Brakhage, the discussion rolled around to poetry and Brakhage posed the question whether I owned copies of the published portions (*Foundations*, 1980, and *Spires 34-50*, 1984) of Ronald Johnson's long poem *ARK*. Though it was hardly the first time that he mentioned *ARK* to me, I allowed that, despite my awareness of his enthusiasm for the work, I did not. Within a week, the volumes arrived in the mail. A while later, a typescript arrived in the post, with a note written on the top: "Dear Bruce—This/ "Spires" by R.J. (from Kansas also by the way) much mixed with sea and sand and sky, of the mind, midst whirl of camera, catching light with Marilyn and Anton [Marilyn was married to Stan Brakhage], 'up island' [at Parksville, on Vancouver Island]... hoping it moves you too. Blessings, Stan Aug. 1990." They were *Spires* 50 to 66, from Johnson's *Ark*. Brakhage soon called so that we could talk about the new Johnson poems.

Right now, however, it is the question of what Brakhage

was trying to tell me about his own work that interests me most. Some affinities between Brakhage's work and Johnson's poetry are obvious. Brakhage and Johnson are both among the rare contemporaries committed to the visionary strain in art. Like Brakhage's films, *ARK* is paean to process, a hymn to light (the concrete that Johnson offers in "Beam 13" brings the ideas of process and flux together as compactly as any of Brakhage's films): *ARK* begins with a long time of light, then, in "Beam 4" after a very Brakhagian account of Vision, that proposes the eye is the sun in another form, goes on to say "there began to be eyes, and light began looking with itself." In *ARK*, matter produces consciousness, its straining for music produces Bach ("Beam 7"), and also ("Beam 17"):

he who
obsessed by light,
possessed by sight.

(One wonders whether Brakhage might not have taken this to refer to himself, though for Johnson, of course, it referred to the port.)

Both Brakhage and Johnson's art lean towards the cosmological (even the title of one of Brakhage's films, *Stellar*, is, but for initial capital, the concluding line in Johnson's "Beam 14"), and in both attention to detail, to the immediate particular, viewed with Zukofskian objectivist clarity balances the cosmological interests—in both artist's work, the expansive and the minute particular have a fascinating tensional relation. There is, too, a complex relation between the concrete and the optical/cosmological in Johnson's writings, as there is in Brakhage's filmmaking. Those who know Brakhage's writings or lectures on Gertrude Stein will know how often he referred to the famous "[a] rose is a rose is a rose," especially in its original presentation, closed in a circle. Brakhage was fond of pointing out that concrete contains references to "a rose," to "Rose," to "eros" (love), to "rows" (death), and to "arose" (resurrection). On his concrete (part of *ARK*, "Beam 24"),

earheartearth
earheartearth
earheartearth
earheartearth
earheartearth
earheartearth

poet Ronald Johnson remarks, "Earheartearth is a linkage of ear to hear to heart. Art and hearth are also hid in it. All is at the core of fall. Even the stones here have overtones and the clouds may speak."

ARK (to say nothing of Johnson's other works) is an extraordinarily diverse collection—the poems it draws together range from concretes to lyrics (e.g. the PALMS, relatives of the biblical Psalms, in "The Song of Orpheus") to collage works (*ARK* 26) to prose poems (*ARK* 12) to found poems (*ARK* 14) to works that, by including imitation bird song (another enthusiasm Brakhage shared with Johnson, explaining party, his interest in Olivier Messaien); among recent poets only Kenneth Patchen and Louis Zukofsky, it seems to me, has a similar range. But Brakhage's films display a similar range—the common criticism of Brakhage's work, that I hear so often from academics, that "his films are all the same" is among the most foolish critical statements I can imagine: I can't think of another filmmaker whose films

span so great a range as that between *Anticipation of the Night* and *The Dante Quartet*, or between *Rage Net* and *The Mammals of Victoria*.

Brakhage desired to ground his cinema in the unique person that he was. This was, in fact, very much the Emersonian desire to undo the deforming influence of culture, and to return to the authenticity of the self-reliant individual. In "The American Scholar" Emerson had proposed. "If there be one lesson more than another, which should pierce his ear, it is, The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is law of all nature, and you know not yet how a globule of sap ascends; in yourself slumbers the whole of Reason; it is for you to know all, it is for you to dare all. Mr. President and Gentlemen, this confidence in the un-searched might of man belongs, by all motives, by all prophecy, by all preparation, to the American Scholar. We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." And, again, "I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or provincial minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds." Johnson held similar beliefs. In "A Note" to his long poem *ARK*, Johnson writes, "... I knew I'd my own tack to take. If my confreres wanted to write a work with all history in its maw, I wished, from the beginning, to start all over again, attempting to know nothing a but a will to create, and a matter at hand." Pound had defined the epic poem as "a poem containing history" and made it his business to write an epic. Johnson separated himself from that ambition, wanting to get behind the distortions of history and back to the authentic individual. So did Brakhage, even while, I, as a filmmaker, continued to seek the Historical Sublime (so Brakhage's sending me the completed portions of *ARK* may have been to suggest to me the error of my ways).

A Conversation Between Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage

The following conversation took place at Anthology Film Archives, in New York City, on November 3, 2000. Originally recorded for Vogue magazine, only a small portion of the conversation was published there. We present here a more substantive extract from a conversation between two of the most eminent figures in avant garde cinema.

Jonas Mekas: Here you are, Stan Brakhage, who, not only for me, but for most of those who write serious film criticism, or make movies, is considered as possibly the number one living filmmaker, both in the importance of the body of your work and in your influence on other filmmakers.

Stan Brakhage: And here is what you are to me: in addition to being a great filmmaker who has forged ahead in an area where you are practically unique, that is, the diary, journal film, you are the only one who has created a believable, meaningful, extended journal across most of your adult life. In addition to this, you have found a way to sponsor films that you love and to create cooperatives through which they can be distributed; to create the Anthology Film Archives so that they could be preserved and shown in a repertoire and continue today to be certainly the only place for what we want to call Poetic Film. So, you have not only done these two things, but you also have this rich life as a poet. Not knowing Lithuanian, I can just read the English translations of your work, which are very moving. I don't know how you keep all this going.

JM: We both have been in it all for fifty years now. You have been making films since 1953. And me, in the spring of 1953 I moved to the Lower East Side of New York and opened my first showcase for the avant garde films at the Gallery East. I showed Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, Maya Deren, and Sidney Peterson. So you see, I didn't move very far.

SB: Well, the man who really gets something done is the one who can stay at home. Of course, ironically, you are an exile, exiled from your home [Jonas Mekas was born in Lithuania and emigrated to the United States shortly after World War II].

JM: We lived in a century where for maybe half the world it was made impossible to remain at home. So now, I often say that cinema is my home. I used to say culture was my home. But it got a little bit confused. Nobody knows what culture is anymore. So I stick to cinema.

SB: That's where you and I first got into trouble, with what culture was, and art. I was so frightened the social concerns of the sixties would overwhelm the long-range aesthetic possibilities, as I viewed them. As I look back on it now, I think that you were largely right, that I needn't have been afraid for the arts in the ways in which I was. Let's say, many of the films that came out were very stupid from a standpoint of art, or aesthetics or even craftsmanship. Still, they were crucial to the moment.

JM: When we celebrated Anthology Film Archives' 30th anniversary, I got together with Ken Kelman and P. Adams Sitney and we talked about the creation of the Essential Cinema Repertory, which consisted of some 330 titles of very carefully selected films that we felt indicated the perimeters of the art of cinema. We came to the conclusion that we did not make any bad mistakes in our choices. I discovered that what I showed, what I promoted, all ended up in the Essential Cinema Repertory, the films that are now considered the classics of the '60s. There were, of course, some that did not become classics. Important works are always surrounded by some that are not that important, but as time goes they fall off. In a sense, it's like Darwin's law applied to the arts. Not the biggest, but the most essential survive.

SB: I was afraid the lesser works would sink the ship.

JM: They just evaporate. Your work, or that of Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren, and Michael Snow, they just keep growing.

SB: But I also wonder if that doesn't have more to do with what you provided.

JM: What came up during my conversation with P. Adams Sitney, was that what's lacking today is serious or passionate writing on the contemporary avant garde film. That, of course, was my function in the *Village Voice*, via my column "Movie Journal."

SB: I don't know any. Is there any aesthetician or critic or any kind that regularly deals with the Poetic Cinema in the entire North American continent?

JM: There are many alternative newspapers and monthlies, but none of them cover the Poetic Cinema. They are all writing about Hollywood kind of the film.

SB: That's also pretty much true now for poetry, architecture, or some of the performance arts: there is no regularity of coverage.

JM: You walk into a newspaper store and you see twenty, thirty magazines on art, but inside you see nothing but advertisements.

SB: In defense of myself, one of the ways I got most laughed at, in the '60s and '70s, was when I tried to defend the word "art." I finally had to give it up because it was taken away by everybody and applied to every kind of consideration. It ceased to be a meaningful word.

JM: I read a survey conducted by Peter Moore, who had a column in *Popular Photography* magazine in the mid-'60s, where people were asked whether they felt they were artists. Six million people said they felt they were artists. Of course, when you have six million artists in one country, then you give up using the word art.

SB: Pretty soon, someone said, half the American nation will be teaching art to the other half.

JM: Some terms get so overused that you have to forget about them for a while until time cleans them up.

SB: We have other words that have suffered from this, words like "love," "God," "evil." So I would say that it isn't just film that suffered from these difficulties. All the arts, what we traditionally call the arts, have suffered from this breakdown of terminology, this lack of serious critique. Here is a discipline far older than any other we know of human beings, but when it's taught in public schools, in fact in colleges, it's taught as a playground for finger painting and for expressing yourself.

JM: I would like to bring something else up. When you began making films in the early '50s, and when I turned to cinema, around the same time, there were several other very important developments in the arts—action painting, the improvisational theater of Strasberg, the Happenings theater, conceptual art, Fluxus, and video art—and it all somehow produced a thing called installation art, which has developed and grown. Now that installation art has swallowed video, film, sculpture, painting, and everything else, I meet more and more young people who are interested in returning to the very basis of their arts. At some point you have to go back to the very essence: what is really music, painting, cinema, poetry, etc.

SB: Remember, when we were choosing the name Anthology Film Archives, we thought that there should not be the article “the,” because we thought there will be other anthologies and that they would contradict our Essential Cinema list and that would set up a dialogue.

JM: No, that did not happen. We were the only ones who were crazy. Same as when Andy Warhol was making his film portraits. I thought and I wrote in the *Village Voice*, that the time will come when everybody will be making film portraits, because it's so easy. Nobody imitated Andy. They cannot imitate Warhol, or Dreyer, or you. All those things happen only once, and that's the beauty of it

SB: That's also the great truth. I have come to an age when I mostly say “I don't know.” That's what passes for wisdom. Some few things I do know. One thing I know is that there's no two people on Earth alike; all their cells are as unique as snowflakes.

JM: But the interesting thing is, that despite the fact that every snowflake has its own shape, beyond the shape there is water. Somewhere they all meet, somewhere we all meet. When people call me an independent, I usually say, no, I depend on many things, my friends, my past, what I read, all the poets.

SB: Gertrude Stein said there are those who are independent dependents, and those who dependent independents.

JM: Now I want to talk to you, dear readers. Nobody else will ever do what Stan Brakhage, or Ken Jacobs, or Kenneth Anger are doing. So we better love them, help them, and take care of them. These are such unique achievements of the human spirit, like fragments of paradise on earth.

SB: This is really that side of you that could not stand to see what you cared for and loved and respected just scuffled aside; that you deeply felt you needed to speak for them and save and preserve them.

JM: I think it's a very unfortunate mistake to think that what the avant garde filmmakers are doing is something very far out and not for the everyday. People seem to think that our lives, or the strangeness of our lives may be of some interest, but not our work. But I think the work is universal, because poetry is universal. There is no difference between reading a volume of Sylvia Plath and seeing a film by Stan Brakhage. I wonder where ideas that Poetic Cinema is more difficult to appreciate come from. In schools Faulkner and Olson are taught in the same classes. In literature the kind of separation that is made in cinema does not exist.

SB: There is a kind of professor that knows that if he or she books Hollywood movies only, that they will be popular. They will have huge classes and secure their tenure . . . Whatever it is, I still continue. I am mostly painting on film now and it takes time to make twenty-four individual frames for every second, but that is really all I can afford. I can afford only a few photographed films.

JM: My own diaristic style came very much from that fact that I had no time and money to make a scripted, "conventional" film. So instead of making films, I just filmed. I sometimes joke, I say I am not really a filmmaker; I am only a filmer. I film real life. I never know what will come next. The shape of my films emerges from the accumulation of the material itself. I go through my life with my Bolex camera. Here is a question for you. Let's take a film you did in Canada, *The God of Day Looked Down Upon Him*. Did you see its shape in your mind when you began it, or did that shape developed as you went along?

SB: I knew from the beginning it was the third part of a trilogy. The title comes from Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*. This was the first summer we went back to this place on Vancouver Island where my wife was raised. I still was hairless because of the chemotherapy; I had come very close to death. So I was in the mood to see that ocean in relationship to the end, or to the night, or to the darkness. My head was filled with things like Rothko's old age paintings, like the Houston Chapel. That Chapel saved my sanity. Also

Braque, the old age Braque, the real brown period, with the wooden plow. I felt old like that, I had expected to die, and I still expect to die any moment.

JM: I just wanted to know for myself, if you had any idea, feeling of the shape before you began filming it. To make a film, a filmmaker is one who already at the beginning sees its shape more or less. But I never have that. I am just a filmer, because it's life. I don't know what the next moment will bring, and when I will want to film.

SB: But you're such a stylist. You know that it all hangs together. I called you the Samuel Pepys of film because you're a stylist in that sense.

JM: Yes, but the style and the techniques come from the content, from this procedure. I am dealing with real life from moment to moment and instantaneously.

SB: Do you ever think about money?

JM: I never think about money.

SB: I knew you'd say that.

JM: There is a space next to Anthology Film Archives where we are going to build a library for the largest collection of written material on avant-garde/independent cinema. It will cost \$3.5 million. I know the library will be built. All it takes is to believe in it, and work, work, work . . .

Alicia Ostriker

Daffodils

by
Alicia Ostriker

Ten thousand saw I at a glance
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.
William Wordsworth

Going into hell so many times tears it
Which explains poetry.
Jack Spicer

* * *

The day the war against Iraq begins
Im photographing the golden daffodils
With their outstretched arms and ruffled cups
Blowing in the wind of Jesus Green

Edging the lush grassy moving river
Along with the swans and ducks
Under a soft March Cambridge sky
Beautifying the earth like a hand

Starting to illustrate a childrens book
Where humans come out to play
To act out the journey of new life
With their lovers, animals, and children

As theyve always done in the peaceful springs,
And this is also hell, myself am hell, because
The daffodils do look as if they dance
And make some of us in the park want to dance

And breathe deeply and I know that
Being able to eat and incorporate beauty like this
I am privileged and by that token

Taste pain, roll it on my tongue, its good

The cruel wars are good the stupidity is good
The primates hiding in their caves are very good
They do their best, which explains poetry.
What explains poetry is that life is hard

But better than the alternatives,
The no and the nothing. Consider light
And color, a splash of brilliant yellow
Punctuating a bright green text, white swans

And brown ducks floating quietly along
Whole and alive, like an untorn language
That lacks nothing, that excludes
Nothing. Period. Dont you think

It is our business to defend it
Even the day our masters start a war?
To defend the day we see the daffodils?

Luis Rodriguez

Poems to Ponder in Times of War and Uncertainty

by
Luis J. Rodriguez

1.

When prisons become the fastest growth industry
Our minds and hearts become the imprisoned

When the past of blood and conquest is denied
The land gives back this blood in torrents

When war is the only imagination of the people
The people's imagination becomes an insurrection

When we sacrifice lives, including our children's
Evil becomes as common as breathing

When truth scares us to apathy
Our only truths come from the most fantastic lies

When enemies are whoever our leaders say they are
We won't know an enemy from a rainbow

When power and wealth drives social policy
All policies are subject to poetic death

When my son asks, do I have to go to war?
A father's duty is to war against war first

When people say peace is the absence of conflict
They have no idea what they're talking about

When war forces us to die outside of ourselves,
We have to learn to live from inside our bones.

2.

I read the newspapers today
and the climate reports again proclaimed
perpetual nightfall.
I read the newspapers and saw that things
are worse for our children
then they were for us.
I turned on the TV and found the darkening
pulling us along fast-moving swollen rivers,
where we grasp for unstable stones and loose branches
only to be swept away into the shadows
next to “welcome” doormats and canary cages.

3.

Our leaders have called in the troops
with one or two syllable declarations.
Imagination is a casualty of this war
as are poetic language and moral consistency.
Despite millions taking to the streets against war
we go to war anyway because, hey, we got the weapons.
This is a democracy that doesn't care that people care.
This is a country that fights evil with guns
although this is evil's playground,
that opposes affirmative action in colleges
but pushes affirmative action in the military,
that has no vision, although there's plenty to see,
that has no dreams, although there's plenty of sleeping,
that denies reality, although there's plenty of
reality shows.

4.

Walk with the young, America,
be young, again, America,
be among the defiant and awake,
solid in their dreams.
Be the revolution in the marrow
where passions, ideals, fervors,

purposes and courage
are not just something
people had in history books,
but what we have to possess everyday,
anytime repression, injustice,
fear and greed
gather like night riders
about the gallop
through our living rooms.

5.

Where will your fingers take you when you can no longer
trace the lines on your mother's face? When will a child's
cry stop being the breath of morning? As war becomes
the milk in our cereal, the rain on our sill, the constant
rattle beneath our car's hood—so much a part of everything—
we lose the conception of life without war.
we lose what it is to be alive without killing.

6.

I see the lost youth of America
finding their way
with plenty to fight for, not just against.
Thousands marching across the land,
walking out of schools, putting up signs,
and talking the ears off their friends.
Rigorous, animated and brave
instead of sad and silent down the hallways.

7.

Education cannot be confined to fenced buildings.
It is in the heart, at home, in the parks, in the mall.
Schools don't teach, you say?
Then choose to learn anyway.
Fight for the schools, but never stop accepting
that in the spirit of learning, with community,
education is everywhere.

8.

The parents of the dead Vietnam War vet
have pictures of their son on a mantel
with photos of childhood school faces
and baseball teams next to certificates and trophies.
These are monuments to their quiet collusion,
their confused collaboration
in his sacrifice—something they must never
acknowledge even as their tragic mistake
haunts their sullen walk in every room of the house.

Patricia Choulakian

Flight From Van

Memories of an Armenian genocide survivor

This story was told to me in the 1970s by my mother-in-law, Varsig Pazian Cholakian. I very much regret now that I did not record it in her own words, but at the time she insisted that her English was not good enough and that I should write it down for her. Allowances should be made for the fact that these are the memories of a very young child and that many years elapsed between the events and the telling. My original purpose was to preserve her story for the family history, but I believe that it is also of interest to a wider audience, not only because it is so compelling but because it contains a description of life in eastern Anatolia before the 1915 genocide, an eye witness account of the historic Armenian resistance to the Turkish army during the siege of Van (the siege that Atom Egoyan depicts in his film "Ararat"), the Russian rescue of the city and the chaotic exodus that followed it. It is also possible that the apron Varsig remembers her grandmother wearing was similar to the one worn by Arshile Gorky's mother in his famous painting.

In September 2000 my husband Rouben and I visited eastern Turkey, which had been populated by Armenians prior to the genocide. It is now inhabited mainly by Kurds, who have also been in bitter conflict with the Turks. In Van nothing remains of the Armenian presence, for the city was completely rebuilt after the First World War. When I asked the hotel desk clerk where the neighborhood of Arakh was located, he had no idea and had never heard of it. In fact, we encountered only one Armenian during the entire trip—the ancient custodian of an Armenian church in Diyarbakir.

Patricia Francis Cholakian

January, 2003

She was born on June 22, 1908, in Tiflis, Georgia, the first child of Tavit Haroutunian and Lucia Nersesian. It was a premature birth in the seventh month of pregnancy and her mother told her later that she was so frail and

ugly that when she first saw her, she turned her head away and the doctor offered his condolences. Nonetheless, Varsig had a rugged constitution and survived.

Tavit was a nomadic mechanical engineer, who could repair anything from a broken tramway to a ship's engine, but never stayed long in one place. Seven years earlier he had returned from Russia to his native Van in eastern Anatolia and settled briefly in a small house belonging to his family, which was on the same street as the large, prosperous home of the Nersesian family. To them this tall, handsome stranger who wore European clothes and had a gold watch seemed an ideal match; for a son-in-law with contacts abroad could be a real asset to the family, if the Turks should again attack the Armenians as they had in 1895.

At the time she was married, Lucia was still in school. As the pampered daughter of a well-to-do family, she had been exempted from the household tasks usually assigned to Armenian girls her age. Indeed, she was so young for her age, that she barely understood what was taking place and later recalled gazing curiously around her during the wedding ceremony. Once the marriage had taken place, Tavit left Van for Odessa, promising to send for his bride once he had established himself there and found a house for them to live in. He was gone six years.

Lucia's life went on as before. She continued to attend the Armenian school nearby and almost forgot that she was a married woman. During this period, Mooshegh Pazian a young cousin by marriage, was a frequent visitor to the family. Mooshegh's family were Protestants and he attended the missionary school. Although not so well off as the Nersesians, they were more European in their outlook and better educated. They spoke English as well as Armenian, and Mooshegh's older brother was a teacher at the mission. He too had a plan to save his family from the dangerous situation Armenians faced in Turkish Armenia. In 1904, this older brother emigrated to the United States and began saving money to send for his younger brothers and sisters.

Mooshegh was attracted to Lucia, for there were many Armenian girls who were pretty, but few who were educated. In this strict household, the two were never alone together, but in the presence of family members, they often spoke

Patricia Choulakian

together of their studies and shared their love of Armenian poetry. Lucia too was drawn to Mooshegh, who was so much more intelligent and well-read than the other boys she knew. However, Mooshegh was gently reminded that Lucia was already married, and his visits stopped. Soon after, he followed his brother to America. Eventually Tavit Haroutouian sent for his bride, who had by now become a young woman, and she joined him in Odessa. From there they went on to Tiflis, where Varsig was born.

The adjustment was difficult for Lucia. Her family had spoiled her by allowing her to stay in school. As a result she had learned nothing about cooking or housekeeping. She would tell later how the first time her husband brought her a chicken and told her to cook it, she stared at him in dismay. She had no notion at all of what happened between the butcher's block and the table. In addition, she soon discovered that she and her husband had little in common, so it was not without bitterness that she resigned herself to life as his wife.

But if the first sight of her baby daughter depressed her, she soon found herself peeping at the wrinkled little face under the blankets and came to love her. Varsig grew into a toddler, clinging to her mother's skirts. A brother, born a year later died of scarlet fever in Tiflis; and Tavit decided to move his family to Alexandria. After the death of their son, the couple grew closer and they welcomed the birth of another daughter there, naming her Ishkhanuhi, which means Princess.

The family lived on the verge of poverty, due to Tavit's irregular work habits. They could afford only a tiny, third-floor apartment, and Lucia had to take in sewing to make ends meet. She also began to write short pieces, stories and poems, for the Armenian newspapers. Through these, she made friends in the Armenian community, and they encouraged her to work with them as a volunteer for the Red Cross. For the first time, since she had left Van, she began to enjoy life. Tavit, however, suddenly decided that they should move on to Istanbul, and then back to Odessa. There they lived in one room with a tiny kitchen and a window that looked out on a courtyard with a fountain in the middle.

One day, while Tavit was repairing a boat, he slipped and fell into the water. That evening he went to bed with chills and fever. It soon became apparent that he was seriously ill. In time he grew better, but he never fully regained his health. Ever a man to believe that a change was the best possible medicine, he decided to return to Van where the beneficial climate was legendary. Or perhaps he sensed that he would not get well again, and wanted to see his birthplace before he died.

The journey from Odessa to Van was arduous. There were no railroads once they reached Turkey. They had to buy space in covered wagons that were journeying east. They were on the road for several months, and Tavit's strength was overtaxed by the task of arranging for transportation and obtaining necessities for the family. They arrived in Van in the summer of 1914, and Varsig saw for the first time the legendary city of which Armenians said, "Van in this world, paradise in the next." The town near a lake about twice the size of Lake Geneva, whose water is so high in alkaline content that those who bathe in it emerge wholly clean, as if they have been washed with soap. The walls of the old citadel date back to biblical times, when the Urartians covered them with cuneiform inscriptions that tell of the ancient Vannic empire. In 1914, this part of the city was inhabited mainly by Turks. Its medieval streets teemed with all the hustle and bustle of an oriental bazaar.

On the hills lay the suburb of Ikestan, the garden city where Lucia's parents and most of the other prosperous merchants had their homes. Here intensive cultivation by artificial irrigation had created plants and trees so perfect that they looked as if they had been grown under glass. Varsig now entered the world of fruit and flowers in which her mother had grown up. The Nersesian property lay in the precinct of Arakh, one of the outermost sections of the city. The house was hidden from the road by high walls, which made it seem a little world in itself. To its right were planted, in an order that tradition had made invariable, first walnut trees, then hazelnuts, then pistachios, and finally fruit trees—apples, pears, peaches, and apricots. Even the poorest house in Van had such an orchard, but this was a rich man's house, and it had many trees of each kind. Behind the trees lay the *saku*, a round enclosure in which the family took tea in the afternoon. And beyond it were the grape arbors and flowering trees. To the left, between the garden and the house lay an area in which many of the menial tasks of the household were performed. It included a sort of covered

porch, in which fruits and vegetables were hung to dry, a storeroom containing jars of honey, huge crocks, in which meat was salted down in mutton fat for the winter and pickles were set to age in vinegar. In a second storeroom were rows of wooden bins, in which the staples of the household were kept—rice for pilaf, bulghur, dried fruits, raisins, beans, peas, and many others. With its colors and smells, this was a fascinating place for a little girl, and there was always the hope of receiving a few dried apricots or raisins, the local equivalent of candy. Beyond the storerooms were the earthenware ovens where the family's bread was baked and the *geraghooxs*, or stews, simmered. And finally, there was the bathhouse, in which tubs of water were heated on wood fires.

In a climate where the sun shines most of the year and it almost never rains, it was possible to do a great deal of working and living outdoors. The interior of the house consisted of a parlor or *mangal*, where the family ate and received guests in wintertime. A pit in the center of the room contained a charcoal heater with benches surrounding it. At mealtimes the family sat here and the food was brought to them on trays. Benches and walls as well as the floor were covered with rugs. The only other room on the ground floor was a small pantry that served to store the supplies kept on hand for guests and some small kerosene stoves on which the sweet, black coffee demanded by the rules of hospitality could be brewed. Hospitality played a cherished role in the Armenian household, and no caller could escape without tasting the strong brew served in tiny cups with straight sides to which the grounds could cling and enable the adept to take a quick glance at the future.

The main part of the cooking was done outdoors, however, with the aide of servants or *mahaghs*. These lived in tiny cells distributed around the kitchen, but in hot weather, they would go up on the roof to play and sing by the light of the stars. There was always one of them who had an *oud* or a mandolin and Varsig loved to listen to their music as it floated out over the garden. They received only a little spending money, but all their physical needs were supplied and their masters were kind. To Varsig, already wearied by years of rootlessness and one-room apartments, this well-ordered household seemed a harmonious haven, overflowing with bounty. She loved to spend her days at her grandmother's heels, following her from kitchen to storeroom. She was always ready to receive one of the dried sweets that her grandmother kept tucked in the pocket-pouch Armenian women wore beneath their aprons.

In the upper story of the house there were several small bed-sitting rooms, which were occupied by her grandparents, her uncles, and their wives. It was surrounded on all sides by a glass gallery that led out onto a flat roof, which was used for drying fruit at harvest time. The daughters-in-law, known as *hars*, were expected to be subservient in all things to their mother-in-law. They assisted her in the household duties and spent the rest of their time upstairs sewing or crocheting, since they were not allowed to be seen by any male guests who might arrive on the scene.

The peace and prosperity of Arakh was only surface deep, however, for there were persistent rumors of a war that promised to involve Turkey and thus bring up once more the question of Armenian allegiance to the Turkish government. In addition, within the family itself, a tragedy was approaching. Tavit had not grown better since his return to Van. He was now bedridden, his ankles swollen to twice their size. In addition, Lucia had given birth to twins, who also proved to be unhealthy and whose constant wailing irritated the sick man.

Despite these troubles, the family did not neglect the annual pilgrimage of thanksgiving to the famous monastery of Varakh, situated in the mountains above Van. The entire population participated in this ancient festival, arising at six A.M. and trudging on foot up to the shrine at which they were to make a thank offering for the plenty of the harvest. Varsig never forgot the sounds, sights, and smells of that wonderful morning, as she followed her grandparents up the mountain on which autumn flowers were still in bloom, and heard the waterfalls cascading down to the streams below.

The monastery, located about seven miles above the site on which Van then stood was in a mountain pass. It was of great antiquity, built in the Armenian style with a conical dome. It had come to be especially venerated in these latter days as the seat of the great Abbot Khrimean, who had left it to become the Katholokos of all the Armenians. Khrimean, a man of great personal holiness, had been among the first to inspire the persecuted Armenians to a love of learning and a sense of pride in their heritage. He had founded a school for boys at the monastery and encouraged the opening of Armenian schools in

Van. He had even procured a printing press and installed it in the monastery to aid in the dissemination of knowledge.

Unfortunately, the saintly Khramean had long since departed and the monastery had fallen on hard times. The school and brotherhood had dwindled in numbers, and the Turks had appropriated the printing press. But to the people of Van, Varakh was still a place hallowed not only by centuries of Christian worship, but by the recent presence of a great spiritual leader. Now as they made their way along the mountain paths, snatches of song could be heard from various groups, and neighbors exchanged shouts of recognition. Progress was not swift. It was a social occasion and the Armenians are a gregarious people. In addition, they were burdened with the animals and provisions they had brought with them, for they were about to perform a rite so venerable that it went back to biblical times.

Once at Varakh, each family slaughtered an animal in the cloister enclosure, and the priest cut off a symbolic ear as token of the sacrifice. Then the animals were roasted in pits specially constructed for the purpose, and the feast was offered to the poor. Only when these had eaten their fill did the offerer and his family partake of what remained. The solemnity of the sacrifice soon gave way to joyous merry-making, however. There was, in fact, roast lamb and pilaf for all, with plenty to spare, as well as great quantities of the plump fruits of Van; and when no one could eat or drink any more, there was singing and dancing in long chains, the dancers linking their little fingers and the leaders waving kerchiefs in the air. Finally, when the sun had sunk low, the long procession made its way back down the mountain, the people now subdued, the children bumping sleepily against their parents' knees and finally drifting off to sleep over their shoulders. They did not know that never again would the people of Van make the pilgrimage to the cloister of Varakh, or that soon there would be other processions in which those too tired to walk would drop by the roadside and not rise again.

As winter approached, it became apparent that Tavit Haroutunian would not recover. The handsome, wandering stranger bequeathed to his widow nothing but the small property in Van. On the night he died, Varsig dreamed she saw tiny angels singing and going up and down a ladder to heaven. After years

spent wandering from one foreign port to another, Tavit had brought his family back to the heart of Armenia on the very eve of a holocaust.

The month after his death, in the spring of 1915, the Turkish government moved to settle “the Armenian question,” and began systematically massacring the Armenian people by means of enforced death marches. Although many of the villages and communes submitted helplessly, pockets of resistance flared up, and one of these was in Van. The city was divided into military districts or *taghs* by the patriots. The Nersesian home, the largest in the neighborhood, became a fortress, the headquarters for Arakh. The entire population mobilized to resist the invading Turkish armies, certain that failure would mean death for all. It was a heroic attempt with little chance of success, but the alternative only hardened their determination to fight to the last man. “Kill them or die!” was the battlecry.

In the early days of the war, the Turks confiscated all Armenian weapons and munitions, claiming that their loyalty was suspect at a time when the country was at war. Armenian nationalists had managed to secrete a few stockpiles of arms, however, and in desperation, they begged the Russians, their potential allies and rescuers, to sell them more. The Turks were literally at the gates of the city and the sound of guns was heard day and night. Everyone was put to work, the elders making gunpowder, the women cooking and caring for the wounded, the young boys and girls carrying messages and supplies, and even the little children making sandwiches for the fighters.

For Varsig, this terrible time was in many ways a holiday, however, for there were no school lessons. To free their parents for other tasks, all the children were brought together under the supervision of a few capable women. Since the embattled city had to turn night into day, there were no schedules or regulations, and bedtimes were non-existent. Everyone, including the children, ate and slept where and when they could. Determined to protect the youngest from the horrors taking place around them, the leaders gave strict instructions that no one was to discuss the war in front of them, and that those who had lost relatives in the fighting should not be allowed to grieve in their presence. Despite these orders, it was impossible to insulate the children from what was going on, and Varsig often overheard the old women whispering among themselves that if the Turks came, they preferred to die.

She was also aware that children only a little older than she were dying in the effort to save the city. Her grandfather's house was located in the middle of the town on a hill that commanded a view of the surrounding countryside. It had been fortified and connected to the rest of the city by means of a network of trenches that were used to carry messages, and supplies. The messengers were more often than not children of about ten, for their short stature made it possible for them to run through the trenches without being seen by the enemy. They were sent out in small groups with the instructions that they were to go on no matter what, even if one of their number was killed. Beyond the walls of the improvised nursery, Varsig and the other children often heard the screams of the dying. Then the women in the room would quickly whisper, "It's nothing." But as their situation grew desperate, more and more often came the harsh command, "Sit still and be quiet!"

After forty days of what had seemed a hopeless struggle, the besieged city was miraculously rescued by the Russian army. The month that followed was a time of almost hysterical jubilation. People greeted each other in the streets with the cry, "Big Bear is here!" After the nightmare of the siege, when everyone had been sure they were doomed, the arrival of the Russians seemed heaven-sent. Meanwhile the Turkish inhabitants of Van, most of whom lived near the center of town in the old city, had fled, leaving behind their houses and possessions. Motivated by greed and revenge, the Armenians, who had for years been buying their safety and well-being from the local Turkish officials with heavy duties and bribes, joined the Russian soldiers in an orgy of looting. Varsig's grandmother went immediately to the home of a wealthy Turkish family she had known and took their jewels and diamonds from the safe.

Despite the holiday atmosphere in Van, the war continued and the Russians began to suffer reverses. They announced that they were forced to withdraw from Van, but realizing what the fate of the Armenian citizenry would be, they gallantly offered to conduct them into Russian Armenia, where facilities were being set up to receive the thousands of refugees fleeing from the Turks. The people of Van were given eight hours to ready themselves for the departure. Many became hysterical and rushed out of the city, taking nothing with them. Others, sure that one day they would return, spent the time burying their gold and jewels, much of which was later appropriated by the Turks, and much of

which may remain hidden underground to this day. The more sensible gathered up food, clothing, and personal possessions. The fortunate piled their belongings into carts or wagons or strapped them onto donkeys and mules; the rest were forced to rely on their own backs.

Lucia found herself abandoned and alone with her two little daughters and only one donkey. For reasons Varsig didn't understand, Lucia's father had packed his belongings into a wagon and set off with his sons without waiting for her. Perhaps he was impatient to be off and thought she would catch up with them on the road. Probably no one had a very realistic notion of the confusion and chaos that would attend the enforced exodus of thousands of fear-crazed people. Lucia strapped a blanket on the donkey, collected enough food to last a couple of days, and set out. As they walked down the street, Varsig suddenly remembered the baby chicks that had just hatched in the dooryard. She broke away and ran back to fetch them, but her mother commanded her firmly to come back, and protesting vehemently, Varsig rejoined the ever-growing throng, laden with bundles. At the edge of town they found themselves in the middle of a stampede. People knocked each other down and stepped on each other in their hurry to escape the Turks, whom they believed to be just behind them. The air was filled with the sounds of animals bellowing and women screaming. Riders beat savagely at their horses, as they reacted to cries exhorting them to make haste. Within a few hours, the city of Van was deserted, except for the old and infirm who had been left behind or chosen to stay and die.

Varsig was numb with shock and fatigue. She walked in a daze broken only by her mother's arm pushing her to walk faster, comforted by the monotonous sound of the cart wheels ahead of her on the road. Hypnotized, she imagined that she was once more on the road to Varakh, going to celebrate the festival. "Why don't we have a wagon?" she asked her mother, but Lucia, preoccupied by the struggle to propel herself and the two girls forward, did not answer. More than once, she had to snatch them up to keep them from being stepped on; and as the Russian soldiers rushed up and down the line shouting that the Turks were nearer and that they must make haste, the danger of being crushed to death by the panic-stricken crowd increased. Ishkhanuhi, who was not quite three was allowed to ride on the donkey, but Varsig had to keep up as best she could. When she saw a Russian cannon rolling by, she demanded, "Let me sit

on that!" At times it seemed to her that she would surely drop to the ground, but each time her body sagged, her mother jerked her up again and dragged her forward.

Finally night fell and they were allowed to stop. The air was stifling, and there was no water. Desperate, the adults gave the wailing children their own urine to drink. The road had been carved out by the Russians through a desolate region and at night the ground was alive with snakes and scorpions which terrified the little girls and made it impossible to lie down. They were forced to sleep standing, leaning against something. The halt was only a brief one. Soon they were awakened and urged to move on, for the dreaded Turkish army was still at their backs. Armenian soldiers brought up the rear guard, and according to rumor the half-savage Kurds were only an hour behind them. Many of the youngest children were soon dead of starvation. Varsaig felt she had become nothing but a tired lump. She could think only of her desire to lie down and sleep for five minutes, but she did not dare to stop, for she had seen others who had fallen and been trampled to death. Eventually the group passed by a rushing river, and the half-crazed refugees began to loosen their heavy bundles and to hurl them into the current. The urge to lighten their load spread through the crowd and some of the women in their eagerness to follow suit threw in their own babies, which they were carrying on their back, and then realizing what they had done, hurled themselves into the river and drowned. In the confusion resulting from thousands of people moving forward with no organization, family groups had become separated, and all around one heard the frantic cries of mothers searching for their children. All night, they would go from group to group, peering into the faces of the sleeping children and calling the names of their lost ones, "Haro!" "Maro!" "Sako!" so that there was never a moment when the air was not filled with their cries.

The little Ishkhanuhi was a winning child, plump and affectionate, with huge dark eyes and fair skin. She soon caught the attention of the Russian soldiers, who found a horse for them and put both the sisters on its broad back, allowing Lucia to follow on the donkey. This turned out to be less than a blessing, however. The horse was nervous and high-spirited. Lucia had her hands full already and could not keep it in check. Suddenly it started violently at a noise in the rear and galloped off with the two terrified children on its

back, leaving their helpless mother behind. They were soon out of her sight and could do nothing but hang on for dear life. At last, a man managed to catch the horse and lift them down, but he turned out to be nothing but an opportunist, for he led the horse away and left a shabby little donkey in its place. Varsig now became obsessed with one idea: never to let go of her sister's hand. She was frightened of the braying, stubborn donkey and refused to mount him. With one hand, therefore she held tightly to his rope, and with the other she clung to her sister. It did not occur to her to look for her mother. Her only thought was to keep her sister beside her. At last when they could stumble on no further, they sat down on the ground and fell asleep, Varsig being sure to keep a tight hold on the donkey's lead. When she awoke, she found it still in her hand, but the donkey had disappeared while they slept.

They were now reduced to the state of beggars, living off the hand-outs of those who took pity on them. She discovered that she had a few raisins in her pocket, and these she rationed out, determined to make them last as long as possible. The days became a blur of hunger, thirst, and fatigue. No one paid much attention to the two children. There were many like them whose parents had been lost or died along the way. The Russians did what they could, but they had no facilities to care for the huge throng, which was totally unorganized and undisciplined. Eventually, despite all her efforts to keep hold of her sister's hand, they were separated and she was totally alone. Already in a state of shock, her mind became completely benumbed and she no longer reacted to anything around her.

At last she reached Igdir, a small town to the northeast of Mount Ararat. They had come about a hundred miles from Van. Varsig squatted in the street with the other refugees, dirty, ragged, emaciated, seeing nothing. Those who had lost their loved ones sat there day after day, questioning new arrivals in the hope of learning what had happened to them. The pavement burned her bare feet and legs, for the summer sun beat down mercilessly. High above her head, branches of fruit hung temptingly, but they were jealously guarded by their owners, who hated and feared the hordes of refugees who had turned their village into a nightmare land filled with sickness and death.

Suddenly, Varsig found herself being picked up and covered with kisses. She heard the sound of a voice calling her pet Armenian names—"Darling, sweet

one, little one!” She recognized the face of Ardashes Mirzoian, the husband of her mother’s cousin, who had been brought up with Lucia in the Nersesian household at Van. A few months before, he had brought his wife and their child to visit her relatives in Van, so he recognized Varsig. He covered the filthy, half-starved, little girl with kisses, laughing and crying as she clung to his neck. A month after their departure from Van, his two-year-old child and his wife had been burned to death by the Turks. He was now a second lieutenant in the newly-formed Armenian army, under its commanding general Antranik Pasha. Ardashes had discovered Lucia at the school-turned-hospital where she was helping to care for the sick. Some kind people had already brought Ishkhanuhi to her, but she had been sure that she would never see Varsig again. Ardashes had promised to search for her nonetheless, and finding her was like finding one of his own.

When he set her down, he realized that she was disgustingly dirty and covered with lice, so he took her to be washed, shaved her head, and found her some decent clothes before taking her to her mother. Still not recovered from the horrors of the past days, Varsig paid no attention to Lucia, however, but ran to her sister, threw her arms around her, and refused to let go of her. Ardashes, who had connections, had been able to find Lucia a good place to stay in a doctor’s house, and Varsig remembered how, since it was very hot, the three of them slept together on the roof under the stars.

Lucia was now destitute. She had thrown away what few possessions she had managed to save when she lost the children. Since she spoke Russian and had some experience, however, she had found a job nursing the sick, for the privations and lack of sanitary precautions during the exodus had led to outbreaks of disease, and the refugees were threatened with a full-scale cholera epidemic. But this job left her no time to look after the children, so she followed Ardashes’ advice and placed them in one of the orphanages that had been formed for Armenian refugee children. She had had word that her parents had managed to save a few belongings and some money and were determined to push on to Baku.

Meanwhile, in Igdir, a tall, handsome officer wearing the uniform of the Russian cavalry walked down the street one day and came upon a group of Armenians he recognized as his fellow-townsmen. He stopped to talk to them

and have his boots blacked, for many of the exiled Armenians were reduced to such tasks to earn their bread. He struck up a conversation with an elderly member of the group, who was obviously from Van.

“Did you by any chance know the family of Nerses who lived in Arakh?” he asked.

“Yes,” came the reply, “they’ve gone on to Baku.”

“And did their daughter Lucia go with them?”

“No, she was married to Tavit, you know, and had two little girls by him.”

“Then she must be with her husband?”

“No. Her husband died before the siege of Van. She’s here in Igdir, working at the hospital.”

The cavalry officer stared at the old man as if he had caught him in a lie, until the old man asked grumpily, “And what makes you ask so many questions about Lucia?”

“I am the nephew of her brother’s wife,” was his answer. “I am Mooshegh.”

Then the old man held out his arms. “Mooshegh!” he exclaimed. “Of course you are. I am Lucia’s uncle. Come, I’ll take you to her.”

Mooshegh Pazian had heeded the call to all the diaspora Armenians to serve their country, and had returned from America to serve as captain with a Russian cavalry unit under General Yegarian. When the two reached the hospital, someone was sent to tell Lucia she had a visitor. She came into the room and saw her uncle with a stranger.

“Do you know me?” he asked.

Many years had passed since Lucia and Mooshegh had read together under the fruit trees in her father’s garden. She had journeyed back and forth across the eastern Mediterranean world, borne six children, buried a husband, and been driven out of her homeland into exile. Nonetheless his name rose without hesitation to her lips.

“Mooshegh! You are Mooshegh!” she cried. In her heart, she had never stopped thinking about him and he had never stopped thinking about her. Both

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believed to the end of their lives that theirs was a true love made in heaven. On November 20, 1917, Mooshegh married Lucia with General Yegarian's permission. The groom, who had been educated by American Protestants in Van, converted to the Armenian Apostolic faith the same day, and Yegarian served as his best man.

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For Lucia this was the happiest time of her life. The Turks had once more abandoned Van and a group of its former residents decided to return to the city and rebuild. When she and Mooshegh arrived, they had a bitter shock, however. They found nothing but ruins. The fruit trees were broken and burned, the wells polluted, the fertile gardens were flooded by the sophisticated irrigation system that had nurtured them. The house of Nerses, once the proudest of Arakh, was only a shell. Even the stairs had disappeared. Determined to salvage something, Lucia borrowed a ladder and climbed to the second story. There she found a few pictures of her children, including one of Varsig dressed in a Cossack costume, sitting on her father's knee. Sick at heart, she gathered together these momentos and turned away. Nothing else was left.

Lucia and Mooshegh remained in Van about two months, but it became increasingly evident that the destruction of the city had been so complete that it could no longer sustain life; and the optimistic citizens who had wanted to rebuild were soon on the verge of starvation. What is more, the dream of Armenian sovereignty was quickly fading as the big powers once again forgot their lofty promises and betrayed the helpless people of Armenia. Mooshegh became convinced that they must return together to America. Within a few months his visa would expire and he would then no longer be free to leave. Lucia agreed. If they must take up residence on foreign soil, she preferred the freedom and opportunities of America to those offered by the Bolsheviks, who now controlled Russian Armenia. Accordingly, she wrote to the authorities and asked that her children be released from the orphanage and returned to her at once. To her horror, the reply came that the officials in Nakhitchevan, where the girls had been sent some months before, had no information as to their whereabouts. In the chaos following the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russian bureaucracy had lost track of Varsig and Ishkhanuhi. Lucia was frantic. If she and Mooshegh did not leave immediately, they would be interned in Russian Armenia. There was no time to search the hundreds of orphanages housing Armenian children. Reluctantly, she agreed to leave for America while there was still time and put the case into the hands of the Red Cross. Once Mooshegh who was an American citizen had legally adopted her daughters, the Soviet government would be obliged to let them join her. Accordingly, she emigrated with him to the United States.

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When she arrived, she did not give up her determination to find the children, but the situation seemed hopeless. The Russian Revolution had thrown all of what is now Soviet Armenia into confusion. Varsig and Ishkhanuhi, along with thousands of other orphans, had been shipped from town to town, often without enough to eat, sometimes separated from each other, always struggling to stay together. At last, when they had all but forgotten their mother and their homeland, they were located by the Red Cross. Lucia wrote eagerly to tell them about the new country where they would all live together. There was little money, however. She and Mooshegh were both forced to work hard just to support themselves, but they managed to scrape together enough to purchase two boat tickets. Thus began the last and longest journey for Varsig and Ishkhanuhi, first to Constantinople, and then to the New World.

There, like so many victims of the genocide, Varsig and Ishkhanuhi lived to see their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren thrive, living proof of the survival of the Armenian people.

Review

Why Terrorism Works: Understanding the Threat, Responding to the Challenge by Alan M. Dershowitz

reviewed by
Robin Melville

“Should the ticking bomb terrorist be tortured?” Alan Dershowitz’s prescription, discussed at length in chapter four of his book, *Why Terrorism Works*, that law enforcement officers should be able to seek and judges should be able to issue a warrant to torture a supposed terrorist who might be able to provide information that might save lives, has already been much commented on. It is only the most notorious of the several “tragic choices” he canvasses in exploring how a democracy might change its ways in order to grapple with a certain sort of threat. In light of the commentary his suggestions have already excited, I see little point to further discussing them here. Rather, taking as my starting point the notion that solutions tend to be prefigured in the way a problem has been defined, I propose to reflect on the way Dershowitz defines his problem. In doing so, I wish to urge that he, like everyone else who does more than merely gesture vaguely toward 9/11 and its consequences, is presenting a history-laden and theory-laden perspective on those terrible events. But histories and theories are necessarily subject to critical evaluation. And this remains true of Dershowitz’s particular history and particular theory, despite the fact that he does what he can to discourage their evaluation.

At the outset I suppose I ought to confess I’ve always been just a little bit envious of the self-assurance of those who can assert their opinions without a hint of qualification or evidence. I almost wish I had the sort of mind and personality that would allow me to impose my worldview authoritatively on those who read or listen to my words. Hence, I read the opening sentence of Dershowitz’s Introduction with a mixture of envy and incredulity:

The greatest danger facing the world today comes from religiously inspired terrorist groups—often state sponsored—that are seeking to develop weapons of mass destruction for use against civilian targets. [2]

How can he make such an unqualified claim in a world in which there is so much disease and hunger and so much violence, even deadly, mass violence, which has nothing at all to do with religiously-inspired terrorist groups? Surely Dershowitz must recognize that there are other dreadful, deadly dangers in the world? So what criteria is he employing to rank order them out of sight? Dershowitz's book provides no answer to these questions. Rather, his selective focus distorts the nature of the problem, restricts the range of questions to be raised, and presupposes the kinds of answers to be provided.

Underdeveloped argument, unexplored alternatives hidden behind the mask of confident assertion, would seem, in fact, to be the symptoms of the intellectual disease from which this book suffers, namely, no matter what the cost to honesty and fair dealing, to force his worldview on his readers.

Consider this second example, from the third paragraph of Dershowitz's Introduction:

Global terrorism is thus a phenomenon largely of our own making . . .

—Aha, I thought, he is going to ponder the fact that the “weapons of mass destruction,” whether fuel-laden jumbo jets, or deadly chemical or biological agents, or nuclear weapons deliverable by long-range missiles, cargo containers, or suitcases, were devised, created, developed and disseminated by the world's most economically and technologically advanced and powerful countries for their own purposes. But no, I was mistaken.

The international community—primarily the European governments and the United Nations, but also, at times, our own country [presumably the United States, though from the evidence of this book, Dershowitz's national identity is not entirely unambiguous]—made it all but inevitable that we would experience a horrendous day like September 11, 2001. We are reaping what we have sown . . . [I]t is our policy toward terrorism that will determine whether their terrorism succeeds or fails. It is we who must change our failed approach to terrorism if the world is not to become swept up in a whirlwind of violence and destruction. [2]

So we are not, after all, going to be asked to reflect upon the regrettable and foreseeable consequences of our own pursuit of what Philip Green so long ago scornfully referred to as “Deadly Logic.” Rather, we, who made the possible destruction of the entire world a key component of our “defense posture” and who seem not to be about to deny ourselves the capacity to go on threatening to utterly destroy selected portions of it, and who in the process have contributed and are still contributing massively to the production of so many kinds of terror weapons of mass destruction, must now try to figure out how to curb and contain relatively minor practitioners of an approach to difficult political problems that we, the great ones of the earth, have employed so energetically for so long. And to help us do so, Dershowitz claims, not, I think, without pride, that he is, as Herman Kahn was once willing to do with respect to nuclear war, “willing to think the unthinkable.” [13]

Neither—despite his observation that “we are reaping what we have sown”—are we going to be invited to reflect upon possible consequences of an imperial presence, past or present, in various parts of the world distant from whatever “homeland” the imperialists hailed from. Rather, Dershowitz is inviting us to blame the old, now enervated imperialists for failing to be rough enough and tough enough to play their proper part in the world-order we now inhabit. Thus, despite having repudiated the notion that the root causes of terrorism can be understood and eliminated, [24] Dershowitz shows no reluctance to understand it, at least in part, in a decidedly particular way. The subtitle of his second chapter could hardly make it more clear: “How Our European Allies Made September 11 Inevitable.” [35] And in the passages that follow he excoriates these allies for their pusillanimous treatment of those, mostly Palestinian, whom Dershowitz himself would have treated much more harshly. It may, incidentally, be relevant here, given his own clearly stated political commitments, to point out that France, at least, has a much longer record of this sort of pusillanimity than he is perhaps willing to acknowledge. For so long ago as 1946 that country gave asylum to Eliyahu Lankin, an Irgun terrorist who had escaped from British custody, thus allowing him to assume a leading role in Irgun’s European operations (see “The Irgun Abroad,” at the Irgun web site, <http://www.etzel.org.il/english>).

It is, I think, also relevant to note that Dershowitz is here castigating “old Europe” and the United Nations for their failure to behave as he would have them behave some time before they became the object of official defamation and talk-show abuse because they refused to acknowledge the wisdom of President George W. Bush’s approach to Iraq. Unlike the regularly noted and

invariably criticized anti-Americanism, anti-Europeanism is neither a widely acknowledged nor regretted phenomenon in the United States (where by my observation it is actually quite widespread). But it surely ought to be. Certainly, Dershowitz, for one, would seem to appeal quite blatantly to aspects of that fuzzy set of prejudices regarding Europe. This is, I would venture, entirely in keeping with his approach to argument, at least in this book, aimed at a large, largely American audience. It is not scholarly; it is unscrupulously lawyerly, in the sense that he seems set on making the best case possible for his side, no matter how much obfuscation, misrepresentation and *ad hominem* argumentation that may require.

Thus, in his very opening paragraphs Dershowitz arbitrarily and prejudicially delimits the range of his reflections, and so ours, on the eternally troubling problem of political violence. And thus does he thereby prescribe the ways in which it should be dealt with. But troubling as these broad contextualizations are, yet other of his contextualizations are even more reprehensible because they are so outrageously *parti pris*. To be sure, he does briefly, very briefly, acknowledge that “nearly every nation has made some use of terrorism.” [7] And he does admit, rather dismissively, as if of little account, that the United States and Israel, among others, have supported or engaged in terroristic actions. [7] It is necessary to remark his brief comments on these two particular states because they occupy such a privileged place in Dershowitz’s concerns. Indeed, after reading the book I find myself wondering whether it is really about the United States and the problems it faces after September 11. It could surely be read in the other direction, so to speak: now that Americans have experienced September 11, perhaps they can be persuaded to accept a very particular account of Israel’s predicament and to sympathize with the harsh measures the Israeli government has employed against its enemies? The manner in which he frames his discussion, first, on his book’s dust jacket, and secondly, and at some length, in his second chapter, reflects on this possibility and on the egregiously biased character of his book.

Surely, looking first to the book’s dust jacket, it is no accident that it features the smiling faces of Yasser Arafat and Osama bin Laden with the word “TERRORISM,” dripping blood, between them. Such, however, is the subtlety of images that it would surely be possible for Dershowitz to claim, should he wish to do so, that he was not in fact asserting any close linkage between the secular Palestinian and the fanatically religious Saudi. But frankly, I would not believe him. The argument of this particular image—that,

somehow, the Palestinians were responsible for what happened on September 11, 2001—is of a piece with all those other—failed—attempts to prove there was a link between the detestable bin Laden with others, in Iraq and elsewhere, who have been demonized. And no doubt many Americans will believe him. Just as many have been led to believe Saddam Hussein did it. And who knows, before long many may find themselves being led to believe it was Bashar al-Assad of Syria.

What is merely implied in the visual imagery on his dust jacket is made verbally explicit in his second chapter, “The Internationalization of Terrorism.” [35-103] For in this chapter Dershowitz makes quite clear his belief that the Palestinians stand at the heart of “global terrorism.” Further, as already noted, he holds that the European governments which failed to deal harshly with Palestinian acts of terror in Europe contributed to its flourishing and so contributed to making them an example to be emulated. In pressing these claims, Dershowitz again contextualizes to his own convenience. Don’t ask about Jewish-Palestinian relations prior to the territorial rearrangements brought about in the 1967 war. Don’t ask what the Europeans might have been grappling with domestically or internationally. Dershowitz nowhere acknowledges that they may have been struggling to manage a number of related Middle Eastern problems or that they may simply have developed a different understanding of how to contain terrorism. Their top, indeed, their sole priority should have been the same as Dershowitz’s, as should have been their way of dealing with it. Furthermore, unwilling to leave us scope to misunderstand just how awful the Palestinians have been and just how complicitous the Europeans and the United Nations have been in fostering this awfulness, he imposes on his readers a twenty-one page list of Palestinian perfidies and the benefits they supposedly derived from them [57-78], this on top of twenty-one pages of text highlighting several of the items in his list [36-57]. After all of this, it takes quite a mental effort to remember that the Palestinians were not in fact responsible for September 11. It also takes quite a mental effort to remember that it is the Palestinians who have lived in thoroughly miserable conditions under military occupation by foreigners for so many of the last thirty-five years (to look at matters only from within the time frame Dershowitz himself imposes) and who have seen illegal settlement after illegal settlement installed on their lands. If this constitutes success, what would Dershowitz consider failure?

To advance his cause, Dershowitz must also downplay the terrorism of others in order to make the terrorism of his enemies seem so much the worse, even

unique. Thus, he relatively briefly mentions a number of cases where terrorism met with less success and yet others where, according to him, terror had little to do with outcomes which favored those who employed terror. With respect to the former, the Armenians and the Kurds, Dershowitz's account is again rather peculiar. For his main aim seems again to be to put the Palestinians in a bad light: both the Armenians and the Kurds, he asserts, had much stronger grounds than the Palestinians for seeking their own nation states, but their resort to terrorism failed to get the approval of "the international community," perhaps, he explicitly suggests, because neither of their enemies was a Jewish state. [91-92] Similarly, according to Dershowitz, resorting to terror has not brought success to the Irish Republicans. [93] This would likely cause Gerry Adams or Martin McGuinness to smile and cause a host of Britain's leading politicians over the last thirty-five years to shake their heads in disbelief. In this last regard, coincidentally, recent news reports on the still largely secret findings of the British Stevens Commission do raise the possibility that British state terrorism, in conjunction with the terrorist campaigns of the Ulster Loyalists, may in fact have helped the cause of those seeking to resist change in the constitutional arrangements of northern Ireland. Will it ever be permissible to raise the question of the terrorism of the Israeli state and its consequences?

Turning to the two cases where, he acknowledges, some might argue terrorism contributed to the successes of those practicing it, in the case of the African National Congress, he asserts without discussion, that its defeat of the apartheid system owed little to the terrorism it did employ. His second case is necessarily more controversial because, as already noted, Dershowitz himself devotes so much attention to yet other aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Let me quote his remarks on Jewish terrorism in their entirety:

In Palestine, the Irgun and the Stern Gang attacked British military and administrative targets primarily, seeking to make it so difficult for the British to rule that they would simply give up and leave. Terrorism certainly contributed to the achievement of this goal, but other factors were much more important, and many historians believe that the British would not have remained in Palestine very long in any case. [93]

Now it is indisputable that, where the British were concerned, there were, indeed, other factors conducing to their departure from Palestine and from a great many other places too. But surely Dershowitz's account of the activities of Irgun and the Stern Gang—certainly when compared to his lengthy account

of Palestinian actions and supposed successes—is all too self-servingly brief. Even the Irgun veterans who operate the Irgun website (<http://www.etzel.org.il/english>) offer an account of their own history rather less anodyne than the one Dershowitz presents. Thus, one would never know from what he says that the Arab population of Palestine was also subject to attack by these Jewish terrorist organizations, that so early as 1937 Irgun began attacking Arabs, thereafter setting off bombs in Arab markets in Haifa and Jerusalem (cf. the section “Restrain and Retaliation,” at the Irgun site). Since it connects with yet other aspects of the contemporary terrorist culture which Dershowitz views with understandable repugnance, it is also interesting to note that Irgun heroized its terrorist bombers. Thus, one who was attacked by local people as he was about to set off a bomb in Old Jerusalem receives the following recognition: “Yaakov Raz was the first member of the Irgun to die as a result of an operation. The heroism he displayed, and particularly the manner of his death, made him a symbol and inspiration for generations of young Irgun members.” (ibid.)

Dershowitz also sees fit to distinguish “global terrorism” from terrorism that limits itself “to more localized attacks” [93]—the former being, for some unexplained reason, more culpable than the latter. Surely the two Italian passers by who were the victims of Irgun’s bombing of the British Embassy in Rome in November 1946 would not agree with him. (Cf. the section “The Irgun Abroad,” at the Irgun site.) So far from being localized in their operations, the Irgun veterans also inform us that Irgun began to organize abroad before World War II and that, having decided after the war to renew activity in Europe and to there launch a “second front,” which led, *inter alia*, to an attack on the British headquarters in Vienna and the sabotage of a British troop train. Further, might it not be reasonably argued that the infamous assassination of the UN representatives, Colonel Serat and Count Bernadotte, who had had the temerity to advocate a settlement Irgun didn’t like, constituted an attack on the international community and hence an act of “global terrorism?”

So fraught with misunderstanding and bad faith is the discussion of these matters, it is perhaps necessary to repeat that it is Dershowitz himself who juxtaposes the Jewish groups to the Palestinian ones, to the extreme detriment of the latter. I am merely trying to point out that he does so in such a fashion as to raise questions regarding his objectivity.

In sum, then, Dershowitz's history, like his analysis, is simply too idiosyncratically focused on his own narrowly and self-servingly defined concerns to be of any use to anyone genuinely seeking to think through the problem posed by terrorism and how to respond to it. What he seems to be engaged in is demonization, not scholarship. It thus renders his suggested responses to terrorism both understandable and worthless. Having categorized the "global terrorists" as a new, utterly inhumane species, spawned by the Palestinians, whom he utterly abominates, and whom he depicts as utterly unlike anyone civilized people like himself would hold any truck with, why not torture them (with sterile needles under the finger nails)?

Sadly, one cannot just leave it at that. For it is very possible that Dershowitz's experience of September 11, 2001, was so traumatic as to radically affect his discourse. But it must also be acknowledged that many among his anticipated audience were similarly traumatized. Nevertheless the burden of authorship is surely more demanding than is the burden imposed on the reader. Especially in such times, when passion is all too common while perspective is not, those making political arguments and pressing policies should surely be trying to exercise the greatest responsibility. On the basis of this book, however, Dershowitz must be ranked alongside all those others who have irresponsibly chosen to appeal to and exploit the passions generated by 9/11 for their own ends. Sadly, too, this may well help bring yet more pain and suffering to people around the world, including those belonging to the very communities to which he most intensely imagines he belongs.

Brian Trench

Review

The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories That Shape the Political World by Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman

Reviewed by
Brian Trench

One reason stands out above all others for studying the media: what the media does presumably exerts important effects. That presumption underlies most informal commentary and much formal analysis. Yet one weakness stands out above all others: little published analysis offers any solid proof of the strength or nature of the media's influence and effects. The reasons for this may lie more in the limits of what is capable of being known than in lack of scholarly effort. There simply are no reliable ways of establishing specific effects of media messages on perceptions, attitudes or behavior.

There are few plausible analyses of how a series of media events, or the output of particular media organizations, generated particular responses in media audiences. To show conformity between media representations and public perceptions poses an interesting question, not an answer. This paradox of "presumed but unknown" media effects lurks at the heart of mass communication and journalism studies. The ease with which so many scholars use a concept such as "agenda-setting" with its premise of media as cause and public attitudes and/or policy as effect, is evidence of a highly inadequate degree of self-awareness. That daunting paradox also hampers this academic study of relationships between media performance, public opinion and political strategies in the United States during the 2000 presidential election, and its aftermath.

The title rings boldly: *The Press Effect*. But it is not at all clear who is telling the "stories that shape the political world," or where they come from. In a critique of the media's glib penchant for psychological profiling of major personalities, the authors *briefly survey* techniques of media effects research, emphasizing their limitations. They discuss the "likelihood" that one story version was "more effective" *in influencing the public* than another, offering evidence from public opinion surveys. But what they are describing is better

viewed as correlations, mediated in both directions through politicians, press and public, rather than as direct causal effects. Yet Jamieson and Waldman do try to develop a more nuanced approach. Combining critiques of media content with analysis of politicians' parties' rhetorical strategies, and opinion and survey data, they build a compelling and disturbing picture of media bias and of failure to tell the full story. They refer to honorable exceptions and acknowledge that parts of their critiques are derived from observation of other professionals whose commitment to truth is, in their view, admirable. But the dominant effect of their study is to raise deep concern about the state of health of American journalism.

Their key concept is "framing," which seeks to establish what aspects of particular stories are given greatest weight in their telling in the media. Looking at print and broadcast media on a range of topics over 2000-01, the authors demonstrate how story frames espoused by particular parties were taken up in the media, and how the preferred frames left significant or more appropriate aspects of those stories marginalized. Media coverage of the 2000 presidential election campaign is said to have adopted the frame of Gore-as-liar and Bush-as-stupid. In part, this is attributed to the way the contending parties, applying negative campaigning tactics, sought to frame the opposing candidate. In part, it is attributed to the media's need for personality profiling. In describing in this way how the media treated recent political episodes, Jamieson and Waldman are being neither exceptional or exceptionable. They do, however, acutely highlight how linguistic choices (e.g., in TV news anchors' phrasing of questions) displayed the operationalization of particular frames. And they venture into unusual places to do so: for example, a content analysis of jokes on late-night shows, and a close analysis of the phrasing of questions on Sunday current affairs programs for evidence of dominant perceptions among media professionals.

The authors venture into more daring territory when they mention the alternative available frames that they say the media largely ignored, and deserved at least equal attention. But they rarely explain how these alternative frames might be made "available." As an "old European" reading media accounts of the Florida recount, I was lost in undervotes and overvotes, chads and dimples, various categories of absentee ballots, and butterfly ballots. I wondered why there were apparently no accounts in mainstream media that characterized the punch-card ballot as bizarre, the conflicts of interest affecting leading arbiters of the process as scandalous, the state counts and Electoral College system as archaic, and the low turnout of voters across the

United States as seriously undermining the legitimacy of the election result. Are these the frames of a Martian, or European, or were they not also “available?” Did they not also merit inclusion in the range of possible frames? I was *also* surprised to find the authors’ analyses completely contained within the Republican versus Democrat difference.

There is a pervasive tone of complaint about media performance. Invariably, what was “seldom done” represents the authors’ preferred option. The authors pose rhetorical questions as to why the media did not tell that story or highlight that point. They refer to the dulling of the *press’s* fact-finding instincts, to the press uncritically embracing “government-blessed versions of fact.” Occasionally, the authors do acknowledge that elements of the press corrected mistakes, or returned to investigate disputed events, such as the Florida presidential election recount. Despite their judgment that the public is “well served in the longer term” by the press, the tone of this analysis puts the authors clearly in the “glass is half-empty” school. The *press’s* principal failure, *as they see it*, is *in* allowing itself be diverted from seeking facts. “The dramatic narrative can drive out relevant facts,” they state. Indeed, it can, but it is likewise true that dramatic narrative allows relevant facts to become accessible to the public.

The authors believe that “we rely on journalists to tell us, above all, what is true and what is not.” *So, they say*, when the TV networks called the result early in Bush’s favor, “the viewing public accepted these descriptions as facts.” Every successful “deception or persistent public misconception can be understood in part as a failure on the part of the press in its role as custodian of fact.” The necessary qualification—a big one—is the “in part” phrase, but they move on as if the qualification was minor. The authors seem to believe that pristine pure facts are readily available. One of their key cases concerns an argument during the 2000 presidential election over plans for Social Security. Jamieson and Waldman observe, justifiably, that the press emphasizes political strategy over policy—the how and why, rather than the what and who. But they are on dicier ground when they insist that the responsibility of the press was to determine whose claims were correct. Policies, and any judgements on them, are matters of interpretation rather than statements of fact. The authors are surely right to say that journalists have an important role in helping the public make sense of policy choices, but that may as often involve judgements on motivation as arbitrations on fact.

Brian Trench

Telling stories is a large part of how we interact and how we make sense of things. It is important to look at the specific role of the press and to measure its performance against stated standards. It is a different thing to argue that the press is the strongest link in the story-generating chain or to argue that it is deviating from its primary responsibility *in telling stories* or to argue that it accommodates too comfortably to the politically dominant story-frames. Jamieson and Waldman are ambitious and brave in seeking to argue all of these propositions, and more. They offer much valuable evidence that others will want to pore over too. But, on balance, their case is unproven.

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Teresa Walker

Review

Globalism: The New Market Ideology by Manfred Steger

reviewed by
Teresa Walker

Manfred Steger's *Globalism: the New Market Ideology* is a good example of the importance of clarifying a question before we rush to embrace answers. The subject of this study is that knobby intersection where trade, politics and social norms joust for dominance and how, within that space, neoliberals have employed ideology to promote their private interests as public goods. Because his subject has so many facets and so many players struggling for command, Steger's balanced overview of the historical process offers some welcome clarity to a very tangled topic. Throughout this work, Steger goes to great lengths to differentiate between the process of globalization (the expansion of the cultural flows of ideas and trade) and the current ideology of globalism (the idea that unregulated capitalism is the inevitable, inescapable fate of successful economies). Ultimately, Steger is arguing that globalism derogates human dignity and security, therefore globalism, as an ideology, is inherently anti-democratic and politically destabilizing. However, the goal of this work is not to denounce globalization, Steger asserts, but rather to "offer a thoughtful analysis and critique of globalism," (xi) in order to expose the internal contradictions and biases inherent in the ideology of globalism. Fortunately for his readers, Steger accomplishes this goal with coherence, breadth and style.

Globalism opens with a review of the Western European discourse that has surrounded the politics of ideology. The central elements of neoliberal globalism, "the primacy of economic growth; the importance of free trade to stimulate growth; the unrestricted free market; individual choice; the reduction of government regulation and the advocacy of an evolutionary model of social development," (9) are the outgrowth of the nineteenth century market utopia expounded by Adam Smith (1723-1790), David Ricardo (1772-1823), and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). Smith's recognition of individual economic interest as a motivator and the elevation of efficiency over social obligations led to the "invisible hand" that guided a "harmonious

system of natural laws.” Ricardo’s Theory of Comparative Advantage provided a rationale to end government regulation of markets by arguing that the advantages of specialization and trade outweighed the constraints of social considerations. However, Steger claims that Spencer’s “Social Darwinism” was *the* formative basis of classical liberalism. Spencer argued it was not compassion or care of human needs that advanced human progress, but rather free-market competition. Consequently, Social Darwinism has been used to legitimate Western dominance of subordinate economies. The collapse of world markets during WWI and protectionist reactions to the extremes of laissez-faire capitalism caused liberalism and Spencerian theory to fall out of favor. After WWII, Keynesian economic theory was employed to create a mixed economy as an expression of political pluralism, resulting in state interventions that led toward the social welfare state.

Steger refers to the work of author Daniel Bell (*The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*), who argued that post-WWII Western intellectual discourse rejected purist ideological claims of how the world should work in favor of more moderate and rational resolutions. Bell maintained that the West had exhausted and rejected some of the foundational presumptions of Marxist socialism and classical liberalism, specifically, the “inevitability of history” from the Marxist school, and the Holy Grail of the liberals’ “self-regulating market.” This rejection of the idea that human history is fated to follow a particular path and of the commercial paradise promised by laissez-faire liberals is central to Steger’s argument that our historical experience runs counter to the ideological claims of neoliberal globalists. Steger concludes that Bell’s analysis is a valid representation of the post-war shift from regulated capitalism to the mixed economy of the welfare state, which was a rejection of classical liberalism.

Liberalism next reappeared in the late 1980s and 1990s as *Neoliberalism*. In response to the concurrent high inflation and unemployment that were stressing the mixed economy structure of the late 1970s, Steger writes that neoclassical laissez-faire economic theorists (such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman) argued for a return to the principles of classical liberalism. “TurboCapitalism” was the result, which married social conservatism with neoliberal economic policies. This neoliberal project, Steger maintains, has been expanded into an ideology that defines market liberalization as the “natural” and inevitable path of globalization. As a part of that project, neoliberal globalists encourage the general public to uncritically accept the worldwide spread of free-market, i.e., unregulated, capitalism. Privatization

of socialized industries (transportation, power, etc.), dismantling government oversight of industrial and trade processes, tax cuts and reduction of public expenditures are presented by neoliberals as natural consequences of the “natural” economic laws of supply and demand. Such reasoning, Steger points out, promotes market responses over human will. Through media focus, statements by political figures, and marketization that reduces all relationships to market values, globalism has been presented as an objective process that is based on what the author calls “standards of normative evaluation.” Steger points out how this purported objectivity is used to present market logic as somehow more valid than human rights:

Market principles are portrayed as pervading even the most intimate dimensions of our social existence. And there is nothing consumers can do about it. In other words, socially created relations are depicted as exterior, natural forces that are more powerful than human will. (6)

Steger maintains that neoliberal globalists are “market fundamentalists” (12) who have simply repackaged classical liberalism for today’s new technologies and circumstances. Steger is arguing that the discourse on globalism has been directed and staged by neoliberal interests to the point that it is no longer an examination of options, but rather a determined campaign for private interests carried out through co-option of local élites, political coercion and market power. Neoliberals who trumpet “market reforms” are simply claiming Spencer’s mantle of progress and modernization to legitimate their proposed changes and to validate the dominance of Western hegemony as “the privileged vanguard of an evolutionary process.” (13) In this way, Steger argues, neoliberals are promoting the spread of unregulated capitalism as both inevitable and as a normative good.

Steger carefully distinguishes between globalism—the ideology, and globalization—the material process. The author argues that separating these two concepts allows us to go beyond what is being said to examine why it is being said; we need to understand the instrumental nature of the message before we take it at face value. Steger identifies globalism (the dominant market ideology that is currently directing the process of globalization) as the spread of unregulated capitalism. Globalization, on the other hand, Steger describes as our historically expanding and integrating patterns of exchange, which include political and cultural as well as commercial exchanges. Steger refuses to grant economic materialism the causal primacy that it has in the

Marxist paradigm. He argues instead that our social trajectory is the product of ideas as much as it is “the outcome of material forces.” (14) Steger goes on to identify methods neoliberals have used (primarily via the media and academia) to reify globalization as globalism.

Steger insists that we need to critically examine the ideas and normative values of globalism, not just analyze its economic outcome. On this basis, he eschews the kinds of statistical data that so richly inform Benjamin Barber’s *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1995), but relies instead on a careful examination of the ideological dynamics of globalism, revealing some of the strategies and slight-of-hand used by neoliberals to promote their private interests as a public good worthy of a generalized support. The result is a well-reasoned and balanced examination of globalism and the forces arrayed against it.

These are the five claims that Steger defines as central to the ideology of globalism: (1) Globalization means market deregulation and integration; (2) Globalization is inevitable and irreversible; (3) Nobody is in charge of Globalization; (4) Globalization will benefit everyone; (5) Globalization will further the spread of democracy in the world. Steger examines each one of these claims at some length, comparing the ideological claims to the historical record.

Note that neoliberals promote globalism by talking about globalization. This subtle shift in terminology allows globalization—trade and political relations carried out on an interregional and intercontinental scale—to be conflated with globalism, the term Steger uses to describe the expansion of unregulated capitalism. Steger maintains this is a true paradigm shift, allowing market values rather than human values to be used to validate social choice.

Because neoliberals are making claims about globalization, Steger defines this term as well. He divides the discourse on the process of globalization into two categories, academic and public, with three broad arguments:

1) Globalization is “globaloney,” an “analytically impoverished,” “vacuous term” that is so ambiguous that it is meaningless. As a strategy, denial allows globalization to proceed unexamined and unchecked. Steger claims that refuting this charge would require more data about the material process, with greater depth of analysis, and a critical analysis of the ideology behind globalism. (17)

2) Globalization is a false concept that denies the reality of local and regional structures. These theorists (Hirst and Thompson) argue that globalization is largely a myth used to promote neoliberal interests and to disempower local political controls. They present data that show today's trading patterns in a historical light, with Europe, East Asia and North America as the traditional foci. (22)

3) Globalization is not a novel "new market paradigm" as claimed by the neoliberal camp; it is an historical process that has been aided by political and technological progress. Economist Robert Gilpin points out that international economic exchanges (labor and capital) were actually much greater prior to WWI. World systems theorists (Frank and Wallerstein) argue that colonial exploitation and imperialism go back to the ancient empires of Rome, Persia and China, emphasizing, "globalizing tendencies have been proceeding along the continuum of modernization for a long time." (23) Steger notes that although the world systems perspective sees global integration as an ongoing, historical process, these theorists have presented it as a primarily economic process, with ideology and culture given a subordinate role, giving rise to a theory that relies on statistical analyses that neglect the powerful social impact of these changes. This touches on a central tenet of Steger's argument, the idea that human will and choice create market models, rather than the inverse, where market logic dictates the limits of human choice.

Neoliberal demand for unrestrained development is premised on the theory of biomimicry, arguing that economies and nature rely on the same patterns of development: a pre-existing condition that evolves into a successfully specialized adaptation, resulting in a new pre-existing condition, which in turn, invites endless specialization and innovation. Neoliberals argue that government regulations that inhibit economic activity are akin to trying to regulate the processes of evolution and so are doomed to failure. Steger is arguing that economic systems are not constrained in the same way as are biological systems. There are at least four significant differences between the neoliberal economic model and the biological relationships they claim as their standard.

First, as Steger points out, pre-existing economic conditions are brought into being by human will, not just survival-of-the-fittest in the marketplace. The neoliberal evolutionary model relies on a purportedly objective market logic that rewards successful innovators and extinguishes less successful competitors, based on how well each utilized the pre-existing material

conditions. However, those pre-existing material conditions were the results of political power and human will, not a natural process of elimination. Thus, in the economic realm, human will creates the parameters, not the forces of nature.

Another difference has to do with the relationship between competitors and resources under these two models. In natural systems, which neoliberals claim as their archetype, the coin of the realm is energy. Biological competitors struggle to capture, utilize and exchange energy that is firmly embodied in resources. In human systems of exchange we use currency to separate value from the resources that produced that value. The neoliberal economic model rewards competitors who successfully accrue displaced value. If this were natural, bears would hoard honey.

The third difference is a result of the second. In nature, the evolution of successful innovators creates increasing diversity, resulting in complex webs of energy users. In contrast, the unrestrained capitalism of the neoliberal model has centralized economic power, allowing for horizontal and vertical market integration that results in monopoly.

Finally, in natural systems, biological innovators are seeking a niche that will allow each to prosper at the expense of its competitors. In systems of human exchange, whether cultural, social or economic, there is a moral imperative that has precedence over survival of the fittest. Therefore, creating systems of exchange that recognize and accord each participant dignity and security is a goal in human systems that is not addressed in natural systems.

Steger insists that because globalism, with its alleged “natural” precepts, preceded and, indeed, created the current economic paradigm, we must examine the rationale behind the ideology if we are to understand the consequences of neoliberal policies. Steger then goes on to challenge neoliberal claims to historical inevitability by presenting alternative narratives about globalization.

Anti-globalist challengers come from diverse backgrounds and have formed unexpected alliances in their shared opposition to globalism. Steger gives his readers a comprehensive tour of the right-to-left spectrum, beginning with Patrick Buchanan’s *Reform Party* and Gerhard Frey’s *Deutsche Volks-union* as examples of the nationalist-protectionist position on the right. Because globalism makes traditional borders more porous to the migration of capital,

jobs and displaced peoples, leaders like Buchanan and Frey champion xenophobic responses to the crescendo of threats to cultural heritage and economic advantage. Although these groups direct their appeal to a populist base, Steger asserts they are fundamentally undemocratic because they rely on strong leaders and scapegoating rather than on an involved and informed electorate.

Ralph Nader's Green Party and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) are offered as examples of the international-egalitarian left. This perspective includes issue-specific organizations from civil society: environmentalists, feminists, and human rights advocates. In general, the international-egalitarian left avoids the nationalistic drum beating and scapegoating practiced by the nationalist-protectionists on the right, but they join with the right in identifying globalism as inherently undemocratic and a threat to the sovereignty of every nation. Steger maintains that this alliance between left and right has scored some significant victories in recent confrontations with neoliberal forces.

The 1999 "Battle of Seattle" was a pivotal point in the discourse on globalism because it allowed the struggle against globalist structures that supported corporate interests to gain center stage in mainstream media and because it fostered unity between dissimilar allies; resistance to the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) was more extensive and better organized than anyone had expected. Steger explains this as the result of civil society's utilization of the same new communication and transportation technologies that neoliberals had used to advance their agendas. Organizations like *Third World Network*, *The International Forum on Globalization* and *Global Exchange* are offered as examples of the internationalization of the antiglobalist advocacy network, what Steger refers to as "globalization from below." (110)

Thus far, Steger has steered his readers a lucid path through shifting ideological shoals, but there comes a point when history must give way to potential future outcomes. This is the point in the book where he quite justifiably begins to waffle. He raises questions about the ongoing ideological struggles that his readers will see reflected in the daily news. Was the "Battle of Seattle" a blip or a watershed? Has the WTO and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) become more responsive to "globalization from below," or is their mild reformism simply political maneuvering? Will the nation-state be strengthened or transcended? This reader wants to see the

clarity and logic Steger has applied up to this point translated into clairvoyance about “Future Prospects,” the title of his last chapter. He does suggest some likely options and lobbies for a more democratic and egalitarian international order, but there are no promises, and this is as it should be, because this author is not marshalling true believers. One of the chief strengths of this book is that Steger is able to reveal his leftist bias without apology and without compromising the rationality of his argument. It is his radical rationality that makes so apparent the unsustainable duplicity of “globalism with a human face” and Anthony Giddens’s centrist “Third Way.” (137-8) The subtleties of rhetorical reform versus true structural reform are revealed because Steger has focused on the historical process and on the instrumentality of ideology.

Manfred Steger’s critical theory of globalization links the deliberative intent of ideology with the nuts and bolts of economic processes. In doing so, he articulates a much-needed and convincing alternative to the neoliberal worldview. More importantly, his methodology legitimates bringing purported objectives into the discussion, rather than just relying on selected outcomes to evaluate the juggernaut of globalism.

Review

Seeing Red: Hungarian Intellectuals in Exile and the Challenge of Communism, by Lee Congdon

reviewed by
Péter Fárango

Lee Congdon's recent book, *Seeing Red*, is an excellent continuation of his *Exile and Social Thought* published in 1991. Both books deal with emigrant Hungarian intellectuals in the twentieth century. It is commonly regarded as the most exciting and complicated period in Hungarian intellectual history, and perhaps in the whole of Hungarian history. Congdon starts his new book right where he left off. He begins with how these intellectuals, who later became very well-known all over the world, accepted the communist idea at the beginning of their careers and ends with how the same thinkers came to be anti-communists. These books have nearly the same cast of characters: liberal thinkers like Aurél Kolnai and Karl Mannheim are central figures in both cases even though new names like Michael and Karl Polányi, Imre Lakatos, and Arthur Koestler, among others, appear here as well.

One cannot talk about the beginning of the twentieth century without taking into consideration the permanent spread of Marxist ideas and the formation of the Russian communist empire in 1917. Most of these intellectuals fell into the trap of adopting the theses of communism without any personal experience. All of them have a different story but there are so many significant parallels in their lives that Congdon needs to make them explicit all the time. There are at least three such parallels in the course of their lives that Congdon highlights. The first can be found in the Jewish origins of these brilliant intellectuals. But the story is not as simple as it initially appears. Of course, they had Jewish predecessors, some of whom were rabbis, teachers, bankers and scientists, but none of these intellectuals were practicing Jews. What is more, some of them became Christian in one way or another. Indeed, some predecessors of Michael Polányi and Imre Lakatos were rabbis even though they became, in the end, liberal thinkers. Polányi (as well as Mannheim) joined the Moot Circle in Great Britain, a so-called Christian anti-war organization. Congdon, unfortunately, does not mention the Moot Circle in his book though it played an important role in breaking off the friendship of

Polányi and Mannheim. Nevertheless Michael Polányi and Arthur Koestler were such good friends—until Koestler’s tragic death—that they regularly discussed their non-Jewish religious feelings, according to Congdon. Imre Lakatos, the formerly diabolic communist, gained such a conservative personality, though not a religious one, that he felt frustrated by the riots in 1968 and was the first to stand up against the university reforms demanded by students at the London School of Economics. This parallel implies not only a common Jewish fate, but a determined and almost unavoidable path to British conservatism and Christianity.

The second important parallel in the careers of these various thinkers is that most of them had to emigrate more than once in their life. In 1919, Mannheim left Budapest for Vienna and helped Georg Lukács to escape from the so-called white terror (the revenge of Horthy’s troops on the former Red Army). Soon after he moved to Heidelberg taking an active part in the town’s intellectual life mainly led by Marianne Weber, Max’s widow. After becoming a *Privatdozent* in 1927 and gradually turning away from the formerly honored Lukácsian Marxism, Mannheim took up residence in Frankfurt in 1931 and became very well known as a result of his “sociology of knowledge.” In 1933, as with all the other European Jews, Mannheim had no place at any of the German universities choosing Great Britain as his final residence.

Of course, Mannheim was not alone in his wanderings through Europe. Lakatos, who was born in Debrecen, hid during the war years in Nagyvárad, Transylvania (Oradea in Romania), and studied then taught in Budapest. Soon after he was freed from the prison of Recsk, the feared concentration camp of the Rakosi régime, Lakatos emigrated to Great Britain becoming one of the most highly honored and cited lecturers in the philosophy of science. Kornai and the Polányis experienced a similar double emigration. But, as Congdon emphasizes, none of them wandered as widely throughout Europe, spoke as many languages at the highest level as Arthur Koestler, author of one of the most frequently cited anti-communist novels of the period, *Darkness at Noon*. Koestler was born in Hungary into a bilingual (German-Hungarian) family. After attending the Vienna Technische Hochschule in Austria, he broke off his studies and, seeking a new milieu, moved to Palestine. He managed to establish himself in a job with a German daily newspaper, the *Berliner Zeitung*, owned by the respected Ullstein Company, and also published in some other German language newspapers. He spent a few years in Palestine in a *kvutsa* (a small *kibutz*) as an eager-minded Zionist abounding in enthusiasm to build a new country as well as a brand new society. He never managed to feel at home so far from Europe. Therefore, he had

himself relocated to Paris by the Ullsteins. After travelling to the North Pole on the Graf Zeppelin, Koestler moved to the USSR to work as a tractor driver. But Koestler was unable to settle down anywhere for too long. He travelled to Spain reporting on the revolution against the Franco régime, but soon found himself in prison, again. He was sentenced to death for espionage but luckily managed to escape when he was exchanged for a hostile prisoner. After spending some secure years in Paris, Koestler was rounded up with other communists in a French internment camp for a few months. Joining the Foreign Legion was his only hope to avoid the German invaders. But as he reached Great Britain, travelling through Portugal and Gibraltar, he was sentenced to internment again as a foreign citizen before finally obtaining refugee status and, later, British citizenship. These autobiographies, standing like signposts, became the most important works of his life.

While Congdon makes these two parallels explicit, the main focus of his book is the gradual political change that occurred in their thought. These intellectual wanderings are at least as important as the geographical ones they were forced to pursue. So brilliantly does Congdon connect his story chapter by chapter that these similar but otherwise isolated stories perfectly overlap one another forming a coherent and organic history. The émigré intellectuals spoke with one voice in condemning Nazism, but they often differed in their judgement of Communism and the USSR. However, they had one common aim, namely, to dispel nihilism, the loss of stable values in European culture. Each of them started his career as a Marxist and an admirer of the communist system but most of them became disillusioned when they saw communism for what it really was. It was only the claim of excessive nihilism that made them open to a new faith reinforcing the world with a stable range of values. The promise of a new civilization appeared in different forms in their thinking.

According to Congdon, there were three dimensions that any communist intellectual could choose from: Christianity, science, or antifascism. For Karl Polányi, e.g., Christianity and socialism (or communism) are blood-brothers because both are created to sustain the human community. Christianity does not mean the worship of God in his view but a serious struggle for the coming (the advent) of a holy community (communism). Polányi's communist thought is based on economic conceptions stating that the Soviets had resolved the problem of economic democracy, while he disregarded the political price—the loss of freedom—they paid for it. His masterwork, *The Great Transformation*, a theory of the end of the self-regulating market, was published only in the U.S. in 1944.

Seeing Red is, however, not only a collection of different sources of Hungarian communist thought; it also deals with how some British intellectuals became communists and in what sense. Karl's brother, Michael Polányi made several efforts to refute the claim that science is communism. His main opponent, apart from the Soviets, was a British scientist, John Desmond Bernal. At the beginning of their career, neither Bernal nor Polányi dealt originally with the philosophy of science. Bernal, a biologist, was applying crystallographic techniques to biological materials at the prestigious Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge, while Polányi, a chemistry professor at Manchester University, was interested in a new theory of absorption and in thermodynamics. Bernal, who descended from a Sephardic Jewish family, was born in Ireland, while Polányi, of Ashkenazi Jewish origin, was born in Budapest. Bernal committed himself to a special romantic Marxism typical of so many western intellectuals at that time. Rejecting the differentiation between pure and applied science, Bernal came into serious conflict with Polányi who was an unshakeable liberal his entire life. According to Polányi, the main task of science is not to fulfil social claims but to fulfil the personal interests of scientists. Science is not only for society, as Bernal argues, because it is science itself that creates social interests as well. Rather, science is a set of autonomous ideas that grow as a result of the successful application of methods of thought and observation.

Anti-fascism, of course, meant communism for all the figures of Congdon's book since fascism (and especially Nazism) considered Jews, especially Jewish intellectuals, the old enemy of the dark new world of Aryans. Some of them, like Koestler and Karl Polányi, admired the USSR itself, while others, like Lakatos, Mannheim and Aurél Kolnai were impressed, rather, by Marxist philosophy. But as they received increasingly more information about existing communism, they eventually changed their minds, seeking other stable points in their war against nihilism. Lee Congdon has chosen a superb historiographical method to demonstrate how many similarities and personal connections bind together these émigré intellectuals in this fight. But none of them was a fighter in the full sense of the word; they were journalists, writers, philosophers and sociologists. They were men of sense, spirit and intellect—artists of the pen, not of war.

Rouben C. Cholakian

Ararat and the Pain of Remembering

by
Rouben C. Cholakian

The Criticism

Critics have had a hard time making sense of Egoyan's most recent film, *Ararat*. As Anthony Lane comments in his *New Yorker* review: "Surely the one thing that is required of *Ararat* is that viewers come away without confusion, versed in the facts of the case; instead, they may feel baffled and upset." (November 28, p. 105). The truth is, however, that Egoyan has never wanted to make films with easy, linear plots. "I refuse to believe in the death of complexity," he was recently quoted as saying. "It goes against everything I believe in. After all is said and done, that's what all my films are about and this is no different."¹

But this particular film *is* "different," for here Egoyan addresses two separate audiences, the initiated and the uninitiated. For the former, the events in *Ararat* need little or no introduction. The grim story of genocide is all too familiar to them, having heard it from surviving parents and grandparents. For those who are not familiar with the massacres, and that is virtually everybody else, Egoyan's intricate narrative is an invitation to go back and learn about the essential facts concerning the systematic annihilation of the Armenian population of Turkey at the beginning of World War I, some one million people, adults and children alike. For the uninitiated viewers the complex strands of the film can make sense only if they have a rudimentary knowledge of the history that inspired Egoyan.

Historical Background

To begin with, for most Armenians, the very title of the film, *Ararat*, resonates deep in the collective psyche. This snow-capped mountain and its surrounding region was a part of Armenia since ancient times,² and like the

American eagle, a venerated national icon, represented again and again in art and literature.³ The title therefore, is an indication that the movie's aim is contentious and political. While Egoyan does not want his film to be a documentary, his point of departure is a decidedly historical event.

At the start of the First World War when the Ottoman Empire was slowly crumbling, a new Turkish government run by a group of passionate nationalists dreamed of reformulating itself under the banner of Pan-Turkism.⁴ As the idea took shape in the minds of its ruling triumvirate—Enver, Talaat and Cemal—it became obvious that such a project necessitated what in today's parlance would be called “ethnic cleansing.” It is that forgotten genocide that the cinéaste tries to resurrect in artistic language.⁵

Egoyan's story is complicated by the intrusion of a film-in-progress. There is, in other words, a framed subplot whose central issue is the representation of one particular episode in the history of the Armenian genocide, the siege of Van. The choice is not arbitrary.

The extermination of Armenians began in the *vilayets* of Zeytun, Dörtül and Hacin with gruesome success, but things went quite differently in the city of Van where the Armenian population was much larger and where the desire to fight back much stronger. Of the fifty thousand inhabitants, more than half were Armenians. No doubt they had heard of what had happened in neighboring Anatolian *vilyets*, and they were understandably suspicious when the ultranationalistic minister of war, Enver—eager to rid his country of foreign elements—replaced the current district leader of Van with his own brother-in-law, Cevdet, known to have ruthlessly murdered Persian Christians.⁶

Looking for a reason to justify the Young Turks' determination to get rid of the Armenians, Cevdet was delighted when on April 20, 1915, he got what he wanted. When two young Armenian civilians attempted to stop the rape of an Armenian woman by Turkish soldiers, they were shot dead. Each side saw the story differently. The government immediately went into high gear to put down what they defined as an act of rebellion; Armenians in turn took up arms and positioned themselves to fight back. Thus began the Van

insurrection, the most significant instance of Armenian self-defense in what was otherwise a very much one-sided battle.

But the Van resistance was short-lived. The Armenian citizenry, even swelled with ranks of refugees from the outlying areas, could not hold out for long against the better-armed Turks. For weeks on end, the Armenian section of the city was bombarded, forcing the outnumbered Armenians to send ahead for help from the nearby Russian Army.⁷

When the news reached the Russian General Nikolaev, impatient to do battle with the Turkish army, he immediately set out for Van, a city that was rapidly being obliterated. After several months of fierce fighting in and around the city, Nikolaev realized, however, that he had no chance to outmaneuver the large Turkish forces there, and ordered the evacuation of Van. Hysteria followed as thousands of crazed and frightened Armenians grabbed whatever they could carry on their backs. Panic-stricken, the Armenian citizens of Van followed the defeated Russians out of the city, no doubt suspecting that they might never return.

It was a defeat and yet, in the minds of Armenians, it was gratifying because (1) it was a rare moment of resistance; and (2) an even rarer instance where a majority of inhabitants managed to escape. Thus the siege of Van symbolizes for Armenians the duality of survival: loss of an irretrievable past, fear of an uncertain future.⁸

Plot and Characters

When these facts are known, it becomes easier to understand Egoyan's script. The film's central story-line can be summarized in this way: a Canadian-Armenian family consisting of a widowed mother, Ani (Arsiné Khanjian), her son, Raffi (David Alpay) and a stepdaughter, Celia (Marie-Josée Croze), are all grappling with the past. Ani's first husband, Raffi's father, was killed trying to assassinate a Turkish diplomat. Celia blames Ani for the death of her own father who became Ani's second husband. Did he slip off a mountainside or did Ani push him? When Ani, an art historian who is writing a biography of the Armenian painter Arshile Gorky (Simon Abkarian), is asked to be a

consultant for a film about the Armenian massacres of 1915, directed by Edward Saroyan (Charles Aznavour), a second plot emerges.

In the personage of the filmmaker “Edward Saroyan,” Egoyan is conflating himself and another illustrious Armenian creator, William Saroyan (1908-81), author of the Pulitzer prize-winning play, *The Time of Your Life* (1939) and the novel, *The Human Comedy* (1942). The director, “Saroyan,” thus embodies the Armenian artist who reinvents a traumatic heritage.

Egoyan also introduces an historical figure, Arshile Gorky (1904-48, né Vosdanik Adoian), who represents the troubled genocide survivor. In one of several of the film-in-progress’s backward glances, the eleven-year old Gorky is shown as a messenger boy shuttling dangerously between the battle lines. Although Gorky’s family was from the region of Van, this episode is a product of Egoyan’s imagination.

More real, however, is the scene in which Gorky and his mother are seen having their picture taken. It is this photograph that inspired his famous painting now hanging in the Whitney Museum, which is the topic of one of Ani’s lectures. She explains to her audience how this portrait of mother and son has become a metaphor for the victims of the Armenian genocide. Gorky’s mother died in the famous retreat from Van.

Egoyan builds on that metaphor. In one of the most moving moments of the film, he shows Gorky in his New York studio working on this painting, which has haunted him for decades. Suddenly we see him scrubbing out the mother’s hands. Weeping hysterically, his own hands trembling, he rubs out his mother’s hands, obliterating them—the state in which they appear in the painting today. As Gorky once said: “I like painting because it’s something I never come to an end of.”

Egoyan wants the viewer to probe the scene’s underlying intent. What is the purpose of this destructive act and what is being rubbed out? In one sense, the picture’s incompleteness signifies the hope that the story may still come out right, that there is still a chance that pain and grief can be erased. Paradoxically, Gorky’s gesture is an attempt to remove not just the hands but the remembrance of lost love and lost identity. As Boyajian and Grigorian write:

The nonrecognition of the Armenian genocide generates an identity formation problem in the life-cycle of Armenians. This identity devaluation may continue for generations to come unless and until it is resolved by the proper recognition of the genocide by the world at large.⁹

In 1948, Gorky, a broken man, took his own life.

Egoyan is very keen on observing how genocidal trauma plays out in the lives of other characters. One of these is the screenwriter, Rouben (Eric Bogosian), who at one point argues with Ani because he wishes to make Ararat a backdrop to the Van episode. She says it is not possible; Ararat is not visible from Van. Rouben replies that geographic reality is not the only issue here. He wants to take into consideration the deeply emotional character of the events of 1915 of which the mountain, he says, is a pregnant symbol. He argues that he is not making a documentary, but a personal representation of psychological coming-to-terms. That is also Egoyan's objective.

Another interesting character is the Turkish actor who plays Ali (Elias Koteas) in the film-in-progress. He is the spokesperson for the present-day Turk, not necessarily hostile, but misinformed, a victim of the Turkish government's desire to conceal the facts of the genocide story. In Rouben's script he is made to play a cruel Turkish official and at the end of his scene, he asks Saroyan if he was chosen for the part because of his own ethnic origins. Saroyan smiles and walks away. Raffi, disturbed by Saroyan's silence, later confronts the director, who responds, almost as if talking to himself: "Why did they hate us so much?"

The remark haunts the hot-blooded Raffi. He wants immediate reprisal. When he drives the Turkish actor home, he is so troubled by the director's distressing query that he is unable to remain calm, and when Ali invites him in to share a bottle of champagne, like Saroyan, Raffi is unable to understand how this man can be so callous and indifferent. "It happened so long ago," Ali retorts with a grimace. While an event that happened eighty years ago is meaningless to the Turkish actor, for the genocide survivor it is the source of his identity.

The most puzzling secondary character, who at first seems to have no place in the narrative, is the Canadian customs official, David, (Christopher Plummer). In a protracted scene at the airport, he interrogates Raffi, back from Turkey presumably with new footage for the film, whom he suspects of smuggling drugs. Raffi has traveled to Eastern Anatolia on the classic search for the father. There he visited ancient Armenian ruins and returned with a video of what he had seen. During the interview Raffi shows David's haunting shots of Ani, once an important center of Armenian culture, and of Achtamar, a tenth-century church, magnificently decorated with biblical bas-reliefs that time and neglect are slowly destroying. The representation of the Virgin and child takes on special significance because of its resemblance to Gorky's well-known painting.

Raffi's running commentary on Armenia's history gradually transforms the customs officer's skepticism into tolerance toward him, and by extension, toward his own son, currently involved in a gay relationship. In the end, David feels compassion for the young Armenian struggling to make sense of his troubling heritage. Even though he does eventually find drugs in the film cases, David does not arrest Raffi, for now he sees him as much a victim of prejudice as his own son. Raffi's epiphany becomes the estranged father's as well.

What at first seems like the least significant episode in the film is therefore, perhaps, its most important. In it Egoyan not only defines Raffi's anguish and his ultimate sense of who he is, he also offers a ray of hope in an otherwise melancholy tale of hatred and destruction. To Saroyan's shattering question about the causes of animosity, he provides a twofold response: one must come to terms honestly with the past and, one must have confidence in the redemption that comes through truth and understanding.

Political Denial

For the victims of the genocide who managed to survive in a world-wide diaspora, there has been not only the trauma of remembering, but the absence of moral vindication. From the very start the Kemalist government, which was in power throughout the war and afterward, consistently maintained that what happened in Eastern Anatolia could be directly attributed to the war.¹⁰ To this

very day, the Turkish government argues much the same thing every time someone brings up the subject of the Armenian genocide. But in fact the war was a convenient cover for the plan of wiping out an undesirable ethnic group.¹¹ The international community, eager to assure its own interests, allowed the lie to persist. Callous indifference to the events of 1915 made it easier for an ambitious Adolf Hitler to quip twenty years later: “But who remembers the extermination of the Armenians?”¹²

The answer is: almost no one. To date, France and Israel are the only nations to have recognized the Armenian genocide in any official way. America, “the land of the free and home of the brave,” has not done so.¹³ Indeed, for a nation that often brags about its commitments to human rights, America’s position has been far from exemplary. President Woodrow Wilson never submitted for Senate approval the mandate that would have established an expanded Armenian state.¹⁴ By the time the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 was signed, Kemalists had managed to persuade Americans to ignore the “Armenian Question.”¹⁵ And ever since, the government, driven by geopolitical concerns, insists on speaking of an “alleged” genocide in 1915.¹⁶ As late as 1985, the Turkish government succeeded in preventing Congress from establishing April 24 as a “day of remembrance of man’s inhumanity to man with particular reference to the Armenian tragedy.”¹⁷

In short, this was the genocide that never was. This was the mass murder that never took place.¹⁸ When the Armistice was signed in Paris in 1918, Turkey was on the losing side of one war, but the winner of another. It had found a scapegoat for its military defeat and its loss of empire, an innocent population of Armenians, and all with the tacit complicity of the world community.

Not that there weren’t plenty of eyewitness reports. There are the famous *Blue Books* of Lord Bryce, the British diplomat who carefully gathered incriminating evidence that he later published with a preface by Arnold Toynbee. In it Toynbee excoriates the Young Turks for their cold-hearted plan to exterminate the Armenians. In a *New York Times* article dated November 27, 1915, Bryce himself writes that the reported atrocities are not “produced by imagination,” and warns the civilized world that on the day of reckoning “these unspeakable crimes” will need to be kept “in constant memory.” There is also the distressing report of the German clergyman, Johannes Lepsius,¹⁹ along with the

indignant cries of people like Henry Adams Gibbons, René Pinon, Anatole France, Albert Thomas and the medical missionary, Clarence Ussher, whose memoirs of 1917 are a major source for Egoyan's film.²⁰

But the most damning evidence comes from Henry Morgenthau, America's ambassador to Turkey at the time, who gives a hard-hitting and detailed testimony of his own experiences, noting at the close of his book: "I am confident that the whole history of the human race contains no such horrible episode as this. The great massacres and persecutions of the past seem almost insignificant when compared to the sufferings of the Armenian race in 1915."²¹

Ararat: A Triumph

In 1933, Hollywood wanted to film Franz Werfel's novel, *The Forty Days at Musah Dagh*, a story featuring in bloody detail the annihilation of this one Armenian village of Eastern Anatolia. The Turkish government threatened retaliation against America, and producers were promptly forced to end their project.²² Seventy years later, when Egoyan announced his own plan to treat the explosive subject of Armenian genocide, he too encountered terrible resistance. Beleaguered by menacing phone calls, he was told many times over that his film would never make it to the screen. Undeterred, when *Ararat* was finally released, he boldly advertised it as "the movie they don't want you to see."

So Egoyan was surprised at the Cannes festival, when a Turkish journalist stood up to invite him to show his film at the festival in Istanbul. The skeptical director nodded consent only to learn subsequently that the magnanimous gesture was little more than a publicity stunt. Shortly thereafter, the Turkish minister, Yilmaz Karakloyunlu was reported in an Ankara newspaper as having declared: "Turkey will do everything possible against this film. It is a shameful production."

Egoyan's *Ararat* is not only for Armenians but for all right-minded people, an unmistakable triumph. For Armenians, however, scarred for several generations by a repressed trauma, the film has deep personal meaning²³ For them, the

confusing layering is not, as some would have it, an aesthetic flaw,²⁴ but an artistic attempt to capture the psychological effects of buried pain.

That this subject has gotten onto the screen at all, is for these frustrated survivors an unmitigated victory; and Egoyan is a hero. With him, we can only hope that this horrendous crime can at last be brought to public attention, and that a recalcitrant Turkish government will, as the Germans have done, own up to the errors of their predecessors, express genuine regret, and move on from there.²⁵ Eighty years later is none too soon.

Notes

¹Cited by Murray White, *New York Times*, November 17, 2002.

²For example, the Greek geographer/historian, Strabo (64BCE-23CE), in his famous *Geographical Sketches*, speaks of his visit to Armenia and specifically of the beauty of this region.

³The major literary journal for American-born Armenians is *Ararat*. But the title that first comes to mind is Michael Arlen's masterful *Passage to Ararat* (New York, 1975). Other writers, however, not necessarily of Armenian parentage, have also understood its significance as a symbol. For example, Elgin Groseclose and D. M. Thomas, in novels dealing with the Anatolian crisis, both title their books *Ararat*. For a more general review of Armenian characters represented in literature, see Leo Hamalian, *As Others See Us*, New York, 1980.

⁴The *Ittihad* or CUP (Committee of Union and Progress) came into existence in 1908.

⁵"There is now a consensus among scholars that the Armenian genocide, which was the first large-scale genocide in the 20th century, is the prototype of much of the genocide that has occurred since 1945." G.S. Graber, *Caravan to Oblivion: the Armenian Genocide of 1915*, New York, 1996, p. xi.

⁶See Joseph Naayem, *Les Assyro-chaldéens et les Arméniens massacrés par les Turcs*, Paris, 1920.

⁷In spite of a peace treaty signed in February of 1914 between the Russian Imperial government and the Young Turks, by the spring of 1915, Russia and Turkey were already engaged in a border dispute in Eastern Anatolia. The whole conflict was further complicated by the Bolshevik Revolution.

⁸"The panic was indescribable: nearly two hundred fifty thousand refugees fled toward Transcaucasia, leaving just about everything behind. What little they had they lost in Kurdish ambushes. Forty thousand died of hunger and exhaustion or were killed along the way." Yves Ternon, *The Armenians: History of a Genocide*, tr. by Rouben Cholakian, Delmar, N.Y., 1981, p. 184.

⁹Levon Boyajian and Haigaz Grigorian, "Psychosocial Sequelae of the Armenian Genocide," in *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, New Brunswick, 1986, p. 184.

¹⁰Although a war crimes court was set up to adjudicate the misdeeds of the Young Turks, and members of the CUP were found guilty of premeditated massacres, the highly nationalistic Kemalist government, unwilling to tarnish Ottoman history, rejected the verdict. The result was that Armenians took the situation into their own hands, assassinating several of the perpetrators, including Talaat. See Ternon, *Op. cit.*, pp. 242-52.

¹¹As Robert F. Melson argues, Turkey's joining the German side of the conflict, permitted it to "claim that the internal Armenian enemy was in league with the external foe. Wartime circumstances then were used to justify the deportation and destruction of the Armenian community." *Revolution and Genocide*, Chicago, 1992, p. 248.

¹²For a complete review of this issue, see Kevork B. Bardakjian, *Hitler and the Armenian Genocide*, Cambridge, MA, 1985.

¹³Although the American government did ratify the 1987 United Nations convention statement on genocide, both Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush did not fulfill campaign promises to do something about the neglected Armenian genocide. See in this regard the BBC broadcast interview with their Turkish correspondent, Fergel Keane. (January 26, 2003).

¹⁴Robert H Ferrell, *Woodrow Wilson and World War I*, New York, 1985, p. 144.

¹⁵Dadrian says of this document that it is a "monument to the triumph of political expediency over fundamental principles of justice." Vahakn Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide*, Providence, 1995, p. 423.

¹⁶Speaking on behalf of the American government, Andrew Curson writes: "Because the historical record of the 1915 events in Asia Minor is ambiguous, the Department of State does not endorse allegations that the Turkish government committed a genocide against the Armenian people." "Armenian Terrorism," *Department of State Bulletin*, 82, August, 1982, p. 35.

¹⁷Richard G. Hovannisian, ed. *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, New Brunswick, 1986, p. 2.

¹⁸See Marjorie Housepian Dobkin, "What Genocide? What Holocaust," in Hovannisian, *Op. cit.*, pp 111-133. As recent as this past December, the Assembly of Turkish American Associations published in its bimonthly paper, *The Turkish Times*, an article by Ahmet Gursoy in which the author not only pretends that the annihilation never took place, but that "on April 15, 1915, when the Russian army moved into the City of Van . . . not a single Turkish civilian was alive in the city. Armenian rebels cleaned them all out before the arrival of the Russian army." December 15-31, 2002, p. 23.

¹⁹See especially *Le Rapport secret du Dr. Johannes Lepsius sur les massacres d'Arménie*, Paris, 1919.

²⁰*An Armenian Physician in Turkey: A Narrative of Adventures in Peace and War*, Boston, 1917.

²¹*Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, New York, 1919, pp. 321-22.

²²See Roger R. Trask, *The United States Response to Turkish Nationalism and Reform, 1914-1939*, Minneapolis, 1971, pp. 90-91.

²³Though the term "genocide" was first used by Raphael Lemkin in 1944, there have been numerous other attempts at a broad definition including the one formulated by the United

Nations in 1948. For a good summary of the issue see Melson, *Op. cit.*, pp. 22-30. For a more general bibliography on the entire subject of genocide, consult Israel W. Charny, ed., *Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review*, vol. 2, New York, 1991. Most historians differentiate what happened in Anatolia from what took place later in Germany as less an instance of racial annihilation and more a case of pan-Turkish nationalism.

²⁴In his *New York Post* review, Jonathan Foreman first chides Egoyan for a confused text and then concludes: “The Armenian genocide deserves a more engaged and honest treatment.” (November 15, 2002). However, his unconsidered assessment entirely misses the cinéaste’s point. This is neither a history book nor a polemic. It is one survivor’s tortured attempt to describe in the language of the cinema a painful horror story.

²⁵Most internal criticism has met with no success. In 1975, for example, the Turkish newspaper, *Politika*, published an article by the journalist Ali Talat who asked: “Must the Turkish Republic continue to bear the guilt of the Ittihad?” (Cited in Ternon, p. 252). His question went unanswered. In a recent conference on Egoyan’s film, sponsored by the Zoryan Institute and the graduate school of CUNY, (January 25, 2003), the Turkish scholar, Taner Akçam, also insisted that the present need not assume the guilt of the past, but only acknowledge its existence. Because of his outspoken criticisms, Akçam has been forced to live in exile outside of his native land.