ALSO BY ROBERT HUGHES

Barcelona (1992)
Frank Auerbach (1990)
Nothing if Not Critical (1990)
Lucian Freud (1988)
The Fatal Shore (1987)
The Shock of the New (1981, 1991)
Heaven and Hell in Western Art (1969)
The Art of Australia (1966)
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Culture of Complaint

THE FRAYING OF AMERICA

Robert Hughes

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For Elizabeth Sifton

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Introduction

THIS BOOK GROWS out of the series of lectures I was invited to give under the auspices of Oxford University Press and the New York Public Library at the Library in January 1992. Already, for several years, the clouded issues of "political correctness," "multiculturalism," the politicization of the arts and so forth had been moving from academe, the artworld and the cultural magazines into American popular journalism, creating, on the whole, more heat and fumes than light. I thought it might be interesting and perhaps worthwhile to take a look at them from the point of view of a practising writer, neither an academic nor an American citizen, but with one leg in history and the other in the visual arts. This involved walking across a number of social minefields, and speculating about areas which are not my speciality, such as education in a country in which I did not grow

up, and politics in a state where I cannot vote; for this I make no apology. After twenty-two years in the U.S., much of it still seems highly exotic to me, most of all the peculiarly exacerbated relations between culture and morality which were, in large part, the subject of the lectures and of this book. I hope the reader will not misconstrue this as anti-Americanism, or as the unearned condescension of a foreigner. Next to Australia, America is the place I know and love best, and I feel a visceral attachment to it by now. That should be plain from the ensuing pages.

A one-hour lecture is short, five thousand words at the most. On finishing the series, I felt dissatisfied at having touched on a variety of matters without being able to dilate on them. Immediately afterwards, the text of the first two lectures was abridged into a cover story for the February 3 issue of *Time,* "The Fraying of America." (The third lecture was published in full by the *New York Review of Books;* once again, I must thank its editor, Robert Silvers, and my editors at *Time,* Walter Isaacson and Christopher Porterfield, for their encouragement, enthusiasm and hard work in turning the spoken word into the word on the page.) The public response this evoked was so large that I decided to give the argument its length, and the result is this book. Written between the spring and fall of 1992, it contains many references to events which were not touched on in the original lectures, because they had not yet happened. Chief among these was the victory of the Democratic party under Bill Clinton, in a Presidential election which was, to no small extent, a referendum on many of the issues referred to in my original text.

My debts to others, in conversation, are many and large. I cannot list them all, but I owe particular ones to Arthur

Schlesinger (whose own recent book, *The Disuniting of America,* says much of what I say but said it earlier and better); to Gilbert T. Sewell of the *Social Studies Review,* for supplying me with a copy of that singular document, *The Portland Baseline Essays;* to Edward Saïd; and to David Rieff. And as always, to my beloved wife Victoria Hughes, and her perfect commonsense.

LECTURE 1

Culture and the Broken Polity

forgotten personal resentment, complete epics written in private languages, the daubs of schoolchildren ranked above the greatest masterpieces . . .

"Idealism will be replaced by Materialism . . . Diverted from its normal outlet in patriotism and civic or family pride, the need of the masses for some visible Idol to worship will be driven into totally unsociable channels where no education can reach it. Divine honours will be paid to shallow depressions in the earth, domestic pets, ruined windmills, or malignant tumours.

"Justice will be replaced by Pity as the cardinal human virtue, and all fear of retribution will vanish. Every corner-boy will congratulate himself: 'I'm such a sinner that God has come down in person to save me.' Every crook will argue: 'I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged.' The New Aristocracy will consist exclusively of hermits, bums and permanent invalids. The Rough Diamond, the Consumptive Whore, the bandit who is good to his mother, the epileptic girl who has a way with animals will be the heroes and heroines of the New Tragedy, when the general, the statesman, and the philosopher have become the butt of every farce and satire."

What Herod saw was America in the late 80s and early 90s. A polity obsessed with therapies and filled with distrust of formal politics; skeptical of authority and prey to superstition; its political language corroded by fake pity and euphemism. Like late Rome, unlike the early republic, in its long imperial reach, in the corruption and verbosity of its senators, in its reliance on sacred geese (those feathered ancestors of our own pollsters and spin-doctors) and in its submission to senile, deified emperors controlled by astrologers and extravagant wives. A culture which has replaced gladiatorial games, as a means of pacifying the mob, with hi-tech wars on television that cause immense slaughter and yet leave the Mesopotamian satraps in full power over their wretched subjects.

Unlike Caligula, the emperor does not appoint his horse consul; he puts him in charge of the environment, or appoints him to the Supreme Court. Mainly it is women who object, for due to the prevalence of mystery-religions the men are off in the woods, affirming their manhood by sniffing one another's armpits and listening to third-rate poets rant about the moist, hairy satyr that lives inside each one of them. Those who crave the return of the Delphic sibyl get Shirley MacLaine, and a 35,000-year-old Cro-Magnon warrior named Ramtha takes up residence inside a blonde housewife on the West Coast, generating millions upon millions of cult dollars in seminars, tapes and books.

Meanwhile, artists vacillate between a largely self-indulgent expressiveness and a mainly impotent politicization, and the contest between education and TV—between argument and conviction by spectacle—has been won by television, a medium now more debased in America than ever before. Even its popular arts, once the wonder and delight of the world, have decayed; there was a time, within the memory of some of us, when American popular music was full of exaltation and pain and wit, and appealed to grown-ups. Today, instead of the raw intensity of Muddy Waters or the virile inventiveness of Duke Ellington, we have Michael Jackson, and from George Gershwin and Cole Porter we are down to illiterate spectaculars about cats or the fall of Saigon. The great American form of rock-'n'-roll has become over-

technologized and run through the corporate grinder, until it is 95 percent synthetic.

For the young, more and more, entertainment sets educational standards and creates "truth" about the past. Millions of Americans, especially young ones, imagined that the "truth" about the Kennedy assassination resides in Oliver Stone's vivid lying film *JFK,* with its paranoid elevation of a discredited New Orleans prosecutor into a political hero beset by an evil, omnipresent military establishment that murdered Kennedy to keep us in Vietnam. How many of them saw anything wrong with Stone's frequent claim that he was "creating a counter-myth" to the Warren Commission's findings, as though one's knowledge of the past equated with the propagation of myth? Hollywood's treatment of history used not to matter—that harmless gadzookery about Louis XV, or 'pon-my-soulery about Lord Nelson, or devotional claptrap about Jesus. But in a time of docudramas and simulations, when the difference between TV and real events is more and more blurred—not by accident, but as deliberate policy from the bosses of electronic media—such exercises fall into a mushy, anxious context of suspended disbelief that old Hollywood pseudo-history never had.

And then, because the arts confront the sensitive citizen with the difference between good artists, mediocre ones and absolute duffers, and since there are always more of the last two than the first, the arts too must be politicized; so we cobble up critical systems to show that although we know what we mean by the quality of the environment, the idea of "quality" in aesthetic experience is little more than a paternalist fiction designed to make life hard for black, female and homosexual artists, who must henceforth be judged on their

ethnicity, gender and medical condition rather than the merits of their work.

As a maudlin reaction against excellence spreads to the arts, the idea of *aesthetic* discrimination is tarred with the brush of *racial* or *gender* discrimination. Few take a stand on this, or point out that in matters of art "elitism" does not mean social injustice or even inaccessibility. The self is now the sacred cow of American culture, self-esteem is sacrosanct, and so we labor to turn arts education into a system in which no-one can fail. In the same spirit, tennis could be shorn of its elitist overtones: you just get rid of the net.

Since our new-found sensitivity decrees that only the victim shall be the hero, the white American male starts bawling for victim status too. Hence the rise of cult therapies which teach that we are all the victims of our parents: that whatever our folly, venality, or outright thuggishness, we are not to be blamed for it, since we come from "dysfunctional families"—and, as John Bradshaw, Melody Beattie and other gurus of the twelve-step program are quick to point out on no evidence whatsoever, 96 percent of American families are dysfunctional. We have been given imperfect role models, or starved of affection, or beaten, or perhaps subjected to the goatish lusts of Papa; and if we don't think we have, it is only because we have repressed the memory and are therefore in even more urgent need of the quack's latest book.

The number of Americans who were abused as children and hence absolved from all blame for anything they might now do is more or less equal to the number who, a few years ago, had once been Cleopatra or Henry VIII. Thus the ether is now jammed with confessional shows in which a parade of citizens and their role-models, from Latoya Jackson to Rose-

anne Barr, rise to denounce the sins of their parents, real or imagined. Not to be aware of a miserable childhood is prima facie evidence, in the eyes of Recovery, of "denial"—the assumption being that everyone had one, and is thus a potential source of revenue. The cult of the abused Inner Child has a very important use in modern America: it tells you that personal grievance transcends political utterance, and that the upward production curve of maudlin narcissism need not intersect with the descending spiral of cultural triviality. Thus the pursuit of the Inner Child has taken over just at the moment when Americans ought to be figuring out where their Inner Adult is, and how that disregarded oldster got buried under the rubble of pop psychology and specious short-term gratification. We imagine a Tahiti inside ourselves, and seek its prelapsarian inhabitant: everyone his own Noble Savage.

If the Inner Child doesn't let you off the hook, the embrace of redemption will. It used to be said that there are no second acts in American lives. That was before TV started burning out our memory-cells. The public life of America today is largely made up of second acts, and has become an unconvincing parody of the original promise of America as a place where anyone, relieved of the burdens of the Old World, could make a fresh start. I remember feeling some qualms fifteen years ago when Charles Colson, one of the minor Washington villains of the Watergate years, announced at the very gate of the minimum-security prison that he had seen the light of Christ and been born again. Surely Americans won't swallow this? But they did. Even David Duke said he was reborn from Nazism into the brotherhood of Christ—and thousands of people believed him. Next,

Robert Maxwell's family will tell his aggrieved bankers and former employees that he was moral at the last, and died from a bungled attempt at self-baptism by total immersion. With so many crooks queuing up to be washed in the blood of the Lamb, it's no wonder that the poor creature is looking a bit pale.

The all-pervasive claim to victimhood tops off America's long-cherished culture of therapeutics. To seem strong may only conceal a rickety scaffolding of denial, but to be vulnerable is to be invincible. Complaint gives you power—even when it's only the power of emotional bribery, of creating previously unnoticed levels of social guilt. Plead not guilty, and it's off with your head. The shifts this has produced may be seen everywhere, and their curious tendency is to make the "right" and the "left" converge. Consider the recent form of discussion of sexual issues, which revolve more and more around victimization. Pro-lifers borrow feminist lingo to call abortion "surgical rape" (never mind that it is a wholly voluntary act).

Meanwhile, the new orthodoxy of feminism is abandoning the image of the independent, existentially responsible woman in favor of woman as helpless victim of male oppression—treat her as equal before the law, and you are compounding her victimization. Conservatives have been delighted to cast their arguments in the same terms of victimology, with the difference that, for them, what produces victims is feminism itself, in league with the opportunist phallus. In *Enemies of Eros* (1990), the antifeminist writer Maggie Gallagher claims that "A man exploits a woman every time he uses her body for sexual pleasure when he is unwilling to accept the full burden of paternity." She "may consent

fully, knowledgeably, enthusiastically to her exploitation. This does not change the nature of the transaction." Almost precisely the view of the feminist Andrea Dworkin—sex between men and women is always rape. "Physically the woman in intercourse," writes this extremist, "is a space invaded, a literal territory occupied literally; occupied even if there has been no resistance; even if the occupied woman said, 'Yes, please, yes hurry, yes more.'"[1] Such grotesquely expanded views of criminal assault reduce women to victims without free will, deprived equally of the power of assent or of denial, mere dolls tossed around in the ideological flurries of feminist extremism. "Viewing 'yes' as a sign of true consent," wrote the Harvard Law School professor Susan Estrich, "is misguided." Everything is rape until proven otherwise.

In these and a dozen other ways we create an infantilized culture of complaint, in which Big Daddy is always to blame and the expansion of rights goes on without the other half of citizenship—attachment to duties and obligations. To be infantile is a regressive way to defy the stress of corporate culture: Don't tread on me, I'm vulnerable. The emphasis is on the subjective: how we feel about things, rather than what we think or can know. The problems of this inward-turning were sketched long ago by Goethe, speaking to Eckermann. "Epochs which are regressive, and in the process of dissolution, are always subjective, whereas the trend in all progressive epochs is objective . . . Every truly excellent endeavour turns from within toward the world, as you see in the great epochs which were truly in progression and aspiration, and which were all objective in nature."

II

As Auden saw, what this culture likes is the twin fetishes of victimhood and redemption. The Puritans saw themselves, with reason, as the victims of persecution, sent forth to create a theocratic state whose virtues would transcend the evils of the Old World and thus redeem the fall of European man. The sublime radical experiment of American democracy—and it is worth remembering that although we tend to think of America as perpetually new, the fall of despotisms leaves its form of government older and more continuous than any in Europe, older than the French Revolution and much older than British parliamentary democracy—was to break the status of colonial victim, and create a secular state in which self-evident rights would be continuously expanded in the interest of equality.

There has always been a friction between the remains of the Puritan ideology of a hierarchy of the virtuous under the immutable eye of God, and the later, revolutionary, 18th-century American conception of continuous secular development towards equality of rights which were inherent in man and not merely granted by government. This friction never seems to vanish; we still feel it today. It was foreseen in 1835 by Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America:*

> Men will never establish any equality with which they will be contented . . . When inequality of condition is the common law of society, the most marked inequalities do not strike the eye; when everything is nearly on the same level, the slightest are marked enough to hurt it. Hence the desire for equality

always becomes more insatiable in proportion as equality is more complete.

Such was the view of a visitor from the Old World, so class-bound that he thought equality was "the common law" in a country which was still a slave state. We can't imagine sharing his lofty elitism, but Tocqueville did have a point. The fundamental temper of America tends towards an existential ideal which can probably never be reached, but can never be discarded: equal rights to variety, to construct your life as you see fit, to choose your traveling companions. This has always been a heterogeneous country and its cohesion, whatever cohesion it has, can only be based on mutual respect. There never was a core America in which everyone looked the same, spoke the same language, worshipped the same gods and believed the same things. Even before the Europeans arrived, American Indians were constantly at one another's throats. America is a construction of mind, not of race or inherited class or ancestral territory.

These things, I know, have been said before, but their obvious truth is why America has always seemed marvelous to foreigners like me. It does not mean that America has a monopoly on freedom, or even that its models of freedom are exportable everywhere in the world. But it is a creed born from immigration, from the jostling of scores of tribes who become American to the extent to which they can negotiate accommodations with one another. These negotiations succeed unevenly, and often fail: you only need to glance at the history of racial relations to know that.

It is too simple to say that America is, or ever was, a melting pot. But it is also too simple to say none of its contents actually melted. No single metaphor can do justice to the complexity of cultural crossing and perfusion in America. American mutuality has no choice but to live in recognition of difference. But it is destroyed when those differences get raised into cultural ramparts. People once used a dead metaphor—"balkanization"—to evoke the splitting of a field into sects, groups, little nodes of power. Now, on the dismembered corpse of Yugoslavia, whose "cultural differences" (or, to put it plainly, archaic religious and racial lunacies) have been set free by the death of Communism, we see what that stale figure of speech once meant and now means again. A Hobbesian world: the war of all on all, locked in blood-feud and theocratic hatred, the *reductio ad insanitatem* of America's mild and milky multiculturalism. What imperial rule, what Hapsburg tyranny or slothful dominion of Muscovite apparatchiks, would not be preferable to this? Against this ghastly background, so remote from American experience since the Civil War, we now have our own conservatives promising a "culture war," while ignorant radicals orate about "separatism." They cannot know what demons they are frivolously invoking. If they did, they would fall silent in shame.

Two hundred and sixty million people make up the same country, but this does not mean that they are all the same kind of people, with the same beliefs and mores. The fact remains that America is a collective work of the imagination whose making never ends, and once that sense of collectivity and mutual respect is broken the possibilities of Americanness begin to unravel. If they are fraying now, it is because the politics of ideology has for the last twenty years weakened and in some areas broken the traditional American genius for

consensus, for getting along by making up practical compromises to meet real social needs.

Through the 80s, this happened with depressing regularity on both sides of American party politics. Instead of common ground, we got demagogues urging that there is only one path to virtuous American-ness: palaeo-conservatives like Jesse Helms and Pat Robertson who think this country has one single ethic, neo-conservatives who create an exaggerated bogey called multiculturalism—as though Western culture itself was ever anything *but* multi, living by its eclecticism, its power of successful imitation, its ability to absorb "foreign" forms and stimuli!—and pushers of political correctness who would like to see grievance elevated into automatic sanctity.

In society as in farming, monoculture works poorly. It exhausts the soil. The social richness of America, so striking to the foreigner, comes from the diversity of its tribes. Its capacity for cohesion, for some spirit of common agreement on what is to be done, comes from the willingness of those tribes not to elevate their cultural differences into impassable barriers and ramparts, not to fetishize their "African-ness" or *Italianità,* which make them distinct, at the expense of their Americanness, which gives them a vast common ground. Reading America is like scanning a mosaic. If you only look at the big picture, you do not see its parts—the distinct glass tiles, each a different color. If you concentrate only on the tiles, you cannot see the picture.

We have entered a period of intolerance which combines, as it sometimes does in America, with a sugary taste for euphemism. This conjuction fosters events that go beyond the wildest dreams of satire—if satire existed in America any

more; perhaps the reason for its weakness is that reality has superseded it. Take, for example, the battle for victim's rights recently staged in Betty's Oceanview Diner in Berkeley, California, and reported with a degree of morose gusto by Nat Hentoff in the *Village Voice.*[2]

There, one morning in 1991, a waitperson named Barbara, who afterwards refused to reveal her surname, saw a journalist sitting on his own and perusing a magazine article on the Bill of Rights by the same Nat Hentoff. But the magazine was *Playboy,* and so Barbara Somethingperson refused to serve him breakfast, claiming that she was "appalled and shocked," that the very sight of *Playboy* was a form of vicarious rape, sexual harassment in the workplace, a threat to women's self-esteem, and so on.

She and the manager asked him to leave. So the wretched scribe, who really only wanted a muffin and maybe some OJ, not a civil rights confrontation, retreated; and shortly afterwards a group of Bay Area civil libertarians staged a read-in at the Diner, with free copies of *Playboy* supplied by one of Christie Hefner's PR people; and then there was a counter-demonstration by feminist groups, whose members variously opined that "women's health is affected by *Playboy* being in a restaurant," and that the event "had nothing to do with free speech; it had to do with power—power of white men to impose their standards on anyone, no matter how humiliating." If the first law of American corporate life is that deadwood floats, the corresponding rule of liberation-talk is that hot air expands. As we shall see, America has lately been full of occasions when someone prevents someone else from saying something and then denies it's a free speech issue.

Betty's Diner was comic; other events are much less so. In

October 1992 the *Village Voice* sponsored an evening's debate at Cooper Union in New York, on the subject "Can a Liberal be Pro-Life?" The chief speakers were Nat Hentoff and Governor Robert Casey of Pennsylvania, a Democrat who had dissented from the pro-choice plank of the Democratic Convention in New York three months before. Now there were certainly reasons to argue with Casey—as Hentoff later pointed out, there is a glaring inconsistency between his tender regard for fetal rights and his support of the death penalty for adults—but these never got an airing. What happened instead was that a gang of pro-abortion protesters, some wearing buttons that read FUCK FREE SPEECH, took over the hall and prevented any speaker being heard, so that the debate itself was aborted. One of these, a harpy from some obscure left group, later preened herself and her comrades on this victory over free speech in a letter to the *Village Voice:* "When 80 to 100 antiracist and prochoice activists shut down a forum by one of the most powerful racists and sexists in America, as we and others did . . . it is a victory for all progressives." Except, that is, for those progressives who do not believe in the jackboot and the gag, and value debate above Brown Shirt ranting.

Some impulses, one realizes, don't change, they just go underground; there is a direct cable hookup between Cooper Union 1992, Berkeley 1991 and Massachusetts 1670, and it bypasses the Bill of Rights. A couple of years ago, the head of student government at Stanford, young and black, complained that "We don't put as many restrictions on freedom of speech as we should." Precisely the view of Representative Jim Inhofe, Republican of Oklahoma, who at about the same time rose in the House to declare his support of George

Bush's flag-protection amendment to the Constitution, with the ringing words "There comes a time when freedom of speech is not in the best interest of this country, and we've reached that point." Palaeo-conservatives and free-speech therapists are both on the same wagon, the only difference being *what* they want to ban.

This whining, denunciatory atmosphere has put quite a load on readers and writers, on how writing is interpreted—and taught.

As our 15th-century forebears were obsessed with the creation of saints and our 19th-century ancestors with the production of heroes, from Christopher Columbus to George Washington, so are we with the recognition, praise and, when necessary, the manufacture of victims, whose one common feature is that they have been denied parity with that Blond Beast of the sentimental imagination, the heterosexual, middle-class white male.

The range of victims available ten years ago—blacks, chicanos, Indians, women, homosexuals—has now expanded to include every permutation of the halt, the blind, the lame and the short, or, to put it correctly, the differently abled, the other-visioned and the vertically challenged. Never before in human history were so many acronyms pursuing identity. It's as though all human encounter were one big sore spot, inflamed with opportunities to unwittingly give, and truculently receive, offence. Thirty years ago, one of the epic processes in the assertion of human dignity started unfolding in the United States: the Civil Rights movement. But today, after more than a decade of government that did its best to ignore the issues of race when it was not trying to roll back the gains of the 1960s, the usual American response to in-

equality is to rename it, in the hope that it will then go away. This, as George Orwell pointed out in *Politics and the English Language,* destroys language without shifting reality one inch. The only safeguard against it, he argued, was to be concrete:

> If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself. Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. One cannot change all this in a moment, but one can at least change one's own habits . . .

III

Orwell wrote that in 1946, and it remains true half a century later; indeed, it will always be true. There are certainly worse things in American society than the ongoing vogue for politically correct language, whether of the left or of the right. But there are few things more absurd and, in the end, self-defeating.

We want to create a sort of linguistic Lourdes, where evil and misfortune are dispelled by a dip in the waters of euphemism. Does the cripple rise from his wheelchair, or feel better about being stuck in it, because someone back in the days of

the Carter administration decided that, for official purposes, he was "physically challenged"? Does the homosexual suppose others love him more or hate him less because he is called a "gay"—that term revived from 18th-century English criminal slang, which implied prostitution and living on one's wits? The net gain is that thugs who used to go faggot-bashing now go gay-bashing.

Or take "homophobic," a favorite scatter-word of PC abuse. Today, out of twenty people who use it, scarcely one knows what it means. "Homophobia" is a clinical term for a pathological disorder. It means an obsession with homosexuality, caused by the heavily suppressed fear that one may be homosexual oneself. Today it can be, and is, indiscriminately applied to anyone who shows the slightest reserve about this or that same-sexer, or disputes (however mildly) any claims of special entitlement (however extreme) made for them as a group or class. In the 80s one heard American writers accused of "anti-Semitism" if they were Gentiles, or "self-hatred" if they were Jews, because they didn't toe the extremist political line of the Likud party in Israel and its lobbyists in Washington. In stress, angry people who don't have enough language (or whose language is merely the servant of an agenda) reach for the most emotive word they can find: "racist" being today's quintessential example, a word which, like "fascist," raises so many levels of indistinct denunciation that it has lost whatever stable meaning it once had. You can be a "racist" for having crackpot theories of superiority based on the lack of melanin in human skin; or for saying the simple truth that the Rev. Al Sharpton hoaxed New York with the entirely concocted abuse of the black teenager Tawana Brawley by

imaginary white goons; or for having doubts about the efficacy of welfare; or, in some minds, merely by virtue of being white.

Just as language grotesquely inflates in attack, so it timidly shrinks in approbation, seeking words that cannot possibly give any offence, however notional. We do not fail, we underachieve. We are not junkies, but substance abusers; not handicapped, but differently abled. And we are mealy-mouthed unto death: a corpse, the *New England Journal of Medicine* urged in 1988, should be referred to as a "nonliving person." By extension, a fat corpse is a differently sized nonliving person.

If these affected contortions actually made people treat one another with more civility and understanding, there might be an argument for them. But they do no such thing. Seventy years ago, in polite white usage, blacks were called "colored people." Then they became "negroes." Then, "blacks." Now, "African-Americans" or "persons of color" again. But for millions of white Americans, from the time of George Wallace to that of David Duke, they stayed niggers, and the shift of names has not altered the facts of racism, any more than the ritual announcement of Five-Year Plans and Great Leaps Forward turned the social disasters of Stalinism and Maoism into triumphs. The notion that you change a situation by finding a newer and nicer word for it emerges from the old American habit of euphemism, circumlocution, and desperate confusion about etiquette, produced by fear that the concrete will give offence. And it is a peculiarly American habit. The call for politically correct language, though some answer it in England, has virtually no resonance

in Europe. In France, nobody has thought of renaming the Frankish king Pepin le Bref, *Pepin le Vérticalement Défié,* nor do Velásquez's dwarves show any sign of becoming, for Spanish purposes, *Las gentes pequeñas.* And the chaos that would ensue if academics and bureaucrats decided to overthrow gender-specific terms, in Romance languages where every noun has a gender while, to make things worse, the word for the male genital organ is often feminine and the one for its female counterpart not uncommonly masculine (*la polla / el coño*) hardly bears thinking about.

No shifting of words is going to reduce the amount of bigotry in this or any other society. But it does increase what the military mind so lucidly calls collateral damage in a target-rich environment—namely, the wounding of innocent language. Consider the lumpen-feminist assault on all words that have "man" as a prefix or suffix.

"Man-words" are supposed to be gender-specific and thus insulting to women: "mankind," for instance, implies that females aren't human. So in place of *chairman,* we get the cumbersome *chairperson* or simply *chair,* as though the luckless holder of the office had four cabriole legs and a pierced splat. Recently I was sent the Australian Government's Style Manual for official publications, which forbids, among other things, such terms as *sportsmanship, workman, statesmanlike* (whose suggested synonyms are "skilful, tactful"—which may say something about the present lack of Antipodean statespersons, given that in October 1992 our Prime Minister, Paul Keating, robustly denounced the Australian Senate as "unrepresentative swill" and "a bunch of pansies"). Even *craftsmanship,* is out; its mellifluous alternative is "skill application."

Soon my fellow-countrymen, persuaded by American examples to look for euphemisms where no insults exist, will rewrite *Waltzing Matilda* to begin "Once a jolly swagperson camped by a billabong . . ."

But what is this fuss about "man"? Anyone who knows the history of our language knows that, in Old English and Anglo-Saxon, the suffix *-man* was gender-neutral: it had, and retains, the same meaning as "person" today, referring to all people equally. To denote gender, it had to be qualified: a male was called a *waepman,* a female *wifman.* This gender-free use of *-man* gives us forms like *chairman, fisherman, craftsman,* meaning simply a person of either sex who engages in a denoted work or profession. The ancient sexist wrong supposed to be enshrined in the word since the time of Beowulf turns out not to exist.[3] Nevertheless it affords ample opportunities for the display of pettifogging PC virtue, as in the following rebuke from one S. Scott Whitlow, an academic in the College of Communications of the University of Kentucky, to Victoria Martin, a student, who passed it along to the *American Spectator:*

> Dear Victoria,
>
> On your recent scholarship application, members of the review committee noticed the inappropriate use of the word "chairman" . . . of course, it is especially inappropriate to address a woman as "chairman" unless she has specifically requested such a limiting language . . . Soon you will be entering the corporate or media sector as you begin your career. There, too, you will find there are expectations that women not be made invisible through thoughtless use of language . . . there are a number of books I would be happy to recommend. Please let me know if you wish a list.

What is so grating about this tidbit is not just the sloppy English ("wish a list"), or the bureaucratic vagueness ("entering the corporate or media sector"—this, from someone who is meant to be teaching *communication!*) or even the condescending use of a stranger's Christian name *de haut en bas* ("Dear Victoria"). It is the anile priggishness of the Puritan marm, lips pursed, seeking nits to pick.

There are, of course, many new terms and usages that seemed picky or unnecessary to conservatives when they appeared, but are now indispensable. What letter-writer, grateful for the coinage "Ms," which lets one formally address women without referring to their marital status, would willingly go back to choosing between "Mrs." and "Miss"? There is a case to be made for "African-American," though it seems to have no marked advantages over "black" beyond its length, a quality of language many Americans mistake for dignity. Probably the term "Asian-American," vague as it is, is better than "Oriental," because it is at least decently neutral, without the cloud of disparaging imagery that still clings to the older word: "Oriental" suggests a foreignness so extreme that it cannot be assimilated, and raises the Fu-Manchu phantoms of 19th-century racist fiction—treacherous cunning, clouds of opium, glittering slit eyes. "Native American" for American Indian, or just plain Indian, sounds virtuous—except that it carries with it the absurd implication that whites whose forebears may have been here for three, five or even the whole thirteen generations that have elapsed since 1776 are in some way still interlopers, not "native" to this country. By the time whites get guilty enough to call themselves "European-Americans" it will be time to junk the whole lingo of nervous divisionism; everyone, black, yellow, red and

white, can revert to being plain "Americans" again, as well they might.

In any case, words are not deeds and mere nomenclature does not change much. As Barbara Ehrenreich remarked,

> I like being called Ms. I don't want people saying "man" when they mean me, too. I'm willing to make an issue of these things. But I know that even when all women are Ms., we'll still get sixty-five cents for every dollar earned by a man. Minorities by any other name—people of color, or whatever—will still bear a huge burden of poverty, discrimination and racial harassment. Verbal uplift is not the revolution.[4]

Not only is it not the revolution: it has been a godsend to the right. Where would George Will, P. J. O'Rourke, the editors of the *American Spectator* and some of the contributors to the *New Criterion* all be without the inexhaustible flow of PC claptrap from the academic left? Did any nominally radical movement ever supply its foes with such a delicious array of targets for cheap shots?

Satire loves to fasten on manners and modes, which is what PC talk really is: political etiquette, not politics itself. When the waters of PC recede—as they presently will, leaving the predictable scum of dead words on the social beach—it will be, in part, because young people get turned off by all the carping about verbal proprieties on campus. The radical impulses of youth are generous, romantic and instinctive, and are easily chilled by an atmosphere of prim, obsessive correction. The real problem with PC isn't "post-Marxism," but post-Puritanism. Its repressive weight does not fall upon

campus conservatives, who are flourishing, delighted that the PC folk give some drunken creep of a student who bellows "nigger" and "dyke" into the campus night the opportunity to posture as a martyr to speech-repression. The students it harms are the kids who would like to find a way of setting forth their dissatisfactions with the way America has gone and is going, but now find they can't speak so freely about them in case they use the wrong word and thus set off flares of complaint and little airbursts of contempt from those on their left. In an academic world where an administrator at the University of California in Santa Cruz could campaign against phrases like "a nip in the air" and "a chink in one's armor," on the grounds that such words have expressed racial disparagement *in other contexts,* anything is possible; how about banning "fruit-tree" as disparaging to homosexuals?[5] And their dilemma is made worse on those campuses, like Stanford, which have created speech codes. These are generally not created by students, but imposed by their elders—Baby Boomer academics, members of a moralizing and sanctimonious generation both left and right. As Nat Hentoff pointed out,[6] these codes, "every one of them so overboard and vague that a student can violate a code without knowing he or she has done so," are not always imposed by student demand, for

> At most colleges, it is the administration that sets up the code. Because there have been racist or sexist or homophobic taunts, anonymous notes or graffiti, the administration feels it must *do something*. The cheapest, quickest way to demonstrate that it cares is to appear to suppress racist, sexist, homophobic speech.

Thus a student can be punished under academic law for verbal offences and breaches of etiquette which carry no penalty off-campus, under the real law of the land. This dissociation is rooted in a Utopian fantasy about the nature and role of universities: they are, or should be, Arcadias. But in practice it may impede the student's progress from protected childhood to capable adulthood, which is not an Arcadian state. As one (black, female) community college administrator from Colorado, Gwen Thomas, remarked in the course of a panel discussion at Stanford,[7]

> As for providing a non-intimidating educational environment, our young people have to learn to grow up on college campuses. We have to teach them how to deal with adversarial situations. They have to learn how to survive offensive speech they find wounding and hurtful.

IV

The American right has had a ball with Political Correctness. Yet its glee is hollow, and there is something distasteful about its caperings, its pretence to represent "real" language. One would rather swim than get in the same dinghy as the PC folk. But neither would one wish to don blazer and topsiders on the gin-palace with its twin 400-horse Buckleys, its Buchanan squawkbox, its Falwell & Robertson compass, its Quayle depthfinder and its broken-down bilgepump, that now sits listing in the Potomac as its crew bickers over who "really" lost the 1992 election.

Why? Because the right is as corroded by defunct ideology as the academic left. Propaganda-talk, euphemism and evasion are so much a part of American usage today that they cross all party lines and ideological divides. The art of not answering the question, of cloaking unpleasant realities in abstraction or sugar is so perfectly endemic to Washington by now that we expect nothing else—the main practical difference being that presidents, congressmen, generals and CEOs hire others to write the stuff. The loss of reality by euphemism and lies was twenty times worse and more influential in the utterances of the last two Presidents and their aides than among *bien-pensant* academics, although you didn't find any complaints about that in *Commentary* or the *New Criterion*. Just as managerial lingo gave us "equity retreat" for the 1987 stock market crash and "corporate rightsizing" for firing large numbers of workers, so the Gulf War taught us that bombing a place flat was "servicing a target" or "visiting a site," that bombing it again to make quite sure that not even a snake or a thornbush survived was "revisiting a site." Touchiness about animals and fish has also given us such mincing euphemisms as "harvest" for kill, presumably as in Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Deerharvester*. Their object is to suggest that hunting is really gathering: canning companies like to put out flackery about "harvesting" tuna, implying that their far-seeing executives had sown the seeds of the albacore and yellowfin and were now merely picking them when ripe.

Gazing on the fall of Communism, conservative columnists wrote about a "unipolar world"—an exquisitely silly piece of late imperial thinking, if you don't happen to be American—and George Bush announced that America now presided over "The New World Order." This uplifting phrase meant nothing. Bush was lucky that the Berlin Wall fell and

that the Soviet monolith, its underpinnings rotted beyond repair during the Brezhnev years, collapsed during his Presidency. Sensibly, he did not intervene, and left the liberation of Eastern Europe to the Europeans and Russians themselves.

But at present there is no "New World Order."

Instead, we have an intractable New World Disorder, laced with Arms Business as Usual, as all the nationalist passions and religious hatreds that had been frozen under the Soviet imperial icecap since 1945—some, inside Russia, since 1917—emerge, refreshed by their siesta, impotently watched by the rest of Europe and by the few Americans who can bestir themselves to look up Sarajevo in an atlas, and start killing.

The right has its own form of PC—Patriotic Correctness, if you like—equally designed to veil unwelcome truths. It, too, has a vested interest in keeping America divided, a strategy that bodes worse for the country's polity than anything the weak, constricted American left can be blamed for.

Polarization is addictive. It is the crack of politics—a short intense rush that the system craves again and again, until it begins to collapse. The exacerbated division between "right" and "left" in America comes from reality-loss. It no longer fits the way that most voters respond to politics or envisage their own needs. In the 60s, the New Left tried to label every conservative a fascist. In the 80s, the New Right called every liberal a socialist—and the name stuck. In their unconstrained hostility to everything that descended from the New Deal, the Reaganites managed to conflate all government intervention in economic life (except the military budget) with creeping Marxism. Then, when real Marxism collapsed at the end of the 1980s, its death was made out to be a crushing setback for American liberalism. There, was, for a time, a grim humor in the sight of conservative columnists and editors singing "Glory, glory, the Soviet Union has fallen apart because of the far-sighted actions of Ronald Reagan," without noticing that the USA was coming unstuck for the same reason.

All this was sleight-of-hand. In the last fifteen years American conservatives have had a complete, almost unopposed success in labeling as left-wing ordinary agendas and desires that, in a saner polity, would be seen as ideologically neutral—an extension of rights implied in the Constitution. "I favor 'anti-political politics'," remarked Václav Havel, shortly after becoming president of Czechoslovakia. "That is, politics not as the technology of power and manipulation of cybernetic rule over humans, or as the art of the useful, but politics as practical morality, as service to the truth, as essentially human and humanly measured care for our fellow humans. It is . . . an approach which, in this world, is extremely impractical and difficult to apply . . ." In America today, Havel the intelligent liberal would be as unelectable as Jefferson the elitist slave-owner. For the idea of "humanly measured care" for the legitimate interests of others is dissolving in a frenzied search for scapegoats; hysteria over feminism, gay rights and abortion has filled the discourse of politics with a rancor that has few parallels in other Western democracies.

The vast majority of American homosexuals are not in militant groups like Act Up or Queer Nation; they rightly despise Cardinal O'Connor's views on condoms—as plenty

of us straights also do—but they don't disrupt Mass at St Pat's; they merely wish to live their lives without being persecuted for their sexual nature.

Yet in the 80s, their call for government action on AIDS got nothing from Washington; Reagan did not pronounce that monosyllable in public once, and from Bush they received little but vague wafflings. Now they have become the subjects of a base rhetorical game, vilified by politicians who expect to win by appealing to intrusive prejudice. Thus in 1992, anti-gay fanatics of the Christian right in Colorado, operating under the name of "Colorado for Family Values," managed to persuade their electorate to erase the state's existing civil rights laws for homosexuals. Henceforth, in Colorado, homosexuals have no protection from job or housing discrimination; threats and violence against them have sharply increased; and skiers in Aspen, as they snuggle into their ecologically correct, fake-fur-lined parkas, may reflect that they are contributing to the prosperity of a state which has now placed itself somewhere near the ethical level of Alabama's race politics in the 1950s.

American feminism has a large repressive fringe, self-caricaturing and often abysmally trivial, like the academic thought-police who recently managed to get a reproduction of Goya's *Naked Maja* removed from a classroom at the University of Pennsylvania. It has its Puritan loonies like the writer Andrea Dworkin who regard all sex with men, even with consent, as a politicized form of rape. Does this in any way devalue the immense shared desire of millions of American women to claim the right of equality to men, to be free from sexual harassment in the workplace, to be accorded the

reproductive rights to be individuals first and mothers second?

Yet for some American bigots, feminism is actively diabolical; Pat Robertson, a former candidate for the Presidency who may conceivably run for office again, recently attacked a proposed equal-rights amendment to the Iowa state constitution as part of a "feminist agenda . . . a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians."[8]

When political utterance descends to such levels, fanatics enlist in the crusade but sensible people tend to wash their hands of it. There was little point, as the 1992 election amply showed, in trying to build a party platform on "family values" when what people are really worried about is jobs, or in attempting to sell a campaign for less government which so largely consisted of moving the field of state control out of the corporate boardroom and into the cervix. States tend to look absurd to their own citizens when they try to legislate morality in this way, especially in a country where, polls indicate, clergy are held in lower respect than pharmacists. "Reasonable" voters begin to suspect that the talk about moral values may be a cover-up for the lack of practical social policy. But it is political folly for the "reasonable" to assume that the election of Clinton and Gore in any way neutralizes the large gains made by evangelical groups at the local political level in 1992. On school boards, in city councils and state legislatures, indeed in all areas of American political life outside Washington itself, evangelical bigotry is gathering strength and will continue to do so. When the American economy

recovers, there may be fewer people voting against Republican fiscal policy and more voting for the moral promises of an evangelized GOP. Intelligent Americans have no grounds for complacency—not unless they want to hear their kids chirping about the Sin of Sodom and parroting the inanities of "creation science" after school a few years from now. The fundamentalists' drive to annul the constitutional separation of Church and State, to spread theocracy on the land, must be resisted by anyone who cares about democracy in America.

In the 80s, one of the features of the electoral scene was a public recoil from formal politics, from the active reasoned exercise of citizenship. This trend is no longer affordable. It came because Americans didn't trust anyone. It was part of the cafard the 80s induced. In effect, the Republican and Democratic parties since 1968 have practiced two forms of conservative policy, one episodically liberal and the other aggressively not. Both are parties of upper-middle-class interests: the last genuinely progressive tax reform proposed by a President, for instance, was put forward by Jimmy Carter in 1977—and it was immediately sunk by the vote of a Democratic Congress. The whole apparatus of influence in Washington is geared to lobbying by big business, not to input from small citizen groups. As E. J. Dione eloquently argued in his recent book *Why Americans Hate Politics,* there is no bloc in Congress or the Senate that truly represents the needs or opinions of people in the enormous central band of American life where workers and the middle class overlap.

In the early 1970s the Democrats began to lose the confidence of this public by committing themselves to "liberation" politics, focusing more and more emblematically on the rights of minorities and the poor. Listening to liberal Democrats talk in the 70s and early 80s, a foreigner might have supposed that America had only two kinds of people whose political fate actually mattered—the very rich and the ones on welfare. This line was an artifact of ideology, made from ideas of the late 60s. Democrats rejected their more moderate and pragmatic leaders like Henry "Scoop" Jackson and staked their political future on *cultural* liberation. Like the Republicans in 1992, the Democrats under George McGovern in 1972 tried to run a campaign on moral values—and lost.

Working-class Americans distrusted the "limousine liberals" with their fixations on the environment, women's rights, abortion rights, busing and affirmative action. To talk about blue-collar racism was too simple—it was just another way of schematizing real people from above, and the younger, more ideologically liberal Democrats constantly fell into this trap. American workers saw their jobs and their neighborhoods threatened by policies imposed from above.

And so the Republicans could present themselves as the tribunes of the disparaged values and symbols of the ignored middle, the blue-collar voters who believed in America, mistrusted affluent radicals, and hated flag-burners. It was not immediately apparent that the Republicans cared very little for the economic interests of these people. Who could foresee that their fiscal policies in the 1980s would buy a short-term expansion of the American economy at the cost of $4 *trillion* in debt, thus leading to recession, painful unemployment and the seemingly irreversible decay of public infrastructure? At least the GOP seemed to have an economic policy, though it failed. It was nicknamed the trickle-down theory: the rigidly ideological prescription that a free ride for the rich would generate money for the middling and poor. The Democrats

had none that they could sell to an electorate. They didn't like talking about nuts and bolts and jobs. Instead, they mainly talked about rights. They were off in what struck many millions of American voters as a Cloud-Cuckoo land where every pornographer could drape himself in the Jeffersonian toga of the First Amendment, and any suggestion that a child might stand more chance of happiness and growth if it was raised by two parents who loved both it and one another could be pooh-poohed by some ideologue on the left, fresh from the beansprout commune in Vermont. Thus, in Dione's words,

> The moralism of the left blinded it to the legitimate sources of middle-class anger. The revolt of the middle class against a growing tax burden was not an expression of selfishness, but a reaction to the difficulties of maintaining a middle-class standard of living. Anger at the rising crime rates was not a covert form of racism but an expression of genuine fear . . . Impatience with welfare programs was sometimes the result of racial prejudice, but it was just as often a demand that certain basic rules about the value of work be made to apply to all. Those who spoke of "traditional family values" were not necessarily bigots . . .

This was a value-gap you could barrel a truck through, and the Republicans did so, thus splitting off a large and useful voting-bloc of "Reagan Democrats." But this real-liance is proving unstable, now that the actual results of the Republicans' push to unconstrained *laissez-faire* are in: the largest deficit, the most crippling load of debt to foreign lenders, and the widest gap between high and middle income ever to afflict America.

Reaganites talked soothingly about the return of traditional American values, moral contracts, and the like. They showed little sense of a moral contract with African-Americans, because the GOP had seen where the votes lay: in the white suburbs, not the black inner cities. Hence the poisonous error of the Reagan and Bush presidencies: their "Southern strategy" of accommodation towards whatever was most racially divisive in America, their reluctance to treat blacks *as Americans*. Whatever unity they proposed was no more than the specious unity of us-against-them. The famed Willie Horton ad, which sank the 1988 Dukakis campaign, was merely the tip of this iceberg of moral failure.

The GOP's "morality" was all about sex and honoring thy father, and it tactfully avoided other commandments, particularly the one against stealing. Thus one of the prototypical figures of the time was Charles Keating, a Cincinnati businessman with the lantern jaw, piercing eyes and strict ethical look of the risen cracker-salesman. Keating co-founded the National Coalition Against Pornography, with the intent of saving the innocent from Satan, and became a major agitator for "traditional moral values" in the Midwest. Only later did it appear why Keating was so interested in preserving American innocence: he cheated thousands of innocent people of hundreds of millions of dollars in his manipulations of Lincoln Savings and Loan, though—unlike most of his fellow swindlers in this racket—he went to jail for it.

Reaganism did more to uncouple American business from its traditional moorings than any political ideology in the country's history. This orgy, which culminated in the Savings and Loan scandal, went unchallenged by the public at first—mainly because the government kept the public in the dark about what was happening. By mutual consent of the

two rival parties, the unpalatable truth that taxpayers must now pony up several hundred billion dollars to bail out the S & L system was not announced until just after the 1988 election. But in any case, the numbers were so huge as to be beyond most people's grasp.

The new business heroes, the corporate raiders and junk-bond merchants—Michael Milken, Ivan Boesky, Kohlberg Kravis—exploded the traditional business relationship between investor, employee and customer; the only interests that mattered, in the new atmosphere of leveraged buyout and tear-down, were those of investors and their agents. This wasn't conservatism. It was more like Jacobinism—a wildly abstracted form of fiscal revolution-by-deed, in which every company, whatever its grounding in former practice and principle, was led before the guillotine of credit. As Michael Thomas put it:[9]

> In such conditions time itself breaks up into discrete parts. An enterprise that may have sunk its roots in commerce and community over a century can be disassembled by a takeover artist in a matter of weeks. Continuum means nothing. Relationships mean nothing. The modern financier lives and dies by the transaction. Each day is wholly new, the wheel subject to endless reinvention. There is no need for coherence because there is no advantage to coherence. Action is all . . . Critical judgment is neutered by celebrity, censure collapses in the face of success.

The 80s brought the fulfillment of Kenneth Galbraith's morose aphorism about America's recoil from the memory of New Deal policies. Private opulence, public squalor.

The traditional role of public architecture in a democracy—to remind the citizen that he or she is the reason for the state, and not vice versa—was cut from the cultural script. America seemed to have no great public buildings or works projects to show for the 80s. Where were the kind of structures that had stirred its social heart and bolstered its civic confidence from the 1880s to the 1930s—the symbols of promethean America, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Golden Gate, the Empire State Building or, for that matter, Huey Long's Louisiana State House? Nowhere—only a succession of ticky-tacky post-modernist confections by Philip Johnson and his favored younger architects, the pediment-quoting Ralph Laurens of their profession: formica-thin memorials to the vanity of this or that corporate raider, gilded Trumpery, visual propaganda for the empire of Donald Duck. Cultural tourists came to New York to gaze on its past monuments, as they once came to Rome; but in the present, they saw only discos, galleries, trends, the brightly roiled surface of fashion. Every part of America's public exoskeleton was on borrowed time: rivets popping from the Williamsburg Bridge, concrete spilling from overpasses, city roads worse than Istanbul's, schools degenerating, squalid airports. Now and then, down in the senile guts of Manhattan, a water-main would explode, bringing the subways to a halt; or in Chicago the river would find its way past a weak point in its subterranean tunnels, and a repair that might have cost $25,000 (if the bureaucracy had done it in time) suddenly became a flood crisis that knocked out the power of the whole city center. Such metaphors of decay were poignant; they made vivid a pervasive sense of entropy in the midst of shocking disproportions of wealth, a hollowness at the cultural core, a retreat from public responsibility.

V

Meanwhile the sense of common citizenship dissolved in a welter of issues that enable Americans to take unnegotiable stands on smaller things, now that they can no longer define themselves against the Big Thing of the Cold War. In William Greider's words, "most [American citizens] cannot imagine the possibility of forming a continuing relationship with power—a political system that would enable them to share in the governing processes and trust in its outcomes." The sense of democratic possibility is "shriveled."[10]

The number of enfranchised Americans who voted in Presidential elections dropped steadily from a high of 63 percent in 1960 to just half the electorate—50.1 percent—in 1988. The 1992 elections registered a modest upturn: a sense of urgency over the sick economy, and Ross Perot's careening appeal to people who felt themselves cut off from Politics as Usual, brought 104 million citizens, representing 55 percent of the voting-age population, to the polls. This figure was encouraging, but it hardly represented a sudden return to civic engagement after the last two decades of voter indifference; it only brought the turnout back to its 1972 level.

Such apathy amazes Europeans and, I should add, Australians.

Why do so many of the citizens of the world's oldest democracy not vote when they can, at a time when the struggle for democracy in Europe and throughout the rest of the world has reached its most crucial and inspiring level since 1848? Partly, it's an administrative problem—the disappearance of the old party-machine and ward system, whose

last vestige was Chicago under Mayor Daley. Whatever its abuses, it got people street by street, household by household, to the ballot-boxes. Its patronage system did help tie American people, especially blue-collar and lower middle-class ones, to the belief that they as citizens had some role to play in the running of their country from the bottom up, ward by ward. It reinforced the sense of participatory democracy.

Without it, the poor stopped voting because they believed that nobody in Washington did or could represent them. The less the poor vote, the more the party of the rich will benefit. This produced a vicious spiral, and American electoral techniques reshaped themselves to bypass the lower third of the society, except when it could be selectively stirred by threats of joblessness or veiled appeals to working-class racism. One of the great challenges facing the Clinton administration will now be to reinvest participatory democracy with the meanings it has partially lost—to draw all Americans back into the political process. The fact of Clinton's election, by itself, does not guarantee this; but at least there are grounds for hope.

There is much ground to be rewon. By the late 70s the American citizen was becoming a passive spectator at political events handed down in snippets between commercials. American network television is mostly junk designed to produce reality-shortage, and the average American is said to watch seven or eight hours of the stuff a day. No wonder that the act of pulling the lever every four years seemed to mean less, and that fewer people went to the booth to do it. In the first free election after Franco died, nearly 80 percent of Spain's electorate voted. If 80 percent of American voters voted, as they regularly did in the rough old days of stump

politics between 1840 and 1910, that would be a populist revolution; it would mean that Americans really appreciated democracy, instead of just sitting around and making patriotic noises whilst urging democracy on other nations who, not uncommonly, value it by voting more than Americans themselves do.

But it was patriotic noise one got from Washington in the 80s. And who can honestly claim not to be fed up with it? The public face of politics dissolved into theater: a banal drama of pumped-up optimism, fireworks and ballets of Elvis look-alikes at the Statue of Liberty, little cosmetic wars in Grenada and Panama to simulate the sweets of victory after the bitter taste of Vietnam. In the 80s, as never before in America, we saw statecraft fuse with image-management. Too many things in this supposedly open republic got done out of sight of the citizens. Or they were presented in terms that mocked public intelligence by their brevity and cartoon-like simplicity. This was known as "Letting Reagan be Reagan," and it accorded perfectly with the dictates of TV. So the very words that described one's grasp of events mutated: one casualty among dozens was "perception," which used to suggest the act of seeing things truthfully, but in the 80s came to mean "notion" and finally "illusion" or "dumb mistake."

Did the Presidential setup of dazzling stage-lights in front of murky waters have anything to do with the early American ideal of open democracy? The protected power of the CIA and the events of Iran-Contra made a mockery of the vision of open governmental disclosure and civic responsibility that had inspired Jefferson and Madison to campaign against John Adams's repressive Sedition Act back in 1798.

The public face of politics, and especially of the Presidency, was radically overhauled to suit a public attention-span abbreviated by TV. The more argument, and the harsher it is, the more people do vote. So one did not argue: one produced sound-bites, memorable icons of a few syllables. One did not appear; one granted photo-opportunities. One did not write one's own speeches; instead one had hacks to produce vivid, cheap oratorical prose whose function was to create Presidential character. In a sense, the President *was* TV—the world's most successful anchorman. Did he forget things? No matter: TV is there to help you forget. Did he lie? Oh well, never mind. Maybe he just forgot. Or he "misspoke himself." The box is the muse of passivity. With somnambulistic efficiency, Reagan educated America down to his level. He left his country a little stupider in 1988 than it had been in 1980, and a lot more tolerant of lies, because his style of image-presentation cut the connective tissue of argument between ideas and hence fostered the defeat of thought itself. When he appeared before the wildly cheering Republican conventioneers in Houston in 1992, he quoted a passage from Lincoln—"You cannot strengthen the weak by weakening the strong"—that hadn't been written by Lincoln. Its author was a Pennsylvanian clergyman named William Boetcker, who penned it some forty-five years after Lincoln's death. But who was counting? For Reagan's fans, the idea that there ought to be, or even might be, some necessary relationship between utterance and source seemed impertinent to the memory of his Presidency.

This was not a frame of Presidential character that Jefferson or Lincoln would have been likely to imagine—or feel the slightest respect for. Retooled for TV as never before, the Presidential image came out of the box and went straight

back into it: for the networks adored it, and the press—most of it, anyway—was not far behind. The big media went right along, because those tropes and tricks and abbreviations were their very own, part of a seamless culture of spectacle. Celebrity politics for an age of celebrity journalism. What began with the Kennedys reached its climax with the Reagans—the fixation on the Presidential person as a substitute king, no longer the *primus inter pares,* first among equals, so radically envisaged by the founders of the republic. But where was the citizen? Outside, as audiences are at spectacles.

Bush lacked Reagan's consoling histrionic power, and to his misfortune the bills accumulated by Reaganite economics began to fall due during his Presidency. In August 1992, the Republican party found itself badly trailing in the polls, without a plausible economic policy, unable to cope with America's vast and growing deficit. It had little of substance to promise a middle-to-working-class electorate that was worried sick about its jobs and its modest investments in the face of a yawning recession. Still, the GOP had to stage a party convention in Houston that would reverse the success of the Democratic Convention a few weeks earlier in New York. The Republicans were in much the same pickle with the voting public as the Conservative party under John Major had been at the 1992 elections in Great Britain. They resorted to the same strategy of division, going for the jugular of fear and distrust, though with a peculiarly American twist which revived the specters of right-wing intolerance in the 1920s and 1950s—and in precisely the same language.

Clinton and Gore had appropriated the lingo of Recovery and group therapy for their campaign pitch; they had gone in soft, dramatizing "concern" and "healing." In a moment of particularly toe-crinkling sentimentality, Gore had related how his son was run over by a car, how he had gazed into the boy's eyes as he hovered between life and death, and how that, fellow Democrats and alienated citizens out there, was like looking at America today. As the oratorical shades of Demosthenes and Burke had once been discerned behind the speeches of Churchill, so those of Oprah Winfrey and Robert Bly could be seen above the Democrats' podium in Madison Square Garden.

But the mild queasiness induced by this imagery was nothing to the rhetorical gross-out of the Republican Convention.

In Houston, the "big tent" under whose ample canvas all kinds and degrees of conservative thought were supposed to gather became the site of a revival meeting. The strategy was to go for deep reflexes with trigger-words, to appeal to prejudice rather than reason or self-interest. The GOP's platform left nothing in the middle ground; it was raw anxious bigotry, aimed to separate America into "us" and "them." The key to this was not economic policy, of course; nor was it even international policy, though much was made of Bush's illusory victory over Saddam Hussein, and there were the usual claims that the fall of Communism in Russia, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and the Baltic had far less to do with the Russians, Germans, Czechs, Hungarians, Poles and Balts themselves than with the actions of George Bush in the White House.

No, the key was moral; it was "family values." This phrase was a coercive cliché before the GOP Convention opened, and by its third day not even the happiest-married person could hear it without wincing. For if the American right had

a monopoly on the virtues of the nuclear family, and knew how to fix them in the time of their supposed decay, why did they come adrift during the last twelve uninterrupted years of Republican power? Better not to ask. There was a real America, a true core America, which had these "family values." Its paladins were George Bush, Dan Quayle, and the religious right. There was a false America, a perverted and cynical America, which did not. Its visible agents were liberals and their friends: homosexuals, feminists, tree-huggers and spotted-owl freaks, Hollywood and "the media," meaning all journalists, print or electronic, except the one the Vice-President or his aides happened to be giving an interview to at the time. ("I don't mean objective responsible media people like you, Bill, but . . .") Some of these folk did not actually exist in the real world: thus Quayle was able to attack a fictional character, Murphy Brown, for having a baby out of wedlock—rather as some disaffected Elizabethan might have cited Doll Tearsheet, the whore in *Henry IV,* as evidence of moral decay at Hampton Court. Real and unreal, such people constituted a "cultural elite" whose mission was to discredit and trash the "family values" of the real America.

To announce the battle Patrick Buchanan, Bush's recent conservative opponent, was called to the podium. He gave a speech so harsh and divisive that it might not have been out of place in the Reichstag in 1932. It contained nothing that Buchanan had not said a hundred times before: the same putrid stew of gay-bashing, thinly veiled racial prejudice, black Irish paranoia and authoritarian populism continued to bubble beneath the commonfellow surface. Two decades before, John Mitchell, as crooked an Attorney-General as America ever had, called this "positive polarization"; and Pat Buchanan, then a young speechwriter for Richard Nixon, sent his President a memo on the uses of divide-and-conquer politics: "If we tear the country in half, we can pick up the bigger half." This was entirely in the spirit of Buchanan's boyhood hero, Joe McCarthy. To divide a polity you must have scapegoats and hate-objects—human caricatures that dramatize the difference between Them and Us. If some part of a political strategy can turn, as it now does, on the act of inflaming prejudice against homosexuals and denying them certain rights as a class or group, then so be it; and so much the worse for the people whom in the past Buchanan had called promoters of "Satanism and suicide," "perverted," "destructive," a "pederast proletariat"—all those lisping armies of the night out there, sneaking up on *your children,* not just on consenting adults! God's little ally, the AIDS virus, was "divine retribution" against such people, just as, to the fundamentalist preacher of the 1920s, the spirochete and the gonococcus had been launched against the rake and the seducer by an offended God. Nothing had changed.

VI

But then, why should it? Apart from the vastly more efficient means of dissemination, the databases and faxes and instant-polling devices and other tools of info-blitz, there is little new about either these effusions of patriotic and pious bigotry, or the codewords that announce them. Nor was it

altogether surprising that the American electorate, wiser than pundits often suppose, should have rejected them and voted, instead, on realer issues—mainly, the depressed economy.

Such movements, such forms of rhetoric appear in America whenever deep change impends.

In the 1890s the Populists sought to counter the confused identity of an America in radical flux from immigration with their virulent anti-Semitism, their nativism and their religious bigotry. The hate-objects were recent immigrants, Jews and Irish Catholics, rather than "liberals" as such. Precisely because America is a country of immigrants, it is the older arrivals, now rooted, who always resist the irruption of the new stranger. This distress was found at all levels of American culture at the century's end, high and low, just as it is today. The Irish had Tammany Hall, the aggrieved Jews opposed it; in 1902 a Jewish funeral procession, passing through an Irish industrial district of New York, was pelted with iron machine-parts and some two hundred Jewish mourners were clubbed down by Irish cops.[11] Ninety years later similar scenes of bigotry against "the unassimilated stranger," this time involving Jews and blacks, would be played out in Brooklyn.

In the 1920s, once again, due to the increase of big industry, the rapid growth of cities and a new influx of millions of European Catholics and Jews, traditional Protestants closed ranks against the "alien"; the WASP felt, in Lipset and Raab's words, that he "was losing control of the society which his father had dominated and which he had expected to inherit as his birthright."[12] This defensive impulse was particularly strong among Christian fundamentalists in the "heartland," who felt menaced by the growing dominance of "city culture"

and the way in which relativism and science were loosening America's grasp on biblically revealed truth. The "monkey trial," in which J. T. Scopes, a Tennessee teacher, was arraigned for expounding Darwin's theory of evolution to his pupils, was only the most visible sign of a nationwide reaction against pluralism. The idea that many moral and intellectual positions could coexist within the frame of democracy repelled these American monists, who desired only one orthodoxy, one revealed truth. To them, in the 1920s as in the 1990s, disagreement was illegitimate and the "market of ideas" invalid. The extreme of this was summed up in the apocryphal remark attributed to a Baptist preacher, that a man needed only one book on his shelf: for if an idea was in the Bible you needn't look any further for it, and if it wasn't it would be wrong anyway. The monist ("one-truth") line runs exactly counter to Thomas Jefferson's wise prescription: "If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety in which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it."

Today, America is not "heading back" to the 1920s or to the McCarthy years of the 1950s. Like fungal spores in the soil, these repressive tendencies are always there, always latent, and capable of fruiting overnight given the right conditions. Their appearance is cyclical, and their tenacity deflates one's optimism about moral progress in 20th-century America. But the objects on which they fix can change, since this kind of ultra-conservative reaction lives by personifying social fears of the Other; Joseph McCarthy's effects on American social morale had little to do with the number of Communists he actually found in government, but every-

thing to do with the ways he found to break the American polity by projecting a half-human, half-demonic shape of dread on the amorphous anxieties of his time. There were Soviet agents in America, though it now seems fairly certain that Alger Hiss was not one; parts of the media became "soft on Communism" through the pro-Soviet bias of some writers and editors; spies did steal atom secrets; and traitors were at work. Many liberals in America turned a blind eye to the atrocious realities of government under Stalin and Mao, just as their counterparts did in France and Italy, and would continue to do through the 1960s and even into the 1970s. But none of this quite explains the intensity of the McCarthyite witch hunt, its apocalyptic grip on the American imagination.

McCarthy's success lay in unlocking the vast reserves of American monism, the long-hoarded nativist intolerance of difference, and allowing that to play on the specifically ideological issue of Communism-versus-liberal democracy just at the moment that America went to war with a Communist regime, North Korea. McCarthyism was less a political movement than a Children's Crusade, an irrational quasi-religious event. It owed both its initial success and its eventual collapse to the diffuseness of its targets, their lack of bodies and names. McCarthyism, opportunistic by nature, had a blurred focus. Which *Americans* embodied the enemy ideas? "The closest McCarthy came to personifying a group as that enemy in America," Lipset and Raab pointed out, "was his attack on the elite."[13] The elite—meaning the well-off, well-educated, brightest-and-best of eastern WASPdom—"have been selling the nation out," McCarthy declared, through their "traitorous actions."

Shifting blame to an elite, or declaring your enemies to be

one, is one of the oldest tools in the demagogic kit. Elites are snobbish, out of touch with the people, arrogant, secretive and plain un-American. Best of all, their members need not be named. Shortly after Vice-President Quayle fluttered the dovecotes with his speech about the "cultural elite" in 1992, a TV interviewer asked him to name some of its members. He refused to, coyly adding that "we all know who they are."

With Communism gone, the politics of division needs other "outsider" and "deviant" groups to batten on, such as homosexuals. It also needs people or symbols to idealize. Hence the efforts to claim the flag for "us," the American right alone; to fetishize it to the point where it becomes not just a national symbol, but a kind of eucharist, so sacrosanct that it must have a constitutional amendment (no less!) to protect it from misuse. Hence, too, the bizarre politics and imagery of the new Sacrificed Body of American conservatism, the fetus.

When the person laying siege to the abortion clinic declares himself to be "Pro-Life," we may be sure that he's not worrying about the life of the scared pregnant teenager; what is at stake is not so much the survival of the fetus, as the issue of how much male control over the bodies of women this society will grant. For without the right to choose abortion over pregnancy, the idea of equal opportunity for women fails: the involuntary mechanism of ovary and womb will always hamper their pursuit of degrees, appointments, jobs and free time. The growing conservative obsession with legislating against "choice," of trying to hustle a grave moral decision which is inherently personal into the domain of public law, can only prove, in the end, a disaster for conservative interests. It will do to them what strict Roman Catholic doc-

trine on contraception has already done to the Catholic Church.

The image of the fetus has established a strange presence in American popular culture, one which has no parallels elsewhere in the West. It made a bizarre appearance at the closing ceremonies of the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, capering on the stage of the Montjuic stadium, eight feet high or so, apparently made of foam plastic, moved by a dancer inside it, flashing a fixed white grin as inane as a 70s Smiley-face sticker. This, the announcer proclaimed, was "Whatizit," the official emblem of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. Tiny limbs, goggly eyes, an oversize body, a vestigial tail on which the five Olympic rings were coyly threaded like quoits on a stick. What Walt Disney did to the duck, some team of American designers had done to the fetus. The fetish of the religious right is now an Olympic mascot. No wonder the Catalans were perplexed.

Does this portend a wave of Fetus Chic for '96? Unlikely, but there are bound to be millions of Whatizit souvenirs, as there were millions of Cobis in Barcelona—fetus lapel-pins, fetuses promoting Coke, inflatable fetuses, cuddly fetuses covered in synthetic plush, little fetal paperweights. Close your eyes and see a new hotel by Michael Graves, its pediment supported by fetal caryatids, all in the form of Whatizit. This prospect suggests how deep the image of the fetus has sunk into the weird stew of American media-consciousness, with a third of the country obsessing about the Unborn and another third vaporing about its Inner Child.

Did the designers sit down with some committee for Atlanta '96 and decide to make a Games logo in the form of a

fetus? It seems improbable. Fetuses do not suggest sport. They are, on the whole, as unathletic as little pashas. Supine in their amniotic fluid, they do not practice the butterfly or the Australian crawl; they do not even begin to kick—let alone jump, run for extended periods, cycle or show signs of proficiency with a target pistol—until they are almost babies. No, Whatizit is not a conscious image; he is a phantom of the *Zeitgeist,* a case of overspill, or precipitation, from fetus-overload in popular culture. Semiologists, if one wanted to get fancy about it, would call him a floating signifier. He would not exist without those demonstrators brandishing their plastic babies at the abortion clinics on the six o'clock news; without the two Pats of the fanatic right, Robertson and Buchanan, ranting about innocence. Only in America could a fetus pass so quickly from the symbol of a "cultural war" to the logo for a sports event. Whatizit is a cute reminder of an issue that is not at all cute.

This is why Whatizit is going to get very intrusive as the Games approach, and gratuitously bothersome. He already bothers me, and I have only seen him once so far—but then, being an ex-Catholic, I am readily irked by such matters. In the comparatively simple and absolutist frame of Catholic upbringing in Irish Australia forty years ago, there wasn't the enormous ambiguity about abortion that America has today; it was simply assumed that abortion was murder, unthinkable, *tout court,* no argument about it. Where the stress lay was on contraception, and on the "right to life" of the spermatozoon. Crammed with unruly testosterone, two hundred of us boys would sit in the boarding-school chapel listening to a priest expound the moral theology of this. God, one learned, had put the sex-drive in us for two reasons. The first

was to ensure the propagation of the species. The second was to give pleasure, thus holding legitimate marriages together. It was wrong to short-circuit God's first purpose in order to get to the second, especially if you weren't married. Primary purposes, secondary purposes: this arid quibble, designed by celibate theologians, has helped to drive countless Catholics out of the Church. Masturbation might not make you blind, or cause a single black hair to sprout unstoppably from the palm of your hand—the Jesuits, on the whole, were above such coarse Protestant fright-tactics. But every sperm was sacred, being a potential human being: more like a microscopic tadpole right now, but capable of turning into a person once it hit an egg, and therefore to be honored and preserved along with its millions of siblings. Every time you wanked, it was a slaughter of future Catholics so small that a hundred of them could dance, or at least wiggle, on the head of a pin. The real trouble with masturbation was that it represented an inversion of the cosmic order—and contraception, even worse. The notion that some small part of the cosmic order hung on our teenage willies was a heavy load for us young soldiers in St. Ignatius' army of Christ. In some of us, including Private Hughes, it induced the kind of suffocating guilt that led to skepticism: if God was so busy counting sperm, and so apparently unconcerned with preventing the world's famines, epidemics and slaughters, was He worth worshipping? Was He there at all? No answer from the altar.

Something of this fetishism continues to haunt the abortion debate—to the point where Cardinal O'Connor, in a speech to the national convention of the Knights of Columbus in New York in August 1992, felt moved to propose that a "tomb of the unborn child" should be erected in every

Roman Catholic diocese in America. This, not the Olympics, would be the right spot for Whatizit. We are to value the three-month fetus or even the embryo, that insentient piece of highly organized tissue attached to the uterine wall, above the interests of the mother not because of what it *is,* but for what it *may become*. The primary purpose of women is to be mothers and ensure the continuation of the species; their secondary purpose is to be self-sufficient people, with rights over whatever their bodies contain; if the two conflict, the second must lose. This is the iron law of abstraction. No decent person pretends that abortion does not present a grave moral choice, but the whole point is that this choice must be made by the mother, not denied her by the state. Nobody—except those who believe, on no evidence at all, that an immortal soul really is implanted in the embryo at the moment of conception, thus endowing it with complete humanity—can say at what point an embryo turns into a human being.

The innocence of fetuses is not in doubt. But it is irrelevant: lettuces are innocent too. Fetuses do not sin because they cannot sin. They cannot sin because, at least as far as anyone can detect, they have no free will and are not presented with the occasions of sin. The womb is short of temptation. It is like the Garden of Eden, before the snake. Presumably this is why the anti-abortionists, with their PC jargon of innocence and potential, prefer the unborn to the born: in the act of being born, we fall into an imperfect world, whereas the fetus, like the distinctly unborn-looking Star Child surrounded by a caul of light in Kubrick's *2001,* is an emissary from a perfect one—the uterine state, the Womb with a View, of which all our expensive comforts from sofas to heated swimming-pools are only metaphors. This may be

one reason why the opposition to abortion grows more extreme as the material circumstances of America grow worse.

Just twenty years ago, when Philip Roth published *Our Gang,* his wonderfully corrosive lampoon against Richard Nixon, he imagined the President setting out to run for office on the votes of the "embryos and fetuses of this country"—who will gratefully remember

> just who it was that struggled in their behalf, while others were addressing themselves to the more popular and fashionable issues of the day. I think they will remember who it was that devoted himself, in the midst of a war abroad and a racial crisis at home, to making this country a fit place for the unborn to dwell in pride.

There was hardly a book-critic in America who didn't take Roth to task for going over the top, exceeding the permissible limits of satire, and the rest. (*Time* magazine, among others, refused to review it at all.) Canvassing fetal votes! Who ever heard of such a thing! *Our Gang* was the only satire written by a modern American fit to be compared to Swift's *A Modest Proposal.* But unlike the Dean's vision of a starving Ireland nourished on the flesh of its surplus babies ("I have been assured by a very knowing *American* . . . that a young healthy Child well Nursed is at a year Old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food"), Roth's has, in a general way, come true. There are moments in America when reality outstrips the powers of satire, and the "abortion issue"—or so one felt, while watching one orator after another blowing steam at the 1992 National Republican Convention in Houston about the sacred rights of the unborn and the need

for a Constitutional amendment to outlaw abortion, even in the case of pregnancies caused by rape or incest—has turned out to be one of these.

VII

By the eighties the American left was a spent taper in national politics. Its only vestiges of power were cultural. It went back into the monastery—that is, to academe—and also extruded into the artworld.

The main target of McCarthyism was the heritage of New Deal liberalism from the 30s. The main target of the conservative push of the 80s, as Paul Berman pointed out, was "the heritage of democratic openness and social reform that dates from the radical sixties"—including the part of that heritage, wacky or sensible, that surfaced on campus.[14]

The middle-to-highbrow form of the assault is the ongoing frenzy over "radical," leftist influences within academe, meant to warn Americans that although the ideology of totalitarianism has collapsed in Europe and Russia, it survives in China, Cuba—and American universities. By this reading, a "new McCarthyism," this time of the left, has taken over the campus and is bringing free thought to a stop. The culture, warns Hilton Kramer in *The New Criterion,* is "in deep and terrible trouble." The academy has internalized the Barbarians who once assailed it and "this barbarian element—so hostile to the fundamental tenets of our civilization . . . now commands an immense following in our mainstream institutions. It has already radically transformed the teaching

of the arts and humanities in our colleges and universities." Not everyone who thinks so is a neo-conservative, either—in 1991 no less eminent a historian than Eugene Genovese, writing in *The New Republic,* affirmed that "As one who saw his professors fired during the McCarthy era, and who had to fight, as a pro-Communist Marxist, for his own right to teach, I fear that our conservative colleagues are today facing a new McCarthyism in some ways more effective and vicious than the old."

Other (mostly younger) academics fervently deny the McCarthyism charge, calling it an overheated metaphor. And indeed there is little sign of a repetition of what the senator from Wisconsin and his cronies actually did to academe in the 50s, usually through pressure on administrators and faculties who regarded themselves as liberals: the firings of tenured profs in mid-career, the inquisitions by the House Un-American Activities Committee on the content of libraries and courses, the campus loyalty oaths, the whole sordid atmosphere of persecution, betrayal and paranoia. The number of conservative academics fired by the lefty thought police, by contrast, is zero. There has been heckling and stupidity. There have been baseless accusations of racism, like those flung at the historian Stephan Thernstrom at Harvard, who took the view—scandalous to PC-mongers—that in studying the history of American slavery, one should attentively read the historical evidence on both sides, including the record of how slaveowners and pro-slavery writers defended the practice. Certainly there is no shortage on campus of the zealots, authoritarians and scramblers who view PC as a shrewd career move or as a vent for their own frustrations.

Nor is it a fantasy of the right that almost anyone teaching

the humanities in an American university today is going (at the very least) to be badgered by PC attitudes and will need a robust independence of mind to resist them. The process is akin to the old American religious one of shunning and shaming. It will also help determine which teachers get hired and which don't. And it is given strength by the sheer size of American academe, the inflation of its numbers, the sense that the academic audience is practically a mass audience anyway so that nobody need think of readers outside its self-referential and all-too-often conformist boundaries. No question, the academy has gotten too fond of the tags and labels that substitute an easy moralism for thought and judgment—racist, sexist, homophobic, progressive, reactionary. The uniforms in its current war of mice and frogs may look novel, but the war itself is not so very new—or so one is reminded by Auden's "Under Which Lyre":

> But Zeus' inscrutable decree
> Permits the will-to-disagree
> To be pandemic,
> Ordains that vaudeville shall preach
> And every commencement speech
> Be a polemic.
>
> Let Ares doze, that other war
> Is instantly declared once more
> 'Twixt those that follow
> Precocious Hermes all the way
> And those who without qualms obey
> Pompous Apollo.
>
> Brutal like all Olympic games,
> Though fought with smiles and Christian names

And less dramatic,
This dialectic strife between
The civil gods is just as mean,
And more fanatic.

However, one may well be skeptical of the standard neoconservative charges that American academe has been taken over by the militant left—by a cabal of "Visigoths in tweed," in the words of Dinesh D'Souza, author of the 1991 bestseller *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*. A picturesque phrase—but also one that makes one wonder about D'Souza's grasp of the Western values whose survival worries him. If he knew about Visigoths he would also know that in the 6th century they did wonders to consolidate the battered remnants of Roman order in Spain, that their legal code is justly regarded as one of the true monuments of Western jurisprudence, and that on instituting Christianity as their state religion they embarked on a large and costly program of church-building. They could hardly have done better if they were led by William Bennett and Cardinal O'Connor. In truth, there has scarcely been a time since the Russian Revolution when the American right was *not* fretting about the number of "tenured radicals" (in Roger Kimball's phrase) installed at American universities, and how different things are now from the better and less ideological past. It is common to read about the academies' fall into "politicization" compared, say, with the 1950s. But then one finds the distinguished philosopher Sidney Hook, in *Heresy, Yes. Conspiracy, No* (1953), advocating a bar against Communists teaching in American colleges, and claiming that a thousand Reds were already teaching, just in New York schools:

> Even if each teacher, on a conservative estimate, taught only a hundred students in the course of a year, this would mean that every year one hundred thousand students in New York City alone would be subject to educationally pernicious indoctrination. Of these . . . hundreds would have been influenced by their teachers to join Communist youth organizations from which the Communist movement draws its most fanatical followers.

'Tis ever thus, one is tempted to assume. If the Marxists are, indeed, on the point of taking over the academy in the 1990s, they seem to be rather secretive about it—though that, of course, may be due to their Machiavellian habits of dissimulation. Recently, when the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA did a survey of 35,000 professors at 392 schools, it found that only 4.9 percent of them called themselves "far left" while 17.8 percent (more than three times as many) put down "conservative." All the rest described themselves as "liberal" or "moderate." Even at Berkeley, the *locus classicus* of student radicalism in the 1960s and 70s, only one person out of thirty in the sociology department now calls herself a Marxist.

Such figures should be treated with a degree of caution: not all American colleges are as tolerant of teachers with left-wing views as the elite ones of the Ivy League or the California state system, and an extreme political timidity prevails on community-college campuses. There are still good reasons why an academic, pressed for answers in a survey, might make himself out to be more centrist than he is. Nevertheless, within limits, the results of that survey are probably indicative.

When one hears the often-repeated conservative charge that the modern American campus is "politicized," it is worth remembering that it always was. The idea that, before the 1960s, academe was a kind of ideal state of objective study, free from contamination by political interests and political bias, is a myth: it's just that in the postwar years the political pressures went the other way, and entailed using the campus as a source of information for the FBI and a recruiting-ground for the CIA.

If someone agrees with us on the aims and uses of culture, we think him objective; if not, we accuse him of politicizing the debate. In fact, political agendas are everywhere and the American conservatives' ritual claim that their own cultural or scholarly positions are apolitical is patently untrue. There are leftists of various stripes in the lit and humanities departments—but why should there not be? Universities must expose their students to debate, and genuine debate *should* include the left, the right and the center, particularly in times as conservative as these. The proper objection to left-wing argument at American universities is not that it exists, for it ought to exist and prosper freely—it's that so much of it is opaque, filled with jargon and devoted to marginal issues. But what of the conservative figures who, in the main, occupy the major funded chairs at American universities and run the big campus institutes of economics, management and government, from the Harvard Business School on down? Major American universities are big businesses, disposing of immense investments in stock and real estate, plugged into government by countless advisory pipelines. It is inevitable that their paths of preferment run on conservative tracks. They always have. It is absurd to pretend this is "apolitical."

Much of the traditional teaching in American schools, though not necessarily the machine of thought-bending its critics now claim it was, has been rather less "disinterested" than it seems. A case in point is the basic Western Civ course itself. As the historians Carol Gruber and William Summerscales have shown, the Western Civ classes—a quick once-over in the "cultural values" and "background" of European civilization—actually entered the American curriculum when, and because, America got into World War I.[15] The American government wanted its college-trained doughboys to know what they were fighting for, and a "War Issues" or propaganda course was devised for this purpose. Its aim was to produce what an editorial in *The History Teacher's Magazine* at the time felicitously called "thinking bayonets." It would set American youth straight about Teutonic frightfulness. After the Armistice, this course was developed by Columbia College into "Contemporary Civilization," the prototype of modern Western Civ classes—this time, with a view to producing students who would be made, in the words of one Columbia dean, "safe for democracy" by inoculating them against the new threat of Bolsheviks, "the destructive element in our society."

The truly intractable difficulty of American higher education today is not its ideological content, but the state of preparedness of its students. This problem lies far back, in the high schools, where "disadvantaged" students—mainly black—receive a basic education that is shockingly inferior to white ones. Bad education inflicted years before college level has assured, as a survey of the National Assessment of Educational Progress found in the late 80s, that among 21-to-25-year-olds, only 60 percent of whites, 40 percent of Hispanics

and 25 percent of blacks could "locate information in a news article or an almanac"; only 44 percent of whites, 20 percent of Hispanics and 8 percent of blacks could correctly figure the change due to them after paying a restaurant bill; and only 25 percent of whites, 7 percent of Hispanics and 3 percent of blacks could grasp the content of a printed bus schedule. No university can solve that tragic situation and only the most radical improvement of secondary schooling can combat it. It is not the students' fault. During the 1980s, black American students on their way to college, though falling below the white average on the SAT, actually raised their national average of combined verbal and math SAT scores by 49 points—by a bitter irony, just at the time that the Reagan administration was cutting the amount of federal college scholarship money available to the poor.

Universities, in seeking a quick fix to the anguish of unequal education, may compound the problem. Is the answer to drop entrance requirements as a form of "affirmative action"? In the late 80s, the University of California's Berkeley campus decided that the proportions of new students admitted—black, Hispanic, Asian and white—should roughly follow the demographic distribution of these groups in the larger society of northern California.

The problem was that, of the high school graduates seeking a place at Berkeley, 30 percent of the Asians—Chinese- and Japanese-Americans—qualified, as against 15 percent of the whites, 6 percent of the Chicanos, and only 4 percent of the blacks. There was no mystery as to why: the Asian kids worked hard and came, on the whole, from close-knit families which supported them and kept their noses to the grindstone. So Berkeley simply changed its admission standards. Hence-

forth blacks needed only to score 4800 points out of 8000 to get in, but the threshold for Chinese- and Japanese-Americans was pegged at 7000. Naturally, when word of this got out into the Asian community, there was outrage and protest. Nevertheless the idea keeps lurking in the American higher-education system that black or other minority students can somehow be "empowered" and brought onto the "level playing-field," by rigging entrance standards. But all a university can reasonably hope to do, in this disputed area, is to help the *intelligent* disadvantaged over hurdles more easily cleared by the *intelligent* advantaged. A more equitable policy, as Dinesh D'Souza and others have argued, would be to link preferential college admission to a student's poverty, not to his or her race. Universities are institutions of higher learning, not (at least, not primarily) of social therapy. Do they have the right to lower their admission standards and teaching levels so that the disadvantaged can catch up, at the expense of the educational rights of abler students? If you believe that colleges ought to be training-grounds for elites, however broad-based access to them ought to be, then the answer has to be no. But the main current of opinion, among teachers who came of age in the sixties or later, is passionately, almost reflexively, against elitism. "The prevailing ideology," wrote the educator Daniel J. Singal,[16] "holds that it is much better to give up the prospect of excellence than to take the chance of injuring any student's self-esteem. Instead of trying to spur children on to set high standards for themselves, teachers invest their energies in making sure that slow learners do not come to think of themselves as failures . . . one often senses a virtual prejudice against bright students."

If the causes of poor performance among black students, compared with Asian or white ones, lie too far back in the school system to be corrected at the university door, then lowering the qualifications for black (or any other) students is, in the words of the historian Eugene Genovese, "a charade . . . If, as should be obvious, some people, black or white, begin with less cultural advantage, less preparation, and less talent than others, 'equality of opportunity' can only result in the perpetuation of the initial levels of inequality."[17] What sustains these attempts at social therapy, in Genovese's view, is "the radical egalitarian conviction that everyone is fit for, and has a right to, a college education . . . We have transformed our colleges from places of higher learning into places for the technical training of poorly prepared young men and women who need a degree to get a job in a college-crazy society." If America did not place such unreal emphasis on college degrees, this problem might not vanish, but it might at least deflate. A college degree is not necessary for most jobs that people do in the world, whereas literacy, numeracy and basic skills at interpreting information are absolutely so. (Or such, I should perhaps add, is my own experience, being a college dropout without any degrees.) The main effect of American degree-fetishism has been to make skilled pragmatic work seem second-rate. It has demeaned the objects of Walt Whitman's great litany in "A Song for Occupations":

> Strange and hard that paradox true I give,
> Objects gross and the unseen soul are one.
> House-building, measuring, sawing the boards,
> Blacksmithing, glass-blowing, nail-making, coopering,
> tin-roofing, shingle-dressing,
> Ship-joining, dock-building, fish-curing, flagging of sidewalks by flaggers,
> The pump, the pile-driver, the great derrick, the coal-kiln and brick-kiln,
> Coal-mines and all that is down there, the lamps in the darkness, echoes, songs, what meditations, what vast native thoughts . . .

Moreover, Singal warns, not enough thought has been given to a growing crisis at the other end of the social, racial and educational spectrum: the better-off students, mostly educated in suburban schools, who since the mid-1970s "have been entering college so badly prepared that they have performed far below potential, often to the point of functional disability." In 1970 new students came into leading colleges (Columbia, Swarthmore, the University of Chicago) with average verbal SATs ranging from 670 to 695 out of a possible 800. By the mid-1980s these averages had dropped to a range of 620 to 640. Exactly the same pattern, with a few areas of exemption (mainly the better Southern universities, where test scores *rose* after full desegregation), has held true across the U.S. Once there, the education they receive (when their teachers are not struggling to bring them up to levels of reading and comprehension they should have reached in high school) is downscaled to their reduced ability to read texts, sift information and analyze ideas. Thus it becomes an impoverished coda to the intensive learning students were once offered, and to the expectations that were made of them; geared to the students' limited experience of life and ideas as though this were some kind of educational absolute

(whereas, of course, it is the thing that real education seeks to challenge and expand), mushy with superficial social-studies courses that inculcate only buzzwords and are designed, as far as possible, to avoid hard questions of historical context, it is short on analysis and critical scrutiny but long on attitude and feeling. The full results of this emasculation will appear in the 90s, and the political-correctness flurry—which is all about feelings, and more common, it seems, among teachers than among the students themselves—is merely one of their premonitory symptoms. For when the 1960s' animus against elitism entered American education, it brought in its train an enormous and cynical tolerance of student ignorance, rationalized as a regard for "personal expression" and "self-esteem." Rather than "stress" the kids by asking them to read too much or think too closely, which might cause their fragile personalities to implode on contact with college-level demands, schools reduced their reading assignments, thus automatically reducing their command of language. Untrained in logical analysis, ill-equipped to develop and construct formal arguments about issues, unused to mining texts for deposits of factual material, the students fell back to the only position they could truly call their own: what they *felt* about things. When feelings and attitudes are the main referents of argument, to attack any position is automatically to insult its holder, or even to assail his or her perceived "rights"; every *argumentum* becomes *ad hominem,* approaching the condition of harassment, if not quite rape. "I feel very threatened by your rejection of my views on [check one] phallocentricity/the Mother Goddess/the Treaty of Vienna/Young's Modulus of Elasticity." Cycle this subjectivization of discourse through two or three generations of students turning into

teachers, with the sixties' dioxins accumulating more each time, and you have the entropic background to our culture of complaint.

VIII

In cultural matters the old division of right and left has come to look more like two Puritan sects, one plaintively conservative, the other posing as revolutionary but using academic complaint as a way of evading engagement in the real world. Sect A borrows the techniques of Republican attack politics to show that if Sect B has its way, the study of Plato, Titian and Milton will be replaced by indocrination programs in the works of obscure Third World authors and Californian Chicano muralists, and the pillars of the West will forthwith collapse. Meanwhile Sect B is so stuck in the complaint mode that it can't mount a satisfactory defense, since it has burnt most of its bridges to the culture at large (and denies, in its more narcissistic moments, that the general intelligent reader still exists—though the worse problem is the shortage of general intelligent *writers*). With certain outstanding exceptions like Edward Saïd, Simon Schama or Robert Darnton, relatively few of the people who are actually writing first-rate history, biography or cultural criticism in America have professorial tenure, though many writers are attached to universities as decorative hermits or trophies in those therapeutic diversions known as Creative Writing courses. ("I am astonished," wrote the boxing Dadaist Arthur Cravan in a philippic against art schools, back in 1914, "that some crook has

not had the idea of opening a writing school." Now we know better.) But on the whole, most contact between academe and the general intelligent reader seems to have withered, because overspecialization and the *déformations professionnelles* of academic careerism are killing it off.

Within the lit and humanities departments of the modern American university the angle of specialization—of topics, of ways of thinking, and above all of language—has become so narrow, so constipated by the minutiae of theory, so pinched by the pressure to find previously unworked thesis subjects, that it can't extend into a broader frame. Most of its discourse has no hope of reaching a lay audience. Fine, says the defense: who expects the work of a research scientist at MIT to be read, or even faintly comprehended, by laymen? People are working out there on the edge of mathematics and quantum physics in areas so rarefied that no more than thirty other specialists, world-wide, can understand their papers; and so what? Isn't it the job of universities to support "useless" knowledge, meaning areas of scientific research that have no apparent bearing on the way most people live and are incomprehensible to all but a tiny handful, in the justifiable belief that they may in time become very "relevant" indeed? Science has a thousand blind alleys for every path that becomes a public highway, and research must explore them all—or perish.

All true; but the trouble with applying this to the humanities is that the appreciation of art and literature has no scientific basis whatever; one is dealing in the unquantifiable coin of feeling, intuition and (from time to time) moral judgment, and there is no objective "truth" to which criticism can lay "scientific" claim. The critic Louis Menand points out that

the binding institution of American academic lit-crit, the Modern Language Association (MLA), was founded in 1883 by philologists, "scholars whose work *was* scientific and could therefore be evaluated 'objectively'." Not until 1950 would the MLA add the word "criticism" to its charter; and it only did so because criticism presented itself as increasingly grounded in theory, and hence as a contribution to *knowledge,* not just to the sum of opinion. Obsession with theory, combined with lack of writing talent, creates the awful prose of academic lit-crit. Nobody wants to return to the old ways of harrumphing, "humanistic" belles-lettrism that held sway before the "New Critics" took over forty years ago, but the present state of university writing about the arts today is somewhere between a sleeping-pill and a scandal.

To justify their existence when the model of American higher education was scientific, lit departments had to survive by claiming that they were on the cutting edge of new techniques. Hence the "foregrounding," as jargon has it, of dialects that relate to nothing outside the academy; hence, too, the disconnection between academic criticism and the far clearer writing on kindred subjects in the non-academic press. As Menand argues,

> . . . most of the academic world is a vast sea of conformity, and every time a new wave of theory and methodology rolls through, all the fish try to swim in its direction. Twenty years ago every academic critic of literature was talking about the self, its autonomy and its terrible isolation. Today not a single respectable academic would be caught dead anywhere near the word, for the "self" is now the "subject" and the subject, everyone heartily agrees, is a contingent construction . . . what

ought to be most distressing to everyone is the utter predictability of the great majority of the academic criticism that gets published.[18]

The status of research and publication is high, and that of actual teaching disproportionately low. More and more, students are required to do research hackwork for the teacher's upcoming paper. American universities preserve, as though in amber, the medieval apprenticeship system. In part, this has been forced on them by the expansion of academe itself. When there are so many students that the professors can't teach them all, and funds are limited, the answer is to use "teaching assistants," paid at sweatshop rates; when the professor sees his or her academic duty as lying more in publishing than in teaching, he can call on a pool of "research assistants"—his own students—to do his work for him. Some see this as good training for the dissenting and questioning mind. Others, with at least as much reason, see in it a form of indenture, leading to conformity and opportunism.

When the old New Left students of 60s academe reentered the university as teachers, they saw the exhilarated hopes of their youth deflate after 1968, collapse under the backlash of the 70s, and become mere archaeology by 1980. None of the beautiful promises came true.

Their response to this trauma was to shift away from classical Marxism, with its emphasis on economic and class struggle in the real world, and embrace the more diffuse and paranoia-driven theories of the Frankfurt school—Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse.

For these theorists, all human life was ruled by repressive mechanisms embedded, not in manifest politics, but in language, education, entertainment—the whole structure of social communication.

To this was joined the belief of French poststructuralism, exemplified by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, that the "subject"—the thinking, single agent, the "I" of every sentence—was an illusion: all you had left was language, not mentality: frustration with pervasive systems of repressive undecidability written everywhere in the surrounding culture, but no means of overcoming it. Once there were writers, but now there is only what Foucault derisively called "the author function." The intellectual, under these conditions, is thought to be as helpless against power and control as a salmon in a polluted stream, the only difference being that we, unlike the fish, *know* the water is poisoned.

Thus, by the theory, we are not in control of our own history and never can be. We hold it true that truth is unknowable; we must suspect all utterances, except the axiom that all utterances are suspect. It would be difficult to find a worse—or more authoritarian—dead end than this. John Diggins, in *The Rise and Fall of the American Left,* puts it in a nutshell: "Today the intellectual's challenge is not the Enlightenment one of furthering knowledge to advance freedom: the challenge now is to spread suspicion. The influence French poststructuralism enjoys in American academic life . . . answers a deep need, if only the need to rationalize failure." The intellectual who imagines he or she can challenge the status quo by arguing the uselessness of language starts with not one, but three strikes against him, and this is why poststructuralism, though it has filled the seminar rooms for the last decade and given us a mound of largely unreadable cultural criticism along with some preachy neo-

conceptual art, has had so little lasting effect on the way people in general write, think, or act. It is mostly an enclave of abstract complaint.

Outside its perimeter, real life, real language and real communication go on. In the late 80s, while American academics were emptily theorizing that language and the thinking subject were dead, the longing for freedom and humanistic culture was demolishing the very pillars of European tyranny. Of course, if the Chinese students had read their Foucault they would have known that repression is inscribed in all language, their own included, and so they could have saved themselves the trouble of facing the tanks in Tiananmen Square. But did Václav Havel and his fellow playwrights, intellectuals and poets free Czechoslovakia by quoting Derrida or Lyotard on the inscrutability of texts? Assuredly not: they did it by placing their faith in the transforming power of thought—by putting their shoulders to the immense wheel of the word. The world changes more deeply, widely, thrillingly than at any moment since 1917, perhaps since 1848, and the American academic left keeps fretting about how phallocentricity is inscribed in Dickens's portrayal of Little Nell.

The writer who drops in on this world is bound to feel like Gulliver visiting the Royal Academy of Lagado, with its solemn "projectors" laboring to extract sunbeams from cucumbers, build houses from the roof down and restore the nutritive power of human shit, all convinced of the value of their work. I am also reminded of Australia, the home of lost biological causes: just as the pouched macropods and egg-laying mammals, the kangaroos and wallabies and echidnas and platypi, flourished undisturbed on their drifting fragment of the mother-continent Gondwana eons after they were extinct everywhere else on the globe, so the last Derrideans and Lyotardians and Baudrillardians are still hopping and snuffling around in American academe, years after their intellectual mentors ceased to interest the French themselves. And these are the people who complain about cultural colonialism!

In the late 80s the editor of the Presses Universitaires de France, Nicos Poulantzas, was struggling to complete an expansive series of books on Marxism and contemporary life that had been started in the 70s: Marx-and-cooking, Marx-and-sport, Marx-and-sex, Marx and anything you cared to mention. But it was unfinishable: long ago, Poulantzas had run out of Marx-fixated French writers. "Our only hope is America," he confided gloomily to a colleague, shortly before he committed suicide.

The fact that Marxist influence so endures in the American academic left—to the point where you can still find an Althusserian or two—is a proof of the power of nostalgia. There is and always will be reason for the young to study Marx—starting with the fact that the 20th century is incomprehensible without a grasp of the immense impact his ideas, and others' interpretations of his ideas, have had on world politics.

Nevertheless, Marxism is dead; that part of history is over. Its carcass will continue to make sounds and smells, as fluids drain and pockets of gas expand; Europeans who were once Communists will continue to be reborn as ultra-nationalists, like the genocidal former *apparatchik,* President Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia. Many who satisfied their taste for bureaucratic power within the imperial structure of Commu-

nism will continue to slake it at the new fountains of local nationalism.

Such people, however unworthy of respect, are at least more realistic than intellectuals who sigh for the lost promise of Marx and Lenin. For the fact is that Marxism lost its main bet at the outset. It wagered its entire claim to historical inevitability on the idea that humankind would divide along the lines of class, not nationality. In this it was wrong. Because the bonds of nationhood were so much stronger than those of class, the Revolution could only be exported in three forms: as direct conquest by Moscow, as in eastern Europe; by the reinvention of ancient, xenophobic, authoritarian structures with a "Marxist" veneer, as in Mao's China; and as a handy form of rhetoric which gave "internationalist" legitimacy to nationalist chieftains and *caudillos,* as in Ceacescu's Romania, Castro's Cuba or any number of ephemeral African regimes. But the basic promise of Marxism, an *internationale* of workers joined as a transnational force by common interests, turned out to be a complete chimera. Nationalism survives. Half a century after Hitler's death, neo-Nazi gangs march, hold hate-rock concerts and burn sleeping Turkish migrants in Germany; even Mussolini's granddaughter is in Italian politics. Whereas forty years after Stalin's death, there isn't a true-red Marxist believer in power, or even *near* power, anywhere in Europe.

Marxism has no promise for America. Since 1917, it has failed after three-quarters of a century of tests in every society where it was applied. It has produced nothing but misery, tyranny and mediocrity. The fact that it often replaced other systems which were also tyrannous, mediocre and miserable does not mitigate its failure. The historian learns never to say

"never," but all the same it is highly improbable that large numbers of people, in the imaginable future, will submit themselves to the yoke of a political ideology that assumes that mankind is capable of objectively discerning, judging and controlling everything that exists in terms of a "rational," "scientific" program, a single model propagated by central planning. Marxism set itself against nationalism, spread by adapting to it, and in the end was laid low by it.

Here lies the extraordinary irony of the present American debate over "multiculturalism." The academic left professes to see in it the seeds of radical promise: Marxism has passed through the fires of its own dissolution and is reborn as a "hero with a thousand faces"—multiculturalism. To entertain this fiction is to act as if the fundamental conflict between Marxist-Leninism and national diversity had never existed; as though there was some residue of truth in the now violently rejected claims that Marxism increased a nation's awareness of its own being. Moreover, what's left of the Left would like to endow ordinary internal differences within a society—of gender, race and sexual pattern—with the inflated character of nationhood, as though they not only embodied cultural differences but actually constituted whole "cultures" in their own right. "Queer Nation," indeed. At the same time, American conservatives are apt to take this futile attempt to draft multiculturalism into post-Marxist system-saving as though it represented some kind of reality. There is no Marx left to fight; so forth we go in knightly array against the vague and hydra-headed Multi. Thus both sides are trapped by mutual obsession, in an otherwise empty side-trench of an extinct Cold War.

How could any genuine multiculturalist—anyone who

cares about differences of culture, aspiration, and history between societies or groups—give allegiance to a doctrine that sought, in the name of "liberation," to imprison all human difference within the same internationalist, pseudo-scientific model? Moreover, *Pace* the hard-liners, you do not have to be an ideologue to spot human oppression and injustice, and to want to do something about it; long before *The Communist Manifesto,* men and women burned with indignation when they saw the strong depriving the weak of hope, and they will keep wanting to redress the injustices the rich inflict on the poor long after the last Marxist regime collapses.

Yet the effort to save some notionally "pure" essence of Marx's ideas from their results in the real world still goes on, despondently, in America—because America, unlike Russia or China or Cuba, has never had a Marxist government, or anything resembling one, so that the millenarian hopes and fantasies of Marxism never had a chance to be tested. Thus American radicals have always been able to disport themselves in the ideal promises of Marxism, without having to live with the wretchedness of their fulfillment. Just as Christianity would end if the Messiah were to return, so it is only possible to keep some kind of Marxist faith after the collapse of European Communism by redefining oneself as a "post-Marxist" and focusing on language rather than deeds.

Hence, in the universities, what matters is the politics of culture, not the politics of the distribution of wealth and of real events in the social sphere, like poverty, drug addiction and the rise of crime. The academic left is much more interested in race and gender than in class. And it is *very* much more interested in theorizing about gender and race than actually reporting on them. This enables its savants to feel they are on the cutting edge of social change, without doing

legwork outside of academe; the "traditional left" has been left far behind, stuck with all that unglamorous and twice-told stuff about the workers. It is better to rummage around in pop culture, showing how oppressive structures are "inscribed" in some of its forms and "questioned" by others—a process inseparable, of course, from the protean energies of capitalism, seeking to re-invent its oppressive self every day through popular culture in order to find new and better ways of turning us into docile consumers. Inflation and devaluation are built into this search for small objects on which theory and metatheory can build their large, freeform incrustations. What matters is the *amount* of "knowledge-production" and not its quality. Thus, in the words of the Chicago professor of English and education, Gerald Graff,[19]

> narrow canons of proof, evidence, logical consistency and clarity of expression have to go. To insist on them imposes a drag upon progress. Indeed, to apply strict canons of objectivity and evidence in academic publishing today would be comparable to the American economy's returning to the gold standard; the effect would be the immediate collapse of the system.

This attitude has spilled over into all areas of cultural criticism, and is *de rigueur* in most of them. Thus, as part of the Whitney Museum lecture program of work by advanced graduate students and scholars in art history in May 1992, on the general theme of "Femininity and Masculinity: The Construction of Gender and the Transgression of Boundaries in 20th-Century American Art and Culture," a Ph.D. candidate from New York University named Christopher Davis proposed a theory about "The Construction of Masculinity in Silent Comedy." He showed several clips, including one of Douglas Fairbanks pretending to ride a horse in *Wild and*

Woolly, and another of Harold Lloyd in *The Freshman,* flapping his arms as he screamed out a football chant. What were they doing? Jerking off, for their bodies "move in a jerky, repetitive motion." Indeed, "In the Lloyd film, the imagery of masturbation is so elaborated that even the written text—the white lettering of the intertitle—becomes a kind of textual ejaculate, a graphic explosion of words that mirrors the release of the masturbating boy." And why did young men in the 20s want to see Harold Lloyd subliminally masturbating? Because, whereas once "masculinity was closely tied to the ownership of property," those who lived in an industrialized, citified America "no longer had such a place to become men . . . lacking the means to develop as men, to control the space of their labor, many found in the cinema a simulated space in which masculinity . . . could flourish." And where, presumably, they too could jerk off without alerting Mama.

This kind of wooze, unbolstered by proof or evidence, patched together out of vaguely "radical" aperçus, is what increasingly does duty for cultural analysis—Davis's paper wasn't by any means the silliest given at the Whitney that day.

Madonna is a particular focus for such riffs. She has become the prime pinup of American academe, robed in peek-aboo theory, now filmy, now opaque. As Daniel Harris pointed out in *The Nation,*[20] she "has been drafted into the staggeringly implausible role of spokeswoman of the values and professional interests of university instructors." There is a Lacanian Madonna, a Baudrillardian Madonna, a Freudian Madonna, a Foucaultian Madonna—rather as, in Mediterranean Catholic cults, one may pray to the Madonna of Loreto, of Fatima, or of Lourdes. If you are a Marxist-feminist scholar like Melanie Morton, you can show that her melodies

"prevent what we would call in narrative terms an ideological closure. There is no recapitulation which fixes power and establishes (or re-establishes) any element as dominant."

Thus the blonde bombshell explodes the established order of power. She undermines "capitalist constructions" and "rejects core bourgeois epistemes"—a proposition that would certainly be news to my own employers at Time/Warner, who recently paid Madonna $60,000,000 for the rights to her work. Some rejection. The truth is less radical: some academics want a little slice of the action of spectacle provided by mass culture. Dazzled by its shine and yackety-yack, they are more groupies than rebels. The sequence is predictable. Ice-T or Sister Souljah do their raps about killing whitey, and call themselves "revolutionaries." A CEO at Time-Warner, which distributed Ice-T's exhortations to cop-killing, then defends the corporation's right to produce such stuff in terms plangently reminiscent of Milton's *Areopagitica.* After these pieties, scholars weigh in with learned papers on the revolutionary promise of sixteen-year-olds in the 'hood. Up come the conservatives, wringing their hands in the manner of the late Allan Bloom over rap, rock-'n'-roll, and the unearned Dionysiac ecstasies of mass multi-culti. Somewhere along the line the obvious fact that rap and hip-hop are not the agents of a desired or feared apocalypse, that they are just another entertainment fashion, gets lost. And it is lost because one side needs the other, so that each can inflate its agenda into a chiliastic battle for the soul of America. Radical academic and cultural conservative are now locked in a full-blown, mutually sustaining *folie à deux,* and the only person each dislikes more than the other is the one who tells both to lighten up. Such is the latest mutation of America's Puritan heritage.

If the American left is to revitalize itself, it will have to re-

learn plain English, return to the actual and resistant world, reclaim not only the Enlightenment principles but the language of Tom Paine and Orwell for itself—and it will never do that with its present encumbrance of theory. All that preserves the illusion of radicalness in academic poststructuralism and neo-Marxism is the conservative opposition. The right needs a left: if the battlements of Western culture were not under continuous siege, what would happen to their defenders? All the cash flowing to neo-con watchdog causes from the copious coffers of the Scaife family and the Olin Corporation would dry up. (The choir of conservatives denouncing "well-subsidized left academics" as bludgers, whilst taking their own subsidies from various right-wing foundations, is truly one of the wonders of American intellectual life.) As American conservatism confronts the death of Marxist ideology, its nurturing enemy, one is irresistably reminded of the question posed by Constantine Cavafy eighty years ago:

> What does this sudden uneasiness mean,
> and this confusion? (How grave their faces have become!)
> Why are the streets and squares rapidly emptying,
> and why is everyone going back home, so lost in thought?
> Because it is night and the barbarians have not come;
> and some men have arrived from the frontiers
> and they say that barbarians don't exist any longer.
> And now what will become of us without barbarians?
> They were a kind of solution.

The favorite all-purpose Barbarians, at present, are called "multiculturalists."