
continue to interest a sufficient number of readers. But this final volume doesn't make a strong case for criticism as a lively debate. Perhaps Wellek got tired and couldn't face the chore of dealing with the proliferation of critical theories as they have been made to serve every conceivable ideological cause. Who could cope with this exorbitance? There is another problem. Wellek knows, or thinks he knows, what literature is, what the literary character of language is. I judge that he has lost patience with the error of other critics. He can't be expected to dispute with adepts of deconstruction, feminism, postmodernism, queer theory, cultural studies, and a babel of other rhetorics. Wellek confines his attention to the standard sages. The big names in the present volume are Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Valéry, Benedetto Croce, and José Ortega y Gasset. But each of these is presented as a sloppy thinker, and the whole progress of modern criticism appears as a trek from one Cave of Error to the next. Even when he falls into enthusiasm, Wellek recovers his severity almost at once.

The labor of writing this *History* has evidently been appalling, and it shows. Wellek often drives himself to paraphrase a book he

finds uncongenial or indeed silly—Jacques Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, for instance. He does his best to be equable, but in the end confesses that "an outsider who is suspicious of vague and mystical concepts" cannot make much of Maritain. "It is a pity," he wearily reports, "that such a book, filled with fine reflections on poetry, on inspiration, and on different genres and figures in literary history, ends with a somewhat empty gesture toward a religious metaphysics." It is a more acute pity that Wellek has felt honorably obliged to read hundreds of such babbling books.

In the end, the *History of Criticism* is most interesting, most touching, as Wellek's intellectual autobiography. The pressure of his life in literature and criticism is felt in a word here, a word there, an interpolated *strange* or *curious* or *odd* when Wellek cannot bear to leave the paraphrased sentences without comment. His own life is in those adjectives, for the most part ruefully enforced.

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OTHER TITLES

Contemporary Affairs

BOILING POINT: Democrats, Republicans, and the Decline of Middle-Class Prosperity. By Kevin Phillips. Random House. 307 pp. \$23

The "American dream" has always been vague, but most people (especially outsiders) have assumed that it was fundamentally material rather than spiritual. Phillips's sprawling threnody to American exceptionalism makes the assumption explicit. His argument is that the American "middle-class squeeze" has reached a decisive historical

moment. "Previous cyclical troughs for the U.S. middle class," he writes, were "mere hiccups in the historical expansion that reached a late 20th-century zenith at some point in the 1960s or 1970s when 50 to 55 percent of Americans belonged to an economic middle class without any foreign or historical equivalent." Other analysts tend to see the present economic slippage of the American middle class as merely another symptom of worsening global economic conditions, but Phillips puts the blame on specifically American circumstances, on bad choices made by American business and political leaders.

Phillips has some claim to the role of a political prophet. His *Emerging Republican Majority* (1967) predicted the conservative resurgence—and, as the architect of Richard Nixon's 1968 "southern strategy" he helped bring it about. Two decades later, in *The Politics of Rich and Poor* (1990), he suggested that middle-class woes might finally break the Republican monopoly on the White House. The relatively short time it took Phillips to go from a Republican to a Democratic Jeremiah was the time it took America, he believes, to undergo a secret revolution. In the early 1950s, he points out, \$600,000-a-year executives were taxed at around 75 percent of their income, while the median family "breadwinner" (in his quaint terminology) paid five percent. By the late 1980s "the effective combined rate of federal taxes on median or average families had climbed to the 25-28 percent range," while taxes on half-million dollar incomes had



fallen to almost the same level. "There, in a sentence," he says, "was the fiscal revolution."

But what is the middle class, anyway, in a "classless society" such as America? Even though Phillips is always ready to make assertions about "the middle-class psyche," his characterization is purely financial: It is the mathematical middle-income group. He indignantly dismisses any alternative methods that might take behavior or attitudes into account. Such rigidity forces him to banish from the middle class those most bourgeois of professions, medicine and law, and to cast them as profiteering enemies of his median group. The tendency of young householders, unable to achieve their parents' norm of "a suburban home with two reasonably new cars in the garage," to substitute "stylish clothing and sophisticated wine and food" he mocks as "simulating affluence." Such reasoning reduces his middle class to a tabular abstraction drained of social or cultural content.

Phillips's assessment of the American dream in strictly financial terms also makes it hard to assess his dark hints that bourgeois "boiling-points" have alarming political consequences. Historically, populist movements have involved marginal groups, but for the first time, he argues, it is the middle class that is in revolt. What, exactly, are the terrifying signs of this revolt? Phillips has little to display other than George Bush's receipt of a smaller percentage of the vote in 1992 than Herbert Hoover got in '32 and, also, the twangy antiestablishment gibes of a Texas billionaire. Knowing what has happened to the middle class elsewhere in the industrial world might allow readers to evaluate not Phillips's statistics—which most economists accept—but his prognostications about what these statistics portend. Yet almost the only analogy Phillips offers is to the *brede middenstand* (broad middle group) of the 17th-century Dutch Republic, with its comely houses along the Keizersgracht and Heerengracht. Readers skeptical of Phillips's barely veiled threat of a populist or fascist reaction to overtaxation may take comfort from the fact that the middle class of Amsterdam and Utrecht survived the decline on which he morbidly focuses. There is life after exceptionalism.

NO FRIENDS BUT THE MOUNTAINS: The Tragic History of the Kurds. By John Bulloch and Harvey Morris. Oxford. 242 pp. \$25

During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, responding to President George Bush's call for the oppressed peoples of Iraq to rise up, Kurdish guerrillas seized control of much of northern Iraq. Once the UN truce was signed, Saddam Hussein sent his surviving troops north, slaughtering the lightly armed Kurds and driving millions more into exile. For the Kurds, the Allies' indifference to their fate was business as usual. Constituting the world's largest stateless nationality, the Kurds reside in countries where they have at times been denied the use of their language and even fatally poisoned by chemical sprays—persecutions that are rarely reported in the world press. Why this neglect? British journalists Bulloch and Morris suggest that the major international powers share an "Arabocentric view" of the Middle East. Those who consider the region essentially an Arab domain believe that the claims of the Palestinian Arabs demand attention and redress, while those of the Kurds, an ancient non-