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## The Guns of Theory

"The Assault on the Canon" by Peter Shaw, in *The Sewanee Review* (Spring 1994), University of the South, Sewanee, Tenn. 37383.

It is more than passing strange: The academics who so strenuously object to the "canon" of the great works of Western literature never get down to cases. "Canon-busters" such as Barbara Foley, author of *Radical Representations* (1993) and Paul Lauter, author of *Canons and Context* (1991), do not challenge the standing of *Hamlet*, say, or any other particular revered work. Instead, they train their guns on the process by which the canon is formed, or on the very idea of a canon. Their assault is a *theoretical* one, Shaw, author of *The War against Intellect* (1989), argues—and defenders of the canon, instead of just singing the praises of the masterpieces, would do well to point out the theory's fatal defects.

The logic of the canon assault, Shaw says, rests on the theory of "contingencies of value," as spelled out in Barbara Herrnstein Smith's 1988 book by that name. Traditionalists contend that the canon is composed of works that have stood the test of time. Smith, however, insists that that test "is not . . . an impersonal and impartial mechanism." Biases ("contingencies") *increase* over time, as the ruling class, operating through "cultural institutions," sifts through the literature to find the works that "appear to reflect and reinforce establishment ideologies."

For that to be true, however, Shaw says, "the canon would have to be loaded with second-rate works that happen to reflect 'establishment' ide-

ology." Smith never identifies even one such work. The few attempts others have made to demonstrate her thesis—such as Lawrence H. Schwartz's *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* (1988)—only serve to reveal its poverty, Shaw asserts. Schwartz (who does not question Faulkner's greatness) claims that the revival of the novelist's reputation during the late 1940s was the result of the Cold War and of postwar American chauvinism. But, Shaw points out, the Faulkner revival began during the late 1930s and "was prominently led by Europeans."

The establishment's power to affect the canon is much exaggerated, Shaw notes. When T. S. Eliot, for example, "tried to lend his immense prestige to elevating the poetry of Rudyard Kipling," he failed utterly.

To Shaw, the notion that the canon somehow shores up the powers that be is ludicrous: "Not only do the canonical works not advance the interests of ruling classes at all, but they also do not primarily serve the stability of the social order." Indeed, they are, in general, works of social and cultural *opposition*. "From the resistance to settled order of Sophocles' *Antigone* and Job in the Bible, to the apostasies of Galileo, Diderot, Voltaire, William Blake, Goethe, and Nietzsche, the canon is a hotbed of heterodoxy." Indeed, defenders of the canon themselves are continually at war over who belongs on it. In fact, Shaw notes, the *only* people who are not busy arguing the merits and demerits of particular works are the canon-busters. They remain above the fray—theoretically.

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## OTHER NATIONS

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### Red Star Rising?

"How the East Was Lost" by Adrian Karatnycky, in *National Review* (June 27, 1994), 150 East 35th St., New York, N.Y. 10016.

Three years ago, AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland met with Sándor Nagy, the leader of what had been Hungary's official state-con-

trolled communist trade union. Nagy told him: "There are three major currents in Hungary today—the Christian Democrats, the liberals, and the Social Democrats." Kirkland, a veteran in the fight against totalitarianism, replied: "Mr. Nagy, tell me: What happened to all the Communists?" The Hungarian turned crimson. Now, after the decisive victory of ex-

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Communists in last May's elections, Nagy and his comrades "are back near the levers of power," notes Karatnycky, executive director of Freedom House. Their political comeback, he adds, is part of a startling regional trend: Former Communists hold power, or significantly share in it, in all but five of the 22 states in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. (Albania, Armenia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Latvia are the exceptions.)

Economic difficulties are not the only cause of the comeback, Karatnycky contends. The hardships involved in the transition to a market economy—aggravated by the European Union's denial of market access to East European nations—were certain to push millions of disgruntled workers and pensioners to the left, he notes. But why did they turn to the *ex-communist* Left and not to the new social-democratic parties that emerged from the anti-communist opposition?

A dispirited populace and a tenacious communist *nomenklatura* helped to make the comeback possible, but the biggest factor, Karatnycky argues, was that "anti-communists lost their moral voice. As soon as the communist system collapsed in Central and Eastern Europe, democratic ideas took the back seat. Aid from the West was directed away from building democracy, strengthening the independent media, and re-creating spiritual values, and directed instead toward rapid economic restructuring." Finance ministers, assisted by international technocrats, moved to center stage, supplanting the leaders of the democratic movements.

"The cultural struggle that should have been waged against the evil communist past was jettisoned—at the very time it was needed most," Karatnycky asserts. "Detached, pragmatic Eurocrats and Beltway Bandits recoiled at such unifying, inspiring forces as nationalism and religious revival, which had been central to the collapse of the Soviet system and are central to the fragile rebirth of civil society, community, and a sense of purpose. Instead, nationalism was equated with xenophobia and ethnic hatred. . . .

"Even as the values of human rights, democracy, and dignity so central to the decades-long anti-communist struggle were replaced by a

soulless technocratic jargon, most Western advisers were also urging the new leaders to dispense with any moral accounting of their predecessors' regimes and get on with more practical matters," Karatnycky notes. When material progress was not soon forthcoming, the door was left open for the ex-Communists' return. They cannot easily go back to their old ways, Karatnycky admits, but their comeback shows the urgent need for the West again to stress democratic ideas and values, not just market mechanisms.

### *Britain's 'New Rabble'*

"Underclass: The Crisis Deepens" and "The New Victorians . . . and the New Rabble" by Charles Murray, in *The Sunday Times* (May 22 and May 29, 1994), #1 Virginia St., London, England E1 9BD.

Charles Murray, best known for his controversial 1984 book, *Losing Ground*, in which he argued that America's Great Society social programs actually worsened the plight of the poor, reports from Britain that the British underclass is growing, too. Between 1987 and 1992, property crime in England and Wales rose by 42 percent; violent crime, by 40 percent. Out-of-wedlock births jumped from 23 percent of all births to 31 percent, and the proportion of unemployed men not even looking for work rose from 10 percent to 13 percent. Murray fears that from this upheaval may emerge "a new class system, drastically unlike the old, and much more hostile to free institutions."

The astonishing increase in illegitimacy since the mid-1970s is the "core phenomenon," Murray maintains: "The institution of the family in the dominant economic class of professionals and executives—call it the upper middle class—is in better shape than most people think, and is likely to get better. But the family is likely to continue to deteriorate among what the Victorians called the lower classes." In 1991, in the 10 census districts with the highest percentages of households with unskilled workers, 39 percent of the children were born out of wedlock, whereas in the 10 districts with the lowest percentages of such households, "only" 19 percent