

The Verdict of the People (1854–55), by George Caleb Bingham.

# QUESTIONING LEADERSHIP

*“Close to 3,000 books and articles have been published on the subject of leadership, mostly within the past three decades,” notes business writer Richard Luecke—in a new book that adds to his statistic. Perhaps no coincidence, these same three decades have given rise to a consensus that great leaders no longer move among us. Our authors here propose that the usual ways of addressing the leadership question might themselves be a problem.*

# What's Wrong with American Political Leadership?

BY ALAN BRINKLEY

Visible occasionally among the numbing political advertisements of the 1993 election season was a commercial promoting the New York City ballot initiative proposing term limits for elected officials. The spoken text was reasonably predictable, but the visual image was striking: several enormously fat men sitting together, chomping on large cigars, and chortling—as if expressing their contempt for the law, or the people, or both. Whether the commercial had anything to do with the overwhelming success of the term-limits initiative, it did, it seems clear, convey what has become an increasingly common image of American political leaders: cynical, complacent, corrupt, cut off from any real connection with the people they ostensibly represent.

Something is clearly wrong with a political system in which the men and women charged with governing are held in such contempt by so many of their constituents. It is something more serious than the normal disorder, intrigue, and depravity that have always characterized democratic politics in the United States and other nations. The bonds that link our leaders and our political system with the larger public—the bonds of at least minimal respect and confidence that are essential to the stability and effectiveness of a democratic state—are badly frayed. There is, perhaps, reason to fear that they may soon snap altogether. An almost palpable cynicism has penetrated our public life, a cynicism that seems to be felt at almost every level of society. There is a widespread popular belief that no one in politics is to be trusted, that nothing government attempts works, even that nothing government attempts can work. We are experiencing a crisis of political leadership and legitimacy.

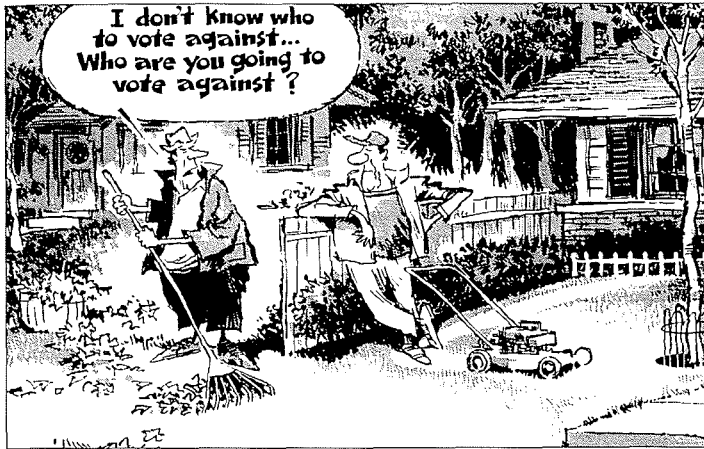
This is not the first time the United States has faced such a crisis. A century ago, in the face of social and economic problems at least as fright-

ening and bewildering as those of our own time, many Americans developed a similar contempt for and cynicism toward their political leaders. Political cartoonists portrayed public officials with the same gleeful disdain that the advocates of term limits used in 1993. The pages of such magazines as *Judge* and *Punch* were filled with derisive images of bloated, complacent politicians and plutocrats, their vests covered with dollar signs and shiny gold watch chains stretched across their enormous midriffs. They too smoked cigars and chortled as they planned new ways to betray the public.

In the 1890s, as in the 1990s, there were fevered efforts by people across the ideological spectrum to explain the political crisis—to determine what had gone wrong, to decide who was to blame, to suggest how to fix a system that had somehow come unglued. And in both the 1890s and the 1990s, those explanations tended to cluster into two broad categories. Each of them had then, and has now, valuable things to say about American political leadership. But each of them, then and now, has also obscured some of the more important causes of our discontent.

The first explanation is what might best be called the populist critique of American politics. It is based on the assumption that most of the problems of our public life are a result of the frustration of popular will—by smug elected officials, by corrupt party bosses, by rapacious party organizations, by selfish special interests.

In the 1890s, the populist critique focused on monopolists and robber barons, the men Theodore Roosevelt once called “malefactors of great wealth.” Standard Oil, it was said, had done everything to the New Jersey legislature except refine it. The railroads, many midwestern and southern farmers believed, regularly controlled the election of United States senators and dominated the workings of Congress.



And, in an age when many Americans believed corrupt party bosses had almost unlimited power, the criticism focused as well on the paucity of political leadership. National political leaders were widely disparaged, either as stolid defenders of entrenched wealth (for example, Grover Cleveland) or as unprincipled schemers intent on advancing their own careers at any cost (for example, James G. Blaine, who was dubbed "the continental liar from the state of Maine").

The 1990s have produced a similar assessment of politicians and of the selfish private interests that seem to control them. This critique has taken many forms, among them a virulent popular outrage at the undeserved perquisites public officials presumably receive and their seeming contempt for the needs and desires of the people they serve. The image of Washington, D.C., as an inspiring symbol of our nation's hopes and ideals, presided over by the spirits of Lincoln, Jefferson, and Washington, must now compete with a counter-image: a city of intrigue and corruption, swarming with greedy special interests. The ferocity with which much of the public and the media responded to such trivial issues as the congressional pay raise, the House banking "scan-

dal," and even President Clinton's haircut in Los Angeles suggests the almost reflexive hostility to the idea of political life that fuels the populist outrage.

In the 1890s, the populist critique produced, among other things, a series of proposals to get the parties and the politicians out of the way of the public, to let the people exercise more direct control over the nation's public life. Such proposals, many of

which were enacted, included direct election of United States senators (to replace election by the easily corrupted state legislatures), the initiative, the referendum, and the recall. There was a new, and briefly successful, political organization: the People's Party, committed, at least at first, to creating a more direct democracy through which ordinary men and women might once again control their own lives and futures.

In the 1990s, the populist fervor has produced a series of similar efforts to allow the people to circumvent politicians and control their public world more directly. The widespread support for term limits is a particularly vivid example. So is the popularity of Ross Perot and other antiparty politicians, who propose a direct pipeline between public opinion and public action.

At the heart of the populist view is the belief that the real wisdom and decency of American society resides in the people, that if only the politicians and the special interests would get out of the way, the people could be trusted to deal fairly and honestly with our problems. This is, of course, an old and enduring element of American folklore. Among recent examples of its hardiness is William Greider's *Who Will Tell the People?: The Betrayal*

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of *American Democracy* (1992), a dismal chronicle of the corruption of the American political system that rests squarely (as the slightly overwrought title suggests) on a belief that the greatest cost of this corruption is the way it frustrates popular will.

Competing with the populist critique is another interpretation of our present political ills, one that, for lack of a better term, might be called the antipopulist analysis. It rests on a quite different assumption: that the problem with American politics is that leaders are excessively responsive to popular will, too easily swayed by the immediate, short-term demands of unreflective voters, and insufficiently willing to resist the politically popular in the name of the larger public interest. Far from being unresponsive to popular will, politicians have become skittishly sensitive to public opinion. They slavishly gauge their actions to the most recent public-opinion polls, to the character of their mail, to the number of phone calls they receive from constituents on this issue or that. The result is a politics in which the people have, on the whole, gotten what they demanded; and what they have demanded—low taxes and high services—has produced an epic fiscal disaster that will require several generations of sacrifice to undo. Hence an effective political system, according to the antipopulist analysis, requires a buffer between popular will and public action. It requires, in effect, an enlightened elite, capable of seeing the nation's long-term interests through the thicket of short-term demands.

**T**he version of this diagnosis articulated in the late 19th century took the form of an extraordinary loathing and fear of the populists among educated elites of all political persuasions (and a particular fear of the disaster their demand for the abandonment of the gold standard would presumably visit upon the economy). And it produced a series of prescriptions for handing control of government over to experts, who would be insulated somehow not just from politicians but from voters. Civil-

service reform created a cadre of professional public servants, protected from the pull and tug of politics. Cities created city-manager and commission governments, in which the day-to-day running of municipalities was entrusted to professional elites, never directly answerable to the people. Independent regulatory commissions emerged at both the state and the national level; their members, too, were to be insulated from politics, exercising control over economic activities on the basis of a disinterested sense of the public interest, rather than on the basis of their own political needs. A cult of expertise and professionalism emerged as a central element of the reform sentiment of the early 20th century—a cult that produced, among other things, a celebration of the “engineer,” the trained professional whose only interest was in the smooth operation of systems, the technician who could be trusted to run society on the basis of scientific principles, not popular pressures.

**I**n the late 20th century, the antipopulist critique is less well articulated (and less politically viable) than it was a century ago and certainly less well articulated than its populist counterpart. But it is visible nevertheless in the interstices of our political culture, both in the rising emphasis on state secrecy and in the persistent belief that there are educated elites capable of understanding our long-term needs in a way that elected officials cannot. Not many years ago, New York City handed effective control of its municipal finances to an unelected panel of experts (the Municipal Assistance Corporation). There are similar proposals today for insulating the federal budget process from popular pressure. Some (although by no means all) of the pressure for a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution reflects not just a distrust of politicians but also a distrust of the public.

These two interpretations of our political problems are, of course, very different, even in many ways antithetical. But they also share something very important. Both rest, in the end, on the premise that there is an identifiable

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public or community interest—a set of concerns and goals that transcends politics, that transcends the particular interest of individuals and groups and reflects the essential needs of the nation. The goal of politics, therefore, should be to sweep away the obstacles to the discovery of that public interest and create a government that reflects it.

There is a basic difference between these two views over where a reliable conception of the public interest can be found. Populists believe it resides in the wisdom of the people; antipopulists believe it resides somewhere else—in the disinterested knowledge of trained elites or in timeless public truths inherited from earlier eras. But both stances reflect a belief that a unitary public interest exists and that it can and should be identified. Both envision a world free of political faction and selfish interests.

**T**he search for a “public interest” is a worthy effort. It is, indeed, essential to the functioning of any political system. But much of today’s political discourse reflects a rather too-easy acceptance of a set of illusions about what it is our society is seeking. The idea that a “public interest” exists somewhere as a kernel of true knowledge, untainted by politics or self-interest, is an attractive thought. But it is also a myth. We cannot identify a public interest outside of politics, outside of competing conceptions of self-interest, because in a democracy—and particularly in a democracy as diverse and contentious as our own—any conception of the public interest will always be contested. And as a democracy, we are obligated to provide a means by which that contest can occur.

That means is politics. And so our best hope for dealing with our problems is not escaping from politics, but rehabilitating and relegitimizing our political system and its leaders so that they can contain the inevitable conflicts of our society in a way that gives all Americans a sense that they have a stake in the process and its outcomes.

One way to begin is to search for some of the causes of our present discontents that

move beyond the limited perspective of the prevailing diagnoses. There are two areas in particular where an effort to reshape politics may be worth pursuing and where a genuine change holds at least some promise of restoring public life and public leaders to a position of respect in our society.

**O**ne reason for the present disaffection with our political system is reasonably well described by the populist critique: the absence of any sense of connection between most individual citizens and the political process. The decline in voter turnout that has characterized public life throughout much of the 20th century and has, it seems, accelerated in the last 20 years is one sign of this sense of disconnection. So, of course, is the cynicism that has helped produce that decline.

The growing disconnection of people from politics has many causes, but among the most important are some changes in the *style* of politics that have occurred in this century, particularly during the last several decades. In the 19th century, and to a lesser but still significant extent throughout the first half of the 20th century, American politics relied heavily on mass popular participation: on the mobilization of thousands, even millions of people not just to vote but to work in campaigns and join in partisan events. Politics was something people cared about not just because of issues but also (as the historian Michael McGerr has argued) because of its importance as a social and cultural activity. For many, politics was a form of self-identification, as important to some people as religion or ethnicity.

An example of the power of this partisan loyalty was David B. Hill, a generally unremarkable Democratic governor of New York in the 1880s, who once attended a political meeting where some dissidents were threatening to desert the party. Hill stood up and made a short speech in which he said he would never bolt the party, no matter what it did or who it nominated, because, he said, “I am a Democrat.” And that single sentence became a

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great political rallying cry, repeated constantly all over the country as a statement of profound emotional force and significance. It helped make David Hill a national hero to his party and, for a time, a highly touted contender for the Democratic nomination for president.

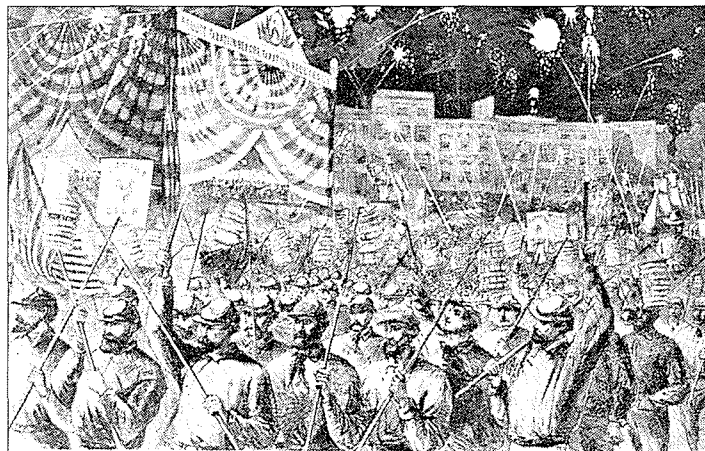
Politics was even a kind of sport. To many people, caring about a party or a campaign was much like caring today about a football or baseball team—an irrational attachment at times, but a passionate one. Politics meant attending rallies and barbecues, marching in parades, distributing bumper stickers and buttons—trivial activities, perhaps, but ones that gave many people the feeling of being a part of the public world and that created life-long habits of political participation.

Americans began to lose those habits nearly a century ago, but during the last 20 years the level of interest and participation in politics has dropped more rapidly and steadily than ever before. Politics has moved out of local party offices, out of the streets and auditoriums, out of any significant place in the lives of communities and families and individuals, and into consulting firms, advertising agencies, and television studios. One result is that the parties themselves play an increasingly attenuated role in public life. Another is that it is now far more difficult for individual voters to feel any real connection with the candidates and campaigns they are asked to support. Politics has become remote, impersonal, unapproachable. And so most Americans have simply ceased to participate very often in, or even to think very often about, public life. Instead, politics has become an almost entirely passive activity in which most voters rarely and glancingly engage. They read capsule descriptions of campaigns in newspapers and magazines. They listen to the radio. Above all, they watch television. And occasionally, in

ever-dwindling numbers, they go to the polls and vote. For most people, apparently, that is not enough to make politics seem significant.

The presidential campaign of Ross Perot in 1992, among its many significant (and ominous) implications, suggests the allure of an alternative political style. In the early months of that campaign, in particular, before Perot's precipitous and temporary withdrawal from the race, it produced something that had long been missing from American politics: It gave millions of voters the chance to feel that they were part of a genuine popular movement. As a result, the Perot campaign enjoyed astonishing success. The enthusiasm of those citizens was not just for, perhaps not even mainly for, Perot himself; it was an enthusiasm for the idea of political participation: for collecting signatures, organizing local campaign committees, passing out buttons and bumper stickers. Perot's followers experienced a small dose of the sense of empowerment that made the civil-rights movement, the antiwar movement, the New Left, and the right-to-life movement so alluring in the United States. Perot gave his supporters the chance to feel that they were controlling the process and not being controlled by it.

Perot's campaign demonstrated, if nothing else, that a yearning for political empowerment remains strong in America. To many voters, apparently, Perot's position on issues



*Parades and hoopla made 19th-century American politics a popular activity. Here Democrats in New York march for their candidate in the 1868 election.*

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(or his unwillingness to take positions on them) was beside the point. He gave them something they considered more important: a chance to feel democracy at work.

Replicating that feeling in more conventional political campaigns will be difficult, perhaps even impossible, given the erosion of party structures and the overwhelming power of television in our world. But involving citizens in public life need not be restricted to campaigns, as the impressive growth of local, grass-roots political movements in recent years demonstrates. Leaders who wish to create some real sense of connection with their followers would do well to recognize that thousands of Americans have found a sense of engagement in working for specific, sometimes local, causes—environmentalism, education, feminism, antifeminism, and many others. Politicians might look for ways to make these people participants in the work of government.

But there is another, equally important, task awaiting those who hope to relegitimize political life in America. And that is the task of introducing into political discourse habits of reasoned reflection capable of making it an activity we can take seriously as an intellectual endeavor. Achieving this goal is even more difficult than meeting the voters' demand that our leaders tell the truth, although without a respect for truth political language will remain as empty and unrespected as it is now. What is needed is a vision of leadership as a search not just for power but also for knowledge.

In recent years, in particular, our politics has often seemed to be precisely the opposite. It has seemed a flight from knowledge. The cultivation of ignorance—ignorance of the real nature of our problems, ignorance of the predictable consequences of our actions—has been a deliberate political style. It is little wonder that contempt for political language and political life has risen significantly in the last decade or so and that leaders at all levels now find it much more difficult to enlist even modest public confidence.

The poet Robert Penn Warren wrote in 1975

(in *Democracy and Poetry*) of this concern, which had shaped his own thinking about politics throughout much of his life. He described

the tragic ambiguity of the fact that the spirit of the nation we had promised to create has often been the victim of our astonishing objective success, and that, in our success, we have put at pawn the very essence of the nation we had promised to create—that essence being the concept of the free man, the responsible self.

To Warren, democracy had meaning only when based on the concept of the “responsible self.” It had meaning only when citizens could aspire to understand the world in which they lived and their place in it, and only when they could expect their leaders to do the same. That was important, Warren argued, because without understanding there could be no effective public action. But it was also important because, without understanding, individuals would have no control of their own lives, no sense of their connections to their fellow citizens, to their community, and to their government.

What separates the 20th century from all the historical eras preceding it is, he argued, this: It is a world in which the gulf separating individuals from the institutions and processes that govern their lives grows ever larger, and in which the entrenched moral and social norms that once shaped and constrained the public world have lost much of their power to persuade. One response to such a world is simply to withdraw from it, to retreat into a private universe where one can at least pretend to exercise control. Another response is to place faith in leaders who promise simple solutions to complex problems. Both responses, Warren suggested, represent abdications of the responsibilities that come with being part of a democratic community. They represent, in particular, an abdication of the responsibility to seek knowledge—of ourselves and of our world. Without knowledge, he argued, we have no contact with our past,

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with our community, and with ourselves. Without knowledge, we move through the world without really living in it. Without a respect for knowledge, the political world becomes an empty place. Its leaders become cynical, amoral, with no moral compass, no guide to what they can and cannot do, creatures of empty political ambitions.

Historians writing of the late 19th and early 20th centuries have noted, looking back on the anguished political rhetoric of those years, how imperfectly contemporaries understood the great social and economic forces that were the most important sources of their problems, how often they focused their anger and fear on things that were marginal to their plights, or irrelevant to them altogether. Future historians of our own time may say the same of us: that we flailed away at ephemera and phantoms without understanding that our real task was to comprehend a series of profound structural changes in our society and our world.

But there were people in that earlier period of political crisis who believed that Americans could find a way of genuinely understanding their dilemmas, and that effective political leadership could help them do so. One of these people was Walter Lippmann, who as a very young man wrote several now-classic books about politics in which he confronted directly what he considered the major crisis of his age: a crisis of knowledge. In one of the most important of those books—*Drift and Mastery*, published in 1914—he described an America that had been “passing through a reorganization so radical that we are just beginning to grasp its meaning. . . . The scope of human endeavor is enormously larger, and with it has come . . . a general change of so-

cial scale. Human thought has had to enlarge its scale in order to meet the situation.”

And human thought, Lippmann and others believed, was capable of doing so, particularly if society was capable of producing leaders committed to genuine understanding of the world. There is, in *Drift and Mastery*, a tone of real contempt for “anyone who picks his way through the world as if he were walking on eggs.” Such people, Lippmann wrote, will find the world “a difficult and unsatisfactory place.” The worst qualities in leadership, Lippmann believed, were “timidity of



One of the more remarkable aspects of Ross Perot's campaign in the 1992 presidential election was the intense involvement of his army of followers.

thought, hesitancy and drift.” (It is not surprising that Lippmann's great political hero was Theodore Roosevelt.)

Drift was a word Lippmann returned to repeatedly, with contempt, even loathing. It was a sign of weakness and failure. Like many intellectuals in those years, Lippmann was profoundly influenced by Freud, and he drew from Freud a belief (perhaps not completely synonymous with Freud's own) that individuals must set as a goal the mastery of their own inner lives. But the more important political task, Lippmann believed, was for the nation, and its leaders, to do the same—for their collective life, their political life. They should



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strive for mastery, for a coherent understanding of themselves and their destiny. In one of his most powerful passages, Lippmann wrote:

We drift into our work, we fall in love, and our lives seem like the intermittent flicker of an obstinate lamp. War panics, and financial panics, revivals, fads sweep us before them. Men go to war not knowing why, hurl themselves at cannon as if they were bags of flour, seek impossible goals, submit to senseless wrongs, for mankind lives today only in the intervals of a fitful sleep. There is indeed a dreaming quality in life. . . . Men often wake up with a start: "Have I lived as long as I'm supposed to have lived? . . . Here I am, this kind of person, who has passed through these experiences—well, I didn't quite know it."

There is, in this passage, a contempt for the drift that Lippmann believed characterized so much of life, but also an implicit admiration for the "waking up," for recognizing the aimlessness of life, because through that recognition can come the determination to *control* one's own life and control one's own world. Lippmann continued:

That, I think, is the beginning of what we call reflection: a desire to realize the drama in which we are acting, to be awake during our own lifetime. . . . When we cultivate reflection, [when] we draw the hidden into the light of consciousness, record it, compare phases of it, note its history, reflect on error, . . . we find that our conscious life is no longer a trivial iridescence, but a progressively powerful way of domesticating the brute.

That is what mastery means: the substitution of conscious intention for unconscious striving. Civilization, it seems to me, is just this constant effort to introduce plan where there has been clash, and purpose into the jungles of disordered growth.

Americans in Lippmann's time never did, and of course never could, achieve real mastery over the great historical forces that were shaping the world. But their effort to do so was responsible for some of the notable public achievements of the early 20th century. In our own time, in a world considerably more complicated and considerably more dangerous than the one Lippmann described, it would be foolish to assume we could do much better. And yet we too, through the way we live our own lives and the way we conduct our politics, have an opportunity, even an obligation, as Lippmann put it, to "cultivate reflection," to attempt to understand and, when possible, "master" the forces that buffet us and bring such uncertainty and insecurity into our lives.

**P**olitical leadership in a democracy—be it from the president or from any one else who presumes to represent the interests of other people—can do only so much; one of the tasks of modern leadership is to help citizens understand that. But political leadership can do something. Leading us in an effort to comprehend our world, and what we can and cannot do to control it, would be a good place for those who hope to refurbish the tattered reputation of American public life to begin.

## Do We Overstate the Importance of Leadership?

BY ALAN RYAN

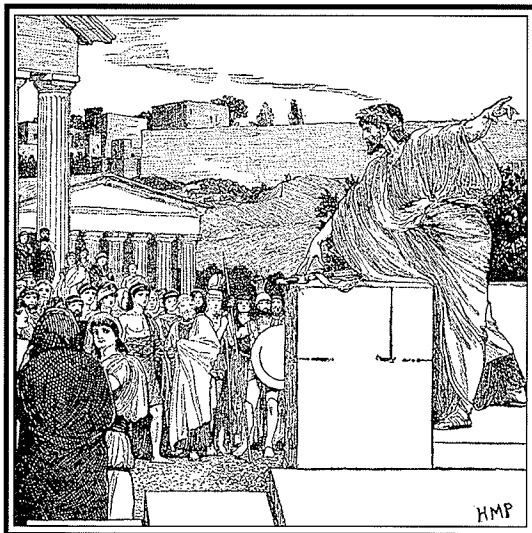
Political argument is so obsessed with leadership that it might seem perverse to claim that it is a local passion, not a universal one, and that even in the United States it has been intermittent and not constant. It is certainly a claim that would be hard to make in a gathering of orthodox social scientists. It would be equally hard to persuade the public. American politicians and voters are much concerned with assorted "crises of leadership" as described in the contemporary mass media. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher remain convinced that their success during the 1980s reflected the public's hunger for leadership. Today, in the face of one "crisis" after another, whether the Bosnian crisis, the health-care crisis, the education crisis, or some other, the cry for leadership continues to go up.

Crisis and leadership may be made for each other, but I

should like to argue that the extent to which leadership is a central element in political life and the extent to which the understanding of leadership is central to the understanding of politics are easy to misunderstand and to exaggerate.

To be sure, there are many forms of initiative needed in any political system, and it would be silly to launch a campaign against all talk of leadership. My aim is not to persuade the reader to stop thinking about leadership

but to emphasize that initiative in the creation of policy is not always leadership, and that leadership does not always imply leaders. It may be noncharismatic, provided by a group rather than an individual, based on knowledge rather than a surfeit of testosterone, and may have much more to do with *eliciting* the moral attachments of a political community than with *creating* them.



Plato feared that great orators such as Demosthenes could upset the workings of the well-ordered state.

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Let us begin with our existing linguistic habits. Consider the distinction between leaders and rulers.\* While rulers have commonly led those over whom they ruled—Elizabeth I both ruled the British and led them to victory over the Spanish, did she not?—there are two tasks, two roles, two statuses here. George III ruled but did not lead; his successors did not rule, even “through” Parliament.

Conversely, we would not say that Lee Iacocca “ruled” Chrysler unless we wanted to make a particular point about his managerial style—as in “ruled with an iron fist.” To say he led Chrysler during the period of the firm’s recovery, however, says only that he was in charge. CEOs lead; only some of them rule. It is a moot point whether any of them may plausibly be said to govern. Are these linguistic habits more than a quirk of idiom?

**I** think they are. Talk of leaders does, but talk of rulers does not, imply a struggle, a fight against other persons or a hostile environment. A leader mobilizes followers to achieve that task for which they join together. Rulers lay down the law, and may do it with an iron fist. It’s a distinction one can see in one of the first great works of political reflection, Plato’s *Republic*. Consider the difference between Plato’s Guardians—the “philosopher-kings” he thought we must institute if a just political order is to be created—and the demagogues he so disapproved of. The demagogues were leaders and would-be leaders; they led factions, and tried to rally the Athenian people behind the projects they had in mind.

Not so the Guardians. Anyone who read the *Republic* in college will remember the question every undergraduate has asked: What do the Guardians actually *do*? They hold supreme

power—but to avert change, not to bring it about. They have “auxiliaries,” soldiers who are ready to defend the *polis* in wartime, but they have no foreign policy save isolationism. They regulate economic activity, but only so it does not run amok, with artisans becoming obsessed with wealth and consumers acquiring a taste for foreign products. Although they possess the unusual, perhaps impossible, attributes that make them philosopher-kings, the authority of the Guardians is not personal. They do not charm their subjects as Alcibiades charmed his followers; they do not persuade them as Demosthenes persuaded them. Because the poets and playwrights have been sent out of the city, Plato’s Guardians can employ none of the theatrical arts on which politicians have always depended. Guardians are not party leaders, faction leaders, or popular leaders, not in any plausible sense leaders at all. We may be led by them, but that does not make them “leaders.”

They are rulers. Their status is peculiar, inasmuch as their authority is the authority of reason itself and not the authority of birth, individual charisma, or past success. Nonetheless, if they are *philosopher-kings*, they are also philosopher-kings. In fact, the label “philosopher-king” is regrettable. Talk of “kings” stops a democratic age such as ours from appreciating the virtues of an administrative elite whose claim to authority rests on knowledge, acquired skill, and public spirit. We see that such authority is not democratic and stop our ears. We ought not to. Modern “Guardians” must be answerable to the electorate in some way or other, but this by no means excludes the thought that they would possess an authority based on solid claims to a disinterested expertise.

A different and almost equally substantial difference between Plato’s vision and anything one might borrow from it must be acknowledged, however. Plato installs the Guardians to stop things from happening, while we have learned all too well that if we

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\*A quick search of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Mill reveals the interesting fact that it is only in Rousseau and Mill that “leaders” are much talked of at all; in Machiavelli, “leaders” only appears where military or faction leadership is under discussion.

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do not move forward we move backward. That is a real difference between what he wanted and what we want. That Plato's Guardians do not *do* much is no defect in Plato's republic; the Guardians surely do not spend their days dashing around Athens putting out brush fires of popular discontent. What they do is set up arrangements that have the force of law, that regulate everyday life, assign people to appropriate work, encourage them into appropriate marital arrangements, and teach them to do without the things that would lure them into foreign adventures. Then, they maintain the timeless structure intact. If we need our own Guardians, it is because we need a flexible structure, one that is anything but timeless.

Plato's desire that the Guardians set up a timelessly valid structure within which individuals would live their lives contained no implication in favor of freedom of choice. Plato mostly treated freedom of choice as mere willfulness, and attacked Athens for placing too high a value on liberty. What mattered was that the citizens should lead the lives that were good for them. While this strongly distinguishes his ideas from liberalism, it remains true that liberal constitutionalism and the Platonic republic have something in common: The Guardians provide *structure* rather than leadership, or, better, they play a leading role without becoming leaders.

Plato's antipathy toward individual self-expression in fact reinforces the point. Citizens—or subjects—of Plato's ideal *polis* have no voluntary allegiances; there is thus no such task as persuading them to subscribe to any particular goal, no such art as that of rallying a *polis* of such people behind any particular cause. The emphasis on a rational structure maintained by a dispassionate elite displaces the entire phenomenon of political leadership from the center of attention.

It is an old complaint that Plato's stress on structure and rule as opposed to personal leadership simply abolishes politics. Aristotle

himself devoted an interesting section of his *Politics* to arguing that Plato's ideal republic had no politics, and a moment's reflection on Aristotle's complaint may be useful, since it will enable me to make my case that Plato and Aristotle both offer little scope to leaders. It is not the absence of *leaders* that Aristotle complains of but the failure to accept the legitimacy of plural interests and plural values. And this has implications for anyone who wants to take seriously the leading role of non-"leaders" and wonder whether we need a modern Guardian class. Just as I readily agree that modern Guardians would have to be democratically answerable, so I readily agree that they would have to consider the welfare of a pluralist society, not a monolithic one. None of this challenges the thought that we have recently undervalued rational guidance and overvalued charismatic leadership, and that Americans pay too much attention to *presidential* leadership.

Aristotle charged Plato with exaggerating the degree of unity a state could and should achieve. Politics is possible only where a degree of unity prevails—citizens must recognize one another as citizens of the same state, accept common institutions, and share a number of social and cultural values. Otherwise, they could not live with one another at all. Nonetheless, their interests are not identical, and politics is the art of reconciling *divergent* interests—not finally and forever, but for long enough to shelter the search for the good life.

As the similarities of this account to the conventional wisdom of American pluralism might suggest, this vision of politics leaves plenty of room for the middle-level political leadership in which American politics is so rich, and American political scientists have often acknowledged Aristotle as a founding father of pluralist political analysis. It is thus an interesting fact about Aristotle's own account of politics that he skates over the question of leadership. He doubtless took it so much for granted that Athenians knew their

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own interests and could press them in the *agora* that the idea that anyone might specialize in “interest articulation” and “interest aggregation,” as political scientists say, was absurd. The problem rather was that people who fancied themselves as tyrants would use their skills as faction leaders to seize absolute power and would then exploit their fellow citizens. Hence Aristotle’s famous wish that laws, not men, should rule.

The idea that when we set up a regime we might build “a machine that would go of itself” was only latent in Aristotle’s *Politics*, but it was latent. It was not a major theme because his main concern was with citizenship. Greeks cared so much whether they were or were not citizens that the question of the qualifications and benefits of citizenship was a pressing one. What citizens got, according to Aristotle, was, famously, the chance to rule and be ruled in turn. The phrasing is significant. They did not get a crack at being the Senate majority leader, or the leader of the people in arms. People would rather rule than be ruled, and justice required a sort of equality. So a just *polis* would have everyone capable of office taking turns to hold it. Although Aristotle stressed the psychic benefits of being a free man who shared in the *polis*’s capacity for self-government, there is no emphasis at all on the pleasures of occupying a *leading* position. Indeed, there is a presumption against any such taste for eminence.

**A**ristotle’s picture of the *polis* is thus a picture of a system that provides the government of laws; citizens contribute by taking part in a public process of deliberation about what conduces to the public good. That sounds banal, but it gets a good deal more force if we contrast it with the emphasis on *decision making* that permeates modern accounts of political activity. Laws do not make decisions and they do not lead. They shape, provide a framework, open opportunities; they do not rally troops, or summon us to some particular cause. They will doubtless lay down the proce-

dures whereby we assemble an army and charge someone to lead it in battle. We use the laws in doing those things that need leadership, but lawmaking is not itself an exercise in leadership. Indeed, what we call *lawmaking* is almost better thought of as *lawfinding* in Aristotle. No one who writes thus is likely to emphasize the role of the man on horseback, or to have a modern conception of executive initiative.

**I**t is easy to object that Aristotle’s account of politics reflects the prejudices of educated Athenians of two and a half thousand years ago and has no bearing on our situation. There is no quick answer to that objection. Here all I can do is offer a quick sketch of one 20th-century view of political life that paints a similar picture, even though its ancestry is Hegelian rather than Aristotelian, and its author’s allegiances were as quirkily liberal as Aristotle’s were not. English philosopher Michael Oakeshott, who died in 1992, appealed to a small but discriminating American audience. In his elegant and strikingly difficult book *On Human Conduct* (1975), he gave an account of the nature of a modern state that pushes leadership to the margins of inquiry in the same way that Aristotle did. Oakeshott borrowed from medieval legal arguments to distinguish between a *societas* and a *universitas*—words about as unhelpful for a useful distinction as could be imagined. Both *societas* and *universitas* refer to “organizations” or “groups”; but a *societas* is a union that has no exterior or ulterior purpose beyond itself, while a *universitas* is a union constructed for some such purpose.

A state may be either or both, and indeed was sometimes called a *societas cum universitate*. Oakeshott wanted to rescue the idea of the state as *societas* from writers who assume that all associations must have a collective purpose, and that their merits are a matter of how well they fulfill that purpose. In spite of the obscurity of the expression, the distinction is one that most people grasp intuitively. To be an American citizen is a matter of being legally and morally tied to other

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American citizens, regardless of what individual and collective purposes one may have. To be an employee of General Motors is a matter of having a particular task to fulfill.

Why does the distinction matter? It implies a view of politics in which leadership is played down. Leadership goes with assembling people to carry out projects, and Oakeshott thought that even such projects as the achievement of "the welfare state" have unnoticed dangers. Politics, in Oakeshott's view, ought to be concerned with preserving the legal and institutional framework that allows particular, noncollective goals to be chosen and pursued by the citizenry. Once we make a goal such as maximizing social welfare central to the legitimacy of the state, it becomes credible that we might achieve that goal by some process of a technical or managerial kind. This erodes the idea that each person has his own life to lead. It also makes each of us vulnerable. Once politics is instrumental, we are in danger of being discarded, either as a threat to the goal, or as simply redundant. A Marxist party that thought it had mastered the key to history is an example of a group that claimed the right to lead society down the path to the socialist utopia because of a technical competence in getting us there, and the Marxist habit of consigning opponents to "the dustbin of history" an example of the danger.

Oakeshott thought that, in such a regime, citizens were no longer citizens but human building materials. He remarked, in a phrase that caused some resentment, that the welfare state is the first step on the road to the concentration camp. That was exaggerated, but not foolish. Anyone who has read Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* knows that one of the more chilling aspects of the book is its depiction of what can occur when many humane, sensible, and eminently defensible ideas for the amelioration of the human lot are taken to the extreme. What is disgusting is just that the inhabitants of *Brave New World* have no lives of their own, and are the manipulated objects of other people's arrangements.

Politics in Oakeshott's universe is a con-

tinuous debate about the conditions under which the game can go on, the ship can remain afloat, the argument can continue. There is a role for leadership here, but not for leaders. Leadership is a matter of helping to *elicit* or to *articulate* a view that the hearers already accept, but only implicitly. It sometimes seems that Oakeshottian politics was best practiced in 18th-century England. Parliamentary politics was not devoid of leaders and followers, but they conceived of themselves—or at least Edmund Burke offered an idealized portrait suggesting that they conceived of themselves—as devoted to preserving a constitutional framework. Yet it doesn't do to think these men had no sense of a collective purpose. The greatness of the British Empire moved them to enthusiasm; the promotion of national prosperity was a constant goal, as was the maintenance of a particular moral and religious culture. Nor, in fact, does Oakeshott wish to say that a political community, what he calls a "civil association," is all *societas* and not at all *universitas*. In practice, states will engage in a mix of instrumental and noninstrumental activities, but Oakeshott wanted to pick out the characteristic that he thought Utilitarians, Rationalists, Weberians, and almost anyone who wrote too readily about the "machinery of government" would overlook. In other words, we need leaders, but not as generally as they suppose, and leadership, but not always provided by leaders, and not always in the form of rallying the people behind a particular project.

**T**he point can be made without Oakeshott's allegiances and antipathies. We might content ourselves with saying that one conception of politics emphasizes the importance of keeping a constitutional framework in good repair and ensuring that legislators understand their task as the provision of a framework, not achieving particular outcomes. People who were "good at" politics so defined would be capable of arguing a case and thinking about what made good law; people who were "good at public administration" would be skilled at

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devising systems of rationing, queuing, or superintendence, and the distribution of benefits to the needy or deserving. Both might have the qualities of a leader in their particular spheres, that is, might be particularly good at the game, deft at getting people to take the same view as themselves, and so on. But the provision of leadership would not be definitive of either activity; nor would it be quite the same thing in different contexts.

Oakeshott's avowed object of discussion was "the character of a modern European state." An American audience might wonder how this bears upon American concerns—especially on the American concern with presidential leadership. In *Taming the Prince* (1989), Harvey Mansfield, Jr., provides an answer. His discussion of the authority of the modern executive starts from what Mansfield, a professor of government at Harvard University, takes to be Aristotle's tactful burial of the topic of executive action. The topic needed to be buried because Aristotle did not wish to dwell on the ugly deeds that leaders must often do. Aristotle throws the burden of government on the whole (qualified) people and suggests, without quite saying, that rulers can be held in check—that princes may be tamed.

**M**achiavelli is the proper foil to Aristotle. He insisted that princes could not be tamed, and that they needed their untamed power if they were to be effective. The U.S. Constitution then turns out to be an attempt to square the circle—to create a prince and then to tame him—and the current obsession with presidential leadership, an anxiety not to tame him so thoroughly that he cannot act. Mansfield himself does some squaring of the circle. He admires the Constitution, but takes the same pleasure as Machiavelli did in insisting that politics is played for high stakes—we rightly speak of executing both policies and enemies. The rise of the modern executive is thus the rise of a power that is beyond the reach of constitutional checks and yet has to be somehow kept in check. In that sense,

Mansfield argues from both sides of the debate I have set up. On the one hand, he stresses the need for general rules, procedures that tie the hands of anyone with aspirations to leadership, and on the other sees even Roosevelt and Reagan as the heirs of Machiavelli's prince.

**W**hatever the justice of the charge, Machiavelli is associated with the doctrine that politics is centrally about the acquisition of power, and that there is a technique for its acquisition that can be learned and applied by anyone with the nerve, ruthlessness, energy, and ambition to do so. This focus on technique displaces the concern of previous political philosophers to elaborate the ends of political association, and it is this that is often simplified into the charge that he teaches evil. More important, Machiavelli writes as though the daring, skill, ambition, and ruthlessness of the would-be prince for whom he writes fill the whole of political space. The skeptical note I want to sound—it is the theme of this second part of my essay—is that writing about politics in these terms suggests that the common people, those who are not striving to become the supreme power in the state, are entirely plastic, and will receive whatever impress the prince cares to stamp on them. To overemphasize leaders is to treat public opinion as endlessly manipulable.

The step to Max Weber is a small one. Weber argued that the convictions of a modern society must be given to it, or impressed upon it, by a leader, whose personality would enable him to carry a conviction carried by nobody else. Part of Weber's argument was that moral and cultural values, and the political projects they validate, are not discovered but chosen—imposed rather than found. A feature of contemporary politics is that conservatives talk a good deal about leadership but believe in the existence of objective moral and religious rules that greatly curtail the leader's freedom, while moral and religious skeptics are anxious about what leaders may lead us

IL PRINCIPE DI NICCHOLO MACHIA  
VELLO AL MAGNIFICO LOREN  
ZO DI PIERO DE MEDICI.

LA VITA DI CASTRUCIO CASTRA  
CANI DA LVCCA A ZANOBI BVON  
DELMONTI ET A LVIGI ALEMAN  
NI DESCRITTA PER IL  
MEDESIMO.

IL MODO CHE TENNE IL DVCA VA  
LENTINO PER AMMAZAR VITEL  
LOZO, OLIVEROTTO DA FER  
MO IL S. PAOLO ET IL DV  
CA DI GRAVINA ORSI  
NI IN SENIGAGLIA,  
DESCRITTA PFR  
IL MEDESIMO.



Con Gratie, & Priuilegi di . N. S. Clemente  
VII. & altri Principi, che intra il termino di . X.  
Anni non s' Stampino . ne Stampati s' uendino:  
sotto le pene, che in essi s' contengono.  
M. D. X X X II.



The title-page of the first edition of *Il Principe* (1532). Machiavelli (inset) cited Cesare Borgia, subject of this 16th-century portrait (artist unknown), as an example of the new "Prince."

into. This may reflect a sound judgment. It is easier to be confident that leaders will do nothing too destructive if you believe in an objective moral universe to which they will feel themselves answerable.

Weber, however, was a skeptic who believed in leadership. Weber's concept of *Führerdemokratie*—"leadership democracy"—emphasized two things that seem to be at odds: the modern phenomenon of the rational, bureaucratic administrative order on the one hand, and, on the other, the elected leader who brings the vigor and ruthlessness of Machiavelli's prince to the task of setting goals, standards, and purposes for that administrative system. What is absent is any suggestion that views and convictions may need to be elicited from and articulated for the public, but not imposed or stamped upon it; the public has desires for comfort and is susceptible to certain sorts of appeal, but this is not a picture of a give-and-take between leader-as-facilitator and people-as-source-of-inspiration. It is a

picture of someone imposing a moral and political commitment where none was. To my eye, this exaggerates a feature of uncommon situations into a defining feature of modern politics.

Let us backtrack briefly. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli discusses the qualities needed by a would-be holder of power in the chaotic conditions of early 16th-century Italy. He generalizes to a wider canvas, but rulers who can rely on tradition, on habits of deference, and on the props of established religion do not interest him in the same way as "new men." The *virtù* of such men is not "virtue," since it embraces such qualities as Hannibal's extreme cruelty and Cesare Borgia's readiness to bring about the ostentatious and savage murder of his lieutenant Remirro de Orco. Politics does not aim at the virtuous life as described by Aristotle. What it aims at is the acquisition and maintenance of power. *The Prince* is advice addressed to a man contemplating a bid for power in a



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rough world. It is amoral. Some kinds of violence and cruelty are so disgusting that they subvert the pursuit of what the prince wants—glory, or a great name in the history books. If a prince can obtain power by morally reputable means, so much the better. It is hard to acquire thus, but, if acquired, easier to hold on to.

I have said that Machiavelli treats technique as all-powerful and the people as passive until molded in what the ruler wants them to be. This makes the “prince” the most interesting character in the story and conveys an implausible image of popular vacuity. Yet, it is the well-being of the common people that is ultimately at stake. The self-aggrandizement of the prince is not Machiavelli’s project. A “good” prince will leave a legacy of sound law and stable institutions, and acquires greater glory by building a stable polity than by any other act. Machiavelli also wants one kind of polity more than another, one kind of political result rather than others: He wants Italy to be unified and powerful, he wants the ordinary people to be contented and prosperous, and he wants them to live in popular republics on the Roman model. It remains true that his great “discovery” was that we can discuss the acquisition of power as a technical matter. Although Machiavelli never employs the word “leader” except when he is discussing leaders of armies or leaders of factions, it is this emphasis on the capacity to acquire power that has fed into modern understandings of leadership.

The connection between Machiavelli and Weber then runs as follows: One-man rule cannot provide for the administration of a modern state. The only thing that can is a technically competent bureaucracy that follows clear rules. Weber was interested both in the technical efficiency of bureaucratic administration and in its adherence to predictable and calculable rules of conduct. Getting things done and handling cases on a uniform basis are not always compatible with each other, and his vagueness on which was to give way to the other is a common

complaint against Weber’s work.

The more important thing is something quite simple. Weber thought of a bureaucratic administration as a headless entity, just as he thought of the mass of the population as a blank sheet on which charismatic leaders were to inscribe their plans. A bureaucracy needs a political input; it has to be given a purpose and a direction from somewhere other than within its own body, just as the public needs a sense of direction. *Führerdemokratie* thus answers to two needs at once. Leaders acquire the authority to govern by getting it from the people in an election, and the people find legitimate rulers in charge of the administrators with whom they have to deal in everyday life.

This picture animates the most impressive, if rather depressing, account of democracy offered in the past hundred years. Joseph Schumpeter’s *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1943) is hated by participatory democrats and other radicals. Schumpeter offered what he called a “realistic” theory of democracy that he contrasted with the so-called “classical” theory offered by writers such as Rousseau and James Mill. Democracy was not government by the people, since government by the people was impossible. Nor was it government by the people’s delegates, since it was impossible to secure that sort of control over the people’s delegates and still have them do what was needed. Democracy was the system of government in which elites acquired the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.

How well democratic government worked did not depend on how democratic it was but on the local political culture. This brings us back to leadership. Where Machiavelli’s prince got his power by the exercise of *virtù*, the modern ruler has his crown placed on his head by the people. This presents a danger that Machiavelli’s prince did not face. The people who have the right to place the crown on their ruler’s head may think they have the right to remove it. If democracy is to work, the

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people must show a great deal of self-control, and Schumpeter does in fact urge that once a government is voted into office it must be allowed to govern. But Schumpeter did not emphasize in quite the way Weber had done the role of charismatic leaders. To borrow from my opening claim, Schumpeter stresses leadership without romanticizing leaders.

The political system as understood by Schumpeter is animated from the top, not from the bottom. The people do not form a view of their own welfare and search for someone to help them attain it. They may reject the vision on which their rulers have operated, but the vision comes from above, not below. Just as consumers are incompetent to design the goods they consume and must respond to what they are offered, so must voters. As the analogy suggests, Schumpeter saw elections as marketing operations, not as moral and evaluative transformations.

Indeed, Schumpeter ended his realistic account of modern democracy by insisting on the importance of an elite civil service, not by looking for a man on horseback. Schumpeter looked to several constitutional and cultural factors to make sure democracy did not collapse into factionalism or dictatorship. A traditional ruling class was one thing on which he relied. If peace was to be kept, politicians had to be able to lose gracefully and then find plenty of other things to do with their lives. Schumpeter expected to find this grace in defeat only in a ruling class that saw political service as a duty, not as psychic compensation or psychic thrill. In other words, democracy would only work with a large admixture of aristocracy. A society that did not possess a social stratum that took it for granted that it *ought* to provide political leadership would find it itself governed by inferior types who sought power for personal gratification or compensation.

Schumpeter did not put the whole burden of successful democracy on the characterological dimension. Two other things do a great deal of work. The first comes in response to a standard truth of liberal democratic theory and practice: the fact that democratic



*Sir Stamford Raffles of the East India Company.*

politics are peculiarly vulnerable to ideological and religious passions. (Schumpeter was an Austrian in exile in the United States and wrote when Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini were at the height of their power.) Having a ruling class of the sort Schumpeter thought the British had possessed in the 19th century would do no good if it were swept away by an inflamed mob. The inflamed mob must be stopped from forming. The obvious means was to take inflammatory matters out of politics. It was irrelevant whether this was done by a constitution as in the United States or by the conventions that preserved the same sense of what was and was not politically discussable in Britain. Fundamentally, what mattered was the thought that it was no part of the political process to sustain religious orthodoxy or racial purity or some particular revolutionary ideology. This was yet another element in the idea of popular reticence and leadership initiative. The public was not to swamp leaders with insatiable and ideologically driven demands, and leaders were not to chase fantasies.

The other essential requirement that

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Schumpeter set down was the existence of an impartial career civil service ready to serve any government with equal skill and public spirit. These civil servants were not paper pushers and order takers, but people who could formulate policy and who would be able to guide, check, and otherwise assist the political leaders of the state. They were a more autonomous source of policy than Weber seems to have thought they could be. Once again, Schumpeter appears to have had in mind the British civil service as it was popularly supposed to be at the end of the 19th century.

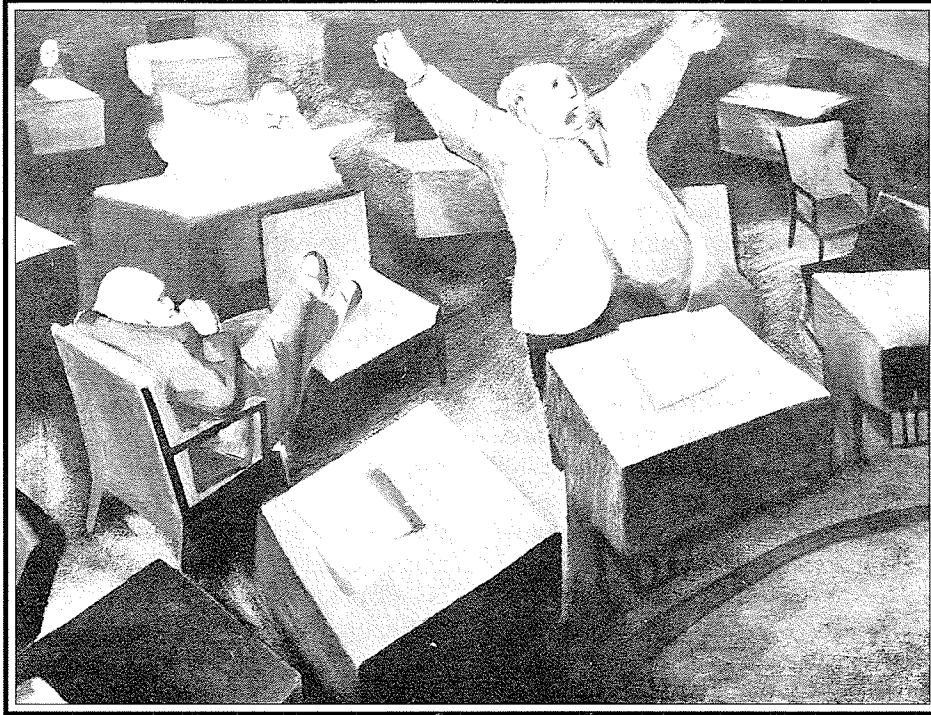
**A**t the risk of sounding like Lord Bryce, who preached this doctrine at Johns Hopkins University a hundred years ago, and even convinced Woodrow Wilson for a time, I should say that I think Schumpeter was right, not so much about the British civil service as about the problem to be tackled. The demand for leadership cannot—save perhaps in time of war—be satisfied by anything done by a president, but it can be *bypassed* by spreading the burden over a differently constituted cabinet and an enlarged senior civil service.

This is not a novel view—something like it was argued by Walter Lippmann in *Public Opinion* in 1922—and it has never made any impact on American opinion. One powerful objection is that the American people distrust elites and do not like government by “experts.” Another is that the people who would have to fill those posts do not exist. My sense is that it is the first objection that matters. So far as the second is concerned, we don’t so much lack the persons who could do the job as an understanding of what the job is and, therefore, of the institutional arrangements that would attract the appropriate people. Only in the State Department have career public servants generally enjoyed the prestige and authority needed for them to perform the tasks Schumpeter had in mind.

It is the idea that the civil service ought to generate policy in a steady and continuous, rather than a crisis-oriented, fashion that is hard to get across. Although this view first reached the English-speaking world in the Northcote-Trevelyan Report in the mid-19th century, I do not suggest for a moment that the United States ought to adopt most features of the British civil service and its relationship to Parliament; the attractive combination is the (rather notional) American attachment to fierce congressional scrutiny by well-informed committees together with a cadre of public servants much like the British administrative class. Each side of the Atlantic has one half of what’s needed.

The more serious the need for independent sources of policy, for disciplined administration, and a selfless attention to the needs of the public, the more persuasive the idea of leadership without leaders. When John Stuart Mill defended the about-to-be-abolished East India Company in 1858 before a committee of the Parliament, he argued that under the rule of disinterested civil servants, both British and native Indian, India had made a degree of progress that could not have been achieved by any other means. It was precisely because India had not been the object of political competition between the leaders of the British parliamentary parties that progress had been possible.

It would perhaps be tasteless to wonder whether the British themselves might have done better had they been governed by the East India Company; it is certainly against the whole spirit of Mill’s argument, which was that it was essential that the East India Company should answer to an elected parliament *in some fashion*. We thus arrive at one defensible recipe for leadership without leaders, and without the obsession with “leadership qualities” that distorts current discussion. Indeed, my guess is that if Plato were writing today, he would be defending this answerable mandarin class, and not his implausibly omniscient philosopher-kings.



The Senate (1935) by William Gropper

## Can Leadership Be Studied?

BY JACOB HEILBRUNN

In 1879 the brilliant young New England conservative Henry Cabot Lodge accepted for publication in the *International Review* a rousing essay calling for revived presidential leadership. Warning of the marked and alarming decline in statesmanship, the author lamented that "both state and national governments are looked upon with suspicion, and we hail an adjournment of Congress as a temporary immunity from danger." The essay, which appeared at a time when the *Washington Post* could state as obvi-

ous that party bosses such as Thomas Reed of Maine were "no less consequential than the president," expressed a widespread unease among Americans over corruption in Congress and political drift.

More than a century later, Thomas Woodrow Wilson's essay, which he expanded into his best-selling book *Congressional Government* (1885), offers a reminder of the enduring preoccupation of Americans with leadership as well as the ambivalence with which they regard it. The yearning for decisive leaders and

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the apprehension that they might upset the balance between power and liberty has made Americans more adept at demanding leadership than at embracing it. Indeed, the U.S. Senate's defeat of Wilson's efforts to bring America into the League of Nations in 1920—a defeat engineered by the same Lodge who in 1879 had published Wilson's essay blasting congressional aggrandizement—could scarcely provide a more telling illustration of the constraints democratic leaders confront.

**T**oday the renewed shift from international to domestic concerns has heightened the sense that we live in an age of pygmy figures hard-pressed to cope with new events and challenges. The diverse interests at play make decisive leadership much harder to assert; the sway of "policy wonks" does not exactly elicit great passions. What is more, leadership itself continues to seem inimical to democratic virtues.

So perhaps it should not be altogether surprising that even the mere *study* of leadership has become the target of various broadsides. Writing in a recent issue of *Harper's*, Benjamin DeMott, a professor of humanities at Amherst College, depicts the entire enterprise of leadership studies as a racket cooked up by academics to swindle American taxpayers and the federal government. Recounting his service on an academic grant-review panel in Washington, DeMott tells how he "was introduced to the leadership-studies cult, a no-less-perfect specimen of late-20th-century academic avarice and a precise depth gauge of some recent professorial descents into pap, cant, and jargon." Though most of his essay is a demolition job, DeMott concludes his attack on a somewhat pious note, charging that the very idea of leadership studies carries with it an antirepublican, mugwumpish fear of the masses that dilutes our "democratic essence."

In truth, it is not difficult to detect a whiff

of intellectual snobbery emanating from DeMott and other foes of leadership studies—even a hint of antidemocratic hauteur. After all, exposing high school and college students around the nation to ideas about leadership, as well as busing them into Washington to visit the State Department, Pentagon, and Congress, is in the best American egalitarian tradition. What could be more reflective of the American creed than the conviction that almost anybody can become—or be taught to be—a leader?

No doubt the breezy how-to tips contained in tracts such as *A Passion for Excellence* (1985) and *Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun* (1985) inspire little confidence in the relatively youthful field. Still, it is easier to deride than to decipher the study of leadership. The recent efflorescence of leadership studies, including the creation of the Kennedy School's Leadership Project at Harvard University, the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond, and countless other programs and projects throughout the nation, has produced its share of monsters, but the field has a more robust (and respectable) intellectual history than *The One Minute Manager* (1982) might suggest. Theorists of leadership can point with pride to several solid accomplishments.

For a start, they have effectively addressed the question of leadership in public administration, business, and the military. The study of relations between workers and employers has, in fact, helped to improve those relations. Studies of "followership" and employee "empowerment" have been very useful to corporations forced to go through radical reorganizations by technological change and financial pressure. The faster that corporate chieftains "flatten management," the more quickly employees at even the lowest levels of management must learn to "lead" themselves.

Most important, the field has attempted to counter what John Gardner, a founding chairman of Common Cause and a profes-

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sor at Stanford Business School, aptly called America's "anti-leadership vaccine." This vaccine, he charged in a 1965 Carnegie Corporation report, not only makes most Americans unreasonably suspicious of all kinds of leaders but "immunizes a high proportion of our most gifted young people against any tendencies toward leadership." Leadership studies provides at least one needed antidote to what Brooks Adams at the turn of the century termed the "degradation of the democratic dogma."

The question looming over the field is whether it can fulfill its quest for devising a scientific formula of leadership. Though leadership specialists readily acknowledge their own shortcomings, their work continues to reflect many of the positivistic assumptions of early social scientists, above all the notion that human behavior and traits can be abstracted, defined, and even quantified. This reification of leadership (to purloin a fancy social-science term) may seem hopelessly naive, but the evolution of the field merits attention. To study the rise of leadership studies is to realize that its failures, as well as its successes, have advanced our understanding of an important phenomenon.

**T**he scientific study of leadership originated in the work of one of the founding fathers of sociology, Max Weber (1864–1920). A polymath who came to the study of sociology via law, Weber set the questions of authority, status, and legitimacy in the context of religion, politics, and the military. Devoting great attention to the unresolved tension between leaders and bureaucracies, he grew convinced that an inexorable trend toward rationalization in every sphere of society made the role of leaders both more problematic and more important.

Weber formulated three "ideal-types" of leadership: the rational-legal, the rational-authoritarian, and the charismatic. The charismatic leader was the most unusual of the three, and the only one, Weber thought, who might counter the dispiriting effects of life in an



*Max Weber launched the modern study of leadership.*

overly bureaucratic and rationalistic world, what he called the "iron cage" of modernity. Indeed, it was Weber's fondest hope that such a leader, endowed with extraordinary, even superhuman, qualities, might be able to instill in his followers a sense of mission and moral purpose that a thoroughly demystified society no longer provides.

The notion of charismatic authority was espoused in different form by Weber's contemporary, Georg Simmel (1858–1918), a lecturer in philosophy at the Humboldt University of Berlin. A pioneer in the study of social interaction, Simmel postulated the existence of a "prestige leader" who commands obedience by dint of unique personal qualities. Even more than Weber, Simmel stressed that the prestige leader could be understood only in the context of the intimate relationship between the leader and follower. Leadership did not consist of a body of received wisdom handed down from the heights of Mount Sinai but instead depended on the follower's perception of his leader. By refusing to appeal to

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the base instincts that united them and by transforming their expectations of leadership, said Simmel, a leader could create a new kind of reality for his followers.

Though different elements of Weber's (and Simmel's) ideas have informed each stage of the study of leadership, the one constant running through the field's history has been the urge to fashion typologies. Indeed, the scientific study of leadership itself can be divided into three phases. In the first, from the turn of the century to World War II, researchers set about identifying the traits of leaders in an attempt to demystify charisma itself. The second phase, which lasted from World War II until around 1970, focused on the behavior of leaders. The third and current phase centers on the interaction between leaders and followers.

**T**he first phase began promisingly enough. In an effort to identify the charismatic traits that leaders presumably possess, researchers such as Charles M. Cox, a finance professor at Brigham Young University, carried out a battery of tests designed to measure personality and character. These tests examined qualities such as the intelligence, physical appearance, dynamism, and speaking skills of exceptional leaders. Many researchers looked for leadership traits among school children. Not too startlingly, the studies revealed that the traits correlating most significantly with leadership were originality, judgment, liveliness, and the desire to excel.

Without question, the most important review of the traits field was conducted in 1948 by

Ralph Stogdill, a professor of management science and psychology at Ohio State University. After examining 120 trait studies, this diligent social scientist declared that no consistent pattern of traits could be detected among leaders. "A person does not become a leader by virtue of the possession of some combination of traits," Stogdill concluded, "but the pattern of personal characteristics of the leader must bear some relevant relationship to the characteristics, activities, and goals of the followers." Because these "trait studies" were unable to quantify leadership, they seemed to demolish the "Great Man" theory of history. Leaders, it turned out, were neither more intelligent nor vastly more energetic than the average person.

Even before Stogdill's conclusions were presented, the leadership field had begun to turn from identifying traits to examining the behavior of leaders. An explicitly psychoanalytic approach was advanced by the enormously influential Yale University political scientist Harold Lasswell. Lasswell did not wholly abandon the interest in typology. After conducting a series of interviews with leading political figures, he concluded that three types existed: the Agitator, the Administrator, and the Theorist. But Lasswell's main interest was in the psychodynamics of leadership. He even devised a formula to explain what impelled potential leaders to mount the public stage:  $p \} d \} r = P$ , where  $p$  equals private motives;  $d$  equals displacement onto a public object;  $r$  equals rationalization in terms of public interest; and  $\}$  equals transformed into; the result,  $P$ , is the political man. All one can say of this re-

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markable formula is that the ineffable has never before been so decisively pinned down.

Other theorists of leadership, including Stogdill, contended that two types of behavior marked successful leaders. One was oriented toward the accomplishment of tasks; the other toward good relations with employees. Employees might designate a task-oriented individual as a leader, but they never termed an exclusively employee-oriented one as such. Under Stogdill's direction, a number of studies carried out at Ohio State disclosed that the effective leader would not only show consideration for his subordinates but also supply them with the tools to complete their tasks.

Identifying two main types of leadership behavior, however, was not the same as detecting precise patterns of interaction between leader and group. Even if the leader behaved in a considerate fashion toward his employees, his subordinates might remain dissatisfied with him. And there appeared to be no clear correlation between the behavior of the leader and the productivity of his employees. Stogdill and his associates were unable to draw a measurable connection between leadership style and performance. The behavioral studies demonstrated only that leadership behavior could profitably be grouped into two broad categories.

The third phase of leadership studies has attempted to examine those categories more closely, focusing on what might be called the "transactional" and "transformational" approaches. In the early 1970s, Edwin P. Hollander, a professor of psychology at Baruch College, employed the term "idiosyncrasy credit" to stand for the freedom that members of a group were granted to act idiosyncratically. He showed that a seeming paradox existed: Giving followers a measure of autonomy increased their willingness to respond to a leader's directions.

The stress on transformational and transactional styles was crystallized by the distinguished political scientist, James MacGregor Burns. Burns's massive study *Leadership* (1978)

has, in fact, become the Rosetta Stone of recent leadership studies. Drawing on a wide range of historical examples and figures, from William Lloyd Garrison to Sir Robert Peel to Franklin Roosevelt, Burns offered an ambitious meditation on the nature of leadership, one that returned to Weber's and Simmel's emphasis on the leader-follower nexus. Unquestionably, Burns's most important insight was to draw a distinction between transformational and transactional leadership. Where transactional leadership is merely a version of managerialism that appeals to the economic self-interest of followers, transformational leadership alters the expectations of followers. Like Simmel and Weber, Burns contends that leaders can elevate their followers to new levels of morality and rectitude: "Moral leadership emerges from, and always returns to, the fundamental wants and needs, aspirations and values of followers."

The current generation of leadership theorists has not been slow to attempt to turn Burns's emphasis on the ineffable qualities of leadership into a measurable theory—or even to challenge it. Prominent among these challengers is Bernard Bass, a student of Stogdill's and a professor of organizational behavior at the State University of New York, Binghamton. The author of numerous books, including *Leadership, Psychology and Organizational Behavior* (1960) and *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations* (1985), Bass contends that Burns created a wholly artificial distinction between transactional and transformational leaders. Far from being antithetical, the two types of leadership can exist in the same person. Leaders such as Charles de Gaulle, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson displayed varying degrees of transactional and transformational qualities. By the same token, Bass points out, a leader may exhibit neither set of qualities.

In an attempt to refine further the understanding of transformational leadership, Marshall Sashkin, an adjunct professor at



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George Washington University, has devised a "Visionary Leadership Theory" to take account not only of the practices of leaders but also of the effect of their behavior on the culture of an organization. Sashkin argues that followers are transformed because they internalize the values of the organization. The task of the leader is to disseminate the organization's principles and to enunciate the values that animate the organization. The ultimate paradox, Sashkin finds, is that the effective transformational leader can employ a managerial approach in order to transform his followers.

Perhaps the most successful promoter of the transformational model in the business world is Warren Bennis, professor of management at the University of Southern California. And not only in business: Vice President Albert Gore has reportedly made Bennis's *On Becoming a Leader* (1989) recommended reading for his advisers. Blunt in manner, Bennis decries "management education" and calls for the training of leaders. "Leaders conquer the context . . . while managers surrender to it," he says. Even though Bennis's books come close to the homiletic school of leadership writing, he deserves considerable credit for linking leadership theory to the challenge of global competitiveness.

Despite its successive adoptions of new approaches to the question of authority, the field of leadership studies has remained hobbled by its epistemological commitments. The scientific quest for a generic model of leadership can take one only so far. Employing factor analysis to quantify leadership and focusing so minutely on the qualities of leadership, the field repeatedly loses sight of the one of the principal reasons for its subject's essentially unpredictable nature—the environment in which leaders function. Or, to put it another way, leadership studies lacks an adequate concern for context, historical or situational.

It is no mystery that different times call for different kinds of leaders. In the business world, patient, low-profile managers are

sometimes preferable to forceful visionaries. The energetic Lee Iacocca functioned best when he was leading Chrysler out of financial disarray. A similar rule obtains in the world of politics. Winston Churchill was ejected from office once he had fulfilled his mission of winning World War II. Leaders, of course, are usually incapable of reconciling themselves to the fact that they can leave an imprint only when a certain constellation of historical forces is present. After a friend commiserated with Churchill and told him his defeat at the polls was a blessing in disguise, Churchill muttered, "If it is, the disguise is perfect."

Besides scanting the historical dimension, leadership studies neglects the variety of arenas in which different kinds of leaders operate. Successful captaincy in business, government, or the military does not necessarily transfer to other fields—or even among those three. General Ulysses S. Grant made a terrible president. Moreover, thanks to academic neglect, we are largely clueless as to what makes a strong religious leader, culture leader, reform leader, intellectual leader, sports leader.

One scholar who has stepped into the breach is Gary Wills, professor of humanities at Northwestern University. In his forthcoming book, *Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders*, Wills examines 17 kinds of leaders to show that a "leader whose qualities do not match those of potential followers is simply irrelevant." For each kind of leader, Wills chooses an ideal-type and an antitype to bring home his point that even an outstanding figure in a certain field is not necessarily a leader. He explains, for example, why the brilliant Viennese philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein never became the kind of intellectual leader that Socrates had once been. ("Wittgenstein's theories were largely wrested out of himself in periods of seclusion, or while serving in the army, or in menial jobs. . . . He was a Socrates in intent without the theory or the methods that lent themselves to interactions with others.") Wills's book is noteworthy precisely because of the emphasis he puts on the ways various fields of human endeavor call forth very differ-



*Varieties of leadership: Eleanor Roosevelt excelled as reform leader; Martin Luther was a reluctant but powerful religious leader; dancer and choreographer Martha Graham stood out as an artistic leader.*

ent kinds of leaders, an emphasis that the formal study of leadership would do well to take up.

**T**hen there is the matter of elites and leadership. Contrary to DeMott's charge that leadership studies is elitist, the field shows inadequate concern for those networks through which leaders rise and operate.

The power of elites is particularly apparent in political arrangements, democratic as well as authoritarian, and the United States is no exception. National power continues to reside in institutions that promote elites—New York and Washington law firms, philanthropic foundations, the Ivy League colleges, the top media organizations. Though the

power of these institutions should not be demonized, it is worth noting that at least half of the nation's industrial assets belong to 100 corporations, 50 foundations control 40 percent of foundation assets, and 25 universities control two-thirds of all private endowment funds in higher education. Fifty-four percent of corporate leaders and 42 percent of government leaders are graduates of 12 private universities—Harvard, Yale, Chicago, Stanford, Columbia, MIT, Cornell, Northwestern, Princeton, Johns Hopkins, Pennsylvania, and Dartmouth. That these institutions have opened their doors to minorities and women does not vitiate their importance as creators of elites; to the contrary, it vindicates their power. Again and again, elites in the United States,

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like the British establishment, have replenished their ranks, and these elites continue to set the course of the nation, for better or worse. Consequently, when things go wrong with the system, the problem is not simply the figure at the top. The quick fix of leadership (narrowly defined) cannot be dumped into the stalled engine of government like antifreeze; the deeper problems rest in the clash of interests and elites on issues such as health care and welfare reform.

Another question to which leadership studies could profitably direct more attention is where our leaders are ending up—and, just as important, why they end up where they do. As former Harvard president Derek Bok notes in his excellent book *The Cost of Talent* (1993)—which could just as fittingly be titled *The Cost of Leadership*—for the past 25 years the best students have shunned government service and teaching in favor of law, medicine, and business. Law and business schools boomed between 1970 and 1990, while only one percent of top students in elite universities opted to teach in public schools. Quite clearly, we get leaders where we put our money, though money is not the only factor. Prestige counts. Whatever the incentives, if those to enter government and education remain grossly disproportionate to those offered by the corporate and legal worlds, our most important public institutions will continue to suffer from lackluster guidance. Leadership studies might provide a valuable service by showing how other societies have encouraged leaders to seek careers in fields that serve the public interest.

For all its concern with leaderly qualities, the science of leadership has devoted too little attention to what might be called the darker side of the question. Ruthlessness, mendacity, dishonesty, and cunning—all are qualities that the leadership theorists flinch from. A promising start would be to return to the Weberian conception of charisma, which has lost none of

its explanatory power. The interaction between charisma and paranoia, as the MIT political scientist Lucian Pye has noted, can form one of the more important characteristics of dictatorial leaders. The defense of a “homeland” or “party” against diabolical foes can increase a leader’s charismatic appeal. It helps to explain why Stalin’s and Mao’s murder of millions did nothing to damage—and, indeed, increased—their mystique at home and abroad.

**T**he mystery of leadership touches on some of the more vexing philosophical questions about human existence, which theorists ignore only at the risk of ultimate irrelevance. Is leadership simply an act, a self-delusion projected upon followers? Are appearances all? Michael Deaver, in his memoir of his White House days with Ronald Reagan, offers an anecdote that goes to the heart of such questions: “One day Dick Powell died, and I asked him, ‘Was he really as good a guy as I think he was?’ And Reagan said, ‘You know, you keep asking me about these actors. There’s one thing you’ve got to understand, Mike. The camera doesn’t lie. Eventually you are what you are.’” And so Reagan became what he was—most authentic precisely when he acted out the presidency. “To grasp and hold a vision,” observed Reagan, “that is the very essence of successful leadership—not only on the movie set where I learned it, but everywhere.”

No leadership theorist has ever said it better—and perhaps none ever will.

To date, the study of leadership has successfully identified many important traits of leaders and made valuable contributions to our understanding of how leaders and followers in organizations interact. But to grow as a discipline, it will have to cast a wider net. Doing so, it may discover that the most important things about leadership lie far beyond the capabilities of science to analyze.

## CURRENT BOOKS

# The Comic Face of the Culture War

**BEFORE THE SHOOTING BEGINS:** Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War. By James Davison Hunter. Free Press. 320 pp. \$22.95

James Davison Hunter is one of the few American writers who try to understand the culture wars rather than fight them. His previous book, appropriately titled *Culture Wars*, showed that new fault lines had emerged in U.S. society setting citizen against citizen over questions of identity, sexuality, and private behavior. No longer are cultural and moral disagreements fought out primarily among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Instead, traditionalists of all three religions have joined forces against modernists of all three faiths (as well as those outside all faith traditions). What was once a theological conflict is now cosmological—and in many ways far more serious.

Hunter's book stood out among similar

works for two reasons. First, unusual for a sociologist, Hunter let real people speak their views. Second, listening to what he heard, he refused to condemn conservatives as backward bigots. Hunter claimed that there was enough moral complexity and ambiguity involved in the culture war to make it, not a contest between good and bad, but an even more tragic conflict between two versions of the good.

Convinced that we must find a way to have a more civilized national dialogue over our cultural differences, Hunter has now shifted his attention to the question of whether democracy can accommodate both sides in the culture war. In *Before the Shooting Begins*, he focuses on abortion, which, he argues, "mirrors the culture war as a whole." As the March 1993 murder of Dr. David Gunn outside an abortion clinic in Pensacola, Florida, demonstrates, the shooting has already begun. Ameri-

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cans, bored with free trade and information highways, feel strong enough about abortion to kill. Yet despite the passion abortion evokes, it seems that Americans—and Hunter himself—are unsure what they are fighting about.

At one level abortion is a matter of “high” politics, involving fundamental questions about the definition of public and private, liberty and authority, and the meaning and purpose of life. Even a liberal such as Ronald Dworkin thinks that the religion clause of the First Amendment is the appropriate constitutional vehicle for deciding what our national approach to abortion should be. At this principled elevation, abortion presents a tragic conflict, like the Civil War. Each side in the debate understands itself, and is understood by its antagonists, as standing for a worldview that cannot be compromised.

All this is understandable. The issues involved in abortion—whether defined as matters of faith or matters of personal identity and privacy—are among the most serious we face. At another level, however, abortion—like other cultural issues such as homosexuality, sexual harassment, unwed motherhood, and childhood sexual abuse—cannot be discussed apart from sex. Americans tend to treat everything having to do with sex as the stuff of gossip, talk shows, soap opera, and confessional literature, even though intimate matters are fully as important in most lives as matters of state. People, after all, are just as much in need of pleasure as they are of principle. But pleasure and principle speak in different languages. The former involves not the body politic but the politics of the body. One arena makes public issues interesting to private individuals, while the other renders the lives of private individuals the subject of public scrutiny. A life, it was said in defense of Lorena Bobbitt, is worth more than a penis.

**B**ut in America a penis attracts more media attention than nuclear proliferation. Americans cannot get enough of the lurid. Sometimes conducted in the noble and tragic rhetoric of Antigone, discussions of

abortion can quickly take on the tone of the comic sexual wars of Aristophanes. But the comedy bears thoughtful consideration. For the debate over abortion is, at least in part, a debate over the remarkable transformation that has taken place since the 1950s in the way Americans think and act about what they do in bed, both inside and outside marriage.

**B**ecause he treats abortion only in elevated and principled terms, Hunter believes that our national discussion of this issue has become “a language game that has the form of meaningful communication, but is in fact merely another form of aggression.” We talk past each other when we discuss abortion. And the problem begins with intellectuals, who routinely violate fundamental democratic principles in the way they balance the competing interests at stake. Both a liberal such as Laurence Tribe of the Harvard Law School and a conservative such as R. C. Sproul, an evangelical theologian, are incapable of recognizing the legitimacy of their opponent’s position, Hunter argues. Tribe is explicitly anti-democratic. To him, the whole purpose of a constitution and a supreme court is to act as a check on popular positions. Sproul, by contrast, sees government as having no other purpose than to embody God’s will—not exactly a formula for pluralism or religious liberty.

Also bearing responsibility are interest groups on both sides of the controversy, groups that tend to prefer rhetorical overkill to persuasion. They manipulate images, whether of dead fetuses or bloody coat hangers. They haul out poignant examples of abortions gone wrong or morning-after regrets. Statistics are routinely colored to support one side or the other. Soundbites and direct mail substitute for informed debate. What the protagonists do not say is that they often have an interest in the outcome, sometimes in the form of money (abortion, after all, is a business), at other times in the form of an ideological agenda, and on still other occasions in the form of preserving gender privilege. (Hunter, like

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Catharine MacKinnon, points out that many men tend to favor access to abortion because it enhances their freedom to act irresponsibly.)

The third problem, as Hunter sees it, is that the general public is both uninformed and ambivalent. Forty-three percent of the American people have no idea what the holding in *Roe v. Wade* actually said, while 80 percent of Americans were willing to admit that they did not know much about recent landmark cases such as *Webster v. Reproductive Services*. Nonetheless, there is a relatively clear distribution of opinion on abortion: Clumps on either end are explicitly pro-choice or pro-life, while most people in the middle respond in different ways depending on what questions are asked.

After a very careful reading of the best polling data available, Hunter concludes that the position taken by most Americans on abortion reflects an emotional, rather than a rational, commitment. In the absence of strong moral traditions or a deep knowledge of the law, "all we can do is express our mutually opposed sense of 'revulsion' to one another. . . . People cannot help but respond viscerally to the images and rhetoric of the issue."

Finally, Hunter concludes, the institutions of civil society—intermediary institutions between the individual and state—have failed to mediate. The news media, which are supposed to be neutral, tend to report the struggle over abortion from the pro-choice side. Even more egregiously, professional associations, such as the American Psychological Association, chime in, confusing their expertise with their politics. (In one case described by Hunter, a number of distinguished historians submitted a brief in *Roe v. Wade* to the effect that abortion was not illegal throughout much of American history and that only in recent times did abortion become a moral issue, an act of shading the truth that the more scholarly of them subsequently came to regret.) Similarly, church leaders conflate their political commitments with religious ideas. One simply does not find intermediary associations playing the role assigned to them by Tocqueville;

they become parties to the debate, not vehicles for bringing the debate under control.

Seen from the perspective of high politics, Hunter is correct to stress that our national debate over abortion fails to reach Sophoclean levels. But suppose we look at the abortion controversy from the aspect of pleasure as well as of principle. In its Aristophanean form, abortion is about one question: Should people be allowed to sleep around knowing that, if birth control fails, they have a fallback option to prevent long-term pain from interfering with short-term pleasure? I believe that a rough consensus surrounding an answer exists in this country. Most people do not believe, in the abstract, that sex should be free of guilt, but they do believe, in the case of their own sexual activity, that abortion should be retained as an option—just in case their principles do not live up to the practical circumstances in which they find themselves.

From this perspective, the very things that Hunter finds problematic about high politics serve the politics of everyday life. Yes, interest groups on both sides of the issue manipulate the truth; they would not be faithful to the ideologically committed who support them with contributions and time if they did anything else. But the question is not whether both sides play fair; the more important question is whether they influence ordinary people. Generally speaking, their influence is rather minimal. Despite the determined opposition of the Catholic Church to abortion, many Catholics have abortions. Despite a 30-year effort to make abortion available on demand, most state legislators, clearly responding to majority sentiment, make abortion difficult to obtain in some circumstances while making it available in others.

Much the same ambivalence holds for public knowledge on the abortion question. To be sure, most people know less about the details of the issue than intellectuals, but they are surprisingly well informed when such knowledge is compared with how much they know about minority set-asides or agricultural price supports, perhaps because sex is one of the few

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genuine universals in our otherwise increasingly particularized society. And the fact that people respond emotionally to the issue ought not to cause dismay, given that sex is the most emotional activity in which people generally engage. Some Americans think we should have less sex and others think we should have more, representing the two ends of the bell-shaped curve that Hunter has found. The question for most people, however, is not whether sex should be prohibited on the one hand or treated casually on the other. Rather, they want to decide whether to have sex at a certain time with a certain person. Ambivalence on abortion may enable them to keep their options open.

**E**ven if we do believe that the question of sexuality should be given a principled rather than a contextual answer, the principled answer that has emerged in this country is not a bad one. Americans are willing to allow their beliefs on sexuality to be expressed as part of their larger understandings of modernity. Those who want women to work and children to free themselves from parental control—decisions that usually imply a more active sex life—support greater access to abortion. Those who believe in the traditional family and have a strong sense of religious morality want to see access to abortion restricted or eliminated. On what better basis can people disagree? There is a great deal to be said for a kind of moral pluralism that enables people to live in more modern or more traditional communities based upon their fundamental values. In such a pluralism, which Hunter endorses, compromise positions may be discovered. (Hunter offers the example of St. Louis, where the director of Reproductive Health Services and the city's leading pro-life attorney fashioned common ground on the need both to reduce unwanted pregnancies and to increase prenatal care.)

As for intellectuals and professional associations—well, here, Hunter has it just right. Of all the Americans he discusses, the intellectuals are the ones who ought to aim for ratio-

nality, nuance, and respect. They, and not the interest groups, have an obligation to make sure that the national debate on abortion is conducted fairly. I am fully persuaded by Hunter's account of how some intellectuals routinely call for balance in the discussion of abortion, only to wind up arguing for one particular side. And his treatment of the way professionals confuse their political sympathies with their professional obligations is chilling; psychologists, lawyers, sociologists, historians, and medical doctors should not be in the business of claiming, based on their expertise, that only one side in the abortion debate has a position that corresponds with mental health, the Constitution, public order, history, or life itself.

In short, if one approaches abortion from the standpoint of principle, the conflict is serious indeed. But if one approaches it from the standpoint of everyday common sense, we may not be facing a new Bosnia. I think it far too premature to conclude that our present democratic practices have failed us. *Roe v. Wade* was not accepted by most Americans. It was altered by democratic debate without even the suggestion of men on horseback, and the resulting compromise remains far from a total ban on abortion. The fact is that most Americans have both moral and religious convictions *and* a healthy respect for everyday pleasures. They therefore want their political system to issue elevated judgments on abortion but not to allow such judgments to interfere with their own freedom.

**D**emocracy, in short, has produced a response to the abortion conflict that is hypocritical, insincere, and contradictory. This naturally upsets those who believe in high politics. Hunter, dismayed by the superficiality of the debate, would prefer a "thicker" democracy that would enable sincere people to express what they really feel about abortion. His belief in "substantive democracy," which implies "an enlarged and deepened debate—a debate that is pre-political in nature" is surely welcome, but it is not

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the last word. More significant is his recognition that we need to be more modest about what politics can accomplish. It would do wonders for our political life if people looked to government to protect commerce, provide economic security, and defend the country, while religious, educational, and community institutions worried about the search for the good.

In any case, if we are to respect both the pleasure and the fear that sexuality evokes in

real people, we ought to recognize the dangers of sincerity and the benefits of hypocrisy. When most people believe that abortion is wrong but also know that they or their children may have to think about one, what can the political system do but look both ways?

—Alan Wolfe is University Professor and professor of sociology and political science at Boston University.

## Tattered Velvet

**EXIT INTO HISTORY:** A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe. *By Eva Hoffman.* Viking. 410 pp. \$23

**THE BIRTH OF FREEDOM:** Shaping Lives and Societies in the New Eastern Europe. *By Andrew Nagorski.* Simon & Schuster. 319 pp. \$23

**THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN:** The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. *By Gale Stokes.* Oxford Univ. Press. 319 pp. \$25

Once upon a time, and not a long time ago it was, Eastern Europe was an almost forgotten place, a great gray swath of territory in the external empire of the Soviet Union. Periodic explosions of discontent were followed by no less periodic repressions and freezes. Then, during the miraculous year 1989, it became a magical territory where hope was rediscovered and the impossible became real. Communism was dismantled, and the nations of Eastern and Central Europe entered a new era. To many in the region and in the West, it appeared as though a new genre of politics was being tested, one based on the values

of dialogue, subjectivity, and human autonomy. "Civil society" was the code word for this antipolitical politics, and Václav Havel, with his celebration of individual rights, its chief spokesperson.

Then, as a few wise prophets had predicted, the past came back with a vengeance. Nationalist passions threatened to destroy the fragile new political democracies, velvet revolutions were followed by velvet divorces, and the region appeared in less rosy colors. Transition ailments, including skyrocketing unemployment and social inequalities, soon led to





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widespread nostalgia for an authoritarian order. Idealism was replaced by pragmatism, disenchantment spread, Machiavellian intrigues and arrangements flourished. Meanwhile, the communists themselves have staged a strong comeback. Last summer, the communists, having renamed themselves the Democratic Left Alliance, took 20 percent of the seats of the Sejm, the Polish parliament. Similar prospects loom large in Hungary's forthcoming elections.

**C**an it be that the Adam Michniks and the Václav Havels were wrong? Does anything remain of the great promises of antipolitics? Will Eastern Europe be able to escape its current predicament and construct workable liberal institutions and procedures?

The questions are disturbing not only because they bear on Eastern Europe's immediate future but also because they touch on the larger issue of the universal validity of liberal democracy and the very possibility of securing pluralist governments in countries that have little democratic "usable past." While they do not address such questions directly, three recently published books shed valuable light on the unfolding story of civic self-reclamation.

In *The Walls Came Tumbling Down*, Rice University historian Gale Stokes offers a needed preamble to the current predicament. His book is an authoritative if somewhat workmanly survey of the dynamics of the Soviet bloc after 1968. In Stokes's telling, the Soviets' prompt suppression of the Czech reformist experiment concluded a chapter in the history of Eastern Europe: the story of the effort to change things from above. Following the debacle of 1968, change was to come from outside the party, from the restored civic associations, or what Czech philosopher Václav Benda called a "parallel polis."

While Stokes describes this grassroots activism and unofficial civic ferment skillfully, he seems to hold to the questionable and somewhat contradictory notion that the revolutions of 1989 were the effect of the gradual

exhaustion of communism's utopian appeals. True, the loss of elite self-confidence was significant, but the genuine force that brought down communism was the collective awareness among the powerless, and primarily among critical intellectuals, of the possible alternative. Indeed, it was the human dimension, Hegel's "negative conscience," that slowly but irresistibly chipped away at the established order. And it is this human dimension that is so essential to the making of the new societies.

In fact, the most perplexing issues confronting postcommunism involve the marginalization of the former dissidents and the vindictiveness of those who did not engage in resistance during the decades of communism but who now posture as apostles of purity and intransigence. A whole political set seems to have left the political scene. Their successors are primarily the former inhabitants of what used to be called the "gray area"—the realm between the communist institutions and the dissident counterculture. Although Havel is still president of the Czech Republic, for example, his position is largely ceremonial, his influence on political decisions minimal. Former dissidents are seen as losers, quixotic characters, dreamers little in touch with the hard realities of postcommunism. At worst, they are attacked as leftists, troublemakers, moralistic preachers. Given this turn of events, one wishes all the more that Stokes's history of the prelude to 1989 provided a closer look at the dissidents and the occupants of the gray area—at both their values and their ways of operating.

**I**n *The Birth of Freedom*, Andrew Nagorski, *Newsweek's* correspondent for Central European affairs, brings us closer to this kind of investigation. Interviewing various members of the new political class, he shows us a group whose ambition is to sever all links to the past, especially to the dissidents. Czech prime minister Václav Klaus, a strong proponent of liberal economics, never formally joined the dissident circles during the communist era. Today, he explains to Nagorski, with

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so much practical work to be done, experience as a dissident should not be considered a professional qualification.

Nagorski lets us hear from the dissidents as well. Father Václav Maly, a former Czech dissident now completely devoted to his priestly duties, is more cynical about the aftermath of 1989. Because many people had collaborated with the communists in some way, Maly relates, the dissidents annoyingly personify whatever guilt they have: "It's a covert pleasure to push them out of politics."

Had Nagorski included Romania in his research, he would have discovered the same pattern. At first, the few dissidents who challenged the Ceaușescu despotism were praised; then, after the new regime was installed in December 1989, they were marginalized and slandered. Similarly, dissidents in the former East Germany, primarily intellectuals, have become the targets of vicious attacks from people who never lifted a finger to oppose the old regime.

At the same time, ironically, there has been tremendous social pressure to identify and bring to justice those responsible for years of repression. The ambiguities of "de-communization" are extensively analyzed not only by Nagorski but also by Eva Hoffman in *Exit into History*. Both focus on the same story of a Czech dissident who was accused of cooperating informally with the secret police, and who as a result saw his political career destroyed by innuendo and unconfirmed allegations.

Vexing questions abound. For example, should the secret-police archives be allowed to govern the lives of individuals decades after the collapse of communism? Add to this the obvious fact that many of the documents in these archives can be manufactured or doctored. Add further that a reference to a certain name of an individual may simply indicate the date he or she was interrogated—hardly an act of collaboration. Being so obsessed with their wounds, Eastern Europeans may be unable to balance retribution with forgiveness. As Hoffman puts it, they "may be finding the limits of too much remembering after having

learned so well the dangers of too much forgetting."

There is, of course, a genuine need to settle accounts with the past. But as Hungary's president Árpád Göncz has pointed out, this should take place in the form of historical analysis and public discussion, rather than through exceptional and always dangerous forms of "corrective justice." Otherwise, de-communization serves all too easily as a vindictive battle cry for conservatives of old and new stripes, populists obsessed with the purity of the nation, and nationalists caught up in paranoid fantasies of foreign conspiracies. The new elites have to choose, Nagorski says, between governing and settling personal scores. The ghosts of the past will not vanish until lucidly scrutinized; the surprising return of the former communists in Poland may offer the best motivation.

**T**he other serious challenge to pluralism involves the rise of the new ethnocentric movements. This trend is not only the unenviable hallmark of the southeastern part of the region, the Balkans. It also stalks the streets (more quietly, to be sure) of Central Europe. Boulevards have been named after former war criminals, former fascist dictators have received official reburials, and Gypsies, Jews, and liberals are again being scapegoated for past and present troubles. Nagorski examines the case of the Hungarian populist writer and politician István Csurka, whose extreme xenophobic views are served up as anticommunist broadsides. What Csurka abhors are liberal values, pluralism, Western-style institutions—all of which he lumps together as elements of a "Judeo-Bolshevik plot." Although Hungary's ruling Democratic Forum forced him out, Csurka has a growing following. Nevertheless, just as in Russia, these ethnocentric movements—with their salvationist rhetoric and their demonization of foreigners, minorities, and the "corrupt West"—are not likely to attract more than a strong minority in Eastern and Central Europe.

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In general, while the threats to democracy are unmistakably present and the new, post-1989 politics has turned out to be less exhilarating—and certainly less pure—than we expected, one should not overreact and see these countries as sliding into new forms of authoritarianism. The old regime, with its despotic structure of repression and ideological pretense, is over. There are numerous encouraging achievements, most especially the disappearance of fear, the greatest force behind submissiveness and passivity. Liberal values have set roots in the region, political parties have developed, and the separation of powers is more than a constitutional stipulation. The media have feverishly expanded, enjoying the discovery of unhindered freedom of expression and opinion. And such segments of “civil society” as independent unions, human rights organizations, and associations committed to opposing bigotry and racism have helped keep alive the ideas and spirit of the dissident groups of the past.

**I**ronically, one of the greatest hopes for the ultimate success of democracy in these countries may come from the most unlikely of sources: the metamorphosis of the old communist *nomenklaturas* into the new business elites. Nagorski focuses on the case of Ireneusz Sekula, a former Polish minister, indeed a chief economic planner, now turned into a successful business executive representing a Polish-Japanese company. The same story could be documented ad nauseam in all the former communist states. To most people, seeing the former political rulers institutionalize their economic privileges is outrageous. But as they grow rich and benefit from the new order, such new entrepreneurs turn hostile to any return of the past. Cynical as they are, they have already linked their fate to the existence of a market economy.

As for the dissolution of the dissident culture, the fact remains that some of the former

dissidents simply could not cope with the burden of bureaucratic tasks. Others could not tolerate the discipline and hierarchy imposed by party politics. In a way, it is normal that the countries of Eastern Europe are now governed by political figures skeptical of romantic abstractions. As Czech political philosopher Martin Palouš recently told me, it may well be that a “third generation” will soon come to the political fore, one that will reconcile the moral zeal of the first and the pragmatism of the second.

**I**n short, the troubles of the current period, including all the outbursts of rancor and envy, should not lead to a revision of all earlier assumptions about the Velvet Revolution. The point is most poignantly spelled out by Nagorski: “Those opposition movements triumphed because of what was to rank as this century’s major creative intellectual achievements: the development of a nonviolent strategy, an entire philosophy of resistance, that undermined the seemingly invincible military and political might of the Soviet empire.”

Civil society was indeed an intellectual project based on the values of tolerance, trust, and individual freedom. Its objective was to create social energies, to inspire social activism, to stir people up and turn them from subjects of the state into citizens of a true republic. That these republics are less noble and successful than many would have wished is beyond doubt. But that does not alter the fundamental fact that the revolutions were made in the name of generously defined liberal values and not on behalf of nationalism or any other form of populism.

—Vladimir Tismaneanu, *associate professor of politics at the University of Maryland and a former Wilson Center Research Scholar, is author most recently of Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel (Free Press, 1992).*

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## OTHER TITLES

### History

#### A REBEL IN DEFENSE OF TRADITION:

The Life and Politics of Dwight Macdonald. By Michael Wreszin. Basic Books. 590 pp. \$30

Dwight Macdonald was probably contrary in his cradle. Of principled opposition, intellectual independence, and educated crankiness he went on to make a life's work. Born in Manhattan to upper-middle-class parents in 1906 and educated at schools appropriate to his class, Macdonald became one of the more conspicuous political, social, and cultural critics in America, and frequently of America, from the 1930s until his death in 1982. In this first biography, Wreszin guides the reader along the dizzying course of Macdonald's shifting political enthusiasms: the flirtation with communism, the embrace of Trotskyite socialism, the unremitting anti-Stalinism, the enduring opposition to totalitarianism and nationalism and the state, the pacifism, the ill-concealed impatience with the masses, the deep cultural conservatism. Perhaps it's no surprise that, by the end of his life, Macdonald had become a radical even a Republican could love.

After graduating from Yale University in the late 1920s, Macdonald worked for Henry Luce's *Fortune*, using the capitalist forum to write sympathetically of communists. During the 1920s and 1930s he believed that liberal democracy in the Western world was finished, a casualty of the World War. Dictatorship was no alternative (though he did retain some reluctant admiration for the dictators of the time). That left Macdonald seeking some third way between contending forces, as he was often to do in life, like Moses negotiating the Red Sea.

But he was rarely as successful as Moses. He opposed World War II, for example—both sides were brutal and reprehensible—and argued for a pacifist middle course. But as evidence of the Holocaust began to emerge, he had no choice but to cast a cooler eye on Germany than he was naturally disposed to do.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that,

though he was entirely serious about his politics and founded and edited for its five-year life in the 1940s an influential journal of the noncommunist Left that was even called *Politics*, Macdonald was not a profound or original political thinker. By the 1950s he abandoned politics altogether and moved to the *New Yorker*, where his criticisms of America were framed by glittering commercial endorsements of the very way of life he censured. And it is as a cultural critic, a Savonarola against masscult, midcult, and kitsch, that he is best remembered. The merging of high and low culture, the homogenization, the leveling of all values, standards, and distinctions struck him as another form of totalitarianism.

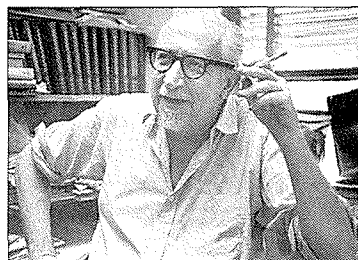
He chose his targets well. The permissiveness

of Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* was an abdication of responsibility by an educated elite and encouraged an ignorance of tradition; it mirrored "a plebeian attitude toward language." The "revised standard version" of the Bible gave up the grandeur of the King James version and substituted

a blandness all too symptomatic of American cultural life at midcentury. Macdonald compared the revisers' work to the bombing of Dresden.

Style was everything to him: An idea did not exist apart from the words used to express it. The possibility that the Bible—a book of faith, after all—might be comprehended more easily in its plain new dress by millions of people would not have occurred to him, and might have been ridiculed if it had. In fact, a good deal seems not to have occurred to him, which is why he frequently appears naive and a bit ridiculous, in his personal life no less than in his politics. By the 1960s and 1970s, Macdonald was smoking pot and protesting against Vietnam and fellow-traveling with the youth movement, his belly hanging bare over his belt and a cocktail serving as compass.

Wreszin's biography takes Macdonald from cradle to grave and moves him dutifully through all the crowds and controversies between. But Macdonald may be a 300-page subject trapped in a 500-page book. The length would be forgivable if Wreszin wrote with Macdonald's own



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mischievousness and wit. ("The Ford Foundation is a large body of money surrounded by a lot of people who want some.") Perhaps only an autobiography would have done the man justice. If he had lived to read this book, he would no doubt have been flattered by all the attention, well deserved after all. And then, honest Dwight to the end, he would have turned on it with his rapier.

**THE BIRTH OF FASCIST IDEOLOGY.** By Zeev Sternhell with Mario Sznajder and Maia Asheri. Trans. by David Maisel. Princeton. 338 pp. \$29.95

Fascism has never received the respect it deserves—or so Sternhell has spent nearly two decades arguing. A professor of political science at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he maintains that fascism is neither a bizarre by-product of World War I nor a thoughtless Middle-European detour into authoritarianism. Rather, it is a full-fledged ideology in its own right. Formed by the confluence of the 19th century's two major ideologies, socialism and nationalism, fascism must be analyzed with all the analytical rigor applied to its major rivals, liberalism and communism. Moreover, Sternhell sees in the cultural milieu of fin-de-siècle Europe—its nihilism, its disgust with the universals of Enlightenment thinking, its festering national and racial chauvinism—a seedbed for the political ideals that were eventually to make ex-socialists such as Benito Mussolini into dictators.

Sternhell's previous book, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* (1986), generated a storm of controversy and brought on one successful libel suit, primarily because Sternhell suggested that French intellectual life in the 1920s and '30s was rife with fascism. His new book has already provoked a similar controversy in Italy, although this time his analysis is focused on the movement he believes initiated the final descent into fascism—syndicalism. If socialism is fascism's godmother on the Left and nationalism its godmother on the Right, syndicalism is its disreputable father, of troublesome origins and questionable intentions.

Launched in the 1890s in France as a trade-unionist ideology not too different from Marxism, syndicalism rapidly mutated under the in-

fluence of sometime-revolutionary and future royalist Georges Sorel. Under his direction, it became an antipolitical movement that called for direct action by workers, demonized capitalists (but not capitalism), and championed moral regeneration rather than economic transformation as the avatar of revolution. Sorel imagined that workers would be moved to violence not by a sensible platform of reform but by a chiliastic call to arms, with apocalypse to follow—or what he called the General Strike.

How did syndicalism's passionate advocacy of class warfare turn into a desire for war between nations? How did a putatively leftist desire to transform a whole society for the sake of social justice evolve into a national socialist manifesto for authoritarian social engineering? Sternhell argues that such tendencies lay barely dormant within Sorel's own theories. The General Strike blurs easily into national mobilization for war, while an acceptance of capitalism's inevitability lends itself to quietism on questions of class and the economy.

But Italy in the teens was also characterized by fiscal insolvency and jingoistic chauvinism, which produced a renewed faith in such sources of communal authority as the army and the church. Sternhell provides a strikingly simple quacks-like-a fascist test: Those leftist intellectuals who abandoned Marxist calls for economic transformation and spoke of "moral elevation," "ethical transformation," and the purging of "parasites" instead of the overthrow of the bourgeoisie were, or were on the way to becoming, fascists.

This book is so densely documented that patches of comparatively thin analysis stand out. It is quite strange, for example (though many critics will say it is not strange at all), that in making his case for the intellectual complexity and coherence of fascist ideology Sternhell should have so meticulously documented its leftist origins while leaving so murky its rightist wellsprings. He remains conspicuously silent about the Catholic corporatism and old-guard Italian conservatism that did so much to put fascism into power and that, as Sternhell rather grudgingly admits, "finally produced a regime from which all elements of socialist origin were banished."

Still, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* adds up to compelling intellectual history. Sternhell forces us

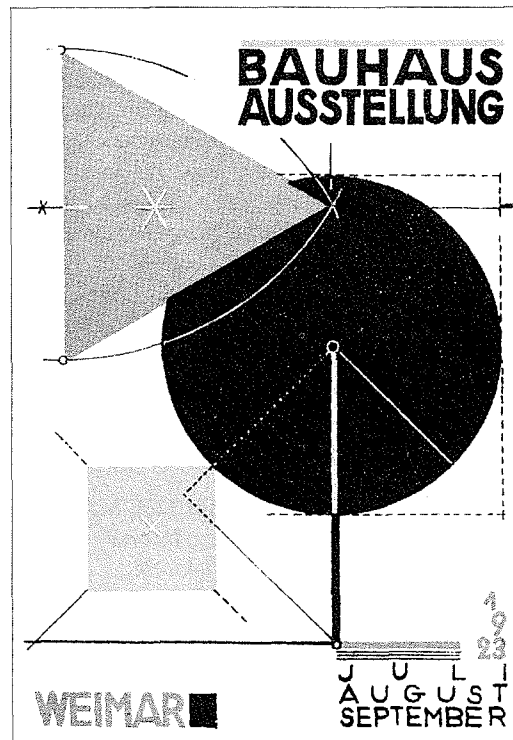
to acknowledge that it is not “age-old hatreds” but new combinations of political theory and historical contingency that we need to fear. After all, in 1912 Mussolini was a vaguely leftist editor of *Utopia*. By 1934 he was congratulating himself on having “buried the putrid corpse of liberty.”

## Arts & Letters

**THE BAUHAUS: Masters and Students** by Themselves. Ed. by Frank Whitford. Overlook. 328 pp. \$85

In *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1981), Tom Wolfe wittily argued that Bauhaus architects—figures such as Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, who gathered and taught at the influential German design school between the wars—were narrow-minded soldiers of socialism who created unadorned, ugly buildings that sacrificed the aesthetic and practical desires of the individual for an ideological ideal. “Every child,” Wolfe charged, “[now] goes to school in a building that looks like a duplicating-machine replacement-parts wholesale distribution warehouse.” Wolfe’s sarcastic indictment of the Bauhaus has now become part of the conventional wisdom about the German design school. But the history and influence of the Bauhaus are a bit more complicated, as this first high-quality, full-scale art book on the school reveals.

Whitford, an art historian, has culled first-person accounts from art critics, journalists, and politicians of the day, as well as from the Bauhausers themselves, and supplemented the usual reproductions of paintings and product designs with such original documents as notes, sketches, postcards, and book jackets. Although one of the aims of the school was to create economically efficient housing for workers, the book shows that the Bauhaus was anything but a source of dogmatism, political or otherwise. Founded by Walter Gropius in Weimar, the school was devoted to uniting all of the arts under architecture, which Gropius considered the supreme art, and to enhancing quality of life through design that was both economical and artistically sensitive. Remaining true to his original manifesto, which called for “the avoidance of all prescription” and



“a preference for the creative,” Gropius consciously brought together people with different and conflicting views.

One of those people was Hannes Meyer, a Marxist who believed aesthetics should play no role in design. Gropius chose him in 1926 to head the newly formed architecture department and then to succeed him as director two years later, but Meyer’s attempts to steer the Bauhaus toward communist purity repeatedly fell flat. His followers were few, and he met formidable resistance from independent-minded artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. In 1930, Mies van der Rohe replaced Meyer and tossed the party line out. Unfortunately, the school, which had moved from Weimar to Dessau and ultimately to Berlin to flee Nazi repression, was finally shut down three years later.

While the Bauhausers were trying to unite form with function, their guiding principles, as this book makes clear, were always aesthetic ones—line, balance, and beauty. Indeed, the Bauhaus was responsible for some of the more celebrated buildings of this century, including Gropius’s Bauhaus school building in Dessau,

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with its spectacular expanse of exterior glass wrapped elegantly around the workshop wing. And the Bauhaus's influence in the United States has been on balance positive, bringing a clean, streamlined look not only to architecture (see, for example, the indisputably gracious Mies Lake Shore apartments in Chicago), but also to graphics, furniture, and consumer products. Most of the ugly "modern" buildings that Wolfe (rightly) denounces were designed not by Gropius, Mies, or their students but by architects who clumsily appropriated the deceptively simple look of modern architecture and have now given it a bad name.

**THE INTELLECTUALS AND THE MASSES:** Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939. By John Carey. St. Martin's Press. 256 pp. \$19.95

That turn-of-the-century literati were by and large hostile toward the masses hardly comes as news. Every British literature survey adverts to the aristocratic elitism and snobbery of W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and other masters of modernism. It comes as no greater revelation that the intellectuals' notion of the "masses" was largely a convenient fiction, spun from such demographic facts as the population explosion (which in Europe was marked by a jump from 180 million to 460 million people between 1800 and 1914), rapid suburbanization, and the growth of the clerkly trades.

What distinguishes Carey's examination of all this is what he makes of it: very much, one might say in his favor; too much, one might object. Consider, for example, the modernist cult of difficulty, the urge to make the art object as complex and demanding as possible. Carey attributes this occultism entirely to the literary artist's contempt for the vulgar, uneducated tastes of the common man, and Carey is not altogether wrong. Many of the archmodernists held that only the priestly few should have access to Art; after all, Art was intended to separate the human wheat from the (barely) human chaff. T. S. Eliot's decree that poets "must be difficult" was widely understood and approved by those whom Coleridge had dubbed the clerisy. Such willful obscurantism led the modernists to

undervalue some of the simpler (but no less important) pleasures of art, including sentiment and story, a bias that in turn has contributed to the marginalization of serious literature to this day.

Yet it is hard not to feel, even on this strictly literary point, that Carey presses too far in one direction, never acknowledging the possibility of a more generously motivated concern. Weren't modern intellectuals right to be opposed to the oversimplifying and sensationalizing tendencies of a modern popular culture that began to emerge at the turn of the century? Carey, a professor of literature at Oxford University, plays too easily the friend of populism when he discounts the virtues of difficulty. He would seemingly reduce art to entertainment. And doing so, he ends up indulging in a form of counter-snobbery, as when he asserts that a person like Leopold Bloom would never read the novel in which he figures so centrally, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, because more than any other 20th-century novel, "it is for intellectuals only."

But art—important as it is—is not all that is at stake here. Carey sees literary values shaping political and social attitudes. And, again, there is great virtue in his driving home just how ugly and inexcusable many of the opinions of literary intellectuals were. Too often these have been lightly passed over, but Carey shouts where others have whispered. We learn of the extent of H. G. Wells's obsession with eugenics and his horror of undesirable types and races. We hear of George Gissing's vitriolic contempt for democracy and his yearning for a Nietzschean superman. We are treated to the full blast of Wyndham Lewis's fulminations against suburban man and his ghastly paeans to Nazi storm troopers. ("The Anglo-Saxon would feel reassured at once in the presence of these straightforward young pillars of the law.") And Carey rightly derides Ezra Pound's excuse for his anti-Semitism—"a suburban prejudice"—as obscuring the true high-culture origins of his attitude.

But Carey insists upon a simple determinism where a more nuanced analysis is called for. Modernist, elitist notions could as easily be used to attack Nazism as to underwrite it, and they were. It is more than an oversight not to mention that Gissing's beloved Nietzsche specifically loathed everything about anti-Semitism, includ-

ing the race-thinking behind it. Much similar denial of the complex play of ideas makes it possible for Carey to reach his banner-headline conclusion: "The tragedy of *Mein Kampf* is that it was not, in many respects, a deviant work but one firmly rooted in European intellectual orthodoxy." To which one can respond only with the Scotch verdict: Not proved.

## Philosophy & Religion

**SELLING GOD:** American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture. By R. Laurence Moore. Oxford. 336 pp. \$25

Americans worship both the Almighty Dollar and, if opinion surveys are to be believed, the Almighty far more fervently than do the citizens of any other Western country. Such dual loyalty seems less incongruous if one considers that one of the sources of America's religious vitality is the absence of an established church. Churches have been forced (or allowed) to compete for souls, much as McDonald's and Burger King vie for hungry mouths. Moore, a Cornell University historian, might say that the link between fast food and religion is more than a useful analogy. Much that we mistake for the secularization of American society, he believes, "has to do not with the disappearance of religion but its commodification."

Since the late 18th century, when the new diversions offered by the nation's growing commercial culture—*theater, cheap novels, and the like*—began to threaten religious authority, church leaders have borrowed commercial methods to spread the Word. One of the first to discover the magic of the marketplace was the Calvinistic Methodist preacher George White-

field (1714–70), whose wildly successful revival meetings in America and in England "turned a portion of the Protestant Christian ministry away from intellectual preparation and instruction toward emotional exhorting," according to Moore. Before long it was an accepted principle in many holy quarters that ministers should borrow methods from the theater to stir up audience enthusiasm. By the 1830s, Walt Whitman could call churches "the most important of our amusements."

The pattern was repeated over and over. No sooner did clergymen denounce the dime novel or television than some enterprising colleague was picking up a pen or daubing on makeup for the cameras.

Moore strives mightily to appreciate some of the benefits of this "commercialized" religion, observing, for example, that the notion of faith as something to be sold rather than imposed promotes religious toleration. But of course it is more interesting to ask what it has all cost. He discerns a general thinning of religion: Spread everywhere in American culture, from self-help manuals to Christian rap music, it seems to be nowhere.

Surprisingly, Moore has relatively little to say about today's televangelists, seeming to regard them as regrettable but inevitable products of a world where denominations must compete. It would have been interesting to get some idea of how "consumer satisfaction" with religion has changed over the past two centuries of "commodification," not to mention how the competition for new souls has affected non-Protestant sects.

Moore reserves most of his criticism for the mainline Protestant churches that embraced the Social Gospel in the late 19th century—the very denominations that most disdained commercial methods. He argues that the Social Gospel was nevertheless the last word in "commod-





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ification," a complete theological capitulation to the era's emerging consumerist ethos. Ministers such as Harry Emerson Fosdick eagerly applied the latest business principles to the management of churches and the advancement of Progressive social reform. Ultimately, mainline Protestants were left "with the reputation that they had no faith stronger than what lay in the collection plate."

Only in his last two pages does Moore reveal his ultimate criticism. A commercialized church, he warns, cannot alert Americans to the dangers of needless consumerism—the real meaning of Adam and Eve's story, he says—and to the resulting environmental apocalypse he foresees. If that is so, it would take another book to prove it.

**BERTRAND RUSSELL: A Life.** By *Caroline Moorehead*. Viking. 596 pp. \$30



In 1961, an 89-year-old Bertrand Russell was sent to jail for protesting the nuclear policies of the British government. He had been the object of controversy before. In 1940, the New York court that overturned his appointment to City College denounced his logic lectures as lecherous, libidinous, lustful, venerous, erotomaniac,

aphrodisiac, irreverent, and narrow-minded. No easy man to live with, he married four times, often wreaking emotional havoc on his wives and children.

Bertrand Russell was also a Nobel Prize-winning philosopher who wrote 83 books, including *Principia Mathematica* (1910), and set the shape of philosophy in the English-speaking world. Though the contrast was rather extreme, both Russells were Russell.

As Moorehead relates in her engaging biography, Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) did not know how to be dull. He brought a philos-

opher's insights to issues ranging from nuclear warfare to the use of cosmetics by schoolteachers, and did so with a literary skill that leaves most other writers green with envy. Even his technical philosophy is full of vivid touches. Moorehead, a British journalist, wisely skirts the impossible task of explaining the foundations of mathematics. Instead, she sticks to what drove Russell to study such things—a longing for the timeless and absolute truth about the world, which he thought lay in logic. She also explains how he abandoned his first and highest love. Ludwig Wittgenstein, his one-time protégé, persuaded him that logic was no more than a matter of human convention; after civilized Europe plunged into World War I, Russell lowered his sights and looked to politics, education, social reform, and more enlightened attitudes toward sex and marriage as the route to human happiness.

Russell's childhood was a gloomy one. His radical parents died when he was a small child, and he was brought up by his elderly grandmother and assorted governesses. Lady Russell tried to keep Bertie pure. She failed. He met and after many battles married Alys Pearsall Smith—like his fourth and last wife, a daughter of Philadelphia and Bryn Mawr. This all fueled his later passion for sexual enlightenment. Paradoxically, Lady Ottoline Morrell, who became his mistress in 1910 and effected his liberation, did not much care for sex with Bertie; it was his mind she fell in love with.

He was amazingly clever and loved Cambridge, but he could never be confined to the academy. He ran for Parliament in 1907 as a women's suffrage candidate, fighting for a seat he could not win in order to stick up for an unpopular cause. In 1916 he threw away his Cambridge career to campaign against the war. Trinity College dismissed him from his lectureship, and in 1918 he was jailed for insulting an ally. (He said the U.S. Army would stay on in Europe after the war to shoot striking workers.)

In the 1920s and '30s he wrote important essays on socialism, the fate of the Soviet Union, appeasement, and the nature of power, but emotional discord bulked larger. In 1921 he married Dora Black, had two children, and opened a school—Beacon Hill. Its finances demanded constant lecture tours in the United States and short

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articles for the Hearst newspapers ("Going to the Cinema," "Should Philosophers Smoke Cigars?," "Who May Wear Lipstick?"). The marriage broke up in the early 1930s. He then married Peter Spence, a woman 30 years younger than he. She left him in 1949. Finally, in 1952 he married Edith Finch and experienced 17 years of quiet bliss: an interesting but not edifying record. Moorehead only occasionally raises an eyebrow at the discrepancy between Russell's mastery of logic and his weak grasp of the realities of other people's lives.

The post-1945 Russell is the one Americans remember. This Russell fought for the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, wrote to John Foster Dulles and Nikita Khrushchev to demand nuclear disarmament, lectured John Kennedy on Cuba, and led a last, bitter campaign against the Vietnam War. Moorehead is pained by the way Russell was taken over by Ralph Schoenman during this final crusade. Schoenman was a left-wing graduate student at the London School of Economics who came to see Russell in 1960; he stayed to tea, then to manage Russell's affairs for the next eight years. He destroyed innumerable old friendships, wasted large amounts of money, hampered every good cause with which he was involved, and made Russell look ridiculous. Moorehead shares the universal relief that almost the last thing Russell did was break with Schoenman and write a memorandum explaining why. Can we decently say that a rip-roaring atheist like Russell redeemed himself? We can certainly rejoice that he died as clear-headed as he had lived.

**BLASPHEMY: Verbal Offense Against the Sacred, From Moses to Salman Rushdie.** By Leonard W. Levy. Knopf. 688 pp. \$35

The question of blasphemy—what it is, what harm it does, whether it can even be a crime in a secular or pluralistic society—calls forth strong yet foggy views from across the political spectrum. Unlike obscenity, it doesn't belong to that category of things you know when you see; the many authorities, religious and otherwise, who have tried to construe it as such have only added to the confusion. As Levy shows in his history

of blasphemy trials, political persecutions, and other related oddities, the charge—no matter who brings it—tends to blur with astonishing speed into related offenses and semioffenses such as heresy, impiety, sacrilege, apostasy, idolatry, and, as the early Catholic Church described the Arian heresy, "pestilential error."

Levy's story wends its way from the original, strict Judaic definition of blasphemy as "reviling God by name" (which, the Name being unknown and unpronounceable, presented insuperable difficulties of prosecution) through the uncontrollable political bloating of the concept in early Christianity up through the age of religious wars and the later struggles to distinguish between blasphemy and obscenity in English common law. The excitement mounts with the great 19th-century blasphemy trials that advanced freedom of the press in England, including those that made a martyr of the printer Richard Carlile, jailed for distributing Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*. These trials in turn led to such legal landmarks as the Trinity Act of 1813, which decriminalized questioning the doctrine of the Trinity.

Levy's own views about the boundaries of blasphemy are obvious from the book's dust jacket, which shows the notorious "Piss Christ" photograph by Andrés Serrano in giant closeup. Levy thus implicitly rejects the view, an important one in the recent art wars, that the context in which such an image is shown or the use to which it is put has no effect on whether it is offensive. Exactly how the author, a professor emeritus of history at Claremont Graduate School, arrives at his conclusion that the charge of blasphemy is meaningless in a secular society remains murky. But there's so much material here that the argument can be treated as secondary, especially since it's clear that, on this subject at least, people are more interested in ammunition than in new ideas.

### *Contemporary Affairs*

**THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS FREE SPEECH AND IT'S A GOOD THING, TOO.** By Stanley Fish. Oxford Univ. Press. 332 pp. \$25

While the current impulse in the so-called

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"canon wars" may be toward conciliation, there's little likelihood that Fish will have a seat at the peace table if multiculturalists and traditionalists bury their differences and shake hands on the White House lawn. Fish, a professor of literature and law at Duke University, is an idiosyncratic and infuriating army of one. Welcoming the charge that he is a "contemporary sophist," he does battle with all sides while coyly refusing to stake out an agenda of his own. His battle cry is "Hearkening to me will lead to nothing. Hearkening to me, from my point of view, is supposed to lead to nothing."

Fish's latest collection is a smorgasbord of law, literature, and campus politics. Last year the author traveled the country with the right-wing polemicist Dinesh D'Souza, and several of the essays printed here are culled from their acrimonious exchanges. In them, Fish argues that much of the debate about political correctness has taken place under false pretenses. Conservative critics of campus radicalism have disguised their own partisan ends by appealing to "neutral" standards of high-mindedness, tolerance, and "common ground." They have exaggerated the spread of the multicultural curriculum and misstated their reasons for opposing it. And they have disingenuously opposed the "politicization of the humanities" while themselves occupying positions of considerable power and prestige.

Fish casts similar aspersions upon the academic Left. While he agrees with New Historicists and other practitioners of advanced literary criticism who declare that everything is "historical" or "political," he denounces their efforts to judge the worthiness of critical enterprises by the degree to which they are historical or political. To those critics who assume that the study of a poem's political implications is more properly "historical" than the study of its aesthetic principles, Fish replies that aesthetics is itself a historical tradition, and one that weighed heavily on poets in the past. These scholars' political aspirations, in short, are both self-contradictory and naive: "Those who conflate and confuse literary and political work end up doing neither well."

Although Fish's targets are scattered, his work clings to a central notion: that human beings cannot get any kind of critical distance from their activities. Instead, they are simply con-

signed to continue along in them as best they can. "Focus cannot be expanded," he argues, "it can only be adjusted." Therefore, Fish loathes any abstract concept—"fairness," "merit," "neutrality"—that promises to free us from our perspectives and guide us toward transcendent truth or open-minded flexibility. It is always, in his view, a false promise.

As a conscientious gadfly, Fish deflates other people's ideals with impressive panache. But he has hardly disposed of those ideals for good. Fish barely pauses to consider, for instance, the possible hazards of speech codes and other restrictions on free speech. It's easy to suspect that his cautious support of such policies is based less on a conviction that they are sound than on his irritation with their opponents.

Although Fish advises all thinkers to forsake "theory" and dwell in the "local," it is plain that he is most comfortable operating on a theoretical level. He is more aroused by the fact that all our perspectives are partial than he is by the content of any particular perspective. Like his fellow pragmatist Richard Rorty, who gestures toward the end of philosophy and the beginning of an age of free-floating conversation without ever quite getting around to joining that conversation himself, Fish apparently would prefer to travel busily across several disciplines than find a local habitation of his own. This champion of the situated self proudly keeps himself afloat.

## Science & Technology

**SILENT TRAVELERS:** Germs, Genes and the Immigrant Menace. By Alan Kraut.  
*HarperCollins.* 352 pp. \$25

Americans of the late 19th century were ambivalent about immigration. Because the nation's booming industrial economy created a need for laborers, popular opinion grudgingly tolerated the admittance of foreigners. At the



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same time, as Kraut, an American University historian, shows, Americans' xenophobic tendencies (never too deeply buried) were stirred up by contemporary beliefs about the origins of disease. According to the dominant theory of the late 19th century, infections and epidemics were caused by decaying organic matter that provided a hospitable environment for disease-causing "contagia." By popular logic, the damp, filthy tenements where immigrants lived offered a perfect environment for the contagia to flourish. Branding immigrants agents of disease, Americans cried out for measures to protect the public health.

States responded with various quarantine measures, which further stigmatized newcomers as a menace to the national welfare. By the 1890s, American concern over disease-carrying foreigners had reached such a pitch that Congress passed an act requiring immigrants to have physical examinations before departing from their native countries and after arriving in the United States. Those who failed were barred from entry.

The collision of cultures only began at Ellis Island, where an authority-cowed immigrant could be rejected as a mental defective for displaying anxiety in front of the uniformed Public Health Service physicians. Misunderstandings and distrust continued thereafter. American health professionals and reformers tried to preach the gospel of sanitation to immigrants living in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions. But many foreigners chafed at the exhortations of intrusive Americans asking them to abandon their traditions. Preferring to rely on amulets and herbal remedies to cure disease, many immigrants distrusted hospitals ("a place you go to die") and organized American medicine in general ("cold and impersonal").

Yet, as Kraut relates, the history of immigration and public health has some bright spots. The swell of immigration from the 1880s to the 1920s brought improvements in health care for all Americans. Hospital construction boomed. The institution of the "school nurse" came as a boon to all children who were not receiving proper medical attention at home. Yearly physical and eye examinations for schoolchildren became mandatory. And, finally, the infusion of foreigners into the labor force, often in dangerous jobs,

forced lawmakers to pass legislation protecting the health of all U.S. workers.

The story that Kraut tells is not completely behind us. The government's classification of Haitians during the 1980s as a high-risk category because of AIDS and more recent worries about foreigners infected with tuberculosis show that some things remain the same.

**UNCOMMON SENSE: The Heretical Nature of Science.** By Alan Cromer. Oxford. 240 pp. \$23

The primary stumbling block to scientific progress, says Cromer, has always been the human mind: It cannot naturally perform feats of logical thought. This explains the persistence of belief in animism, spiritualism, and UFOs, and also why, in Cromer's experience, American college students "don't have the critical thinking skills needed to distinguish the fanciful claims of astrology from the extraordinary claims of astronomy."

According to Cromer, a professor of physics at Northeastern University, the unnaturalness of logical thought also explains why science has not experienced a steady progression from the discovery of fire to the unlocking of the atom. Instead, it has followed the bumpy course described by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962): "a succession of tradition-bound periods punctuated by non-cumulative breaks." The ideas of Copernicus, Galileo, and Isaac Newton displaced existing notions precisely because such thinkers came up with revolutionary ways of viewing the universe.

Cromer says that the reason science first appeared in ancient Greece, and that so many advances occurred during the Renaissance, was that people at both times developed the unusual ability to break through "the barrier of egocentricism" that characterizes most human thought. Greek culture, with its emphasis on assembly and a "maritime economy that prevented isolation and parochialism," gave the Greeks an opportunity to test new ideas and discard ones that were useless. Renaissance thinkers, rediscovering Greek ideas through medieval texts, adopted Greek-style methods of learning and thus were able to lay the groundwork for

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their own scientific discoveries.

Why is scientific thinking so difficult? Cromer accepts the view of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget that only people who advance through the four developmental stages—sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational—are equipped to handle the complexities of physics or advanced mathematics. In an ideal progression, an individual will have reached the formal operational level—capable of solving several problems simultaneously, able to theorize, and so forth—by adolescence.

Unfortunately, as Piaget himself noted, the only way for people to advance from one stage to the next is through the “accumulation of relevant experiences”—learning the ins and outs of word problems, for instance, or understanding the basis of mathematical proofs. By almost any measure, current American educational methods are not providing these experiences. Cromer’s suggestions for countering this deficiency—compressing public education after grade seven into an intensive, two-year “academy” that would develop reasoning skills, and then, after further optional study, admitting the most promising students into college at age 16—are provocative, if full of practical pitfalls.

In the course of *Uncommon Sense*, Cromer demolishes many popular science myths, including the notion that extraterrestrials will visit or attempt to contact Earthlings, or that humankind, given the known laws of physics, will ever develop the capability for interstellar travel. (A moment of silence, please, for the Trekkies in our audience.) Real science, Cromer concludes, will likely find its new frontiers much closer to home: “It is from the fields of molecular biology, brain research, and computer technology that the epochal discoveries of tomorrow will come.”

**THE ASTONISHING HYPOTHESIS:** The Scientific Search for the Soul. By Francis Crick. Scribner’s. 336 pp. \$25

The title is teasing. Has Francis Crick found religion in his old age? The thought

is quickly dispelled. His “astonishing hypothesis” is simply that what we call self, consciousness, the psyche, the ego, or the soul can be explored by ordinary scientific means—through brain anatomy, nerve morphology, and the physiology of nerve function. It is “astonishing,” Crick maintains, because so few psychologists, neurologists, or neurobiologists have attempted to study consciousness by scientific means, and because the history of religion, philosophy, and popular belief has long separated mind from body in a comfortable dualism.

Crick, who with James Watson discovered the structure of DNA in 1953, is not deterred by the huge gaps in our knowledge. He wants scientists to penetrate the black box we call the mind by considering hereditary pathologies, strokes, brain injuries, single-nerve stimulations, histological analysis of the cortical and thalamic regions of the visual system, and especially experiments using primates and other mammals. How do the neurons in different regions of the brain transmit information to each other? How is the information stored and processed so that we can construct a symbol of the external reality that we then recognize as our reality? Focusing on visual perception, Crick shows that the final representation of how we see the world is the product of much “unconscious” analysis.

Crick’s rallying cry for psychologists, neurologists, neurobiologists, and molecular biologists to turn serious attention to the “search for the soul” is much like Erwin Schrödinger’s attempt to bring physicists to genetics in his influential *What Is Life?* (1946). While the scientific benefits of this enterprise are indisputable, the further demystification of such qualitative experiences as awe and love does produce twinges of regret. As Crick writes, “ ‘You,’ your joys and your sorrows, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.”

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# POETRY

## JOHN CROWE RANSOM

*Selected and Introduced by Anthony Hecht*

Any conventional list of the great modernist poets would begin with Eliot and Pound, Rilke, Valéry, and Rimbaud. These were not the only important poets of their era, possibly not even the greatest. One thinks of such others as Stevens, Frost, Montale, and Yeats. But the ones designated as *modernist* are credited with changing our whole mode of feeling, the voice and vocation of poetry itself. It is therefore surprising to recall that in 1926 two by no means negligible poets and commentators placed John Crowe Ransom (1888–1974) firmly in the ranks of the modernists. Robert Graves and Laura Riding, in their still-valuable *Modernist Poetry*, say of Ransom's work that it is of a kind which, "because it is too good, has been brushed aside as a literary novelty." Graves and Riding are no mere crackpots; their book was the inspiration, according to I. A. Richards, of that touchstone of modern criticism, William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930).

The poetry-reading public of today is not inclined to bracket Ransom with the modernists, despite some eloquent defenses of his work by the likes of Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, and Geoffrey Hill; and Ransom's work has engendered no such devoted examination as has attended the poetry of Frost, Stevens, Eliot, Pound, or Williams. Indeed, Ransom's poems are still read with a shocking carelessness even by those who purport to admire them. Take, for example, this observation from the headnote to Ransom's poems in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, edited by Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair: "His poem 'Philomela' describes how, 'pernoctating' once with Oxford students in Bagley Wood, he heard a nightingale's song and was unimpressed." (So greatly do I revere the critical acumen of the late Mr. Ellmann that I have laid the blame for this comment, whether fairly or not, at the door of his colleague.) This has about it, in my view, the same flavor of blissful incomprehension reported by Matthew Arnold in his essay "Science and Literature": "I once mentioned in a school-report, how a young man in one of our English training colleges having to paraphrase the passage in *Macbeth* beginning, 'Can'st thou not minister to a mind diseased?' turned this line into 'Can you not wait upon the lunatic?'"

Ransom was a Rhodes Scholar, and by "pernoctating" (passing the night) he means only, and with becoming modesty, that his Oxford sojourn was briefer than that of others. The poem, as a thoughtful perusal ought to make clear, is not about the experience of hearing a nightingale in Oxford but about the radical break of American culture from its classical parentage, of which the nightingale myth, represented by Philomela and de-

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rived from Ovid, is a lovely but antique and conventionalized representative. Ransom is asserting that the old European tricks won't serve us anymore; in this he is adopting a stance we recognize in the work of Williams and Pound—and indeed of Eliot himself, who wrote of “the change of Philomel” as a “withered stump of time.” When Ransom writes of Philomela's “fairy numbers” he means to recall Keats, and to imply that we can no longer get away with those Romantic stage props or that Keatsian mellifluousness. When he writes of her “fabulous provinces” he means that, for better or worse, the world we now live in has pretty well banished the “fabulous.” Stevens was destined to take up the same theme.

Ransom is sometimes called an ironist, and compared to Hardy. The characterization is fractionally useful: Ransom admired Hardy, and edited his *Selected Poems*. Both, moreover, employed pronounced archaisms and antiquated diction. Hardy did so out of love for modes of rural English speech that were disappearing in the course of his very long life. But Ransom does so for quite other reasons. His poems very often present painful anachronisms that endure beyond the hope of resolution: codes of outdated morality applied almost laughably to a modern or heedless world; lovers torn by an equation of desire and ethics so perfectly balanced that they are like the proverbial donkey simultaneously attracted by two bales of hay, identical in their diametrically opposed distance from him and attraction to him, so that unable to choose, he dies of starvation midway between them. The effect is both ludicrous and pathetic, and it is this special emotional cocktail of contradictory ingredients, powerful and paradoxical, that forbids a simple response to many of Ransom's poems, that continues to puzzle and to charm, and that firmly distinguishes him from Hardy.

**A** poem such as “Captain Carpenter” is predicated on the notion that the ideals of courtesy, chivalry, and gentlemanliness can never survive against the barbarity they are pledged to oppose, since survival would entail abandoning those very ideals and adopting the brutal ways of the enemy. And into this world of irreconcilable paradoxes are always born the innocent, children and lovers, to whom the paradoxes are more bewildering than even to us, the poet's worldly and knowing readers. Ransom is telling us that, for all our worldliness and his, we were once as ill-equipped to cope with the world's welter of contradictions as the innocent; that in fact our worldliness is largely a matter of self-delusion; and when the heart of the matter is truly seen, we are as nonplussed as the veriest child. “Nonplussed” is a condition (if not a word) that Ransom is particularly gifted at eliciting in his readers, as well as describing in his poems. “Brown study” is a phrase he made powerful use of. What distinguishes his poems is a mixture of elegance and bluntness, a deep respect for innocence and the codes forged to protect it, along with a refusal to give way to any romantic or archaic delusions. It is always and disconcertingly, dramatically, dialectically, a bifocal poetry.



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## Philomela

Procne, Philomela, and Itylus,  
Your names are liquid, your improbable tale  
Is recited in the classic numbers of the nightingale.  
Ah, but our numbers are not felicitous,  
It goes not liquidly for us.

Perched on a Roman ilex, and duly apostrophized,  
The nightingale descanted unto Ovid;  
She has even appeared to the Teutons, the swilled  
and gravid;  
At Fontainebleau it may be the bird was gallicized;  
Never was she baptized.

To England came Philomela with her pain,  
Fleeing the hawk her husband; querulous ghost,  
She wanders when he sits heavy on his roost,  
Utters herself in the original again,  
The untranslatable refrain.

Not to these shores she came! this other Thrace,  
Environ barbarous to the royal Attic:  
How could her delicate dirge run democratic,  
Delivered in a cloudless boundless public place  
To an inordinate race?

I pernctated with the Oxford students once,  
And in the quadrangles, in the cloisters, on the Cher,  
Precociously knocked at antique doors ajar,  
Fatuously touched the hems of the hierophants,  
Sick of my dissonance.

I went out to Bagley Wood, I climbed the hill;  
Even the moon had slanted off in a twinkling,  
I heard the sepulchral owl and a few bells tinkling,  
There was no more villainous day to unfulfil,  
The diuturnity was still.

Up from the darkest wood where Philomela sat,  
Her fairy numbers issued. What then ailed me?  
My ears are called capacious but they failed me,  
Her classics registered a little flat!  
I rose, and venomously spat.

Philomela, Philomela, lover of song,  
I am in despair if we may make us worthy,  
A bantering breed sophisticated and swarthy;  
Unto more beautiful, persistently more young,  
Thy fabulous provinces belong.

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## Piazza Piece

—I am a gentleman in a dustcoat trying  
To make you hear. Your ears are soft and small  
And listen to an old man not at all,  
They want the young men's whispering and sighing.  
But see the roses on your trellis dying  
And hear the spectral singing of the moon;  
For I must have my lovely lady soon,  
I am a gentleman in a dustcoat trying.

—I am a lady young in beauty waiting  
Until my truelove comes, and then we kiss.  
But what grey man among the vines is this  
Whose words are dry and faint as in a dream?  
Back from my trellis, Sir, before I scream!  
I am a lady young in beauty waiting.

## Vision by Sweetwater

Go and ask Robin to bring the girls over  
To Sweetwater, said my Aunt; and that was why  
It was like a dream of ladies sweeping by  
The willows, clouds, deep meadowgrass,  
and the river.

Robin's sisters and my Aunt's lily daughter  
Laughed and talked, and tinkled light as wrens  
If there were a little colony all hens  
To go walking by the steep turn of Sweetwater.

Let them alone, dear Aunt, just for one minute  
Till I go fishing in the dark of my mind:  
Where have I seen before, against the wind,  
These bright virgins, robed and bare of bonnet,

Flowing with music of their strange quick tongue  
And adventuring with delicate paces by the stream,—  
Myself a child, old suddenly at the scream  
From one of the white throats which it hid among?

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## Janet Waking

Beautifully Janet slept  
Till it was deeply morning. She woke then  
And thought about her dainty-feathered hen,  
To see how it had kept.

One kiss she gave her mother.  
Only a small one gave she to her daddy  
Who would have kissed each curl of his shining baby;  
No kiss at all for her brother.

"Old Chucky, old Chucky!" she cried,  
Running across the world upon the grass  
To Chucky's house, and listening. But alas,  
Her Chucky had died.

It was a transmogrifying bee  
Came droning down on Chucky's old bald head  
And sat and put the poison. It scarcely bled,  
But how exceedingly

And purple did the knot  
Swell with the venom and communicate  
Its rigor! Now the poor comb stood up straight  
But Chucky did not.

So there was Janet  
Kneeling on the wet grass, crying her brown hen  
(Translated far beyond the daughters of men)  
To rise and walk upon it.

And weeping fast as she had breath  
Janet implored us, "Wake her from her sleep!"  
And would not be instructed in how deep  
Was the forgetful kingdom of death.

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## Captain Carpenter

Captain Carpenter rose up in his prime  
Put on his pistols and went riding out  
But had got wellnigh nowhere at that time  
Till he fell in with ladies in a rout.

It was a pretty lady and all her train  
That played with him so sweetly but before  
An hour she'd taken a sword with all her main  
And twined him of his nose for evermore.

Captain Carpenter mounted up one day  
And rode straightway into a stranger rogue  
That looked unchristian but be that as may  
The Captain did not wait upon prologue.

But drew upon him out of his great heart  
The other swung against him with a club  
And cracked his two legs at the shinny part  
And let him roll and stick like any tub.

Captain Carpenter rode many a time  
From male and female he took sundry harms  
He met the wife of Satan crying "I'm  
The she-wolf bids you shall bear no more arms."

Their strokes and counters whistled in the wind  
I wish he had delivered half his blows  
But where she should have made off like a hind  
The bitch bit off his arms at the elbows.

And Captain Carpenter parted with his ears  
To a black devil that used him in this wise  
O Jesus ere his threescore and ten years  
Another had plucked out his sweet blue eyes.

Captain Carpenter got up on his roan  
And sallied from the gate in hell's despite  
I heard him asking in the grimmest tone  
If any enemy yet there was to fight?

"To any adversary it is fame  
If he risk to be wounded by my tongue  
Or burnt in two beneath my red heart's flame  
Such are the perils he is cast among.

"But if he can he has a pretty choice  
From an anatomy with little to lose  
Whether he cut my tongue and take my voice  
Or whether it be my round red heart he choose."

It was the neatest knave that ever was seen  
Stepping in perfume from his lady's bower  
Who at this word put in his merry mien  
And fell on Captain Carpenter like a tower.

I would not knock old fellows in the dust  
But there lay Captain Carpenter on his back  
His weapons were the old heart in his bust  
And a blade shook between rotten teeth alack.

The rogue in scarlet and grey soon knew his mind  
He wished to get his trophy and depart  
With gentle apology and touch refined  
He pierced him and produced the Captain's heart.

God's mercy rest on Captain Carpenter now  
I thought him Sirs an honest gentleman  
Citizen husband soldier and scholar enow  
Let jangling kites eat of him if they can.

But God's deep curses follow after those  
That shore him of his goodly nose and ears  
His legs and strong arms at the two elbows  
And eyes that had not watered seventy years.

The curse of hell upon the sleek upstart  
That got the Captain finally on his back  
And took the red red vitals of his heart  
And made the kites to whet their beaks clack clack.

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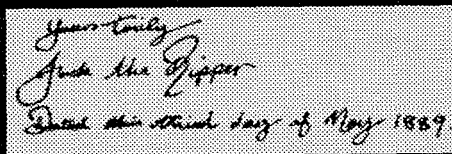
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