
he believes America does not need much in the way of a huge global agenda. Of the analyst at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D. C., who wants "to defend legal order at the far reaches of the globe" on the grounds that "massive breakdowns in the civil order are too dangerous for the entire [global] system," Steel scathingly remarks, "Perhaps this distinguished scholar has not noticed the 'massive breakdowns in the civil order' that have taken place a few blocks from his imposing office."

Steel minces no words when he says that America's overriding duty is to face up to its internal problems. After all, America's rivals today—the industrial megalith of Japan, the nimble trading states of Southeast Asia, the emerging colossus of China, the giant emporium of a uniting Europe—do not want to bury capitalism. To the contrary, they want to do it better than Americans do. "While we struggle with our role of superpower," Steel comments, "they concentrate on productivity, market penetration, wealth, and innovation: the kind of power that matters most in today's world. In this competition we are—with our chronic deficits, weak currency, massive borrowings, and immense debt—a very

strange kind of superpower."

Finally, what are Steel's hopes for this international order in which America so strangely operates as a superpower? His search for a viable future leads him ultimately not forward but backward, into the past. The phrases "concert of Europe" and "balance of power" have an archaic 19th-century ring to them, but Steele finds them the brightest beacons for the 21st century. The role of global policeman is dangerous, but that of traditional "great power," for all Chomsky's labeling of it as naked imperialism, is actually quite useful. If security interests can be redefined less extravagantly, as was done within the balance of power, and if groups of powers can cooperate regionally, as was achieved in the concert of Europe, there is a genuine prospect for a "new world order"—one, Steel believes, that will not be vitiated by ideological polarization. Oh come back, you satisfied nations Churchill spoke of, come back.

—Charles Townshend, a former Wilson Center Fellow and a historian at the University of Keele in England, is the author of *Making the Peace: Public Order and Public Security in Modern Britain* (1993).

OTHER TITLES

History

THE FORBIDDEN BESTSELLERS OF PRE-REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE. By Robert Darnton. Norton. 409 pp. \$27.50

Pornography exploits women—and men, children, and dogs. Such, at least, is the conventional wisdom today, and people who agree on little else, feminists and fundamentalists, right-wing conservatives and gay rights activ-

ists, can at least agree that pornography represents the worst and most reactionary forces of society. Yet, venturing into an 18th-century underworld of penurious hack writers, nervous publishers, and police-dodging peddlers, Princeton University historian Darnton has discovered a forbidden erotic literature that was, in fact, enlightened, philosophical, and progressive.

For two decades Darnton has been elaborating a thesis about the French Revolution



that is itself somewhat revolutionary: namely, that the cultural origins of the Revolution lie beyond the witty *politesse* of the canonical Enlightenment, in the smutty, scandalous, and highly popular works of the so-called *Rousseaus du ruisseau* (Rousseaus of the gutter). In *The Business of Enlightenment* (1979), Darnton described how respectable publishers in France or just beyond its border sold illicit reading matter through such techniques as “marrying” or “larding” (splicing the pages of, say, *Fanny Hill* in French in between those of the New Testament). Now Darnton advances beyond the mechanics of book production and distribution to analyze the contents of these “hot” best sellers. The most popular illicit books of the pre-Revolutionary period (1750–89) were strange hybrids of materialist philosophy, explicit pornography, political slander, and radical utopianism. Darnton scrutinizes three books in particular: an ultra-racy novel, *Thérèse philosophe*; a political utopia

with the forward-looking title *The Year 2240*; and a libel (one of many) of Louis XV’s mistress, *Anecdotes of Madame the Countess du Barry*. Clearly, the line between smut and “serious” thinking was less sharply drawn at that time than today. In *Thérèse philosophe*, women and their lovers (usually priests) discuss fine points of materialist philosophy and utilitarian ethics between bouts of mutual masturbation, thus putting into practice John Locke’s proposition that all knowledge comes from the senses.

The question that Darnton gingerly circles is whether books, these or any others, actually make revolutions. His cautious, indirect answer goes something like this: books can offer readers stories that they understand in relation to their own “cultural frames,” which in turn may affect their behavior. The political slander aimed at Louis XV, his mistresses, and his hated ministers influenced readers’ perceptions of the political upheavals of the late 1770s, and in this indirect way possibly—but only possibly—contributed to the onset of revolution. Darnton’s “indirect causation” does not, in fact, much alter our basic understanding of the French Revolution. But by resurrecting works too explosive to have been included in the classical anthologies—yet works that 18th-century readers found nearly as *philosophiques* as Montesquieu’s political theory or Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*—Darnton has permanently altered our understanding of the Enlightenment that preceded the Revolution.

THE DE-MORALIZATION OF SOCIETY:

From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values.

By Gertrude Himmelfarb. Knopf. 314 pp. \$24

In the nine previous books that established her as a leading historian of the English Victorians, Himmelfarb insistently but discretely held up the Victorian past as a mirror to our modern ills. There is similar scholarship in *The De-Moralization of Society*, but the reticence is gone: now the past argues openly with the present (and wins). We have, Himmelfarb