

Contemporary Affairs

VOICE AND EQUALITY:

Civic Voluntarism in American Politics.

By Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady.

Harvard Univ. Press. 662 pp. \$39.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper

Is American citizenship in crisis? Yes, say most pundits, not to mention most scholars of contemporary political life. A more nuanced reply appears in this comprehensive study, based on a massive survey of more than 15,000 Americans.

Having conducted their investigation at the end of the 1980s, a decade fraught with fractious single-issue politics and virulent partisan combat, political scientists Verba, Schlozman, and Brady report evidence that somewhat contradicts the stereotype of mounting public cynicism toward political institutions. Indeed, they find that voluntary participation is prevalent; that political activity aims (as much as possible) at the "common good"; and that the decline of voting is not matched by an erosion of more active forms of engagement, such as contacting officials on policy matters and giving money to campaigns.

Admittedly, these findings support the commonplace observation that political parties are getting weaker, interest groups stronger. Yet the authors make the more interesting point that political parties and interest groups are also changing. As they note, "Nationalization and professionalization have redefined the role of the citizen activist as, increasingly, a writer of checks and letters."

Verba and his colleagues find this change troubling. The reduction of civic voluntarism to insubstantial "check book" politics neither cultivates social responsibility nor leaves "activists feeling satisfied." It also gives disproportionate influence to those bankrolling the new pressure groups. Back in the 1960s, California Assembly Speaker Jesse Unruh remarked that "money is the mother's milk of politics." With the decline of other forms of political participation (such as community-based organizations) comes the prospect of even less solid nourishment for racial minorities and other economically disadvantaged groups. Such "representation distortion" means greater activism among the haves,

greater apathy among the have-nots.

Thus, *Voice and Equality* presents a challenging paradox. On the one hand, the discourse of class is becoming less salient—in a political regime that has never been heavily imbued with the rhetoric of economic inequality. On the other, the state of political participation in America is now such that "class matters profoundly."

About the causes and consequences of this paradox, the reader is left to speculate. One key to understanding the puzzle might be the decline of progressivism. Born of a moral crusade against economic and political injustice at the turn of the century, progressivism had by the 1970s degenerated into a politics of entitlement that corroded political associations and collective responsibility. In the wake of this "rights revolution," religious institutions have become more pivotal in representing the rank and file's moral concerns.

Yet as *Voice and Equality* reveals, religiosity no longer animates progressive principles. Rather, the authors note, "the center of gravity of the religious agenda in politics currently is a conservative concern with social issues, with a particular focus on the advocacy of pro-life views on abortion." However important, this exclusive focus on abortion draws religiously oriented activists away from other, equally grave issues. As concerned as Americans are about abortion, they are just as worried about the moral decay they perceive in their children's schools, their places of work, and their governing institutions. When it comes to representing and addressing these abiding concerns, neither rights-based groups nor religious associations provide an adequate substitute for genuine civic attachment—what Tocqueville called "the art of *political* association."

—Sidney M. Milkis

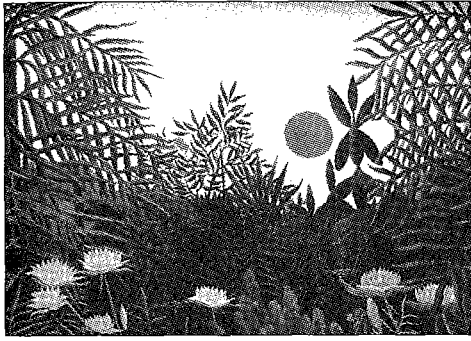
UNCOMMON GROUND:

Toward Reinventing Nature.

Edited by William Cronon.

Norton. 561 pp. \$29.95

Pristine, balanced, wild. These are some of the terms we apply to the natural world. Yet there is nothing *natural* about our use of such terms, according to the 14 essays col-



lected in this volume. Both Cronon, an historian at the University of Wisconsin, and his contributors assert that our ideas about nature are “culturally constructed.”

Several essays are illuminating forays into what might be called “construction sites”—the Amazon rain forest, Sea World, Central Park—where popular ideas about nature are formed. Cronon, Candace Slater, and other contributors point out that the notion of an Edenic natural world, unsullied by human presence, is a myth that fosters unrealistic environmental policies.

Yet these strong points are undermined by the tendency of many contributors to treat *nature* as a mere linguistic bauble whose meaning can be constructed—and deconstructed—at will. More useful than some of these essays would have been a serious discussion of the new, and presumably more accurate, “constructions” of nature now being developed by science.

—Steven Lagerfeld

AN UNQUIET MIND:

A Memoir of Moods and Madness.

By Kay Redfield Jamison.

Knopf. 224 pp. \$22

Memoir is deceptive. On the surface, it appears to be the easiest of genres. No research, no footnotes, no argument. Just write down what happened. But in the depths, where the motley ingredients of a life bubble together, memoir becomes a witch’s brew difficult to stir.

In this memoir, Jamison, a distinguished psychiatrist specializing in manic-depressive illness, peers into the cauldron of her own prolonged struggle with the disease. “It has been a fascinating, albeit deadly, enemy and companion,” she writes. “I have found it to be seductively complicated, a distillation both of what is finest in our natures, and of what is most dangerous.”

Jamison confesses to the difficulty of speaking as both patient and doctor. Unfortunately, this does not prevent her from interrupting the flow of her narrative to engage in professional shoptalk or (worse) to share the details of her curriculum vitae. Nevertheless, this is a brave book. At its best, it makes vivid not only the pain of manic-depressive illness but also—most strikingly—its pleasure:

“How could one, should one, recapture . . . the gliding through starfields and dancing along the rings of Saturn, the zany manic enthusiasms? How can one ever bring back the long summer days of passion, the remembrance of lilacs, ecstasy, and gin fizzes that spilled down over a garden wall, and the peals of riotous laughter that lasted until the sun came up or the police arrived?”

—Martha Bayles

AGING AND OLD AGE.

By Richard A. Posner. Univ. of Chicago Press. 363 pp. \$29.95

Francis Bacon once wrote: “Age is best in four things—old wood best to burn, old wine to drink, old friends to trust, and old authors to read.” What about our understanding of age itself? Should we rely on old ideas—or new? Posner, a federal judge, legal scholar, and economist, evaluates the contentious issues surrounding age through the (relatively) new discipline of rational-choice theory. Though his wide-ranging study draws upon such diverse fields as medicine, psychology, and philosophy, Posner admits that “economics wields the baton of my multidisciplinary orchestra.”

As an overture, Posner asserts that aging is real—not, as some activists propose, a social construct that gathers otherwise unrelated mental and physical illnesses under an unnecessarily demeaning rubric. He also speculates, in an armchair evolutionary argument, on why human beings are built to break down: eventually our resource consumption becomes a drag on the reproductive capacities of the young.

Yet while aging is real, people often behave as though it were not. Among the many topics addressed by this book is social security. Posner admits that most mandatory retirement savings systems are justified by the fact that young people tend not to save for retirement, even though they have every reasonable expectation of living long past