

The New Politics of Consumption

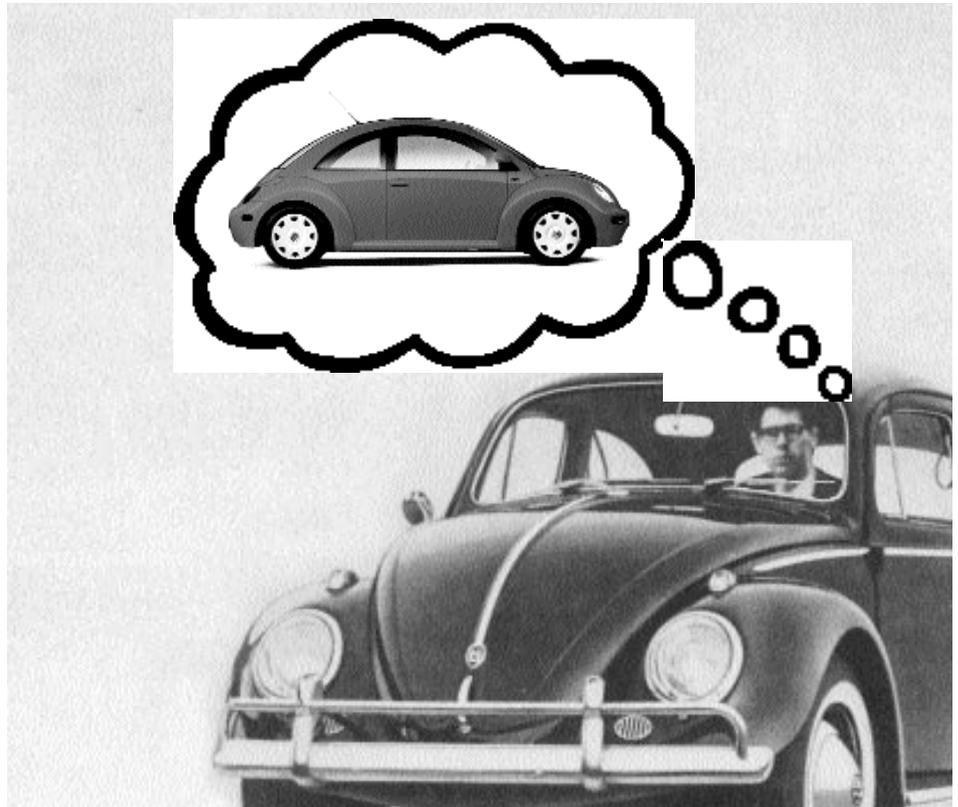
Why Americans want so much more than they need.

Juliet Schor

In contemporary American culture, consuming is as authentic as it gets. Advertisements, getting a bargain, garage sales, and credit cards are firmly entrenched pillars of our way of life. We shop on our lunch hours, patronize outlet malls on vacation, and satisfy our latest desires with a late-night click of the mouse.

Yet for all its popularity, the shopping mania provokes considerable dis-ease: many Americans worry about our preoccupation with getting and spending. They fear we are losing touch with more worthwhile values and ways of living. But the discomfort rarely goes much further than that; it never coheres into a persuasive, well-articulated critique of consumerism. By contrast, in the 1960s and early '70s, a far-reaching critique of consumer culture was a part of our political discourse. Elements of the New Left, influenced by the Frankfurt School, as well as by John Kenneth Galbraith and others, put forward a scathing indictment. They argued that Americans had been manipulated into participating in a dumbed-down, artificial consumer culture, which yielded few true human satisfactions.

For reasons that are not hard to imagine, this particular approach was short-lived, even among critics of American society and culture. It seemed too patronizing to talk about manipulation or the "true needs" of average Americans. In its stead, critics adopted a more liberal point of view, and deferred to individuals on consumer issues. Social critics again emphasized the distribution of resources, with the more economic goal of maximizing the incomes of working people. The good life, they suggested, could be achieved by attaining a comfortable, middle-class standard of living. This outlook was particularly prevalent in eco-



nomics, where even radical economists have long believed that income is the key to well-being. While radical political economy, as it came to be called, retained a powerful critique of alienation in production and the distribution of property, it abandoned the nascent intellectual project of analyzing the consumer sphere. Few economists now think about how we consume, and whether it reproduces class inequality, alienation, or power. "Stuff" is the part of the equation that the system is thought to have gotten nearly right.

Of course, many Americans retained a critical stance toward our consumer culture. They embody that stance in their daily lives—in the ways they live and raise their kids. But the rejection of consumerism, if you will, has taken place

principally at an individual level. It is not associated with a widely accepted intellectual analysis, and an associated *critical politics of consumption*.

But such a politics has become an urgent need. The average American now finds it harder to achieve a satisfying standard of living than 25 years ago. Work requires longer hours, jobs are less secure, and pressures to spend more intense. Consumption-induced environmental damage remains pervasive, and we are in the midst of widespread failures of public provision. While the current economic boom has allayed consumers' fears for the moment, many Americans have long-term worries about their ability to meet basic needs, ensure a decent standard of living for their

children, and keep up with an ever-escalating consumption norm.

In response to these developments, social critics continue to focus on income. In his impressive analysis of the problems of contemporary American capitalism, *Fat and Mean*, economist David Gordon emphasized income *adequacy*. The “vast majority of US households,” he argues, “can barely make ends meet.... Meager livelihoods are a *typical* condition, an *average* circumstance.” Meanwhile, the Economic Policy Institute focuses on the distribution of income and wealth, arguing that the gains of the top 20 percent have jeopardized the well-being of the bottom 80 percent. Incomes have stagnated and the robust 3 percent growth rates of the 1950s and '60s are long gone. If we have a consumption problem, this view implicitly states, we can solve it by getting more income into more people's hands. The goals are redistribution and growth.

It is difficult to take exception to this view. It combines a deep respect for individual choice (the liberal part) with a commitment to justice and equality (the egalitarian part). I held it myself for many years. But I now believe that by failing to look deeper—to examine the very nature of consumption—it has become too limiting. In short, I do not think that the “income solution” addresses some of the most profound failures of the current consumption regime.

Why not? First, consuming is part of the problem. Income (the solution) leads to consumption practices that exacerbate and reproduce class and social inequalities, resulting in—and perhaps even worsening—an unequal distribution of income. Second, the system is structured such that an *adequate* income is an elusive goal. That is because adequacy is relative—defined by reference to the incomes of others. Without an analysis of consumer desire and need, and a different framework for understanding what is adequate, we are likely to find ourselves, twenty years from now, arguing that a median income of \$100,000—rather than half that—is adequate. These arguments underscore the social context of consumption: the ways in which our sense of social standing and belonging comes from what we consume. If true, they suggest that attempts to achieve equality or adequacy of individual in-

comes without changing consumption patterns will be self-defeating.

Finally, it is difficult to make an ethical argument that people in the world's richest country need more when the global income gap is so wide, the disparity in world resource use so enormous, and the possibility that we are already consuming beyond the earth's ecological carrying capacity so likely. This third critique will get less attention in this essay—because it is more familiar, not because it is less important—but I will return to it in the conclusion.

I agree that justice requires a vastly more equal society, in terms of income and wealth. The question is whether we should also aim for a society in which our relationship to consuming changes, a society in which we consume *differently*. I argue here for such a perspective: for a critique of consumer culture and practices. Somebody needs to be for quality of life, not just quantity of stuff. And to do so requires an approach that does not trivialize consumption, but accords it the respect and centrality it deserves.

The New Consumerism

A new politics of consumption should begin with daily life, and recent developments in the sphere of consumption. I describe these developments as “the new consumerism,” by which I mean an up-scaling of lifestyle norms; the pervasiveness of conspicuous, status goods and of competition for acquiring them; and the growing disconnect between consumer desires and incomes.

Social comparison and its dynamic manifestation—the need to “keep up”—have long been part of American culture. My term is “competitive consumption,” the idea that spending is in large part driven by a comparative or competitive process in which individuals try to keep up with the norms of the social group with which they identify—a “reference group.” Although the term is new, the idea is not. Thorstein Veblen, James Duesenberry, Fred Hirsch, and Robert Frank have all written about the importance of relative position as a dominant spending motive. What's new is the redefinition of reference groups: today's comparisons are less likely to take place between or among households of similar means. Instead, the lifestyles of the upper middle class and the rich have become a more salient point of reference for people throughout the in-

In This Forum

We do lots of consuming in the United States. Moreover, the time we spend away from consuming is commonly devoted to doing more of it in the future—we work to make the money, think about what to buy, and shop for the stuff itself. Consumption, in short, is a national preoccupation, a way of life.

What accounts for this striking devotion? Is it a good or bad thing? And if it is bad, what sort of “politics of consumption” might remedy it.

In this New Democracy Forum, economist Juliet Schor proposes some answers to these questions. She traces our aspiration to increase consumption to our ideas about an acceptable standard of living—ideas we get by comparing our own position with the situations of others. So our desires are growing principally because we have been comparing ourselves to wealthier people—not only with the Joneses down the block, but also with the Joneses in 90210 (who have benefited handsomely from two decades of growing income inequality). Schor argues that increased private consumption is a bad thing, partly because we already consume so much, and partly because increasing private consumption is a self-defeating route to happiness: if doing well requires doing better than others, then lots of us are doomed to defeat. The right “politics of consumption” would, in turn, have to encourage people to downplay the importance of social comparisons in their ideas about an acceptable standard of living, and to encourage instead “consumption that is democratic, egalitarian, and available to all.”

Schor's respondents disagree with her at nearly every turn, but the crux of the disagreement lies in the politics. Many respondents argue, or at least suggest, that a serious political movement can criticize the distribution of resources, but risks an unacceptable moralism if it makes a political issue of private consumption patterns themselves. Though the issue is not settled here, its ultimate resolution is central to our expectations of the economy, and will do much to define the character of democratic politics for the next generation.

Joshua Cohen & Joel Rogers, Editors

come distribution. Luxury, rather than mere comfort, is a widespread aspiration.

One reason for this shift to “upscale emulation” is the decline of the neighborhood as a focus of comparison. Economically speaking, neighborhoods are relatively homogeneous groupings. In the 1950s and ’60s, when Americans were keeping up with the Joneses down the street, they typically compared themselves to other households of similar incomes. Because of this focus on neighbors, the gap between aspirations and means tended to be moderate.

But as married women entered the workforce in larger numbers—particularly in white collar jobs—they were exposed to a more economically diverse group of people, and became more likely to gaze upward. Neighborhood contacts correspondingly declined, and the workplace became a more prominent point of reference. Moreover, as people spent less time with neighbors and friends, and more time on the family-room couch, television became more important as a source of consumer cues and information. Because television shows are so heavily skewed to the “lifestyles of the rich and upper middle class,” they inflate the viewer’s perceptions of what others have, and by extension what is worth acquiring—what one must have in order to avoid being “out of it.”

Trends in inequality also helped to create the new consumerism. Since the 1970s, the distribution of income and wealth have shifted decisively in the direction of the top 20 percent. The share of after-tax family income going to the top 20 percent rose from 41.4 percent in 1979 to 46.8 percent in 1996. The share of wealth controlled by the top 20 percent rose from 81.3 percent in 1983 to 84.3 percent in 1997. This windfall resulted in a surge in conspicuous spending at the top. Remember the 1980s—the decade of greed and excess? Beginning with the super-rich, whose gains have been disproportionately higher, and trickling down to the merely affluent, visible status spending was the order of the day. Slowed down temporarily by the recession during the early 1990s, conspicuous luxury consumption has intensified during the current boom. Trophy homes, diamonds of a carat or more, granite countertops, and sport utility vehicles are the primary consumer symbols of the late-1990s. Television, as well as films,

magazines, and newspapers ensure that the remaining 80 percent of the nation is aware of the status purchasing that has swept the upper echelons.

In the meantime, upscale emulation had become well-established. Researchers Susan Fournier and Michael Guiry found that 35 percent of their sample aspired to reach the top 6 percent of the income distribution, and another 49 percent aspired to the next 12 percent. Only 15 percent reported that they would be satisfied with “living a comfortable life”—that is, being middle class. But 85 percent of the population cannot earn the six-figure incomes necessary to support upper-middle-class lifestyles. The result is a growing aspirational gap: with desires persistently out-running incomes, many consumers find themselves frustrated. One survey of US households found that the level of income needed to fulfill one’s dreams doubled between 1986 and 1994, and is currently more than twice the median household income.

The rapid escalation of desire and need, relative to income, also may help to explain the precipitous decline in the savings rate—from roughly 8 percent in 1980, to 4 percent in the early 1990s, to the current level of zero. (The stock market boom may also be inducing households not to save; but financial assets are still highly concentrated, with half of all households at net worths of \$10,000 or less, including the value of their homes.) About two-thirds of American households do not save in a typical year. Credit card debt has skyrocketed, with unpaid balances now averaging about \$7,000 and the typical household paying \$1,000 each year in interest and penalties. These are not just low-income households. Bankruptcy rates continue to set new records, rising from 200,000 a year in 1980 to 1.4 million in 1998.

The new consumerism, with its growing aspirational gap, has begun to jeopardize the quality of American life. Within the middle class—and even the upper middle class—many families experience an almost threatening pressure to keep up, both for themselves and their children. They are deeply concerned about the rigors of the global economy, and the need to have their children attend “good” schools. This means living in a community with relatively high housing costs. For some households this also means provid-

ing their children with advantages purchased on the private market (computers, lessons, extra-curriculars, private schooling). Keeping two adults in the labor market—as so many families do, to earn the incomes to stay middle class—is expensive, not only because of the second car, child-care costs, and career wardrobe. It also creates the need for time-saving, but costly, commodities and services, such as take-out food and dry cleaning, as well as stress-relieving experiences. Finally, the financial tightrope that so many households walk—high expenses, low savings—is a constant source of stress and worry. While precise estimates are difficult to come by, one can argue that somewhere between a quarter and half of all households live paycheck-to-paycheck.

These problems are magnified for low-income households. Their sources of income have become increasingly erratic and inadequate, on account of employment instability, the proliferation of part-time jobs, and restrictions on welfare payments. Yet most low-income households remain firmly integrated within consumerism. They are targets for credit card companies, who find them an easy mark. They watch more television, and are more exposed to its desire-creating properties. Low-income children are more likely to be exposed to commercials at school, as well as home. The growing prominence of the values of the market, materialism, and economic success make financial failure more consequential and painful.

These are the effects at the household level. The new consumerism has also set in motion another dynamic: it siphons off resources that could be used for alternatives to private consumption. We use our income in four basic ways: private consumption, public consumption, private savings, and leisure. When consumption standards can be met easily out of current income, there is greater willingness to support public goods, save privately, and cut back on time spent at work (in other words, to “buy leisure”). Conversely, when lifestyle norms are upscaled more rapidly than income, private consumption “crowds out” alternative uses of income. That is arguably what happened in the 1980s and 1990s: resources shifting into private consumption, and away from free time, the public sector, and saving. Hours of work have risen dramatically, saving rates have plummeted, public funds for education, recreation, and

the arts have fallen in the wake of a grassroots tax revolt. The timing suggests a strong coincidence between these developments and the intensification of competitive consumption—though I would have to do more systematic research before arguing causality. Indeed, this scenario makes good sense of an otherwise surprising finding: that indicators of “social health” or “genuine progress” (i.e., basic quality-of-life measures) began to diverge from GDP in the mid-1970s, after moving in tandem for decades. Can it be that consuming and prospering are no longer compatible states?

To be sure, other social critics have noted some of these trends. But they often draw radically different conclusions. For example, there is now a conservative jeremiad that points to the recent tremendous increases in consumption and concludes that Americans just don't realize how good they have it, that they have become overly entitled and spoiled. Reduced expectations, they say, will cure our discontents. A second, related perspective suggests that the solution lies in an act of psychological independence—individuals can just ignore the upward shift in consumption norms, remaining perfectly content to descend in the social hierarchy.

These perspectives miss the essence of consumption dynamics. Americans did not suddenly become greedy. The aspirational gap has been created by structural changes—such as the decline of community and social connection, the intensification of inequality, the growing role of mass media, and heightened penalties for failing in the labor market. Upscaling is mainly defensive, and has both psychological and practical dimensions.

Similarly, the profoundly social nature of consumption ensures that these issues cannot be resolved by pure acts of will. Our notions of what is adequate, necessary, or luxurious are shaped by the larger social context. Most of us are deeply tied into our particular class and other group identities, and our spending patterns help reproduce them.

Thus, a collective, not just an individual, response is necessary. Someone needs to address the larger question of the consumer culture itself. But doing so risks complaints about being intrusive, patronizing, or elitist. We need to understand better the ideas that fuel those complaints.

Consumer Knows Best

The current consumer boom rests on growth in incomes, wealth, and credit. But it also rests on something more intangible: social attitudes toward consumer decision-making and choices. Ours is an ideology of non-interference—the view that one should be able to buy what one likes, where one likes, and as much as one likes, with nary a glance from the government, neighbors, ministers, or political parties. Consumption is perhaps the clearest example of an individual behavior which our society takes to be almost wholly personal, completely outside the purview of social concern and policy. The consumer is king. And queen.

This view has much to recommend it. After all, who would relish the idea of sumptuary legislation, rationing, or government controls on what can be produced or purchased? The liberal approach to consumption combines a deep respect for the consumer's ability to act in her own best interest and an emphasis on the efficiency gains of unregulated consumer markets: a commitment to liberty and the general welfare.

Cogent as it is, however, this view is vulnerable on a number of grounds. Structural biases and market failures in the operation of consumer markets undermine its general validity; consumer markets are neither so free nor so efficient as the conventional story suggests. The basis of a new consumer policy should be an understanding of the presence of structural distortions in consumers' choices, the importance of social inequalities and power in consumption practices, a more sophisticated understanding of consumer motivations, and serious analysis of the processes that form our preferences. To appreciate the force of these criticisms, we need a sharper statement of the position they reject.

The Conventional View

The liberal view on markets for consumer goods has adherents in many disciplines, but its core analytic argument comes from standard economic theory, which begins from some well-known assumptions about consumers and the markets in which they operate.

1. *Consumers are rational.* They act to maximize their own well-being. They know what they prefer, and make decisions accordingly. Their “preferences” are

taken as given, as relatively unchanging, and as unproblematic in a normative sense. They do not act capriciously, impulsively, or self-destructively.

2. *Consumers are well-informed.* They have perfect information about the products offered in the market. They know about all relevant (to the consumer) characteristics pertaining to the production and use of the product.

3. *Consumer preferences are consistent (both at a point in time and over time).* Consistency at a point in time means transitivity: If A is preferred to B and B to C then A will be preferred to C. (In other words, if roast beef is preferred to hamburgers and hamburgers to hot-dogs, then roast beef is preferred to hot dogs.) Consistency over time can be thought of as a “no regrets” assumption. If the consumer is faced with a choice of a product that yields satisfaction in the present, but has adverse consequences in the future—eat chocolate today and feel great, but gain five unwanted pounds by next week—and the consumer chooses that product today, he or she will not regret the choice when the future arrives. (This does not mean the extra pounds are welcomed, only that the pleasure of the chocolate continues to outweigh the pain of the pounds.)

4. *Each consumer's preferences are independent of other consumers' preferences.* We are self-contained in a social sense. If I want a sport utility vehicle, it is because I like them, not because my neighbor does. The trendiness of a product does not affect my desire to have it, either positively or negatively.

5. *The production and consumption of goods have no “external” effects.* There are no consequences for the welfare of others that are unreflected in product prices. (A well-known example of external effects is pollution, which imposes costs on others that are not reflected in the price of the good that produces the pollution.)

6. *There are complete and competitive markets in alternatives to consumption.* Alternatives to consumption include savings, public goods, and the “purchase” of leisure. Unless these alternatives are available, the choice of consumption—over other uses of economic resources—may not be the optimal outcome.

Taken together, and combined with conditions of free entry and exit of

firms providing consumer goods, these assumptions imply that no consumer policy is the best consumer policy. Individual consumers know best and will act in their own interest. Firms will provide what the consumers want; those that don't will not survive a competitive marketplace. Competition and rationality together ensure that consumers will be sovereign—that is, that their interests will “rule.” And the results will be better than any we could achieve through government regulation or political action.

To be sure, conventional theory and policy have always admitted some deviations from these highly idealized conditions. In some areas interventionist policy has been long-standing. First, some consumers are not considered to be fully rational—for example, children or, in an earlier era, women. Because kids are not thought to be capable of acting in their own interest, the state justifies protective policies, such as the restricting advertising aimed at them. Second, the state has traditionally regulated highly addictive or harmful commodities, such as drugs, alcohol, and explosives. (As the debates surrounding the legalization of drugs make clear, the analytical basis for this policy is by no means universally accepted.) A third class of highly regulated commodities involve sex: pornography, contraceptives, sexual paraphernalia, and so forth. Here the rationale is more puritanical. American society has always been uncomfortable about sex and willing to override its bias against consumer regulation because of that. Finally, the government has for much of this century—though less forcefully since the Reagan administration—attempted to ensure minimum standards of product safety and quality.

These exceptions aside, the standard model holds strongly to the idea that unfettered markets yield the optimal outcomes, a conclusion that follows logically and inexorably from the initial assumptions. Obviously, the assumptions of the standard model are extreme, and the real world deviates from them. On that everyone agrees. The question is by how much, how often, and under what conditions? Is the world sufficiently different from this model that its conclusions are misguided?

Serious empirical investigations suggest that these assumptions do not adequately describe a wide range of consumer behaviors. The simple rational-

economic model is reasonable for predicting some fraction of choice behavior for some class of goods—apples versus oranges, milk versus orange juice—but it is inadequate when we are led to more consequential issues: consumption versus leisure, products with high symbolic content, fashion, consumer credit, and so on. In particular, it exaggerates how rational, informed, and consistent people are. It overstates their independence. And it fails to address the pressures that consumerism imposes on individuals with respect to available choices and the consequences of various consumption decisions. Understand those pressures, and you may well arrive at very different conclusions about politics and policy.

Rational, deliberative, and in control?

The economic model presents the typical consumer as deliberative and highly forward-looking, not subject to impulsive behavior. Shopping is seen as an information-gathering exercise in which the buyer looks for the best possible deal for product she has decided to purchase. Consumption choices represent optimizing within an environment of deliberation, control, and long-term planning.

Were such a picture accurate it would be news (and news of a very bad sort) to a whole industry of advertisers, marketers, and consultants whose research on consumer behavior tells a very different story. Indeed, their findings are difficult to reconcile with the picture of the consumer as highly deliberative and purposive.

Consider some of the stylized facts of modern marketing. For example, the “law of the invariant right”: shoppers overwhelmingly turn right, rather than left, upon entering a store. This is only consistent with the rational search model if products are disproportionately to be found on the right side of the aisle. Or consider the fact that products placed in the so-called “decompression zone” at the entrance to a store are 30 percent less likely to be purchased than those placed beyond it. Or that the number of feet into a store the customer walks is correlated with the number of items purchased. It's far harder to square these findings with “rational” behavior than with an unplanned and contingent action. Finally, the standard model has a very hard time explaining the fact that if, while shopping, a woman is acciden-

tally brushed from behind, her propensity to purchase falls precipitously.

Credit cards present another set of anomalies for the reigning assumptions. Surveys suggest that most people who acquire credit cards say that they do not intend to borrow on them; yet roughly two-thirds do. The use of credit cards leads to higher expenditures. Psychological research suggests that even the visual cue of a credit card logo spurs spending. Survey data shows that many people are in denial about the level of credit card debt that they hold, on average underestimating by a factor of two. And the explosion of personal bankruptcies, now running at roughly 1.5 million a year, can be taken as evidence of a lack of foresight, planning, and control for at least some consumers.

More generally, credit card habits are one example of what economists call “hyperbolic discounting,” that is, an extreme tendency to discount the future. Such a perspective calls into question the idea of time consistency—the ability of individuals to plan spending optimally throughout their lifetimes, to save enough for the future, or to delay gratification. If people are constitutionally inclined to be hyperbolic discounters, as some are now arguing, then forced-saving programs such as Social Security and government-sponsored retirement accounts, restriction on access to credit, waiting periods for major purchases, and a variety of other approaches might improve well-being. Compulsive buying, as well as the milder and far more pervasive control problems that many consumers manifest, can also be incorporated into this framework.

The model of deliberative and informed rationality is also ill-adapted to account for the phenomenon of brand-preference, perhaps the backbone of the modern consumer market. As any beginning student of advertising knows, much of what advertising does is take functionally identical or similar goods and differentiate them on the basis of a variety of non-operational traits. The consumer is urged to buy Pepsi because it represents the future, or Reebok shoes because the company stands for strong women. The consumer develops a brand preference, and believes that his brand is superior in quality. The difficulty for the standard model arises because, absent the labels, consumers are often unable to distinguish

among brands, or fail to choose their favorites. From the famous beer taste test of the 1960s (brand loyalists misidentified their beers), to cosmetics, garments, and other tests of more recent vintage, it seems that we love our brands, but we often can't tell which brands are which.

What can we conclude from consumers' inability to tell one washing powder, lipstick, sweater, or toothpaste from another? Not necessarily that they are foolishly paying a brand premium for goods. (Although there are some consumers who do fall into this category—they wouldn't pay the brand premium, as distinct from a true quality premium, if they knew it existed.) What is more generally true, I believe, is that many consumers do not understand why they prefer one brand over another, or desire particular products. This is because there is a significant dimension of consumer desire which operates at the non-rational level. Consumers *believe* their brand loyalties are driven by functional dimensions, but a whole host of other motivators are at work—for example, social meanings as constructed by advertisers; personal fantasies projected onto goods; competitive pressures. While this behavior is not properly termed "irrational," neither is it conscious, deliberative, and narrowly purposive. Consumers are not deluded, duped, or completely manipulated. But neither do they act like profit-maximizing entrepreneurs or scientific management experts. The realm of consumption, as a rich historical literature has taught us, has long been a "dream world," where fantasy, play, inner desire, escape, and emotion loom large. This is a significant part of what draws us to it.

Consumption is Social

Within economics, the major alternative to the assumption that individuals' preferences are independent—that people do not want things because others want them—is the "relative" income, positional, or "competitive consumption" perspective noted above. In this model, a person's well-being depends on his or her relative consumption—how it compares to some selected group of others. Such positioning is one of the hallmarks of the new consumerism.

Of course, social comparison predates the 1980s. In 1984, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explored the social pat-

tern of consumption and taste in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Bourdieu found that family socialization processes and educational experiences are the primary determinants of taste for a wide range of cultural goods, including food, dress, and home decor. In contrast to the liberal approach, in which consumption choices are both personal and trivialized—that is, socially inconsequential—Bourdieu argues that class status is gained, lost, and reproduced in part through everyday acts of consumer behavior. Being dressed incorrectly or displaying "vulgar" manners can cost a person a management or professional job. Conversely, one can gain entry into social circles, or build lucrative business contacts, by revealing appropriate tastes, manners, and culture. Thus, consumption practices become important in maintaining the basic structures of power and inequality which characterize our world. Such a perspective helps to illuminate why we invest so much meaning in consumer goods—for the middle class its very existence is at stake. And it suggests that people who care about inequality should talk explicitly about the stratification of consumption practices.

If we accept that what we buy is deeply implicated in the structures of social inequality, then the idea that unregulated consumption promotes the general welfare collapses. When people care only about relative position, then general increases in income and consumption do not yield gains in well-being. If my ultimate consumer goal is to maintain parity with my sister, or my neighbor, or Frasier, and our consumption moves in tandem, my well-being is not improved. I am on a "positional treadmill." Indeed, because consuming has costs (in terms of time, effort, and natural resources), positional treadmills can have serious negative effects on well-being. The "working harder to stay in place" mantra of the early 1990s expresses some of this sentiment. In a pure reversal of the standard prescription, collective interventions which stabilize norms, through government policy or other mechanisms, *raise* rather than lower welfare. People should welcome initiatives that reduce the pressure to keep up with a rising standard.

Free and structurally unbiased?

The dynamic of positionally driven spending suggests that Americans are "overconsuming" at least those private goods that figure in our consumption comparisons. There is another reason we may be overconsuming, which has to do with the problems in markets for alternatives to status or positional goods. In particular, I am referring to non-positional private consumption, household savings, public goods, and leisure. Generally speaking, if the markets for these alternatives are incomplete, non-competitive, or do not fully account for social benefits and costs, then overconsumption with respect to *private consumption* may result. I do not believe this is the case with household savings: financial markets are highly competitive and offer households a wide range of ways to save. (The deceptive and aggressive tactics of consumer credit companies might be reckoned a distortion in this market, but I'll leave that aside.) Similarly, I do not argue that the markets for private consumer goods which we tend not to compete about are terribly flawed. Still, there are two markets in which the standard assumptions do not apply: the market for public goods and the market for time. Here I believe the deviations from the assumptions are large, and extremely significant.

In the case of public goods there are at least two big problems. The first is the underproduction of a clean environment. Because environmental damage is typically not included in the price of the product which causes it (e.g., cars, toxic chemicals, pesticides), we overconsume environmentally damaging commodities. Indeed, because all production has an impact on the environment, we overconsume virtually all commodities. This means that we consume too much *in toto*, in comparison to non-environmentally damaging human activities.

The second problem arises from the fact that business interests—the interests of the producers of private goods—have privileged access to the government and disproportionately influence policy. Because they are typically opposed to public provision, the "market" for public goods is structurally biased against provision. In comparison to what a truly democratic state might provide, we find that a business-dominated government skews outcomes in the direction of private pro-

duction. We don't get enough, or good enough, education, arts, recreation, mass transport, and other conventional public goods. We get too many cars, too many clothes, too many collectibles.

For those public goods that are complementary with private spending (roads and cars versus bicycle lanes and bicycles) this bias constrains the choices available to individuals. Without the bicycle lanes or mass transport, private cars are unavoidable. Because so much of our consumption is linked to larger collective decisions, the individual consumer is always operating under particular constraints. Once we move to HDTV, our current televisions will become obsolete. As public telephone booths disappear, mobile phones become more necessary. Without adequate public libraries, I need to purchase more books.

We also underproduce "leisure." That's because employers make it difficult to choose free time, rather than long hours and higher incomes. To use the economist's jargon, the labor market offerings are incomplete with respect to trade-offs of time and money. Employers can exact severe penalties when individuals want to work part-time or forego raises in favor of more vacations or days off. In some jobs the options are just not available; in others the sacrifices in terms of career mobility and benefits are disproportionate to any productivity costs to the employer.

This is not a minor point. The standard model assumes that employees are free to vary their hours, and that whatever combination of hours and income results represents the preferences of employees. But if employees lack the opportunity to vary their working hours, or to use improvements in productivity to reduce their worktime, then we can in no way assume that the trajectory of consumption reflects people's preferences. There may well be a path for the economy that involves less work and less stuff, and is preferred by people to the high-work/high-consumption track. But if that option is blocked, then the fact that we buy a lot can no longer be taken *ipso facto* as proof of our inherent consumer desires. We may merely be doing what is on offer. Because free time is now a strongly desired alternative to income for large numbers of employees, this argu-

ment is more than a theoretical possibility. It has become one of the most pressing failures of the current moment.

A Politics of Consumption

The idea that consumption is private should not, then, be a conversation-stopper. But what should a politics of consumption look like? To start the discussion—not to provide final answers—I suggest seven basic elements:

1. *A right to a decent standard of living*. This familiar idea is especially important now because it points us to a fundamental distinction between what people need and what they want. In the not very distant past, this dichotomy was not only well-understood, but the basis of data collection and social policy. Need was a social concept with real force. All that's left now is an economy of desire. This is reflected in polling data. Just over 40 percent of adults earning \$50,000 to \$100,000 a year, and 27 percent of those earning more than \$100,000, agree that "I cannot afford to buy everything I really need." One third and 19 percent, respectively, agree that "I spend nearly all of my money on the basic necessities of life." I believe that our politics would profit from reviving a discourse of need, in which we talk about the material requirements for every person and household to participate fully in society. Of course, there are many ways in which such a right might be enforced: government income transfers or vouchers, direct provision of basic needs, employment guarantees, and the like. For reasons of space, I leave that discussion aside; the main point is to revive the distinction between needs and desires.

2. *Quality of life rather than quantity of stuff*. Twenty-five years ago quality-of-life indicators began moving in an opposite direction from our measures of income, or Gross Domestic Product, a striking divergence from historic trends. Moreover, the accumulating evidence on well-being, at least its subjective measures (and to some extent objective measures, such as health), suggests that above the poverty line, income is relatively unimportant in affecting well-being. This may be because what people care about is relative, not absolute income. Or it may be because increases in output undermine precisely those factors which *do* yield welfare. Here I have in mind the growing worktime requirements of the market economy, and

the concomitant decline in family, leisure, and community time; the adverse impacts of growth on the natural environment; and the potential link between growth and social capital.

This argument that consumption is not the same as well-being has great potential to resonate with millions of Americans. Large majorities hold ambivalent views about consumerism. They struggle with ongoing conflicts between materialism and an alternative set of values stressing family, religion, community, social commitment, equity, and personal meaning. We should be articulating an alternative vision of a quality of life, rather than a quantity of stuff. That is a basis on which to argue for a re-structuring of the labor market to allow people to choose for time, or to penalize companies that require excessive hours for employees. It is also a basis for creating alternative indicators to the GNP, positive policies to encourage civic engagement, support for parents, and so forth.

3. *Ecologically sustainable consumption*. Current consumption patterns are wreaking havoc on the planetary ecology. Global warming is perhaps the best known, but many other consumption habits have major environmental impacts. Sport utility vehicles, air conditioning, and foreign travel are all energy-intensive, and contribute to global warming. Larger homes use more energy and building resources, destroy open space, and increase the use of toxic chemicals. All those granite counter-tops being installed in American kitchens were carved out of mountains around the world, leaving in their wake a blighted landscape. Our daily newspaper and coffee is contributing to deforestation and loss of species diversity. Something as simple as a T-shirt plays its part, since cotton cultivation accounts for a significant fraction of world pesticide use. Consumers know far less about the environmental impacts of their daily consumption habits than they should. And while the solution lies in greater part with corporate and governmental practices, people who are concerned about equality should be joining forces with environmentalists who are trying to educate, mobilize, and change practices at the neighborhood and household level.

4. *Democratize consumption practices*. One of the central arguments I have made is that consumption practices re-

flect and perpetuate structures of inequality and power. This is particularly true in the "new consumerism," with its emphasis on luxury, expensiveness, exclusivity, rarity, uniqueness, and distinction. These are the values which consumer markets are plying, to the middle and lower middle class. (That is what Martha Stewart is doing at K-Mart.)

But who needs to accept these values? Why not stand for consumption that is democratic, egalitarian, and available to all? How about making "access," rather than exclusivity, cool, by exposing the industries such as fashion, home decor, or tourism, which are pushing the upscaling of desire? This point speaks to the need for both cultural change, as well as policies which might facilitate it. Why not tax high-end "status" versions of products while allowing the low-end models to be sold tax-free?

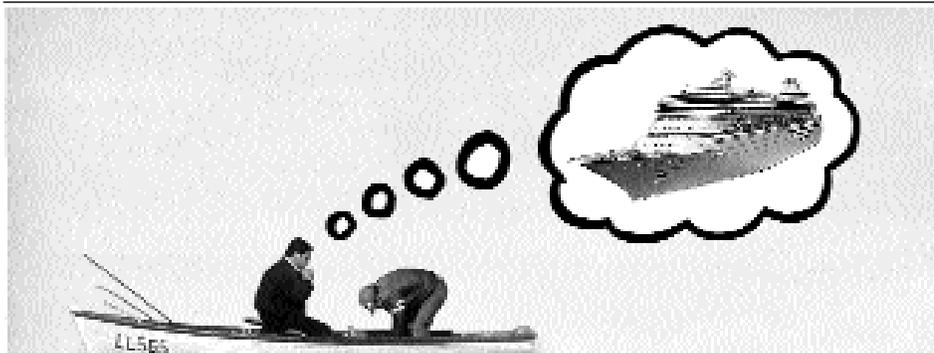
5. *A politics of retailing and the "cultural environment."* The new consumerism has been associated with the homogenization of retail environments and a pervasive shift toward the commercialization of culture. The same mega-stores can be found everywhere, creating a blandness in the cultural environment. Advertising and marketing is also pervading hitherto relatively protected spaces, such as schools, doctors' offices, media programming (rather than

commercial time), and so on. In my local mall, the main restaurant offers a book-like menu comprising advertisements for unrelated products. The daily paper looks more like a consumer's guide to food, wine, computer electronics, and tourism and less like a purveyor of news. We should be talking about these issues, and the ways in which corporations are re-making our public institutions and space. Do we value diversity in retailing? Do we want to preserve small retail outlets? How about ad-free zones? Commercial-free public education? Here too public policy can play a role by outlawing certain advertising in certain places and institutions, by financing publicly-controlled media, and enacting zoning regulations which take diversity as a positive value.

6. *Expose commodity "fetishism."* Everything we consume has been produced. So a new politics of consumption must take into account the labor, environmental, and other conditions under which products are made, and argue for high standards. This argument has been of great political importance in recent years, with public exposure of the so-called "global sweatshop" in the apparel, footwear, and fashion industries. Companies fear their public images, and consumers appear willing to pay a little more for products when they know they have been pro-

duced responsibly. There are fruitful and essential linkages between production, consumption, and the environment that we should be making.

7. *A consumer movement and governmental policy.* Much of what I have been arguing for could occur as a result of a consumer's movement. Indeed, the revitalization of the labor movement calls out for an analogous revitalization of long dormant consumers. We need independent organizations of consumers to pressure companies, influence the political agenda, provide objective product information, and articulate a vision of an appealing and humane consumer sphere. We also need a consumer movement to pressure the state to enact the kinds of policies that the foregoing analysis suggests are needed. These include taxes on luxury and status consumption, green taxes and subsidies, new policies toward advertising, more sophisticated regulations on consumer credit, international labor and environmental standards, revamping of zoning regulations to favor retail diversity, and the preservation of open space. There is a vast consumer policy agenda which has been mainly off the table. It's time to put it back on. ■



Market Failures

Robert H. Frank

Is Juliet Schor right that American spending patterns have gone astray? At a quick glance, it would certainly appear so. Despite growing threats from E-coli, listeria, and other deadly organisms, we cite financial distress to explain why we've cut FDA inspections of meat-processing plants by more than 75 percent in the last decade—even as we've continued to build larger houses and buy heavier sport utility vehicles. And each year we postpone repairs on structurally unsound bridges and shut down cost-effective drug-treatment programs, even as our spending on luxury goods continues to grow four times as quickly as spending overall.

Behavioral science now provides additional grounds to question the wisdom of our current spending patterns. Scores of careful studies show that we would be happier and healthier if we spent less on luxury goods, saved more, and provided more support for basic public services.

But this raises an obvious question: If we'd be better off if we spent our money differently, why don't we? In her essay (and in her recent book, *The Overspent American*), Juliet Schor surveys a variety of possible explanations. Communitarians cite a decline in social capital, noting that affluent Americans sequestered in gated communities are increasingly insulated from the consequences of our neglected public sphere. Social theorists emphasize the imperatives of class and identity, which drive many to proclaim their superiority over others through the purchase of costly goods. Other critics stress the influence of sophisticated marketing campaigns, which kindle demands for things we don't really need. Professor Schor especially favors this marketing explanation,

and she argues forcefully on its behalf, as did John Kenneth Galbraith more than forty years ago in *The Affluent Society*.

Despite its distinguished pedigree, however, the marketing explanation also has a drawback: although it can account for a bias toward luxury consumption spending, it does not seem to explain why things have gotten so much worse. Television advertising has been with us since the early 1950s, after all, and salesmanship in various other forms since before the dawn of the industrial age.

Why, then, are the apparent distortions so much larger today? In my recent book, *Luxury Fever*, I suggested that one reason may lie in a simple change in the economic incentives we face. This change is rooted in a fundamental shift in the distributions of income and wealth in America that began in the early 1970s.

Whereas incomes grew at about 3 percent a year for families up and down the income ladder between 1945 and 1973, most earnings growth since 1973 has gone to families at the top. For example, the top 1 percent of earners have captured more than 70 percent of all earnings growth during the last two decades, a time during which median real family income has been stagnant and the incomes of the bottom fifth have declined about 10 percent. Reinforcing these changes has been a parallel shift in the distribution of wealth, much of it driven by the spectacular run-up in stock prices.

Increasing inequality has caused real, unavoidable harm to families in the middle-class—even those who now earn a little more than they used to—by making it more difficult to achieve balance in their personal spending decisions. The problem

stems from the fact that the things we need so often depend on what others have. As Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has pointed out, a middle-class Indian living in a remote mountain village has no need for a car, but a middle-class resident of Los Angeles cannot meet even the most minimal demands of social existence without one.

When those at the top spend more on interview suits, others just below them must spend more as well, or else face lower odds of being hired. When upper-middle-class professionals buy 6,000-pound Range Rovers, others with lower incomes must buy heavier vehicles as well, or else face greater risks of dying. Residents in a community in which the custom is to host dinners for twelve need bigger dining rooms than if the custom were dinners for eight.

So when top earners build larger houses—a perfectly normal response to their sharply higher incomes—others just below them will have greater reason to spend more as well, and so on all the way down. Because of the growing income gap, the size of the average American house built today is roughly 2,200 square feet, up from 1,500 square feet in 1970.

The middle-income family that buys this house must carry a significantly larger mortgage than the buyer of the average house in 1970. And because public school quality is closely linked to local real estate taxes, which in turn are closely linked to average house prices within each school district, families must buy an average-priced house or else send their children to below-average schools. So even the middle-income family that doesn't want a bigger house may feel it really has no choice but to buy one.

Yet because this family has no more real income than in 1970, it must now carry more debt and work longer hours to do so. Little wonder, then, that despite the longest economic expansion on record, with the unemployment rate at a 29-year low, one American family in 68 filed for bankruptcy last year, almost seven times the rate in 1980. Our national savings rate is now negative, which means that we are currently spending more each month than we earn.

My claim, in a nutshell, is that the imbalance in our current spending patterns may be viewed as a market failure caused by consumption externalities:

Illustration: Nick Lehman

by the fact that greater consumption by some people imposes costs on others. An important strategic advantage of this explanation is that it is grounded in the very same theoretical framework that animates the beliefs of the most ardent defenders of the status quo. Thus, as even conservative economists have long recognized, when one family's spending decisions impose negative consequences on others, Adam Smith's invisible hand simply cannot be expected to produce the best overall spending pattern.

The good news is that if consumption externalities are what lead us to work too hard, spend too much, and save too little, a relatively simple legislative fix is at hand. Just as we have persuaded legislators that effluent taxes and other economic incentives are better than regulation as a way to curb pollution and other environmental externalities, so too might we eventually persuade them that it is better to curb consumption externalities through the tax system than by trying to micromanage personal spending decisions.

In *Luxury Fever*, I suggested that we scrap our current progressive tax on income in favor of a far more steeply progressive tax on consumption. Because total consumption for each family can be measured as the simple difference between the amount it earns each year (as currently reported to the IRS) and the amount it saves, such a tax would be relatively easy to administer. And if the tax were coupled with

a large standard deduction (say \$7,500 per person) and had low marginal tax rates on low levels of consumption, it would be even less burdensome for the poor than our current income tax.

More important, it would provide top earners with strong incentives to save more and limit the rate at which they increase the size of their mansions. Their doing so would reinforce the incentives on those just below the top to do likewise, and so on all the way down. Phased in gradually, this tax would slowly reduce the share of national income devoted to consumption and increase the corresponding share devoted to investment. Total spending would continue at levels sufficient to maintain full employment, and greater investment would lead to more rapid growth in productivity.

The tax could be set up so that the revenue raised from each income class would be roughly the same as under the current system. But persuasive evidence suggests that if legislators were to set rates on top spenders high enough to raise greater revenue than under the current system, both rich and poor would benefit significantly. Since beyond some point it is relative, not absolute, consumption that matters, top earners would not really suffer if the tax led all of them to increase the size of their mansions at a slower rate. Yet they and others would reap large benefits from the restoration of long neglected public services.

Persuading legislators to enact a steeply progressive consumption tax will not be easy. Its congressional sponsors could count on being pilloried by opponents as tax-and-spend liberals. Yet the progressive consumption tax is hardly a fringe idea. A bill proposing a tax with essentially the same features (the "Unlimited Savings Allowance Tax," or USA Tax) was introduced in the US Senate in 1995 by Pete Domenici (R-N.M.) and Sam Nunn (D-Ga.).

By suggesting that our current consumption imbalance is a result, in large measure, of consumption externalities, I do not mean that other explanations for the imbalance are wrong. Social capital has declined. Class also matters, and there is no denying the influence of commercial advertising.

If a political solution is what we seek, however, there may be considerable strategic advantage in focusing on externalities. It is difficult to imagine Congress approving legislation aimed at transforming class consciousness or eliminating commercial advertising. But we have a long tradition of collective action to control externalities—of discouraging some people from imposing uncompensated costs on others. And as Madison Avenue hucksters have known all along, it is a lot easier to sell with the grain than against it. ■

The Stone Age

James Twitchell

“Trophy homes, diamonds of a carat or more, granite countertops, and sport utility vehicles are the primary consumer symbols of the late 1990s.” —Juliet Schor

Oh, my God. Things are worse than I had thought. Sure, I knew there were too many Gucci handbags around. And I knew that, as I drove my gorgeous two-ton Volvo to work, I was seeing entirely too many of those ugly 4,000-pound SUVs on road. Ditto those too-big diamonds and trophy homes. But before reading Professor Schor’s piece, I did not know about all these granite countertops. Where the hell did they come from?

What students of Ivy League economists soon realize is that, just as shoppers on Rodeo Drive have “home brands” around which they concoct a consumption constellation, so too do academic Eeyores have their own *objets fixe*. John Kenneth Galbraith had his Cadillac tailfins, Robert Frank has his Patek Philippe wristwatch, and now Juliet Schor adds the granite countertop. Veblen made first claim on the trophy house.

Look, how come it’s okay to lay a slab of granite four times the size of a countertop over the body of dead Uncle Louie, carve a few dates in it, and then leave it alone for years, while it’s a sign of a really urgent problem—the dreaded “luxury fever”—when the slab appears in the kitchen where it can actually be used and—gasp!—enjoyed?

I realize that to focus on these two words—granite countertop—may be to willfully neglect the Big Points of Schor’s article. What about all the other stuff: debt, status anxiety, mass media manipulation, and simple fair play for those poorer than we? I focus on the minute particulars because it’s on specific items of consumption that the “we must control it” argument rests. Or so it seems to me.

You see, from my point of view, what these academic economists have trouble with is not consumption but taste. Buy a rare edition of John Milton’s *Comus* for \$400,000 (which, thanks to Xerox, has al-

most no scholarly value) and you won’t hear a peep from the lefties over in the Econ department. But buy a videocassette of *Debbie Does Dallas* for four dollars, show it on your big-screen TV in your entertainment center with the Bose wrap-around speakers, and all hell breaks loose.

Don’t even think about doing this if you are poor. The consumption police will be at your door. The first word they will use is waste. Then they’ll say you can’t afford it. You’re already maxed out. But coming next is the most interesting word, and it should always ring a bell. The word is luxury. When you hear them use this word, grab your credit cards and head for the hills.

Luxury is a word like “predator” or “weed.” There is no such thing in nature as a predator or a weed. You hear the word, however, just before someone reaches for the gun or the spade. Mark my words, the next word you hear after luxury is ... tax.

We are not the first generation to encounter this. It started with the Greeks, then the Christians had a go at it. But if you really want to see it played out splendidly go read the raging battle in the eighteenth century, with Adam Smith and Bernard Mandeville on one free-market side, and Tobias Smollett and Henry Fielding on the “we have an urgent problem here” side. Or if reading is not your style—thanks to the evil ways of that nasty Mr. Television, who has filled us with insatiable desire—you can tune in to the show by looking at Hogarth’s engravings. Start with the disputed *Taste in High Life* and work your way to *A Harlot’s*

Progress, A Rake’s Progress, and finish up with *Marriage à la Mode*. Little wonder sumptuary taxes continued up through the Industrial Revolution and still appear in bits and pieces.

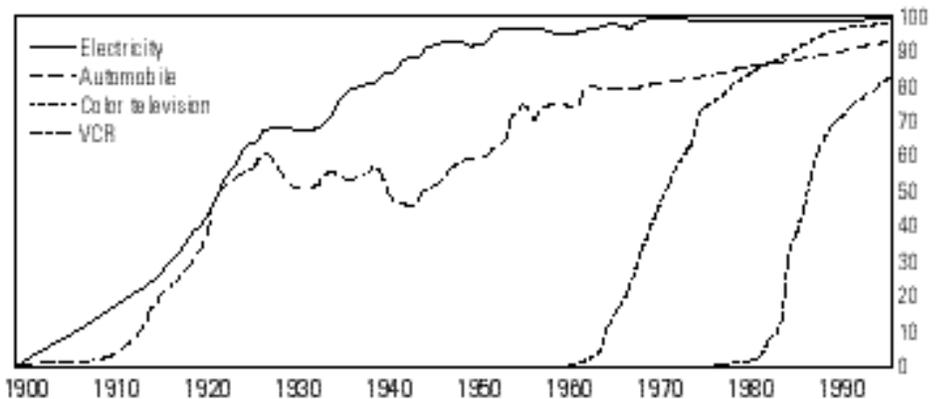
So what’s to be done about our “urgent” problem? Not much. Try to tax and shame it into behaving properly if you want, but history shows it won’t work. The market keeps humming along, occasionally breaking down, and then rebuilding itself. Fear and greed do their thing. Downshifters will downshift, upshifters will upshift. Then they’ll reverse gears and do it all over again. Shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves. Like it or not, the market will do a pretty fair job of inflicting the penalties of living too long in the lap of luxury.

But more to the point, what can be done about those Ivy League economists and their “New Politics of Consumption”?

Here’s my take-two-aspirin-and-see-me-in-the-morning prescription. Professor Schor should:

1. Rent Steve Martin’s *The Jerk* (1979);
2. Paste the graph below over her keyboard; and
3. Read Anthony Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* (1875).

She’ll learn from watching *The Jerk* that even jerks know that we don’t buy things, we buy meanings. Consider that if we drink the advertising, not the beer, maybe it’s the advertising we’re after. She’ll learn from the graph that more often than not what we once condemned as luxury has become necessity for a reason—it’s good stuff, even though granite countertops may cause a temporary problem along the way. If you look at the graph carefully, you’ll see there’s a nifty little welfare system built right into it. The



From *Time Well Spent: The Declining Real Cost of Living in America*, Annual Report of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 1997.

rich may start the process, but the poor benefit. And she'll learn from Trollope that a world in which social status is based on bloodline, church pew, and the name of your club is not so hot—especially if you're Melmotte, the newcomer, a Jew. And this is nothing compared to how much mobility you'll get if you are a woman, a black, an entrepreneur, or just a working stiff. Consumerism is not pretty, but it beats the alternatives put forward so far.

So far I've focused on the minute particulars: the granite countertop and all that I think it represents about "inappropriate" consumer taste and "appropriate" economic judgment. Let me end metaphysically, like the poet Shelley, "pinnacled dim in the intense inane."

To me the problem is not that we are too materialistic, but that we are not materialistic enough. If we knew what goods meant we wouldn't be so susceptible to, so needful of, the addition of meaning. Marketing wouldn't work. Madison Avenue would close down.

But instead we know stuff is important. We love having things. Exchanging things. Hording things. Stealing things. Even economists call them "goods and services." Of course we fetishize objects. How the hell do you think they get meaning? That meaning is so important that we willingly go into debt to get it. Especially when we are young.

Although modern consumption may share a few characteristics with Victorian consumption (i.e. tuberculosis), it is not a disease to be controlled by Drs. Tax and Shame. It is a response

to life as we are living it. When you think about consumption from this point of view, you realize that it is not objects, even luxury objects, that are the problem. It is the meaning of life that has become perplexing in a world bereft of bloodlines, family pews, social clubs, and the like. Face it: you are what you consume, not what you make. You are the logo on your T-shirt, not a descendent of a Mayflower passenger.

What we lack is not a politics of consumption so much as a religion of consumption. Not to sound too eerie, but the development of that religion is precisely what we are now experiencing. The more we have of this stuff, the more important it has become. It is a little unsettling, to be sure. To me, too. But it's not all bad, not by a long shot. In fact, relative to other systems, it's really quite fair. ■

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The Price is Right?

Jack Gibbons

In the midst of the Great Depression, my mother would talk to me about the need to spend money, not just save it, in order to increase consumer demand so that people could become employed to provide goods and services. The only problem was that we hardly had any money and borrowing to spend for consumption was unthinkable. But the message was clear—it's patriotic to consume.

Later I read H.G. Wells' turn-of-the-century musings about future societies in which science and technology had advanced productivity so far that the labors of only a small portion of the population were sufficient to provide goods and services for all. In Wells' view the producers would become the privileged class, with everyone else relegated to a singular patriotic responsibility: to consume. An interesting turn of events, to be sure, but it made a point about the need to think about work and reward in an age of technology and knowledge-based economy.

More recently, the expansion of consumption has combined with the market system and open societies to drive down unit costs of goods and services to the point where yesterday's luxuries are today's affordable necessities. But rather than taking our gains in more leisure and contemplative activities we seem inextricably hitched to the treadmill of income production and insatiable consumerism—strongly abetted not by arguments of the depression years but by commercial and even some religious figures.

What's wrong with this? I suggest that if prices were "right" we'd make wiser choices. But the private market cannot, or does not, charge for considerable "external" costs such as environmental damage, or intergenerational justice.

The results, as we move into the twenty-first century, are worrisome. Two centuries after Thomas Malthus' treatise on population, we need to recognize that we are headed into truly dangerous waters: too many people consuming too many resources on a finite planet.

The twenty-first century will be a century-long moment of truth for humankind. If we hope to continue human progress as the most extraordinary form of biological evolution we must transform our consumption passions into a sustainable rather than exponential form. And we must make a similar transition to a stabilized population. Technological progress can go only so far in enabling more people to consume more goods while staying on a sustainable course. Without a change in direction, as an old Chinese statement goes, "We're very likely to end up where we are headed."

What should be done? Julie Schor offers some interesting elements for a new

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The private market does not charge for considerable "external" costs such as environmental damage.

■

policy of consumerism. I would only take issue with her first: a right to a decent standard of living. My preference would be for rights of opportunity to earn a decent standard of living. We need safety nets, but I don't think we've arrived yet at H.G. Wells' visions of a future where people are paid simply to consume.

I offer a few suggestions for action:

1. *We need to get prices right*—to ensure that they reflect the true total cost of goods and services. As Schor points out, most consumer goods are underpriced. Whether by regulations (shadow price) or fees, we should pay the true cost of goods and services. Henry Caudill, Kentuckian lawyer and author, made a compelling case, for example, for stiff separations taxes

to be placed on the sale of natural resources such as coal so that the wealth taken by this generation and denied future generations would be at least partly replaced by a different wealth—education and technology—for future generations.

2. *We should pay more attention to product labeling*—to make it trustworthy and meaningful. Recent progress in food labeling has been very helpful, and energy efficiency labeling (like food, a federal requirement) helps achieve the economic assumption or goal that consumers exercise judgment when information is available. Remember the Sears labels of "good, better, best"? Or the Good Housekeeping Seal?

3. *We should give greater emphasis on truth in advertising.* The lure of easy access to credit cards—especially to the young and the poor—is destructive and relevant public policies need reform.

4. *More attention is needed in education and our churches and families to raising awareness of the value of non-monetary things.* As one sage put it: "Being rich is having money; being wealthy is having time." As Schor points out, our opportunity is to stop marketplace bias against workers who wish to substitute some income for more time off from work.

"Think globally, act locally" is a phrase that merits more attention, and applies both in space and time. We all need, in our shrinking and accelerating world, to be more cognizant of the twenty-first century imperative to stabilize population and transform the way we provide goods and services so that the system becomes more sustainable. This can be accomplished with the help of advanced technology used by thoughtful people. Otherwise we are destined to leave the planet a much poorer place—not an attractive goal for the human condition. ■

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Boston Review

Quality of Life

Clair Brown

Juliet Schor's provocative and thoughtful call for a new politics of consumption raises important issues about why Americans are obsessed by private consumption and how this affection for commodities is adversely affecting our lives. I agree with much of her analysis, including her indictment of modern economic thinking about consumption. Where I part company is with her claim that the problems of consumption are more urgent now because materialistic pressures have increased over earlier periods. Though this claim about growing pressures is not necessary for her critique of consumerism, it may lead her to underestimate the difficulty of creating an effective politics of consumption.

The "positional treadmill" that Schor describes is a major force behind our obsession with private consumption. But my research on American standards of living does not show an accelerating treadmill. It indicates instead that working families dramatically increased their spending on status consumption as a proportion of their budgets between 1950 and 1973, but increased it only slightly between 1973 and 1988.¹ I categorized families as laborers (unskilled and service), wage earners (semi-skilled and skilled), and salaried (professional and managerial not self-employed). I found that laborer families increased the proportion spent on status from 2 percent of their budget in 1950 to 15 percent in 1973, and then to 21 percent in 1988. The story with salaried families was similar: they increased their status consumption from 18 percent of their budget in 1950 to 27 percent in 1973, and then to 31 percent in 1988. Wage earners' families increased the proportion spent on status from 10 percent of their budget in 1950 to 19 percent in 1973, and then to 22 percent in 1988. Expenditures for variety or comfort consumption remained fairly constant over this period: roughly 10 percent of the budget for laborer families and 25 percent for wage earner and salaried families.

¹ Clair Brown, *American Standards of Living, 1918-1988* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994), Table 8.2.

Two important intellectual shifts over the 1950-1988 period reinforced the emphasis on private consumption. In consumption theory, Milton Friedman's *permanent income hypothesis*—that family consumption is a constant portion of expected lifetime income—displaced James Duesenberry's *relative income hypothesis*—that consumption depends in part on income relative to other families—as a way of understanding a family's economic position. Lifetime income, which is an absolute measure, determined a family's position; relative income (and differences across families) no longer mattered. Second, the emphasis on performance pay in the 1980s and 1990s—the idea that compensation should reflect measured individual performance—focused attention on individual contributions and served as the justification for rising inequality, even though the "quality" differences across individuals remained unobservable. Together, permanent consumption and performance pay meant that economic outcomes reflected individual choice and value-added. Ideas about economic opportunity—about access to good and bad jobs—or about bargaining power and rent sharing tended to drop from sight. And if your income reflects your choices and contributions, rather than your inherited advantages or your bargaining power, then conspicuous consumption is a way to show your value to society.

But even if Schor is wrong in her claim that social pressures to consume have increased, she is right that the *problem* of consumption has become more urgent, and for the reasons she states: increasingly detrimental outcomes to our environment and our communities, and the need to improve living standards in the developing world. Any movement to restore a balanced use of resources globally and to improve the quality of life in the United States must challenge the lifestyles of working and middle class families, in addition to the rich. We may in the end decide that the typical "meager livelihoods" of working families are not inadequate in an egalitarian society

that has more public goods, leisure time, and security.

Let me put this point about adequacy in perspective. In 1988, typical working families with incomes between \$30,000 and \$50,000 (in 1998 dollars)² owned their homes, had air conditioning, owned at least one car, spent a quarter of their food budget away from home, and went on 1.5 vacations annually that cost \$655 each (out of \$3,535 spent on leisure activities). If we look more closely, we find that they spent \$1,140 yearly on a variety of household furnishings such as sofas, refrigerators, and decorative items, and another \$1,635 on household operations including telephone service, gardening, and cleaning supplies. At the same time, they were eating too much sugar, fat, protein, and salt as they consumed junk food and sodas and too few vitamins.³ From a world viewpoint or a historical viewpoint, these families were not living a meager life style; yet in modern-day America, thoughtful commentators find it lacking.

Socially defining a comfortable life style is extremely controversial across the political spectrum. Reversing the obsession for higher incomes so families can buy more is an unpopular proposition that goes against the heart of American culture. In this regard, the 1990s does not deviate at all from previous decades: In the 1920s, the Lynds' study of Middletown lamented, "Why did they work so hard?"

The crucial issue is: what constitutes the quality of life? Schor is correct to pull us back to a discussion about what absolute level of private consumption provides the resource basis for a meaningful life, so that we can focus on improving the quality of life globally. Judging by our history, affluence, and inequality, I predict it will be a rancorous discussion. ■

² This includes families with less than 10 percent of the average income for laborers to more than 10 percent of average income for wage earners. The 1988 median household income was \$37,500. Approximately 37 percent of families fell above and below this range. All dollar amounts are inflated to 1998 dollars. (*Ibid.*, pp. 370-371)

³ *Ibid.*, Chapter 7.

The Personal Level

Betsy Taylor

Americans are consuming like there may be no tomorrow. The dominance of consumerism is arguably more pervasive now than at any time in human history. Our most popular national pastime is watching television, followed closely by recreational shopping. The United States has the highest per capita consumption rate in the industrial world. While our material gains have improved the quality of life in some notable ways, there are many hidden costs to our “more is better” definition of the American dream. Juliet Schor is one of the few intellectuals to rigorously examine these costs. Her call for a new politics of consumption warrants serious debate.

Schor does an excellent job of exposing the underbelly of our consumerist culture. Her analytic work, including her recent book, *The Overspent American*, focuses primarily on how our work-and-spend lifestyles undermine the quality of our lives. In the chase for more, Americans are working longer hours, racking up more debt, while finding fewer hours to enjoy their material acquisitions. Schor’s research also reveals a troubling new trend: our collective tendency to always want much more than we have. In a culture that reveres Bill Gates, the rising stock market, and status goods, people are no longer comparing themselves to the textbook Joneses, but rather to the wealthy celebrities they see on television. For many, this never-ending expansion of wants leads to conspicuous consumption, psychological stress, and a preoccupation with meeting non-material needs materially.

In her essay, Schor points to the other hidden costs of excessive consumerism. Perhaps most troubling, though—and something Schor might have addressed in greater detail—is the environmental damage wreaked by American consumption. With less than 5 percent of the world’s population, the United States consumes nearly 30 percent of global resources. Since 1940, Americans alone have used up as

large a share of the Earth’s mineral resources as all previous humans put together. We use twice as much energy and generate more than twice as much garbage as the average European. The typical American discards nearly a ton of trash per year. We consume 40 percent of the world’s gasoline and own 32 percent of the world’s cars. The average new house built in the United States has doubled in size since 1970. Two-thirds of those homes have two-car garages. To offer some perspective, scientists recently issued a study for the Earth Council indicating that if everyone on Earth consumed as the average North American does, we would need four extra planets to supply the resources and absorb the waste.

What does this mean for the environment? Every product comes from the earth and returns to it. To produce our cars, houses, hamburgers, televisions, sneakers, newspapers, and thousands upon thousands of other consumer items, we rely on chains of production that stretch around the globe. The unintended consequences of these chains include global warming, rapid deforestation, the depletion of over 25 percent of the world’s fish stocks, and the permanent loss of hundreds of plant and animal species—including the very real possibility of losing all large mammals in the wild within the next 50 years.

Along with taking a heavy toll on our quality of life and the planet, consumerism is also placing tremendous pressure on low-income families. The American preoccupation with acquisition afflicts the rich and poor alike. But our collective fixation on keeping up with commercial consumerist norms often wreaks havoc for those in low-income communities and exacerbates the growing gap between the rich and poor. Few would dispute that those living on the economic margins need more material goods. But the culture of consumerism weighs heavily on the 35 million Americans living below the poverty line. The relentless marketing of status footwear,

high-cost fashion, tobacco, and alcohol to low-income neighborhoods is one of the most pernicious aspects of consumer culture. The politics that Schor describes would challenge a culture that encourages people to define themselves through their stuff and would especially support and empower young Americans who feel enormous pressure to acquire things as the only avenue for gaining love, respect, and a sense of belonging.

Schor describes seven basic elements to a new “politics of consumption.” Her elements—or guiding principles for an emerging movement—invite a fusion of those working for justice with those working for environmental sustainability. Her first principle, the right to a decent standard of living, requires affluent environmentalists and progressives to look anew at what structures must be put in place to ensure a level of safety and security for all Americans. If people don’t feel safer—about the future and about their kids—they can’t entertain the deeper moral and environmental question, “how much is enough?” Schor does not specify the components necessary to give people greater security, but the litany of real needs is well known: affordable housing, quality healthcare, living wage jobs, medical care in old age, funds for retirement, and affordable college education for children. People feel alone. It’s hard to stop the chase for money, if not stuff, when you feel no support structures. Unless progressives re-embrace these concerns, those in poor and middle class families will have difficulty connecting with Schor’s politics. Too many progressives have become seduced by the culture of desire: we, too, look up instead of down. We spend too much time in isolation from those living in poverty. With some exceptions, we have lost our edge. Perhaps we are just too comfortable. Perhaps this is unavoidable in a noisy culture that bombards us with 3,000 commercial messages a day.

Schor’s other principles ring true. Millions of Americans obviously share her call for more fun, less stuff. Millions are opting to downshift, choosing to make less money in search of more time. A growing number of people also affirm her call for responsible consumption—a call for a much higher consciousness about the environmental and human

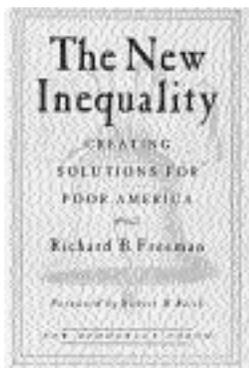
costs of each consumer decision we make. Her call to democratize consumer markets seems a bit naïve, since humans have probably always sought to define themselves in part through their stuff. But in an age of excessive materialism, the times may be ripe to challenge the dominant ethos. Perhaps we can make it cool to shun fashion and footgear with corporate logos and redefine hip as simple, real, and non-commercial.

Her fifth principle taps into growing opposition to globalization and a dismaying recognition that Bangkok and New York look the same. After two decades of mega-mergers and five years of intense globalization, the homogenization of retail environments is destroying local businesses and cultures. A recommitment to local economies, independent small busi-

nesses, and consumer products that are locally designed and produced could be good for jobs, the environment, and cultural diversity.

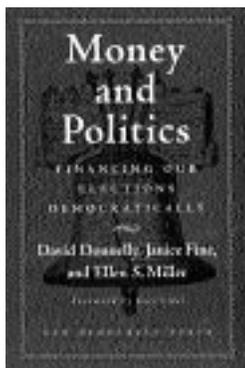
The only principle that seems missing to me is one that goes to the heart of our values. Progressives tend to squirm when encouraged to examine values at a personal level. We want to change the system yet we remain uncomfortable with “soft” discussions of individual transformation. But there is a huge churning underway about values, purpose, and spirit. Progressives can dogmatically dismiss these forces as elements of religious dogmatism or New Age narcissism, or they can connect with this churning. I would argue that a politics of consumption—and we need

a better name for this—should include guiding principles of humility and compassion. Humility and awe in surrendering to the “not knowing” about the cosmology of things, coupled with an affirmation of all those who hunger to experience the Light, however one defines that. We need a politics that embraces compassion for the Earth, for each other as individuals of equal human value, and especially for children who will inherit the future. Can we not come together with new energy, passion, and vision—combining forces for justice and sustainability with the hunger for rekindled spirits? Does a critique of consumer culture open up this discussion in new and encouraging ways? Schor argues that it does. I am persuaded that she is on to something. ■



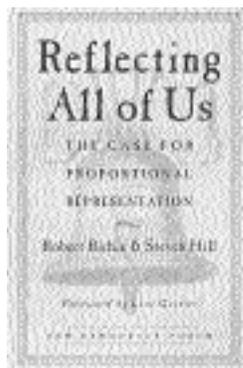
The New Inequality: Creating Solutions for Poor America

Richard B. Freeman, et al.
Foreword by Robert B. Reich



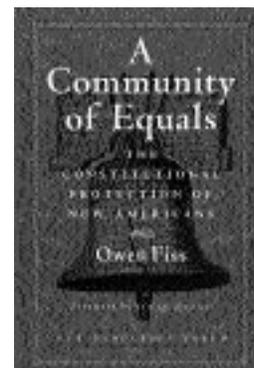
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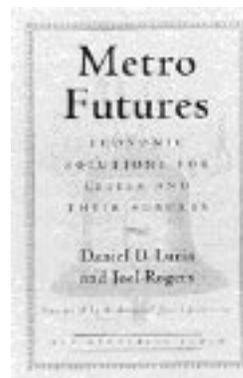


A Community of Equals: The Constitutional Protection of New Americans

Owen Fiss, et al.
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Thoughtful Exchange from the Newsstand to the Bookshelf...

Thanks to a partnership with Beacon Press, some of the best debates from *Boston Review's* New Democracy Forum are now available in inexpensive paperback form. Be sure to check out the latest installments in the series. In *Metro Futures*, Dan D. Luria and Joel Rogers examine our cities, offering concrete policy recommendations that recognize the interdependence between urban and suburban areas. Tracey L. Meares and Dan M. Kahan revisit the struggle between Chicago public housing residents and the ACLU over community policing in *Urgent Times*. As always, prominent scholars and activists respond, producing the kind of fruitful debate readers have come to expect from the New Democracy Forum.



Metro Futures: Economic Solutions for Cities and Their Suburbs

Daniel D. Luria, et al.
Foreword by Jesse Jackson, Sr.



Urgent Times: Policing and Rights in Inner-City Communities

Tracey L. Meares, et al.
Foreword by Eugene Rivers III

Postmodern Markets

Douglas B. Holt

Juliet Schor perceptively describes a complex set of social problems that demand political remedy. But I disagree with her analysis of the new consumerism and, thus, with her proposed remedies.

Analytically, Schor argues that dramatic increases in economic inequality have combined with increasing social comparisons to upscale reference groups in the mass media to produce an intensive quest for upper-middle-class status goods. Widespread participation in this inflated status game has socially destructive results, including environmental degradation, shrinking public provisioning, and an “aspirational gap”—with personal debt spiraling up and personal happiness spiraling down.

As to remedies, Schor’s proposals aim to stem both competitive consumption and its harmful welfare effects. She wants a consumer movement that promotes family, religious, communal, egalitarian, and environmental values rather than status competition. She also calls for taxes on status goods, green taxes and subsidies, and tighter regulations on credit and advertising.

The Postmodern Market

While I share many of Schor’s personal commitments, I don’t think her agenda will work as intended because she has misidentified the basic mechanisms that generate overconsumption and its attendant consequences. What is now driving consumption is not *upscale emulation*, but—in a word—*differentiation*.

The contemporary market—let’s call it the “postmodern market”—depends increasingly upon two strategies to increase sales and profits. First, areas of social life that traditionally fell outside the market—health care, education, prisons, religion, the arts, poverty, the environment, caring for the elderly and the dead—are now being brought into the market. Second, consumer identities are being fragmented, proliferated, recombined, and turned into salable goods. Thus, transnational companies compete on how quickly and effectively they can create markets out of new

styles, meanings, and experiences produced in public culture. For example, Nike has abandoned the core principle of modern marketing, which advises companies to weave into their advertising only those elements of public culture that are consistent with the distinctive meanings of the brand. Instead, Nike is bent upon attaching the “swoosh” logo to *any* person, place, or thing that achieves recognition in the popular cultural world of sports. Monopolizing the public channels of meaning creation—grabbing the latest public fashion—is becoming more important than monopolizing particular meanings.

The culture that supports these postmodern market conditions is premised upon an extreme version of consumer sovereignty. The “good life” is not a matter of having a well-defined list of status goods now possessed by wealthy television personalities. Instead, it is an open-ended project of self-creation. The idea is to circulate continually through new experiences, things, and meanings—to play with different identities by consuming the goods and services associated with them. The market promotes a sense of freedom from constraint, an ultimate individuality through commodities. Environmental degradation, the personal debt crisis, and private provisioning are the unhappy results of these unnatural beginnings. As desires become more dynamic and promiscuous, consumption levels soar. Impossibly high incomes (or loads of debt) seem absolutely necessary, but not because we aspire to mimic the status goods of the upper middle class as seen on television. Rather, fountains of money are needed to participate in the postmodern version of the “good life,” in which one pursues enhanced experiences and multiple lifestyles by purchasing their ever-changing props.

If I’m right that postmodern market conditions lead to overconsumption problems, then a different kind of political intervention than the “new politics of consumption” is required. To see why, let’s suppose that Schor’s proposals were instituted. What social changes would result? My analysis suggests the following:

1. *Social class is but one of many identities that the market promotes.* Thus, if status competition were completely shut down, the market would effortlessly redirect that fraction of market activity devoted to status competition to other kinds of self-definition.

2. *The market would find the non-status values that Schor’s agenda encourages and turn them into salable goods.* For example, the communitarian lifestyle (Disney’s Rockwellesque Celebration, Florida), the progressive lifestyle (Benetton, Body Shop, Working Assets), the green lifestyle (The Nature Company, Smith & Hawken, Ben & Jerry’s). Challenges to the market from alternative lifestyles can be turned into more grist for the postmodern market.

3. *The new politics of consumption agenda would not impact social inequality.* Schor assumes that there is a fixed set of “positional goods” that are used to convey status. Yet one of Bourdieu’s most forceful arguments is that social distinction is not produced by a consensual set of status goods, but by socially endowed sensibilities that are expressed through acts of consumption. Historians and sociologists have shown conclusively that status consumption is extremely dynamic, moving easily across goods and categories. So, even if

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If the cause of overconsumption problems is located in the postmodern organization of the market, challenges must aim at market structure.

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it were possible to limit the consumption of particular goods that are now status symbols, status competition would simply shift to other goods and activities.

A Political Response

If the cause of overconsumption problems is located in the postmodern organization of the market, challenges must aim at market structure—in particular at the processes through which the market recycles public culture as commodities—not the particular goods and services currently for sale. The market will cease to promote postmodern consumer culture only when this strategy becomes more difficult and less profitable (or, alternatively, higher profits are to be had from new strategies). For example, “cultural pilfering” taxes on advertising, sponsorships, tie-in promotions, and public relations expenses would slow the proliferation of commercialized culture. Or, perhaps the process could be hampered by limiting commercial access to the mass media and legislating in favor of more public noncommercial media outlets and fewer private ones (see Bob Mc-

Chesney’s recommendations for “The Future of the Media,” in the Summer 1998 issue of *Boston Review*).

Intervening with market structure rather than market content is also politically preferable. Though Schor understands the elitist, anti-democratic problems inherent in legislating how people should consume, she can’t avoid proposals that dictate consumption patterns because her analysis focuses on commercial content. For example, she calls for legislation favoring mom-and-pop retailers over chains. In my research, I’ve found that working class people absolutely depend upon Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and J.C. Penney’s for inexpensive merchandise of reasonable quality and look forward with great enthusiasm to a celebratory meal at Red Lobster and shopping trips to the local outlet mall. Is it appropriate to discourage these practices in favor of middle-class aesthetics?

We also need a strategy for mobilizing consumers, but based upon different organizing principles than Schor’s. To deflate the motivating force of postmodern consumer culture requires a collective understanding of the linkages between nomadic consumer desires, recombinant consumer identities, and the structure of the postmodern market. As the troubles spawned by the postmodern market continue to grow—and Schor’s figures on credit card debt suggest that the strategy is approaching its limit—it is crucial to anticipate ways to frame this critique of consumerism in a manner that will resonate with a broad audience. Paradoxically, an anti-consumerism movement must adopt sophisticated marketing techniques to have any hope of resonating with people for whom commercial rhetoric has become the dominant vernacular of social life. ■

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A New Puritanism?

Craig J. Thompson

Juliet Schor rightly chastises conventional economic theory for its narrow, rationalistic understanding of consumer preferences. As an alternative, she sketches a sociological model of consumption, in which consumers go in for upscale-emulation and endlessly ratchet up their competitive consumption.

Schor's "status game" analysis conveys important insights and is an improvement over the economic alternative. But applause does not foster discussion, so I propose here to focus on two related points of disagreement: first, Schor is insufficiently attentive to the cultural complexity of consumption; second, her critique of consumption resonates with a puritanical moralism that demonizes consumption as a source of enervation and irrational excess.

1. *Culture and Consumption.* An extensive body of consumer studies has documented that many central aspects of both personal and collective identity are created, maintained, and transformed through consumption.¹ Personal enrichment and communal affiliation do not exist outside of consumption or necessarily in opposition to it. The status game critique of consumption is most compelling when one accepts the romantic view that individuals harbor an authentic self that can only be distorted by the seductions of consumer culture. It is less compelling when identity is taken to be socially constructed. From this perspective, consumer culture provides symbolic tools for constructing and reconstructing identity through self-defining leisure practices. (Am I, for example, a runner, couch potato, classical pianist, foreign film aficionado, or perhaps some combination?) Consumption also links

individuals together. On a small scale, consider the social bonds enacted through the ritual sharing of a meal or gift exchange. On larger scale, think of youth-oriented "rave" cultures, Harley-Davidson enthusiasts, or the virtual communities coalescing around popular culture entertainment (e.g. the resurgent *Star Wars* community). Accordingly, an effective politics of consumption must move beyond a critique of materialism and address the deep connections between personal and communal identity and consumption practices.

For Schor the conspicuous act of materially "keeping up with the Joneses" is the linchpin of contemporary consumption. But this formulation is in some ways behind the postmodern times. Consumers are already pursuing an improved quality of life rather than greater quantity of stuff, and consumer culture is right there selling "it" to them with great skill and alacrity. Whether in the form of travel or museum patronage, self-enriching leisure activities are fundamentally embedded in marketing techniques and the exigencies of consumer culture. Furthermore, nothing is more heavily marketed than spiritual development: the "new age" industry, the mass-marketed quasi-Eastern mysticism espoused by Deepak Chopra, and religious experience (marketing is not just for televangelism any more) are just a few of the "spiritual goods" available on the market. Indeed, postmodern consumer culture has been characterized as a post-materialist "economy of signs," in which self-enhancement and even spiritual epiphany are dominant consumer motivations. Of course, material goods still carry much symbolic currency, but consumption practices that enable individuals to create a "mindful," "centered," "authentic" identity, immune to "other-directed" pressures, are now important markers of social status. An effective politics of consumption must address this essential element of postmodern consumer culture.

Reducing consumption to an unreflective, Veblenesque status game also

elides the role of consumption in negotiating political and cultural ideas and sensibilities. Thus, consider the role of popular culture as a domain of expression and protest for those on the socioeconomic margins and other countercultural groups²: Chuck D said that rap music is the "black CNN." Yes, these expressions of cultural resistance have been routinely coopted by the market.³ Still, consumer culture gives expression to a multitude of meanings, values, and social interests. And even when these countercultural motifs enter the mainstream, they carry the potential for subtle forms of social change. Once-marginal ideas about environmentalism and naturalism, for example, have fostered an increasingly critical stance toward a status-chasing, materialistic lifestyle and the "depthless" world of mass-produced goods, glamorizing advertising pitches, home shopping networks, and dizzyingly garish shopping malls.

2. *Puritanism.* Veblen is usually credited with the original insight into the dire consequences of conspicuous consumption. But his oh-so-seminal account tapped into a broader range of fin-de-siecle anxieties about the detrimental effects of modern civilization upon masculinity. The Victorian "cult of domesticity"—which fostered the cultural link between consumption and femininity—was widely criticized as emasculating, and thus threatening the moral fiber (as well as the bodies) of the next generation of patriarchs. The contemporary manifestation of this historical legacy is the view of consumption as a wanton and scandalously profane activity that impedes the attainment of a higher moral-spiritual plane. If real, deep, genuine, higher human needs could triumph over artificial consumer desires, "the good society" would lie within reach.

¹ See, for example, Eric J. Arnould and Linda L. Price, "'River Magic': Extraordinary Experience and the Service Encounter," *Journal of Consumer Research* 20 (June 1993): 24-46; John Schouten and James McAlexander, "Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of New Bikers," *Journal of Consumer Research* 22 (June 1995): 43-61.

² See for example George Lipsitz, *Time Passages* (1990).

³ Of course, this "trickle-up" process of commodification also inspires new forms of cultural expression among countercultural groups struggling to distinguish themselves from the dominant culture.

What's the problem with this despairingly disparaging view of consumption? For starters, consumer culture has been uniquely attuned to the social positions of women and their culturally constructed feminist aesthetic.⁴ The moral critique of consumerism has an inescapably patriarchal background: it is steeped in a phobia of feminization and an infatuation with Puritanical asceti-

⁴ See among others Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); and William Leach, *Land of Desire* (New York: Pantheon, 1991).

⁵ It's not just about sex. A mundane, if anecdotal example should suffice to make the point. American consumer culture is notorious for its Puritanical, self-abnegating, and hyper-controlling orientation toward food, and it is also a culture where junk food, sublimated advertising images of food erotica, obesity, and binge eating abound. In dramatic contrast, Continental cultures—the French being the exemplary case—view eating in highly sensual and social terms and, in general, have a far more relaxed and unproblematic relation to food.

cism. It effects a rejection of the sensual and emotive aspects of human experience and an extreme suspicion of “unproductive” pleasures.

Consumption is dangerous precisely because it resists this rationalized, puritanical, patriarchal construction of the perfect society. That actual consumer behavior does not correspond even a little bit to the “rational man” model so lionized by conventional economists is not just a theoretical oversight but the very point. Consumer behavior has always been an inexplicable misbehavior for those who envision a rational social order: it is too emotive, irrational, and impelled by desires for pleasure and baroque excess—“why can't a consumer be more like a rational man?”

Rather than extolling the middle-class to “resist” the seductive enticements of the market-place and consume more autonomously and rationally, perhaps we should abandon this self-disciplining, rationalist discourse altogether. Such abandonment need not lead to an even greater preoccupation with consumption. An irony not to be overlooked is that this pervasive moralistic critique of consumption has been the

historical concomitant to the explosive increase in materialism. Perhaps the never-ending cycle of work-spend and the ceaseless quest for “new things” has less to do with a desire to “keep up with the Joneses” than a deeply internalized inhibition against pleasure.⁵

So, perhaps a radical politics of consumption should argue for getting more pleasure out of consumption, rather than repackaging the age-old admonition that individuals seek “true” fulfillment by escaping the flesh, or mortifying it. Schor makes the cogent point that everyone in the advertising industry knows that consumers are not rational, utility maximizers. They also know that “sex sells.” Though it is tempting to say that it sells “despite our puritanical view of sexuality,” the truth may be that it sells “because of our puritanical view of sexuality.” Could it be that insatiable materialistic desires and the undeniable ecological dangers posed by overconsumption are equally dependent on a Puritanical rendering of consumer pleasure as a moral danger—and therefore as worthy of our devotion? ■

Too Much Economics

Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár

In *The Morality of Spending*, Daniel Horowitz shows that generations of American social critics have addressed the perils of changing patterns of consumption.¹ Such critics, according to Horowitz, understood the consequences of these patterns, but were limited in their vision of the social meaning of consumption by their moralistic outlooks. Juliet Schor's essay offers well-intentioned suggestions about how to revive this tradition of social criticism. But her economic point of departure severely constrains her own alternative.

To be sure, Schor's economic perspective conveys important insights. She focuses our attention on the tension between a growing polarization of income and the upscaling of consumption in American society: as desires grow, fewer people have the means to afford what they desire; the result is a general decline in Americans' sense of well-being. The Good Life is increasingly defined in terms of upper-middle class standards, which can be achieved by but a few. The cost of failing is rising, at least in psychological terms.

This starting point is extremely fruitful and addresses what we consider to be one of the main conundrums of contemporary American society: with social citizenship defined in terms of consumption, and with disposable income rising for few and falling for many, how can the majority of the population maintain a sense of self-worth? This problem is becoming more salient not only in the United States, but all over the world, as the market—and more broadly neoliberalism—become the dominant organizing principles of social life.

Schor's past and current writings have appeal largely because she takes as a point of departure the very economic theory that has become common-sense knowledge in contemporary American society. What she writes resonates with the folk theories of the "average-educated-reader" about how

the world works. But economic theory is also the source of the main shortcomings of her contribution—shortcomings that, in our view, plague the details of her diagnosis and solution. Her challenge to consumer society does not go beyond the classical critique of the economic theory of consumer behavior.² This limitation prevents her from fully comprehending the complex meanings that various groups attribute to consumption. Paradoxically, it also prevents her from offering solutions that truly transcend the idea that "money is a key to happiness." Finally, her understanding of the role of consumer movements, and of progressive intellectuals in them, is marred by an unconvincing voluntarism.

Schor criticizes the economic theory of consumption for assuming, for example, that consumers are rational. She offers rich evidence that this and other assumptions are unfounded. However, her description of what guides consumption is generally framed in individual terms. The implicit model she uses remains an economic one—that of a single individual entering a shopping mall and *choosing* among goods to maximize the investment of his or her resources, with the primary goal of accumulating goods to gain status. The definition of status itself is not treated as a problem and social relations enter the equation only through the determination of individual preferences (via the impact of reference groups).

An alternative, more cultural, model would frame consumption as a social act—shopping, for example, is often done with a friend or family member and with someone else's needs in mind.³ And it

² Schor constantly uses economic jargon and metaphors in her essay. For instance, she writes about "markets for the alternatives to status or positional goods," the "market for public goods," the "market for time," the "underproduction of public goods," and the "underproduction of leisure."

³ See Daniel Miller, *The Theory of Shopping* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

would not define consumption in opposition to leisure, as shopping itself is often considered a pastime. Finally, it would examine the full range of definitions of status and worth that people adopt, and their articulation with socio-economic status in particular.

The dominance of an economic model in Schor's argument is also apparent in her failure to systematically differentiate between the meanings given to consumption by members of different classes and races. Her many examples privilege a specific upper-middle class stance by claiming that conspicuous consumption is primary: as always, Newton prevails over Roxbury. But to address the upscaling of needs, one should differentiate carefully among the understandings of consumption by upper-middle class, working class, and poor people. For this last group, meeting basic needs is often primary. For the American working class, quality of life is often defined in terms of the defense of personal integrity and dignity, as well as in terms of consumption.⁴ For the upper-middle class, the goal of maximizing one's socioeconomic status *de facto* frequently goes hand in hand with the construction of a morally meaningful life and the pursuit of self-actualization. Finally, for blacks as opposed to whites, consumption is often the key to a positive collective identity.⁵ Moreover, the logic of conspicuous consumption is different for black urban youth and residents of the Upper East Side. Marketing specialists have identified the urban youth market as one of the fastest growing market segments, and these consumers do not emulate the taste of the white upper-

⁴ Michèle Lamont, "Above 'People Above': Status and Worth Among White and Black Workers," in *The Cultural Territories of Race: Black and White Boundaries*, edited by Michèle Lamont. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press and New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).

⁵ See, for example, Virág Molnár and Michèle Lamont, "Social Categorization and Group Identification: How African Americans Shape their Collective Identity Through Consumption," in *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Demand and Its Role in Innovation*, edited by Andrew McMeekin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

¹ Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes Toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

middle class—while Schor implies that everyone emulates this group.⁶

The impact of economic theory on Schor's thinking is also apparent in the alternative she offers. She proposes to replace an exclusive focus on individual private consumption with a focus on spending *differently* (i.e., by investing in public consumption, buying free time, and saving). However, interviews suggest

⁶ Schor makes the same mistake as Bourdieu in subsuming the tastes of the dominated groups to those of the dominant class. For instance, in *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), she suggests that Americans mostly watch entertainment television that offers white upper-middle-class life as a model (e.g., *ER*, *Friends*, and *LA Law*). In fact, the preferences of whites and blacks in television watching preference have been diverging in recent years.

⁷ When Schor discusses alternative life strategies, she tends to downplay the non-economic aspects of these activities. For instance, she describes work as an oppressive activity tied to money-making, while in fact it is often thought of as a realm of self-actualization. And though she writes that “large majorities hold ambivalent views about consumerism: they struggle with ongoing conflicts between materialism and an alternative set of values stressing family, religion, and community,” she does not go beyond these mentions, and explore the content of these values. Nor does she say how building intimacy, for example, could act as an alternative source of worth and/or status.

that individuals who strive to keep the logic of profit and social-position maximization from dominating their lives do so less by finding new ways to spend and by reducing the importance of spending in their lives than by centering their attention on other spheres and activities: intimacy, creativity, morality, religion, education, and the arts, for example.⁷ This does not mean that consumption is peripheral to people's identity. But how one relates to

■
*As always,
 Newton prevails
 over Roxbury.*
 ■

what one consumes is as important as what one consumes. In other words, the cultural framing of consumption is not as stable as Schor implies; in fact, the spending patterns of the upper-middle class have less legitimacy than she grants them, as goods are always multivocal, even for low-status groups.

Finally, Schor invites us to rejuvenate consumer movements by developing a “New Politics of Consumption” that aims

⁸ Schor advocates personal restraints as a form of “collective response” to consumption. Though she suggests it is wrong-headed to believe that “a pure act of will can resolve this issue,” she does not provide any alternative to voluntarism.

in part at encouraging people to “welcome initiatives which reduce the pressure they feel to keep up with rising standards.” An unrepentant voluntarism underlies this proposal. Schor emphasizes changes in private consumption practices—personal restraints—as the solution to our conundrum.⁸ Taxing luxury products is also offered as a viable strategy. Instead, we submit that change is more likely to emerge from gaining a better understanding of how people develop a sense of self-worth and define a worthy life, and using that understanding to sharpen the messages progressive social movements offer. Well-intentioned scholars such as Schor need to frame alternatives to market-driven lives by looking beyond consumption. Indeed, dignity, personal integrity, and self-actualization are often achieved through meaningful relationships with others, instead of through things. If social membership is so often defined through consumption in American society, alternative bases of membership remain available and must be explored.

These criticisms should not distract from the importance of Schor's contribution in alerting us to the urgency of the situation: she is among a handful of economists, including Robert Frank, who attempt to bring back the social into the narrowly path-dependent worldview of economists. But she clearly does not go far enough, and an effective tactician she is not. We may need a broader understanding of status to reach more convincing alternative paths to limitless emulation and conspicuous consumption. ■

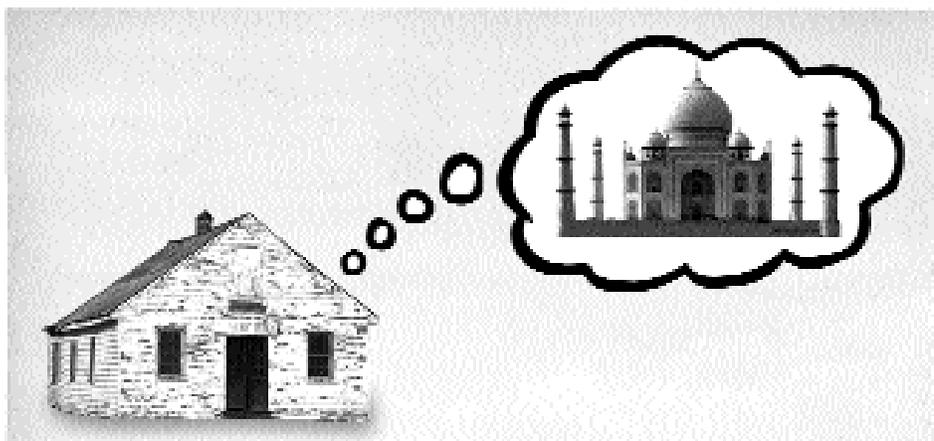


Illustration: Nick Johnson

Leisure for All

Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein,
and John Schmitt

Juliet Schor is to be commended for tackling tough issues and pushing forward the frontiers of economic analysis. Such exploratory work necessarily moves the debate beyond established research and policy discussions, so there is no value in extensive quibbling over the evidence for or against her story line. Rather, we will identify areas of agreement and disagreement and areas where further exploration is needed to satisfy our skepticism.

Schor's main thesis is that we need a new "politics of consumption" because "the new consumerism" that arose in the 1980s—"a rapid escalation of desire and need"—is causing stress, harming the environment, and weakening the public sector.

We agree about the importance a vision focused on "quality of life" rather than "quantity of stuff." So in our work at the Economic Policy Institute¹, we stress changes in "living standards" rather than income per se. Although we see a strong connection between improved living standards and higher income, we know that income is not a complete measure of "economic well-being," let alone a complete measure of living standards or quality of life. And we certainly agree that

justice requires a vastly more equal distribution of income, wealth, and power, both domestically and globally.

We agree, too, that the typical American (by which we mean the median household or family) "finds it harder to achieve a satisfying standard of living than 25 years ago." Incomes have been relatively stagnant since 1973 despite a greater share of family members working—and working more annual hours—in the paid labor force. This stagnation is the result of slow productivity growth and a phenomenal growth in income inequality. These income trends, along with the erosion of employer-provided pension and health insurance coverage and high involuntary job displacement, have induced stress and insecurity, exacerbated crime, and widened a maldistribution of health outcomes. Some of these trends have ameliorated in the period of low unemployment since 1996, but we fear they will return as unemployment returns to more familiar levels.

The causes of the productivity slowdown are not well known but the growth of income inequality has been primarily driven by the growing inequality of hourly wages. Wage inequality, in turn, has been driven by a redistribution of power achieved through such laissez-faire policies as globalization (foreign investment, trade, and the sensitive issue of immigration) deregulation, deunionization, a weakened social safety net, and a lower minimum wage in the context of relative-

ly high unemployment (especially in the early 1980s, when much of this redistribution took place). A related phenomenon has been a significant redistribution of income from wage to capital (profit and interest) income.

We agree with Schor that current policies and market forces do not adequately protect the environment nor adequately support public investment (infrastructure, education) or social insurance and transfers. The public sector, "government," has been under a widespread, intensive assault for several decades now. However, we would not want to over-dramatize the outcome of this struggle, as the public sector's share of national resources has remained relatively constant. Moreover, the attack on government is the product of many factors, including a general decline in voters' faith in the effectiveness of government, stagnant pre-tax incomes (making taxes more of an issue), and an aggressive ideological and policy assault from business and the well-off (who need fewer public services). We disagree with Schor in that we do not see a role for a new consumer mentality, independent of the factors just described, leading to the squeeze on government and a shift in spending from public to private goods. It is notable that the GOP has gotten little political traction for its tax-cut agenda in the last few years as incomes and wages have been rising across the board.

It is also hard to see a new consumerism as responsible for the loss of leisure. We agree that there has been such a loss. But it is principally driven by more women working, and more women working full-year and full-time. It does not reflect a general rise in average weekly hours, as we would expect if a new-consumerist urge to spend was driving leisure down. This greater (paid) work effort is part of a decades-long increase in women's labor force participation, reinforced by feminism and male wage deterioration. The growth in women's paid work hours has been greatest among lower- and middle-income families and not among the well-off.² (We suspect this does not correspond to a "new consumerism," since these are the families where male

¹ See our book, *The State of Working America, 1998-99*, by Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and John Schmitt. An Economic Policy Institute Book (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

² See Table 1.17 in the *State of Working America, 1998-1999*.

wages and family incomes have fared worst. In fact, in the absence of wives' increased contributions, the income of these families would have fallen, instead of merely stagnating.)

Nor is it clear to us that the leisure problem is *primarily* due to employers blocking options of workers—failing to provide a sufficiently flexible range of labor/leisure packages. True, employer policies do not appropriately correspond to the preferences of workers regarding the extent or timing of work. Nevertheless, there does seem to us to be a basic American cultural preference for income over leisure (certainly relative to Europe), as witnessed by the eagerness for overtime and the willingness of workers to accept less paid time off (e.g., vacations) rather than wage reductions during concession bargaining in the 1980s. So, it is values and economics at work here.

In some cases, our response to Schor's arguments is more simply skeptical (or perhaps not adequately informed). One is that "consumption is part of the problem," meaning that the new consumerism is an independent force exacerbating inequalities. We presume that this notion goes beyond the obvious point that a maldistribution of power, wealth, and income leads to a maldistribution in consumption, and that when the well-off gain excessively, one finds ugly, excessive spending. It is also true that vast inequalities exacerbate the risks in not clinging to or getting one's progeny onto the same or higher rung of the social ladder. But we need to hear more about how materialistic consumer attitudes, independent of income and wealth, affect inequalities. We are also dubious that more income, once above the poverty level, "is relatively unimportant in affecting well-being," or that eco-

conomic growth over the last few decades is associated with *declines* in well-being.

We are also skeptical that there is a set of consumer values, called "new consumerism," that arose in the 1980s and that have a qualitatively and quantitatively different impact on the economy. We note that this has been a period of historically *slow* consumption growth in the United States and other advanced countries (except among the very well off in the United States).

Schor usefully asks whether those of us who emphasize renewing growth and greater equity would find achieving a \$50,000 income for the typical family sufficient, or is it necessary to go towards \$100,000? Where is the end of this process, she asks? Fair enough. The answer is "it depends." If income growth comes from people working much longer and harder, the gains may well not be worth the effort. But if productivity growth (defined as getting more from the same human and material inputs) fuels income growth, then there is no problem with expanding income or the standard of adequate income. Similarly with growth that results from enhanced human skills or better equipment. Nor are we sure it is problematic if the share of the population working continues to increase. Furthermore, it is not obvious that we face resource constraints that require us to limit, rather than to shape, growth. Environmentally destructive growth where the vast majority do not see income growth is clearly problematic. But that hardly describes all economic growth.

We too are troubled by a phenomenon closely related to a "new consumerism." This is the continued "marketization" of all aspects of life—the extension of the market into new spheres.

■

To accomplish a culture war against materialism, we will have to confront inequality

■

Commercialism runs amuck, evidenced by commercials before you watch a movie (arriving in the late 1970s) and while you watch a movie (the ubiquitous practice of product placement). The amassing and use of personal data by marketers not only erodes privacy but increasingly reduces us to a singular consumerist role. Making individuals subject to more risk via downsizing, via the privatization of social security, and via other erosions of the social safety net only compounds the problem.

Thus, there is a need to establish policies which "keep the market in its place" and which shape market practices (e.g., employer policies) to accommodate personal lives and provide retirement, health, and other security.

Part of the struggle Schor calls for goes beyond this and amounts to a "culture war" against materialism. To accomplish this, however, we will have to confront current and growing inequality, lest we ask those with a beleaguered living standard to reduce their consumption. But if combined with such confrontation, this culture war is well worth fighting: it would require that we articulate a vision founded on decent political values and establish mechanisms for the economy to reflect those values. Leisure for all! ■



Photo: Nick Jahn

Juliet Schor Responds

The contributors to this forum are an extraordinary group of people, whose work I have long admired and learned from. I am honored by their willingness to comment on mine. These are exactly the kinds of discussions about consuming that we need. Has the post-modern marketplace of Holt, Thompson, and perhaps Lamont and Molnár, vitiated the positional competitions of Schor, Brown, and Frank? Is the most urgent and profound failure of consumption its environmental impact (Gibbons and Taylor)? Or is inequality the larger problem (Mishel, Bernstein, and Schmitt)? Is there no middle ground between Twitchell's *laissez-faire*, celebratory attitude toward spending and his fear of the Consumer Police? These are vital analytical and political questions.

Analysis

Let me begin with some questions about my analysis. Holt, Thompson, and Lamont and Molnár all argue that I have misinterpreted the current consumer culture. While they differ in their specifics, all three responses challenge the centrality which I accord to classic status competitions in my analysis of the growth of consumption. Holt and Thompson argue that a postmodern marketplace has replaced status-seeking with (in Holt's words) an "open-ended project of self-creation," in which consumers do not aim to copy the wealthy but to reinvent themselves by consuming new things in new ways. Lamont and Molnár take the view that upper-middle-class white tastes are not widely shared across society, as in the classical status model.

Generally speaking, I think the post-modern perspective focuses excessively on youth, sub-cultures, new commodities, and "cutting edge" trends. And it takes too narrow and literal a view of how status operates. To focus the disagreement, however, I need to begin by correcting what strikes me as a mischaracterization of my view by Holt. I have never argued that there are *particular* or *fixed* status symbols. Status-competition is a dynamic process, and particular status markers tend to lose prestige and value as they proliferate. (This, by the way, is what Jim Twitchell fails to mention in his comments about Uncle Louie's headstone. Twenty years from now, upscale home buyers will regard the slabs in the kitchen as tacky remnants of a previous generation's bad taste, and will spend large amounts of money ripping them out and replacing them.) What does remain fixed, and perhaps this is what Holt objects to, is that goods which are more socially visible in their use and possession tend to figure more prominently in competitions. So, for example, shoes, clothing, modes of transport, homes, and home decoration have historically been (and continue to be) central in status competitions. Even the most ardent advocate of the postmodern marketplace can hardly have missed the upscaling to luxury vehicles, designer clothing, and larger and more luxurious houses. If people are merely reinventing themselves, why do they typically turn to these visible symbols of their identities? At the same time, what Holt calls postmodern commodities (a weekend at Kirpalu) are *also* implicated in this process. But this is nothing new: when

consumption is rising, new commodities always enter the game. Perhaps I should mention that I have never argued for restricting particular commodities (except on grounds of environmental impacts), as some of these contributions suggest. My favorite type of anti-status tax is one which taxes higher-end versions of commodities more heavily. (And, for a final point on Holt, I certainly do not advocate taking away the opportunity for consumers to shop at cheaper outlets; my concern is with maintaining diversity in retailing. The question is whether or not Wal-Mart will be allowed to wipe out the individual proprietorships and smaller chains.)

Lamont and Molnár claim that I focus on Newton to the exclusion of Roxbury. It's a fair claim, about which I was quite explicit in my book (although not in this piece, given the brevity of the section on new consumerism). I do believe, however, that the differences Lamont and Molnár discuss (class and race, for example) have declined over the twentieth century. Roxbury and Newton youth are not simply the same, but with respect to *what consumers desire*, the trend has been toward more uniformity across groups. The fact that fashion innovations now go from Roxbury to Newton in no way invalidates this claim. Furthermore, status models do not require that all participants experience the game in the same way, only that different groups assign similar rankings to products. Inner-city youth and suburban stockbrokers both want BMWs, but it does not follow that they mean the same thing in both places.

Finally, if I am guilty of overemphasizing the classical status model, it is because I am responding to what strikes me as widespread hostility to this interpretation. I have always found this ironic, because it was just the moment when status competition intensified that the scholars began claiming that status-seeking was dead. Ultimately, as Clair Brown reminds us, a large part of the answer to this question must be empirical. Her work on this question is a classic, and her findings on the 1973-1988 period are a challenge to my interpretation. I wonder, though, if a shift from spending money on new products to spending money on upscale versions of existing products could account for her failure to see an increase in expenditures on status in the consumer expenditure data.

Some of the other responses raised issues of interpretation. I was a bit surprised that Robert Frank characterized me as favoring a “marketing explanation,” in contrast to his account, which emphasizes changes in the income and wealth distribution. My *Overspent American* argued that the worsening distributions of income and wealth set off the current round of conspicuous consumption. Indeed, I believe this is one of the major points of similarity between Frank’s account and mine. (The other is our common emphasis on the externalities associated with positional competitions, and our belief in the value of tax policy to dampen those competitions.) Where Frank and I differ is that he does not argue that the nature of reference group comparisons has changed, as I do. This is why television is important in my story: not because of advertising, but because of the bias in its programming toward affluent lifestyles and the impact that has had on viewers’ perceptions of reality—an impact that has grown with skyrocketing television viewing time over this period.

Finally, Mishel, Bernstein, and Schmitt offer an illuminating series of queries and cautionary notes. On a small point, I would say that the contribution of “new consumerism” has precisely been to increase families’ commitment to dual-earner households and full-time female labor force participation, rather than longer weekly hours. Many of the jobs that married women have been entering are salaried, and therefore longer weekly hours do not raise incomes. On the larger point of their skepticism about the value of raising consumerism as an issue in progressive politics, I understand it fully. It can be treacherous territory. But I would love to see their Economic Policy Institute do research on some of the basic

questions that a consumer critique raises, such as the relations between income, free time, and quality of life, and the question of “limits to growth” raised by Taylor and Gibbons.

Politics

What about the politics of my position? To Craig Thompson’s question about pleasure, I’m ambivalent. Of course, I’m all for pleasure. But I’d say pleasure is one of the things consumerism is pretty good at generating. If the response comes back that the market only gives us “false” short term pleasures, I’d worry about falling into the trap of thinking that consuming is a world of artificial desire or low-brow amorality. Jim Twitchell might want to tar me with that brush, but I’ve tried pretty hard to steer clear of a view with the improbable implication that consuming isn’t satisfying. Mainly because I don’t believe it.

I appreciate Taylor’s pointing out that I gave short shrift to the environmental effects of consumption, and that those must play a central role in any political discourse of consumption. Coming to terms with our current destruction of the planetary ecology will be an important part of coming to a new set of values. In this regard, the suggestions of Jack Gibbons are extremely important—for better pricing, more truth in advertising, product labeling, and so forth.

Lamont and Molnár suggest that I’m too individualistic, economistic, and voluntaristic. On the first, one accusation is that I have an individualistic theory of shopping. Actually, I have no theory of shopping. I have a theory of spending, which people may do alone, or in company. My examples were merely that, for the purpose of showing what’s wrong with the neoclassical view. I reject the charge of an individualist theory of spending because the action in

my story is all around people’s attempts to connect to others, and the importance of social context. By the same token, in calling for a new politics of consumption, I am in no way arguing against non-material meanings, values, and self-definition. Quite the opposite. My work emphasizes the importance of *time* in reproducing human relationships, and the tradeoffs between free time and earning money (not consumption as an alternative to leisure). In this sense, I put myself very squarely in the camp that is questioning the relationship between income and happiness. On the question of excessive voluntarism, I would reply that my principles are a combination of structural change through policy, cultural change through individual and local collective action, and a larger national mobilization. I find it inconceivable that progress on these issues could be made without individual, collective, national, local, cultural, social, *and* economic change. Consumerism is just too powerful.

Finally, to Jim Twitchell: I have no beef with bad taste; it’s the high-end stuff I’m worried about. You don’t have to worry about me hassling the poor. Or even, for that matter, the rich. It’s not particular commodities that worry me. It really is the “Big Points” that Twitchell doesn’t want to talk about. Like Destroying the Planet. Or Not Having Time to Know Each Other. Or Not Having Decent News Because Advertisers Control Content.

Twitchell says at the end of his comment “The more we have of this stuff, the more important it has become. It is a little unsettling, to be sure. To me, too.” After all his celebration of consumerism, it seems to worry Twitchell. And that means he is not only like me, but like most Americans. ■

Primo Levi's Last Moments

A new look at the Italian author's tragic death twelve years ago.

Diego Gambetta

S¹ometime after 10:00 a.m., Saturday, April 11, 1987, on the third floor of a late-nineteenth-century building in Turin, the concierge rang the doorbell of Primo Levi's apartment.¹ Levi—research chemist, retired factory manager, author of our most humanly compelling accounts of the Holocaust—had been born in that apartment 67 years earlier. He opened the door and collected his mail from the concierge like every other day. He was wearing a short-sleeve shirt. He smiled, thanked her as usual, and closed the door. The concierge descended on foot the ample spiral staircase occupied in the middle by a caged elevator. She had barely reached her cubicle on the ground floor, she later told the police, when she heard Levi's body hit the bottom of the stairs by the elevator. It was 10:20. A dentist who lived in the building heard her screams. He immediately saw, he subsequently reported, that Levi was dead.² The autopsy established that he died instantaneously of a “crushed skull.”³ No signs of violence unrelated to the fall were found on his body.⁴ At 12:00, barely an hour and a half after the event, I heard the news on the radio in Rome. There was already mention of suicide. The police inquiry simply confirmed that conclusion.

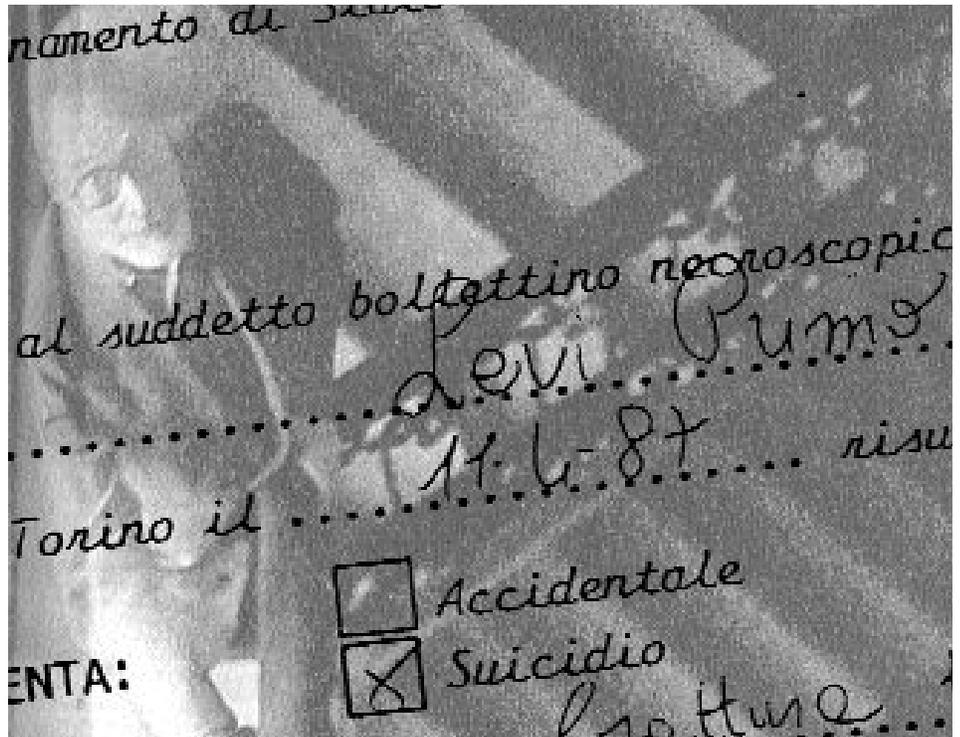
Levi's death, especially the manner of it, came as a terrible shock to his many admirers in Italy and abroad. His friends were devastated by what some considered a totally unexpected event. “Until the day of his death I was convinced he was the

¹ This corresponds to the fourth floor in the United States convention.

² I reconstructed the events from *La Stampa* and *La Repubblica* of April 12-14, 1987.

³ This can be read in Levi's death certificate.

⁴ Reported by Mirna Cicioni, *Primo Levi: Bridges of Knowledge*. (Washington D.C.: Berg, 1995), p. 170.



most serene person in the world,” Norberto Bobbio said.⁵ Still, no one showed much difficulty in coming to terms with it. After the fact, Levi's death seemed so predictable—the “inescapable” end of the life of an Auschwitz survivor. Natalia Ginzburg, a Jewish writer, wrote that “of those years [in Auschwitz] he must have had terrible memories: a wound he always carried with great fortitude, but which must have been nonetheless atrocious. I think it was the memory of those years which lead him towards his death.”⁶ Ferdinando Camon, a friend and Catholic writer, said in an interview: “This suicide must be backdated to 1945. It did not happen then because Primo wanted (and had to) write. Now, having completed his work (*The Drowned and the Saved* was the

⁵ *Panorama*, April 26, 1987.

⁶ *Corriere della Sera*, April 12, 1987.

end of the cycle) he could kill himself. And he did.”⁷

The most poignant comment in this regard came from his son Renzo: “Now everyone wants to understand, to grasp, to probe. I think my father had already written the last act of his existence. Read the conclusion of *The Truce* and you will understand.”⁸ In November 1962, Levi had written:

[And] a dream full of horror has still not ceased to visit me, at sometimes frequent, sometimes longer, intervals. It is a dream within a dream, varied in detail, one in substance. I am sitting at a table with my family, or with friends, or at work, or in the green countryside; in short, in a peaceful relaxed environment, apparently without tension or affliction; yet I

⁷ *Panorama*, April 26, 1987.

⁸ *Panorama*, April 26, 1987.

feel a deep and subtle anguish, the definite sensation of an impending threat. And in fact, as the dream proceeds, slowly and brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses, and disintegrates around me, the scenery, the walls, the people, while the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Now everything has changed into chaos; I am alone in the centre of a grey and turbid nothing, and now, I *know* what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over, and in the outer dream, which continues, gelid, a well-known voice resounds: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command, of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, "*Wstawàch.*"

That idea that Auschwitz was ultimately responsible for Levi's suicide was not limited to Italy or to the immediate aftermath of the event. In the United States, echoing Camon, Elie Wiesel said: "Primo Levi died at Auschwitz forty years later."⁹ Four years after the writer's death, Maurice Goldstein, the president of the Auschwitz international committee, wrote: "Auschwitz reclaimed him."¹⁰ In a review of *The Drowned and the Saved* published in 1988 in the *New Republic*, Cynthia Ozyck wrote that Levi, like several other writers of distinction before him, "[suggests], by a self-willed death, that hell in fact did not end when the chimneys closed down, but was simply freshening for a second run."¹¹ This popular explanation of the ultimate cause of Levi's suicide inspires disturbingly ambiguous conclusions: while it provides an additional source of revulsion against the horrors of Auschwitz, it also led some people to in-

terpret Levi's tragic end as a delayed victory of Nazism. That *that* end should befall Levi makes the thought doubly disturbing. His writings on the Holocaust were fundamental in shaping many people's understanding of what it means to be a decent human being—their sense of the prospects for human survival, even under the worst possible conditions. That a figure of Levi's stature emerged from the fumes of arguably the most savage act of hatred and inhumanity to scar the twentieth century has been a powerful source of hope and strength. Philip Roth describes Levi's "masterpiece on Auschwitz," *If This is a Man*, as "his profoundly civilized and spirited response to those who did all they could to sever his every sustained connection and tear him and his kind out of history." How could *he* lose that strength and jump to his death?

This unsettling question was not voiced publicly in Italy. Italians must have felt too close to Levi to muster the courage required to raise it. In the United States, by contrast, it came right into the open. Just after the event, an anonymous journalist wrote in *The New Yorker* that the "efficacy of all his words had somehow been canceled by his death—that his hope, or faith, was no longer usable by the rest of us." Leon Wieseltier, in *The New Republic*, wrote: "He spoke for the bet that there is no blow from which the soul may not recover. When he smashed his body, he smashed his bet." Ozyck went even further. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, she says, Levi gave up being the "well-mannered cicerone of hell, mortal horror in a decorous voice"; he finally lashed out his full, hitherto suppressed, hatred for the Nazi criminals and their accomplices "in a book of blows returned by a pen of fire." And since "the rage of resentment is somehow linked to self-destruction"—as Levi himself had pointed out analyzing the suicide of Jean Améry, another writer who survived Auschwitz—his final book on the camp should be seen "as the bitterest of suicide notes." She found it "disconcerting that of all the various 'lessons' that might have been drawn from Levi's penetrations, the one most prevalent is also the coarsest and the most misleading: uplift." For Ozyck, "It is in the nature of hell to go on and on: inescapability is its rule." In her gloomy vision Levi's bet never stood a chance to succeed.

One could perhaps reject those remarks as unfounded, even unfair. Levi's books—one is tempted to reply—will touch future generations as much as had he died of natural causes. Still, though brutal, the conclusions of Wieseltier and others cannot be so easily dismissed. Levi's generation, and that of his children (my generation), perceive his writings, rightly or wrongly, as continuous with his life. Their immense value sprang from that fusion: his life seemed to exemplify the possibilities of human decency explored in his books, and to stand as evidence that those possibilities were not mere wishful thinking. As a result, discussion of his death continues to generate highly emotional responses, not least from those who vehemently deny that the circumstances of his death bear any relevance to his message. (I experienced precisely this reaction of insistent denial when I presented an earlier version of this essay at an April 1997 conference organized by Columbia University's Italian Academy of Advanced Studies to mark the tenth anniversary of Levi's death.)

2.

Do we have any evidence that Levi's death was a delayed response to Auschwitz? We do know that in the period leading up to his death, Levi was going through a severe episode of depression. His wife, Lucia, said he was tired and demoralized, and confirmed he was suffering from depression. For some months, he had been taking antidepressants prescribed by his cousin Giorgio Luzzati.¹² David Mendel, a retired British cardiologist who befriended Levi near the end of his life, received a letter from the writer dated February 7, 1987: "I have fallen into a rather serious depression; I have lost all interest in writing and even in reading. I am extremely low and I do not want to see anyone. I ask you as a 'Proper Doctor'

⁹ *La Stampa*, April 14, 1987.

¹⁰ Quoted in Cicioni, *Primo Levi: Bridges of Knowledge*, p. 171.

¹¹ *The New Republic*, March 21, 1988.

¹² Myriam Anissimov, *Primo Levi: La Tragédie d'un optimiste* (Paris: Lattès, 1996), p. 591. Originally published in French, the biography is now available in English as *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist* (Aurum Press for the United Kingdom; Overlook Press for the United States, 1998).

what should I do? I feel the need for help but I do not know what sort."¹³

But Levi's depression may well have had sources other than memories of Auschwitz. In a April 12, 1987 interview in *La Repubblica* Giovanni Tesio referred to Levi's fear of being unable to write anymore, his sense of having depleted his "writer capital." Others said he could no longer bear the sight of his old, ailing, senile mother and mother-in-law, both in their 90s, who lived in the family's large apartment under the constant care of a nurse. A third group, especially in Turin's Jewish community, said he was greatly upset by the controversy, sparked by revisionist historians in Germany and France, over the uniqueness and real extent of the Holocaust. Finally, there was a physical cause: Levi had a prostate operation only twenty days before his fatal fall. There is no indication that the operation, described as "routine" by his doctors, was going to impair any of his functions. But he was weak and still recovering, and surgery does tend to worsen depression.

Apparently Levi was prone to recurrent depression regardless of depressing events. At least two previous episodes were unaccompanied by any obvious trigger. Referring to one of these episodes he wrote in a letter that, after lasting two months, his depression suddenly disappeared in a matter of hours, suggesting that these episodes followed their own course.

Shortly before his death, Levi denied any link between his mental state and the camp. He told Bianca Guidetti Serra, a close friend, that his depression was unrelated to Auschwitz. And he told Mendel that "he was no longer haunted by the camp and no longer dreamed about it." Thus, if we assume that his suicide was caused by the unbearable memories of the camp, we must question the accuracy of his self-report. Perhaps such questioning is warranted. Once we try to imagine the mental processes of those who commit suicide, the possibilities multiply. As Levi says in the chapter devoted to Jean Améry in *The Drowned and the Saved*, many suicides admit "to a nebula of explanations." We do not know whether

the memories of the camp simply re-exploded in his mind that Saturday morning and reached an unbearable pitch.

3.

The most pressing question, however, is not why Levi committed suicide but whether he committed it at all—or if, instead, his death was accidental. The evidence, as we shall see, is not watertight. As far as we know there is no direct proof that Levi committed suicide—no witnesses, no note, no direct physical evidence. And this would not be the first time that a police inquiry reached a conclusion without an in-depth investigation. Levi's biographers, Myriam Anyssimov and Ian Thomson, both believe he committed suicide. But neither has any compelling evidence. Indeed the hypothesis of an accident was never seriously examined.

Primo Levi's life-long friend, Nobel laureate Rita Levi Montalcini cast the first doubts on the suicide a few days after the event. If Levi wanted to kill himself he, a chemical engineer by profession, would have known better ways than jumping into a narrow stairwell with the risk of remaining paralyzed. "Did anyone see him jump over that banister?" she asked rhetorically. "Did anyone find a piece of paper announcing his intention to end his life? Suicide is a far too quick conclusion."¹⁴ She expressed what probably many others, myself included, silently suspected.

Indeed, the stairwell in the Turin building is so narrow that Levi would have had to aim his fall just right to be successful. Horizontally, it is shaped like a cut-off pyramid. The elevator shaft is a square cage that runs vertically through the middle. The side of the elevator shaft extending into the stairwell is 3 feet, 7 inches. The maximum distance between the stairs and the elevator shaft is 5 feet, 7 inches; the minimum distance is just over 3 feet, 4 inches. This does not leave much room for the clean fall of a human body. Rather than killing himself, Levi could easily have hurt himself bouncing between the elevator cage and the railings of the lower floors. Moreover, had he wished to jump, he could have chosen the street or the courtyard, which were free of such constraints

and easily accessible. Furthermore, Levi picked not just a hazardous but a messy and theatrical option that exposed his relatives to a gruesome sight—a gesture in sharp contrast, as Levi Montalcini also pointed out, with the writer's sober and restrained style.

A few years later, in an article in the *Sunday Telegraph*, David Mendel, the cardiologist friend, was the first to make a strong case against suicide by offering a hypothetical reconstruction of the event and some new arguments.

[Levi's] death was not premeditated, he left no note. Older people almost never choose a violent death; they use gas or an overdose, and Primo could, had he wished, have taken an overdose of his medicine. It seems most likely to me that he died from the side effects of his anti-depressant drugs. These often lower the blood pressure, and the effort of walking back upstairs to his flat would lower it further. As a result, his brain would have received an inadequate blood supply and he would have felt faint. If he reacted taking some deep breaths, that would worsen matters by causing a further reduction in blood supply. I have a photograph of Primo holding those banisters, which are well below waist-height; I think that on the point of fainting, he reached for them to steady himself and fell.

Ferdinando Camon, who endorsed the suicide version at first but later changed his mind, received a letter from Levi three days after his death. Shaken, Camon thought: "Now he explains to me why he is about to commit suicide." What he read instead was "a letter full of vitality, of expectations and projects. He feared Gallimard had lost the copy of *The Drowned and the Saved* and wanted to send another. He asked me to send him the article in *Libération*"—which Camon had written to encourage the publication of Levi's work in French—"as soon as it was out." Levi wrote this letter three days before his death. Recently Camon said that Levi posted it that very Saturday morning during a walk he took before his fatal fall.

¹³ David Mendel, "Getting to know Primo Levi," unpublished lecture given at the Italian Cultural Institute in London on April 4, 1995.

¹⁴ *Paese Sera*, April 25, 1987.

Understandably, Camon cannot square this act with a suicide.

Several additional signs indicate that his depression, though no doubt very real, did not drive him into an idle stupor or turn him into a recluse. A few days before his death, he canvassed the wonders of using a personal computer for word-processing with his publisher, Giulio Einaudi; Levi promised to tutor him if he decided to buy one. In the week in which he died he was debating with friends and acquaintances about the prospect of becoming the president of his publisher, Einaudi, as part of a financial rescue operation. Maybe Levi was worrying about his ability to continue writing. But shortly before he died, Levi wrote a short *Storia Naturale* published posthumously by *La Stampa* on April 26, 1987, and delivered chunks of his new novel to Ernesto Ferrero, his editor at Einaudi. The title was *Doppio Legame*, the correspondence between a man and a young woman, in which he reveals the chemical reactions that allow one to make omelets, béchamel, mayonnaise, and vinaigrette. The day before he died, he promised to resume his regular conversations with Giovanni Tesio, who was writing a biographical piece on him. He even arranged an interview with a journalist from *La Stampa* for the following Monday.

This chain of events suggests that if he did commit suicide he certainly did not plan it. Levi left no will. This is uncharacteristic of his style, as by all accounts he was a considerate man. And he did not give any hint of his intention to family or friends. Had they had any immediate fear—his son lived in another apartment on the same landing—they would not have left him home alone that day. Even if he contemplated suicide it seems virtually certain that he did not plan it in that way and at that particular time. The succession of the events is puzzling. Just a few minutes after receiving his mail from the concierge in his usual amiable style, he goes back into his apartment, then suddenly opens the door again, walks to the banister, steps over it and jumps.

These considerations challenge the plausibility of suicide, however, only if we have in mind the premeditated kind. Jean Améry committed precisely *that* kind of suicide in 1978. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi calls him “a theoretician of

suicide.” By contrast, in the little he wrote about it, Levi never argued in favor of suicide. When discussing the other writer-survivors who committed suicide—not only Améry but also Paul Celan—he shows no special empathy or understanding for what they did. He says only that suicide is a philosophical act, and reveals that he thought about it both before and after but not while in the camp. One is too busy trying to survive there—he said—to have any energy left to think about anything else, even suicide.

We cannot, however, rule out the possibility that he committed *unpremeditated* suicide, lucidly or otherwise. He may have decided on impulse, through an internal chemistry we shall never discover. Or a sudden resolve may have been sparked by something that happened at that particular time—something that suddenly threw him back into a dark depression. Could he, for instance, have read something unbearably upsetting in his mail? This seems unlikely, since the concierge said that the items she delivered that day consisted of “a few newspapers and advertising leaflets.” In the newspapers of the day I found absolutely nothing that could have upset him. Moreover, had he been the object of threats or abuse, his family would have no reason to keep that secret. Judging by Renzo Levi’s words, the family does not blame an external event as the trigger of the tragedy.

But an unpremeditated act does not have to be the result of a clear-headed decision: perhaps Levi was simply overtaken by depression. In 1987, Cesare Musatti, the most famous Italian psychoanalyst, said: “Levi did not decide to take his life lucidly. It was a *raptus* [a mental seizure] due to a melancholic depression of a psychotic type. It was a sudden folly that brought him to self-destruction. Auschwitz has nothing to do with it. The truth is that Levi was ill, because depression is a serious illness.” William Styron, who also suffered from severe depression, put forward a similar explanation in a searing little book called *Darkness Visible*. He was “appalled” by the “many worldly writers and scholars” who vented the view that Levi’s suicide had “demonstrated a frailty, a crumbling of character they were loath to accept.” Depression, Styron argued, is a very serious and largely unacknowledged illness that affects millions and “kills in many instances because its anguish can no longer be

borne.” Rather than a product of the faculty of thought, Levi’s death would be the result of its collapse.

Recent research suggests that in a lifetime, 15 percent of patients with major depression will eventually die of suicide—a staggering fifteen to twenty times the corresponding population rates. There is also evidence that suicide is more likely to occur after “having been treated for a medical or psychiatric condition” and that “the typical suicide completers [as opposed to suicide attempters] are older men,” and that “sometimes [they do it] seemingly out of the blue.” Finally, “like depression suicide is *familial*, with relatives of suicides having roughly ten times higher risk of suicide than that of the population.” Levi’s grandfather committed suicide. Levi does indeed appear to have been a subject at risk.¹⁵

Still, population statistics are no evidence on which to settle individual cases. If fifteen depressed people out of one hundred take their own lives, 85 do not, and countless offspring of suicides die of natural causes. Speculating about a person’s mental chemistry to establish whether the person committed suicide leads us to a dead end. The motives of his suicide—as both Norberto Bobbio and Claudio Magris said—are ultimately inscrutable. All we can do is to check whether the facts convincingly exclude the possibility of an accident. Could Levi have unintentionally fallen over that banister?

4.

As David Mendel later acknowledged, his first reconstruction was partially inaccurate. Primo Levi did not fall immediately

¹⁵ This information is all from David B. Cohen, *Out of the Blue: Depression and Human Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), pp. 115, 122-3, 131. Cohen explains why older men are more at risk by referring to the fact that hopelessness rather than depression as such triggers suicide. The probability of suicide changes holding depression level constant and letting the level of hopelessness vary, while it does not change holding hopelessness constant and letting depression levels vary. It follows that “we can tolerate all sorts of pain and suffering if we can remain even vaguely optimistic that things will get better.”

after climbing the staircase to return to his apartment. He was in the apartment and had been there a while. If he died accidentally, something must have prompted him—just a few minutes after the concierge's visit—to open the door again, walk to the banister, and lean forward.

Why would he do *that at that* particular moment in time? The simplest supposition is that he was looking for someone. Perhaps his wife. She was out shopping and actually returned just a few minutes after Levi's fall. He might well have wanted to check to see whether she was on her way back. Or perhaps he was looking for the concierge herself. He might, say, have found an envelope addressed to someone else accidentally stuck in one of the newspapers and wanted to give it back to her. Remember that the concierge said that after descending from Levi's third floor apartment she had just entered her cubicle when she heard Levi's body hit the ground. She does not mention having stopped at any other apartment, so the time lapse may have been under five minutes. Levi may well have approached the banister in the hope of finding her in the staircase. The alternative hypothesis—that soon after the concierge's visit he suddenly reopened the door and went to the banister for the purpose of hurling himself down the stairwell—seems to me less convincing.

Levi was not very tall (5 feet, 5 inches), and the banister—which is 3 feet, 2 inches—must have reached only as far as his navel, or even slightly below. Furthermore, if Levi had been looking for someone, he would naturally have approached the banister at the ninety-degree corner where the horizontal part, which limits the landing, meets the descending part. From this perspective one has a better view of the lower floors and of the elevator entrance on the ground floor. This possibility is compatible with the point from which Levi must have fallen, which we can infer from the known point where his body hit the ground. This is to the left of the elevator, in the section of the landing where the descending ramp begins. The banister's height on the sloping segment at the corner drops by about six inches every step and offers decreasing protection. So perhaps he positioned himself to look down from the corner by holding, arms wide, the horizontal banister with one hand and the sloping one with the other. In

such a position one's balance is precarious as it depends on one's hands' grip.

We know that Levi was recovering from the prostate operation, was on antidepressants, and must have been feeble. If he became dizzy and lost consciousness while looking down the stairwell, the weight of the upper half of his body might have been sufficient to tilt the rest of his body over and drag him into the void. The proportional contribution of the head to one's total weight is greater the thinner one is, and Levi was thin, about 120 pounds. He also fell without a sound, a circumstance, which while not proving anything, is consistent with how an unconscious person would fall.

I asked my father, who is slightly built and about Levi's height, whether, when he visited Levi's apartment building, he thought he could fall accidentally in that way. "It's possible," he said. "That staircase"—he added after pondering a while—"has an odd triangular shape. It gives one a greater sense of void than a square one."

On the strength of this reconstruction, the possibility of an accident cannot be safely ruled out.

5.

The mystery surrounding Levi's death does not end here. Two years ago, on the tenth anniversary of his death, Elio Toaff, the Chief Rabbi of Rome, made a startling disclosure. At a commemorative gathering at a high school in Rome, he revealed that Levi called him on the telephone "ten minutes before" he died. Levi sounded distressed. He did not tell the Rabbi he was about to kill himself, and the Rabbi, much to his chagrin, did not guess what was about to happen. The Rabbi recalls that Levi said: "I can't go on with this life. My mother is ill with cancer and every time I look at her face I remember the faces of those men stretched on the benches at Auschwitz." When I interviewed Toaff in Rome in June 1998, he confirmed the version of the event as reported by the Italian press, including the timing of the call. He also told me that out of discretion he had never spoken about that episode to anyone before, not even privately. He said he decided on impulse to reveal it during the anniversary gathering out of love of truth: "too many preposterous things were being said." His response was prompted by someone in the audience who mentioned

the doubts voiced by Levi Montalcini and Mendel about why Levi should have chosen such a messy way to commit suicide given that he had better alternatives. "The mind of a suicide can be in a state which is not analyzable by ordinary criteria," Toaff told me.

This is the first strong circumstantial evidence that Levi's death might, after all, have been correctly ruled suicide. What the Rabbi says Levi told him, moreover, shows that the memories of Auschwitz were indeed haunting him at the very end.

But how reliable is this evidence? Now in his eighties, Toaff appears to be lucid and energetic. Still, the circumstances surrounding that telephone call are not very clear. Levi was not religious. It seems odd that he should approach the Rabbi. Rita Levi Montalcini, who persists in her doubts about the suicide, retorted that she spoke with Levi on the telephone the night before and that he sounded in good spirits. Giovanni Tesio, who also spoke with Levi the day before, confirmed to me that he had the same impression. Furthermore, Toaff told me that he did not know Levi and had never met or spoken with him before that day.

So we need to perform a difficult leap of imagination. We have to imagine that Levi, sometime after his walk when he posted the letter to Camon and around the time he got his mail from the concierge, managed to find not just the motive and the energy to call the Rabbi, but also his phone number. The Rabbi's home phone number is not listed in the Rome directory. Still, it is not implausible to think he had Toaff's number already for some reason, or that he managed to find him at the synagogue. Even so, we must still stretch our imagination. We have to imagine that Levi brought himself to confide his deepest sorrows to the Rabbi by phone, in a relatively short time, though he had never met or spoken to him before.

The really perplexing fact, however, is the *day* of the telephone call. Levi died on a Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, on which observant Jews are not supposed to use any technical equipment: they cannot cook or even turn on the light, let alone make or receive phone calls.

This apparent inconsistency had not occurred to me before I met Toaff (David Mendel noted it when we reviewed the facts together). I therefore wrote to the Rabbi asking for clarification. The Rabbi

did not reply. I then contacted three Italian sources knowledgeable in these matters to try and establish whether it was conceivable for the Rabbi to answer the phone on a Saturday. All three sources, two of them close to the Rabbi's family, categorically excluded this possibility.

Maybe the Rabbi remembers the timing incorrectly. Maybe Levi called on the Friday before sunset or even the week before. It is unusual, however, for one's memory to make *that* kind of mistake. One can easily fail to recollect accurately the irrelevant aspects of a single memorable event. I clearly remember that I fell down for a quarter of a mile on an icy slope while ski mountaineering and nearly killed myself, but I do not now remember the day it was or even the year. But suppose this accident happened to me the day before my wedding. I would then indeed clearly remember both that the two events were temporally *associated* and how closely. The Rabbi's recollection belongs to the latter category: it is very precise and establishes an association between two memorable events, the unexpected call of a famous man and the death of the same man a few minutes later. So the Rabbi's revelation remains a puzzle. Whatever its solution, the evidence provided by Rabbi Toaff is hardly as decisive as it may initially have seemed.

6.

An accidental death, then, is fully consistent with what we know about the end of Primo Levi's life. Indeed, the facts known to us arguably suggest an accident more strongly than they indicate suicide. The accident hypothesis is disarmingly natural. It makes parsimonious sense of the peculiar coincidence between the concierge's call and Levi's fall, and solves the puzzle of why he picked that hazardous and theatrical way to die, and why he left no note or will. Suicide is, at the very least, no more likely than an accident. And even if it was suicide it is most unlikely to have been lucidly planned. Levi knew and taught the value of doubt about unverified propositions and emotionally-founded opinions. David Mendel asked Levi whether he regarded himself as a guru. He characteristically replied: "Unfortunately I am not a guru. I would be happy to be one, but I lack the essential *sicurezza* [confidence]—as I have more doubts than convictions." In this sense too we owe him extra care in

drawing conclusions. There has been far too much *sicurezza* in the interpretations of his death. Better to live in doubt than on an ill-founded certainty.

Why then were people so prone to believe unquestioningly that it was suicide? Even those who thought we would never know exactly why he did it, and those who thought he was struck by a sudden urge, never for a moment seem to have suspected an accident.

The answer probably lies in a cognitive trap. Devastating past events cast a shadow on future ones, and constrain our freedom to interpret them: if one survives Auschwitz, everything that happens subsequently tends to be interpreted in the light of that experience. There is no denying the awesome oppressive force of the nightmare Levi describes at the end of *The Truce*. It is not a matter of interpretation. Yet, while emotionally compelling, that by itself does not constitute evidence of anything. The Auschwitz hell may kill survivors decades later but it may also impair our ability to evaluate serenely the bare facts before us. It becomes a magnet-explanation. The confidence with which Levi's death was attributed to suicide seems to spring more from this understandable bias than from the weight of the evidence.

It is moreover untrue that survivors commit suicide more than other people do. Aaron Hass, who has carried out in-depth research on 58 survivors now living in the United States, reveals:

When I asked "Have you ever had thoughts of suicide in your post-war life?" none of those I interviewed answered in the affirmative. On the contrary, the response of a survivor of Auschwitz, Jack Saltzman, echoed the sentiments of many: "I wouldn't give the bastards the satisfaction."

A further sign of the vitality of survivors documented by Hass is the unusual energy with which survivors went about marrying and having children soon after they left the camps. The very act of surviving is felt (at least by those who survived long enough to be interviewed by Hass in the late 1980s) as a way of bearing witness against genocide. Like any other human being, they may feel attracted by suicide for whatever reason but they refrain from even contemplating it lest

their death be interpreted as a delayed victory of Nazism. The only way to make absolutely sure one's suicide is not so perceived is not to commit it. Insofar as a survivor takes his life people are driven to interpret it as related to Auschwitz. This is precisely why it is so important to avoid hasty conclusions about Levi's death. Even if we think that the value of his work will survive unaffected by his death, we know that others feel differently.

The impression that survivors are prone to suicide is fueled also by the fact that among writers, a rare but highly visible category of survivors, there have been several suicides: not only Améry and Celan, but also Bruno Bettelheim, Tadeus Borowski and Peter Szondi. Jorge Semprun, a writer who was interned as a communist in Buchenwald and was freed on April 11, 1945, exactly 42 years before Levi's death, recently offered an account that might explain this fact. In his autobiography, published in 1994 and significantly titled *L'écriture ou la vie*, Semprun argues that writing about the experience of the camp, rather than being a cathartic process, makes life much harder to live. The detailed revisiting of appalling atrocities and infinite human misery wears the writer out and, in Semprun's own experience, makes him increasingly suicidal. In Semprun's view, Levi's demise could be interpreted not as a consequence of having been in the camp as such, but of having written about it. Levi wrote several books that are either weakly related to the camp or not related at all (*The Periodic Table*, *The Monkey's Wrench*, *If Not Now When*). Yet, his last published book, *The Drowned and the Saved*, is his most suffered meditation on the Holocaust. Then even if Levi's death were a suicide, his gesture would leave the value of his work intact. He would have succumbed not to Nazism, but to an altogether different thing: the high personal cost of bearing witness to the Holocaust by writing about it.

The facts—or rather the lack of conclusive facts—help us out of this anguishing quandary: we shall simply never know whether he committed suicide or not. One thing is certain though. Levi's last moments cannot be construed as an act of delayed resignation before the inhumanity of Nazism. He never yielded. At most he snapped. On that tragic Saturday only his body was smashed. ■

The Two-Hundred Years War

G. M. Tamás

“For sheer primitive rage,” said an old sage, “commend me to a thorough-going humanitarian when you get him well roused.”¹ As I write (in mid-May), the left-center governments of North America and Western Europe—self-certified do-gooders all—are showering thousands of tons of hardware and hi-tech hellfire on targets in Yugoslavia selected by their “intelligence” agencies. The policy follows this syllogism:

1. *We must stop the terror in Kosovo.*
2. *The bombing will not stop the terror in Kosovo.*
3. *Let's get on with the bombing.*

Such is the reasoning of the most powerful, most prosperous, best-educated, and best-informed nations on earth.

To be sure, the conflict in Yugoslavia defies any facile moral calculus. NATO is fighting a “just war” in the narrow sense of its being directed against a horrible genocidal regime, and pursued with the intention of upholding human rights. But it is also the wrong war, since it does not alleviate the predicament of the victims it purports to rescue. In this it parallels the Iraq imbroglio where, after long years of sanctions, boycott, and air strikes, the position of Kurds, Shiites, leftists, and other anti-Saddam forces are now much worse. The belief in the righteousness of NATO’s case is undermined by US support for authoritarian regimes practicing ethnic cleansing and massacre as an instrument of policy—in Cambodia, Guatemala, Colombia, and Turkey. Still, the enemy, Milosevic is evil; our side is merely absurd and unprincipled.

This “just” but “wrong” war is dividing and destroying the West European left, just as the first timid steps were underway to inaugurate a non-ethnic, non-racist citizenship in Germany and France, and it threatens to ruin East European democracy altogether. There may be no attractive solution but better understanding may help to reduce the current horror.



The oracles have already spoken out on the explanation of the conflict and the ensuing genocide and massive population “transfer.” But their reasoning is not much better than the NATO syllogism. Consider two first-rate minds, both with Balkan roots. The post-Marxist Slovene thinker, Slavoj Žižek delivers himself of the opinion that all that talk about ethnic nationalism is just nonsense, the essence is “power struggle.”² The Bulgarian-French writer, Julia Kristeva, locates the essence in culture. She presents us with a dramatic contrast of East and West in 1793: while the Protestant Kant—according to her—was representing rational understanding (*entendement, Verstand*), Orthodox monks were translating *Philokalia* from the

Byzantine Greek. QED. What more proof could we ask for that Orthodox Slavs are irrational, thus inferior?³

Two famous East European novelists shared their views with Western audiences, too. György Konrád blames the West, not unfairly, for encouraging separatism and believing the canard that Yugoslavia was in some sense more of an “artificial” creation than most states. “The West” writes Konrád, “recognizes, protects, and maintains by force of arms a Bosnia made up of three republics, three nationalities: an entity no less artificial than was Yugoslavia. The West recognized ethnic nationalism and helped it to victory, opening the door to the violent expulsions. By giving top priority to national self-determination and rejecting on principle the federation inherited from the com-

¹ Agatha Christie, *Murder at the Vicarage* [1930] (New York: Berkley Books, 1984).

² *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 21, 1999.

³ *Le Monde*, April 17, 1999.

munist era, the West made individual human rights and lawful, democratic autonomy for cultural minorities subservient to [ethnic] nationalist hysteria.... Western politicians believe they act against [Milosević], but they act for him: the West has walked into the trap."⁴

The Albanian novelist, Ismail Kadaré, however, believes that we have another aggression of would-be Christians against non-Christians on our hands. Kadaré thinks that the Serbs have been blood-thirsty thugs throughout their history. But surprisingly (or perhaps unsurprisingly), he finds words of praise for the *Kanun*, the medieval Albanian handbook of ritual vendetta, even for what he calls "its central part, 'The Rules of Death.'"⁵

Among important Western authors, Susan Sontag, in an article of almost Wieseltierian ferocity, memorably (or ominously) called "Why Are We In Kosovo?" declares herself fed up with European whining and bellyaching about what she feels is "a just war."⁶

The well-known social critic, Jean Baudrillard, basing his theory on the counter-intuitive hypothesis that the leaders of the Western world cannot be complete idiots (why not?), thinks that Milosević is evil, but so is everyone else. All the capitalist countries are trying to get rid of their mostly immigrant minorities, to "eliminate heterogeneous and fractious elements" locally and achieve globalization, as it were, globally.⁷

⁴ *The Nation*, May 3, 1999.

⁵ *Le Monde*, May 4, 1999.

⁶ *The New York Times Magazine*, May 2, 1999. Ironically though, Sontag's quite credible "just war" view is shared by such megastars of the French punditocratic glitterati as Bernard-Henri Lévy, André Glucksmann, Alain Finkielkraut, Alain Touraine, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, and Philippe Sollers, while it was the US House of Representatives that failed to carry a motion supporting the air strikes, and it is Sen. Trent Lott who follows to the letter the party line laid down by the Socialist Worker's Party USA and the Spartacist League (see, "Stop the Imperialist Bombing of Yugoslavia! Support the Fight for Self-Determination in Kosovo!" in *The Militant*, April 26, 1999). Other members of Congress agree with the Communist Party USA in its friendly view of the Serb regime.

Meanwhile, in Yugoslavia, sheer dementia seems to reign supreme. In her stunning war diary Biljana Sribljanović—Serb playwright and admirably courageous member of the Yugoslav democratic opposition (that, according to Dr. Zizek does not exist)—reports that the air attacks in Belgrade are announced on Serbian radio and television by a disembodied voice belonging to somebody called "Avram Israel," and the Serb TV broadcasts endless reruns of *Schindler's List*. The Serbs and the Albanians alike are now identifying themselves with the Jews known to them from Hollywood's anti-fascist kitsch. Miss Sribljanović's generalized moral nausea is the most hopeful and refreshing development since NATO's war began.⁸

But apart from this nausea, the analyses—however plausibly and forcefully stated—are not particularly helpful, and other discussions are comparably ignorant and unilluminating. The past matters in this conflict, and the major commentators are strikingly uninformed about the relevant history—a 200-year legacy that has fostered ethno-cultural division, produced a world without citizens, and correspondingly limited current options to a federal structure policed by external force, or a collection of ethnically pure states, or continued slaughter.

The Empire of Reason

One reason why the Yugoslav tragedy is not properly understood is the erroneous impression of leading analysts that communism was a mere aberration, without a history of its own. The "bracketing out" of 80 years of history where the causes of our present predicament can be found is understandable, but pernicious. There is a fear abroad that looking for the roots of post-communist problems in the communist past of the new democracies would somehow "normalize," "trivialize," or "banalize" what is regarded as the horrendous communist "experiment"—a period that is supposed to have been "abnormal" and "exceptional," because it was, by definition, non-capitalist. Pointing out elements of continuity in the political history of totalitarian regimes seems to mitigate our legitimate outrage,

⁷ *Liberation*, April 26, 1999.

⁸ *Der Spiegel*, April 26, 1999.

so it is rejected on emotional grounds. But if we fail to understand, for example, that it was Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini who destroyed the last remnants of the aristocratic-feudal order in East and Central Europe, not (like west of the Rhine) the liberal middle classes, and it was they, in consequence, who created modernity there, then we egregiously misread the twentieth century.

To show that Hitler inherited some of Bismarck's policies and that the communists had to face difficulties Kaunitz and Metternich faced before them is not tantamount to "relativising" the Holocaust and the Gulag. But there was no historical pause during totalitarian rule. This might sound like a truism, but it is not. The carnage in the Balkans is a result of the unraveling of a revolutionary project—philosophic, administrative and political—that started in the eighteenth century.⁹

It all began with the politically-modernizing reforms of Joseph II, emperor of Austria from 1765 to 1790. In 1781, he issued the Toleration Patent, which ended Counter-Reformation and the persecution of the Greek Orthodox, Protestants, and Jews. In 1784, he followed with the Language Decree, which replaced Latin with German as the official usage. In 1782, the Emperor abolished the material autonomy of the Catholic Church, restricted ecclesiastical legislation to the clergy, dissolved the "contemplative" monastic orders, and imposed government control on seminaries. In 1781 (1786 for Hungary), he ended peasant serfdom. He effectively abolished patrimonial jurisdiction, in which a landlord could be plaintiff and judge at the same time. And in 1789 he introduced a cash tax on nobles, prelates, and guilds. Serfs became tenant farmers in the Western half of the Empire.

The Jewish minister Joseph von Sonnenfels abolished torture in 1776, after

⁹ See G. M. Tamás, *Les Idoles de la tribu* [1985] (Paris: Editions d'Arcantère, 1991); "Old Enemies and New: A Philosophic Postscript to Nationalism," *Studies in East European Thought* 46 (1994); "A Legacy of Empire," *Wilson Quarterly* (Winter, 1994). My writings on nationalism and ethnicism are collected in *Törzsi fogalmak* ["Tribal Concepts"] (Budapest: Atlantisz, 1999), vol. 1.

Count von Haugwitz separated the law courts from the Crown's prosecutorial service and the justice ministry, and standardized weights and measures (in 1749 and 1756, respectively). The Emperor banned the Jesuits, paid the clergy through a central fund, funded the General Hospital in Vienna in 1784, modernized censorship in 1781, and began to allow anti-clerical pamphlets and criticism of himself—though not of the monarchical principle.

Feudal regional assemblies were disbanded or disregarded, and replaced by a modern, centralized administration. Civil servants no longer had to be of noble origin, and lordly justices of the peace disappeared in favor of qualified judges. Joseph II's Uniform Code of Substantive Criminal Law (1787) abolished the death penalty and aristocratic exemptions. The regulation of marriage shifted from ecclesiastical to civil courts. Bankruptcy and inheritance laws followed. Modern record-keeping, statistical methods, and vocational schools were introduced; internal customs duties were abolished; many paved roads and deeper and expanded ports were built.¹⁰

Such was the modernizing political reform of enlightened Hapsburg despotism. It was achieved without the slightest popular participation—or, indeed, participation by anybody except the monarch and his small brain-trust. The Hapsburg Empire comprised a hodgepodge of kingdoms, provinces, principalities, and duchies that had been brought together by accidents of warfare and dynastic marriage—a backward, agrarian ruin of the obsolete Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and the ancient Kingdom of Hungary (including Croatia), the latter laid waste by two centuries

of Ottoman occupation, national insurrection, and peasant *jacquerie*. The regional aristocracies were linked to the House of Austria by wildly differing arrangements of suzerainty, with some of them—especially the noble counties of Hungary—enjoying nearly full-fledged autonomy ensured by medieval constitutions, treaties, and compacts. On this colorful mosaic, Joseph II—who refused to be crowned King of Hungary or King of Bohemia, so his rule was deemed illegal by the noble estates—tried to impose an order of rational benevolence. The emperor wanted uniform and science-based general education, a state-run manufacturing industry, and modern trade according to mercantilist principles—in short, “good governance.”

The Emperor's contempt for the traditional ruling classes ran deep. In the 1780s he was sorely tempted to side with an uprising of the oppressed Rumanian peasantry in Transylvania against their cruel and shortsighted Hungarian masters. His contempt was fully reciprocated. Indeed, Joseph II's rule of reason, welfare, benevolence, and paternalistic bureaucracy was bitterly resisted by virtually everyone with any power: noble Diets and assemblies, the Catholic church, medieval walled cities, and even some grandees at the Court. Paradoxically, the only political foundation for his enlightened, centralist, and “rational” government was the divine right of kings, the sacral monarchy he inherited from Constantine and Charlemagne. Unlike Frederick the Great, the emperor had no sense of national rebirth and greatness operating in his favor, nor, like Napoleon, a revolutionary-democratic version of nationalism. Legitimacy did not derive from the people, however conceived. The Emperor's only allies were people he did not like much: intellectuals, Jews, Protestants, and Freemasons. These groups were either cut off from the system of local feudal privilege or positively hostile to it for philosophical reasons. Radicals of all stripes flocked to the service of the man who embodied *enlightened absolutism*. A typical figure, the Hungarian atheist priest Abbot Martinovics served Joseph II and his successor, Leopold II, as a secret agent. A leading member of the radical Masonic Illuminati, Martinovics later organized a two-tiered Jacobin conspiracy while remaining an active, although disloyal, police spy. He was eventually executed at

Buda, where a city square is still called “Bloody Fields.” Nevertheless, his life established a pattern of cooperation between Hapsburg reformers and “rootless” groups disconnected from regional elites.

Of course, the reforms of Joseph II and Leopold II challenged the local powers-that-be, especially the Hungarian nobles and their county assemblies. The German language decree and Joseph's open disregard of medieval habits and customs allowed the provincial nobility to mobilize ethnic sentiment and genuine love of freedom against the Emperor. Whereas the Emperor claimed divine right, they sought to defend their threatened cash privileges with a modern-sounding democratic nationalism—an ideology presented with quotes from Rousseau, and the singing of *La Marseillaise* and “*Ça ira*” in Latin. (“*Hoc ibit, hoc ibit, hoc ibit,*” intoned the Hungarian nobles defending their ancestral rights to refuse to pay taxes and to keep their peasants in a state of near-slavery.) Bohemian aristocrats—Germans, Scots, Irish, and Italians who could not muster a word of Czech among them—indulged in orgies of “Slav” sentimentality and grief-ridden self-pity.

Thus Joseph's centralized, rationalist reforms-from-above were sabotaged by localist, feudal particularism newly dressed in liberal-democratic, nationalist garb. But those reforms also provoked genuine national sentiment among the impoverished gentry and the incipient educated middle class. This became the first undifferentiated revolt against something I cannot even translate into English, only into French or German as *le pouvoir* or *Obrigkeit*—a populist distaste against anything that originated in the “centre,” in the “metropolis.” Feudal particularism was, of course, regional rather than ethnic or racial. But the language issue added a cultural dimension, further exacerbated by the hatred of those groups regarded as the local agents of universalism: German-speaking intellectuals, Freemasons, Jews, Jacobins, modernizers, and Westernizers—all of them “paid by Vienna.”

Rationalizing, centralized political reforms were henceforth associated with disregard or ignorance of specificity, location, group sensibility, and tradition in East Central Europe. Josephinism was an aggressive attempt at top-down social

¹⁰ On Austrian enlightened despotism and Joseph II see Ferdinand Maass, *Der Josephinismus*, 5 vols. (Vienna: Verlag Herold, 1951-56); Eduard Winter, *Der Josephinismus* (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1962); Paul P. Bernard, *Jesuits and Jacobins* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1971); Robert A. Kann, *A History of the Hapsburg Empire* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1974). Also see the Wandruszka/Urbanitsch handbook, *Die Habsburgermonarchie*, 8 vols. (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1973).

change, and its failure, indeed its unwillingness, to reach out for popular support helped perpetuate a certain image: that the humble, obedient masses are fine, thank you, as they are, and that community self-assertion is best left in the hands of the hereditary ruling elites. In the absence of political rights for the common man, the nobles had only themselves to convince that legal reform abolishing or mitigating traditional caste privilege was somehow *foreign* or *artificial*, and on the whole they managed to persuade themselves beautifully. The axis of political conflict divided a rationalizing but undemocratic center, unwilling to mobilize popular support, and privileged local elites presenting themselves as the bearers of group aspirations and authentic representatives of popular sensibilities.

Emergent East European nationalism was thus already very different from West European nationalism. Western nationalism was usually linked to the idea of a political order, whose realization was deemed to be the *mission* of that nation: moreover, the politics of this nationalism were liberal-democratic. The ability of the free individual to give laws to himself (autonomy) was paralleled by a demand of the body politic for self-determination (independence).¹¹ Nationalism in the Hapsburg empire, however, was more a cultural affair, divorced from politics, at least from what had sometimes been called *philosophical politics*—in which changes toward more freedom and justice through reformist or revolutionary legislation are achieved by public debate with public arguments. Since an attenuated form of “philosophical politics” was conducted by the Emperor without so much as by-your-leave from subjects—even the powerful ones—it was fiercely resisted. But the resisters did not, and could not, take one side of a reasoned debate: there was no debate to join. The remaining self-justification was a rather abstract desire for inclusion, and a shift in national self-definition from aristocratic tradition to all-en-

¹¹ See Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993). His ideas have been reiterated and developed by Isaiah Berlin, “Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Nationalism,” [1972] in his *The Sense of Reality* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998).

compassing and vague “culture.” In the Hapsburg empire, the romantic stress on a cultural identity prior to politics *preceded* liberal nationalism.

In the great Ernst Gellner’s posthumous book, *Language and Solitude*, we find this characterization:

So the cult of community and specificity receives reinforcement from the entire romantic tradition and its claim that the best, or even the only, truly human elements are to be found in the non-reasoning aspects of life. Reason is defied twice over: by the love of the specific rather than the *universal*, and of the *passionate* rather than the *calculating*. Love, or passion, as it were, is enlisted in the political arena: political confrontations are presented as the conflict of life with sterility, of vitality with disease, a disease that masquerades as reason and compassion.¹²

But I would say more. Even German romantic nationalism had a political aim: national unity and independence from France (and Austria). The fusion within the Hapsburg empire of cultural nationalism with aristocratic regionalism, however, made this impossible: the

¹² Ernest Gellner, *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski, and the Hapsburg Dilemma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 19. He has this to say of Wittgenstein: “If there cannot be truth outside culture, if there is neither individual knowledge nor external or universal validation, if knowledge simply must be communal and the speech community is ultimate and final, then this applies to the problem of the authority of science and mathematics as much as it does to anything else. Populist or culturalist epistemology had presumed to defend the moral or aesthetic sensibility of the Carpathian village against the imperialism of Versailles manners or of Manchester commercialism, or more specifically against the Viennese or Budapest bureaucrat, but it had not to argue with Hume or Kant about the nature of inference or about logical antinomies. It had not occurred to it that they might be involved in the same game. Wittgenstein’s strange originality lay in doing precisely this,” pp. 77-78.

Galician-Polish, Bohemian, Hungarian-Transylvanian magnates wanted independence from universalist, centralist, and humanist meddling with their privileges, power, and wealth. They did not want liberal-democratic statehood for a legally non-existent body politic, to which they did not want to be beholden in any way. Even in the nineteenth century, liberal nationalists had no desire, despite appearances, to dismantle the Hapsburg empire.¹³

Joseph II revoked all his measures on his deathbed, and the civil servants, spies, and intellectuals he abandoned turned to conspiracy. But the dream of radical reform through imperial fiat, and of a confidential understanding between the supreme authority and the “rootless” revolutionary intelligentsia never died. Moreover, the fateful separation of politics from culture, and a cultural definition of ethnicity, meant that assimilation and civic patriotism, with its supra-ethnic idea of citizenship, were all out of the question.

The tumultuous first half of the nineteenth century did not change those allegiances. Indeed by mid-century, the Court and most liberals came to realize that the brief illusion of the 1848 revolutions—the marriage of nationalism and democracy—was suicidal. With no clear ethnic majorities anywhere, the break-up of the Hapsburg monarchy would result in absolute mayhem. The Hapsburgs and the Austro-Hungarian liberals shared this “thin ice” theory of civilization: if the democratic and national-ethnic-tribal feelings were unleashed, peace, law, and justice—not to speak of the *douceur de vivre*—would be impossible to preserve.

Hapsburg liberals and, later, Hapsburg socialists evinced a panic fear of the peasant masses, who were ready, at least in the liberal imagination, to destroy liberty and urbanity out of hatred for the more or less benevolent transnational elites. At the same time, the cosmopolitan Court aristocracy had become ever more amalgamated with the “rootless Judeo-Masonic” intellectual elites. This enduring divorce of universalist “politics” and “law” from ethnic “culture,” the enmity of “pan-im-

¹³ See my essay on the great Hungarian liberal statesman and philosopher, Baron von Eötvös, in *Törzsi fogalmak*, pp. 9-143.

perial" (*gesamtmonarchisch*) liberalism and "national" democracy, and more ominously the hostility of international and national socialism are the fountainhead of our present troubles—not the fanciful medieval conflicts ignorant columnists rattle on about in the mainstream press.

The fear from and of the masses is a general nineteenth-century phenomenon. But in the Austro-Hungarian case there was good reason for it: genuine democratic passions of the common people were directed against transnational elites whose existence depended upon the continued rule of an archaic pre-national dynasty. It is this panic that gives the special flavor to the grandiose Austro-Hungarian decadence. On the other hand, genuine social reform was dependent on those elites. The liberal measures proclaimed by the liberal Hungarian nobles during the glorious 1848 revolution were implemented by such absolutist Austrian oppressors as Baron von Bach and the Knight von Schmerling. Without absolutist military rule in the 1850s, serfdom would probably have survived in Hungary well into the twentieth century, something that Hungarian liberals and socialists knew very well.

Unwilling to advance a genuinely popular political project, liberals had to cheat: gerrymandering and extremely restricted franchise, supplemented by electoral fraud and the bribing of minority political leaders and ecclesiastical figures, a bought press, and a tightly controlled academic life were the price of keeping the illiterate rural masses quiet, shutting up the *déclassé* nationalist demagogues, and realizing progressive reforms. Thereby the Austro-Hungarian monarchy became a country of extraordinary individual freedom and extreme political powerlessness—the ultimate divorce of liberal rationalism from democracy.

But democratic passion was strong, at least in the Western half of the Empire, and some concessions had become unavoidable. So the franchise was extended. And the result, for example in the 1907 Reichsrat elections, was the following:

96 Christian Social Deputies; 86 Social Democrats; 31 German People's Party, 21 German-Agrarians, 17 German-Progressives, 12 German-Radicals, 3 Pan-Germans; 28



Czech-Agrarians, 18 Young Czechs, 17 Czech Conservatives, 7 Old Czechs, 2 Czech Progressive 'Realists' 1 "non affiliated" Czech, and 9 Czech National Socialists; 25 Polish National Democrats, 17 Polish People's Party, 16 Polish Conservatives, and 12 Polish Center; 4 Zionists and 1 Jewish Democrat; 10 Italian Conservatives and 4 Italian Liberals; 10 Slovene Conservatives and 5 Slovene Liberals; 25 Ruthene National Democrats, and 4 old Ruthenians; 12 Croats, 5 Rumanians [Bukovina], 2 Serbs, 1 radical Russian; 1 Free Socialist, 1 "Independent Socialist," 1 'Social Politician'; 2 Non-Affiliated Members."¹⁴

And if the Western half of the Empire ("Austria") was ungovernable, the Eastern half ("Hungary") was anti-democratic. There the system discriminated against both the restive ethnic minorities (Ruma-

nians, Serbs, Slovaks, Saxons) and the Magyar pro-independence "left." Because of the outlandishly restricted electoral franchise, the Social Democrats were not even represented in Parliament, although they had a huge membership and considerable influence.

Thus the growing socialist movement in the two halves of the dual monarchy faced a profound dilemma: because of the multi-ethnic character of the country, democracy or political equality meant chaos and/or rural "reactionary" rule, dissolution, and, probably, civil war. But the alternative, transnational centralism, would preserve aristocratic and Court privilege, tending toward military government that would again end in disaster because the Hungarians would never tolerate "democratic caesarism" à la Napoleon.

What was to be done?

Hapsburg Marxists and Ethnic Socialists

The Hapsburgs tried to play an unusually intricate game with all the "nationalists" of the monarchy, pitting them against each other but only trusting the Baroque

¹⁴ Quoted from Brigitte Hamann, *Hitler's Vienna* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 117. Unfortunately, a terrible translation.

and Enlightenment transnational elites, the officer corps (well analyzed in a recent book by István Deák), the church, the imperial civil service, the Jews, the Freemasons, and Social Democracy. They did not have one solution; they were continuously tergiversating, postponing, extemporizing, “muddling through” in a state featuring an odd combination of liberal policies, egalitarianism, regional privileges, and non-democratic reforms.

In “Austria,” the Hapsburgs tried to strengthen the Polish and German liberals against the pan-German (pro-Prussian, pro-Anschluss) forces, limiting democracy against the irresponsible Czech politicians. In “Hungary” they tried to promote democracy and prop up the Rumanian and Serb movements to dissuade the Magyar pro-independence “left,” which of course only used the independence issue as leverage against the Hapsburgs, thus keeping the “ethnics” at bay. The Russian historian Dennison Rusinow called this strategy “a flexible and logical non-solution for an unsolvable national question.”¹⁵ There was no supra-language: Joseph II may have believed that German was one, but in the democratic nineteenth century, German was but one language among many. And there was no good governance as such according to the rules of Reason, just the policies of a bunch of amateur politicians elected at random following the whims of an unenlightened populace. Even imperial rule was no longer divinely ordained, just there as the contingent result of a precarious and transient balance of ob-

scure forces. The state itself came to rest on loyalty, faith, habit, martial virtue, and a quasi-religious belief in authority—but not Reason. Herr von Sonnenfels once published a journal called *Der Mann ohne Vorurteil* (“Man Without Prejudice”). Such men were no longer available, if they ever had been.

The socialists—who treated regional, group, and traditional caste divisions as class conflicts—at first believed they were Republican and nationalist in the sense of standing for the independence and self-determination of ethnic nation-states. But the class conflicts were crisscrossed by strange alliances. Illiterate Greek Orthodox peasants and starving Hasidim were allies of the Holy Roman Emperor. City burghers opposed free trade. Proud German dukes fomented sedition and tumult among Slav peasants. The Court, the Hungarian aristocracy, and the new bourgeoisie destroyed the livelihood of the gentry squirearchy, and the latter invaded the civil service and politicized it, sabotaging the central authority.

At the same time the *irredenta* movements (Italian, Southern Slav, Rumanian, and pan-German) wanted out to create new unions, based on racial myth and historical fiction. They stood for a plebeian democratization colored by distrust of a rational universalism propped up by bayonets, vote-rigging, and show trials. A democratic Rumania, Yugoslavia, Czecho-Slovakia, and a new pan-German republic would be free of fraudulent Reason—which would be replaced by the true will of the people. There would be no more Josephine civil servants, Jewish barons, enlightened bourgeois Freemasons, carping and satirical journalists, radical *savants*—only simple folk of healthy peasant stock, unpretentious village parsons, apple-cheeked maidens, and sturdy militiamen.

So the socialist theoreticians in Austria-Hungary had to find a way to keep their supporters from being seduced by reactionary anti-capitalist Christian “socialists” or by the nationalist peasant parties of the “non-historical nationalities” in the East. What should politics look like in a world of discrete ethno-cultural identities? The answer they settled upon—advanced by Otto Bauer and Karl Renner (and, less clearly, Rosa Luxemburg in Poland and Lithuania,

and the revolutionary syndicalist Erwin Szabó in Hungary)—was to radicalize the Josephine contraption by sharpening the distinction between *politics* and *culture*. And as you read these lines, the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe are still wrestling with the legacy of this decision.

The socialists broke decisively with the democratic doctrine of national self-determination with its one nation/one state principle, and proposed to ensure *cultural* and *personal autonomy* within a state that was itself to transcend ethno-cultural divisions. Cultural autonomy meant that the members of the ethnic group would receive (in proportion to the number of members) a percentage of the taxes collected by the government and use it for education, newspaper publishing, and the like, in its own language. Where ethnic groups, even minorities, were local majorities, they would use their own language in legislatures, administrative agencies, courts, and official documents. They could correspond with central government in their own language. The states were supposed to help create modern “high cultures” where, owing to backwardness, exploitation, and oppression, they did not exist. Personal autonomy—still propounded by ethnic minority movements in Eastern Europe, including the Hungarians in Transylvania and the Serbian Voivodina, or the Poles in Lithuania and Belorussians in Poland—would mean that even scattered diaspora populations have a second vote concerning their ethnic, cultural, and language needs. Territorial autonomy would be permitted, but limited to the fair administration of ethnic issues. Neither secession nor local exceptionalism would be allowed.

The idea, in short, was to localize ethno-cultural issues, so that in national politics there would be class or ideological—that is, universalist—parties. A policy of cultural autonomy, by confining the relevance of the ethnic question to culture and keeping it out of politics, would not prevent cooperation between socialist German or Czech proletarians or, for that matter, liberal German or Czech bourgeois. Also, where cultural autonomy is combined with a measure of territorial separateness, intra-ethnic power struggles were

¹⁵ Quoted by Solomon Wank, “The Habsburg Legacy in the Nationalities Question,” *Austrian History Yearbook*, vol. XXVIII (1997), p. 146. The classical work on the legal structure of such a country is Joseph Redlich’s magisterial *Der Österreichische Staats und Reichsproblem*, vols I/1, I/2, and II (Leipzig: P. Reinhold, 1921); see also on Hungary, Louis Eisenmann’s masterpiece, *le Compromis austro-hungrois de 1867* (Paris: G. Bellais, 1904); on Bohemia, Ernst Birke and Kurt Oberdorffer, *Das böhmische staatsrecht in den deutsch-tschechischer Auseinandersetzungen des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Marburg: Elvert, 1960); and Hugo Hantsch, *Die Nationalitätenfrage im altern Österreich* (Vienna: Verlag Herold, 1953).

expected to limit the romantic lure of “ethnic unity” against benevolent universalist governance.¹⁶

Hungarian radicals accepted a modified form of this program.¹⁷ But its most important impact was on Lenin and Trotsky, and their followers, Stalin and Tito. The socialists who opposed the Austro-Marxist program of a supra- and transnational state, became nationalists—“social patriots,” as the jargon had it—at the outbreak of World War I, so they did not participate in the founding of the Second-and-a-Half, Third, or Fourth International, and thus did not play a role in the subsequent history of Central and Eastern Europe. Communists and social democrats divided at Zimmerwald and Kienthal over the national question, and the heroes of Bolshevism—Jaurès, Liebknecht, Luxemburg, and Lenin—were

¹⁶ On the Austro-Marxist theory of nationality see first of all Otto Bauer, *Die Nationalitätenfrage und die Sozialdemokratie* [1907], 2nd. ed. (Vienna: Verlag der Volksbuchhandlung, 1924). Also Hans Mommsen, *Die Sozialdemokratie und die Nationalitätenfrage im Habsburgischen Vielvölkerstaat* (Vienna: Europa-Verlag, 1963); Norbert Leser, *Zwischen Reformismus und Bolschewismus: Der Austromarxismus als Theorie und Praxis* (Vienna: Europa-Verlag, 1968); William M. Johnson, *The Austrian Mind* [1972] (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 99-114; Ruth D. Roetke-Berens, “Austrian Social Democratic Foreign Policy and the Bosnian Crisis of 1908,” *Austrian History Yearbook*, vol. XVII/XVIII, 1981-82, pp. 104-126. See also Karl Renner’s autobiography, *An der Wende zweier Zeiten* (Vienna: Danubia, 1946). The best general history of Austrian Social Democracy is still Ludwig Brügel, *Geschichte der Österreichischen Sozialdemokratie* (Vienna: Verlag der Volksbuchhandlung, 1922-25), 5 vols. On the Hungarian left, there is not much in Western translations, but let me mention the works of G. Litván, T Erényi, J. Jemnitz, and the Marxist quarterly, *Múltunk* (still extant).

¹⁷ See the accounts of their leader, Oscar Jászi, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Hungary* (London: P.S. King, 1942); and Oscar Jászi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy* [1929] (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961).

war resisters and anti-nationalists. (The tradition of internationalism and revolutionary defeatism today is upheld only by the Trotskyites, one of the movements that might revive because of Kosovo.) The Austro-Marxist tradition, therefore, was one of the most precious treasures and defining elements of incipient Bolshevism, and its betrayal in 1914 became one of the defining traits of “reformist,” “opportunist” social-democratic treason—for Marxist-Leninists, the original sin.

The Communist Promise

The victorious allied powers after the First World War mistook the ethnic problems of multinational territorial empires for their own combination of assimilationist, non-racial civic patriotism at home and racial oppression in the non-territorial colonial empire. Ethnic-ally-based nation states were created with large minorities from the formerly “historical” nations of Austria-Hungary—Habsburg empires without traditional safeguards like the combination of paternalistic liberalism, the rule of law, and feudal/territorial privileges and exemptions. The supra-national networks—German-speaking towns in Slav territory, Hungarian-speaking Jews in Rumanian territory, the common, “progressive,” positivist-scientist and Germanic “high” culture tradition of proletarian trades unions everywhere, and a common bureaucratic routine and pride in lack of particularistic bias—were destroyed. As everybody knows, the Versailles, Saint-Germain, and Trianon treaties were flops, and the quite legitimate issue of the mistreatment of the ethnic German minorities in the successor states triggered the Second World War. The idiocies of the 1918-20 peace treaties were repeated in 1945, though by this time the Jewish question was “solved” by Hitler, and the ethnic German question was “solved” by Stalin and Benes in a fell swoop of ethnic cleansing. The ethnically purged Poland and Bohemia-Moravia today live in perfect harmony, but they needed Hitler’s and Stalin’s cumulative efforts for that: in the spirit of Dr. Benes’s wartime dictum, national minorities are out of date and will not be allowed. Millions were forced to leave exactly like the Kosovo Albanians today, but without the benefit of CNN.

The third wave of destruction of multinational federative states happened,

of course, in 1989 and after, with perfectly predictable consequences.

To understand what happened, we must realize—however unpalatable this may sound in these days (and let an old dissident tell you this) of cheap no-stakes, facile, after-the-fact anti-communism—that the Bolshevik variant of cultural autonomy was not wholly unsuccessful. The federative states of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia (Marshal Tito, who started his political career as an Austro-Hungarian social democrat in an automobile factory has been called “the last Hapsburg”; he was half-Croat, half Slovene¹⁸) realized to a certain extent the Austro-Marxist ideal, with all its flaws. These two countries, while hardly abstaining from the wholesale murder and internal deportation of recalcitrant or otherwise undesirable populations, created a complex structure of federative and autonomous republics, autonomous territories, regions and districts, and structures for non-territorial minorities.

Naturally, these entities did not offer political freedom; communist society did not offer freedom to anyone. But they did keep ethnic high and popular culture in a rather good repair, and sometimes created a high culture for pre-literate populations, complete with script and standardized, super-dialectal language. They offered institutions—ethnic-language colleges and universities, theater and film studios, academies, learned societies, research institutions, newspapers and periodicals, publishing houses, symphonic orchestras, museums, ethnographic collections, and folklore ensembles. They put up bilingual signs. And, most important, through the relative decentralization of both Communist Party and state administration, they created a number

¹⁸ Tito’s view of himself can be found in Vladimir Dedijer, *Tito* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953). In the preface to the autobiography of another famous Yugoslav communist, we find the following newspaper account: “In giving the defendant’s personal history, the chief judge described him as a Montenegrin. Djilas, who otherwise bore the extravagant indictment and even the sentence of three years ‘strict imprisonment’ without discernible emotion, leapt to his feet. ‘I object,’ he declared. ‘The statement should show that I am a Yugoslav.’” Quoted in Milovan Djilas, *Land Without Justice* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958), p. vii.

of local regional elites that in most cases never existed before; sometimes they did the work of nineteenth-century cultural nationalism by conjuring up an ethnic intelligentsia, replacing the old, but much more frequently they created it from scratch, out of peasant lads.

The Bolshevized ethnic (political and intellectual) elite in the former autonomous regions is the ruling class of the new states. This ruling class had been able to read the classics of Western literature and philosophy in first-ever spanning new translations in its own mother tongue (the general accessibility of the modern cultural canon for millions is one of the greatest achievements of communism anywhere, now sadly decaying under the combined onslaught of economic crisis, commercialism, and popular culture—ordinary people really *did* read Shakespeare and Balzac and Tolstoy and everybody could afford opera and concerts). Certainly there was indoctrination, but it is not meaningless that it was done in dozens of languages, that it offered jobs to literate people in hitherto despised places, and that social oppression was not, except towards the end, *systematically* duplicated by ethnic or racial humiliation.

Yugoslavia, for example, was a tyranny, but with a difference. The federal structure insured a certain degree of diversity and it certainly guaranteed inner peace and safety. The Hapsburg experience told the Yugoslav leaders not to mix democracy and nationalism. This is why Tito tried to weaken the strong (the Serbs) and strengthen the weak. This is why he kept large Serb minorities hostage outside Serbia. The Serb intellectuals protested because they weren't allowed to oppress the rest, and the beauty of it is that they were quite right. The Brünn (Brno) program of Austrian Social Democracy (1899) and the Dresden program of the Yugoslav Communist Party (1928) established the same structure of virtual self-determination and cultural autonomy.¹⁹ The Yugoslav model preserved, in a debased form, many features of enlightened absolutism—in particular, the separation of ethnic culture from high politics. It kept would-be local despots quiet, but denied popular participation and representation; of necessity, then, democratic and ethno-nationalist demand merged once more. Whatever provisional and partial liberties could be enjoyed were always granted by tyrannical fiat until withdrawn. The fabled

“self-management” scheme was a bureaucratic stratagem of giant complexity and zero yield. Still, the regime betrayed itself: it inadvertently showed that it needed at least some appearance of popular participation. It also experimented with a simulated market *à la hongroise*, but it had to give it a “leftist” gloss to mask the abolition of central planning.

When the center collapsed, these stratagems made it necessary to involve the regional ethnic elites in the pseudo-market “decentralization” (read: dismantling, chopping up) of the state economy. As appetite comes with eating, local ethnic elites re-centralized the state economy, but on the “federative republic” level. The bounty had to be protected—hence the gradual redeployment, relocation, and “ethnicization” of the police force. The discrimination against local Serbs by the regional ethnic elites was couched in terms of decentralization, democracy, autonomy—official and “progressive” slogans. The Serb ruling group demanded, in response, another federal re-centralization, this time openly on an ethnic, not Austro-Marxist nor Titoist, basis, and cited minority Serb ethnic grievances in the republics (some real, most not). By this time not only the Enlightenment legacy was squandered (and then abruptly forgotten), but the emperor was dead, too.

It was the old story again: the regional aristocracy scrambles to preserve its privileges and pre-eminence as the “plebeian” masses make genuine democratic demands. The lack of participation was blamed on a federal system that let the re-

gional oligarchies off the hook. The lack of freedom came to be seen as a problem with the actual composition of the body politic. The fateful separation of the cultural and the political in the understanding of a nation forbade the simple democratic reform of the pre-existent (multi-ethnic or multinational society, federative state plus autonomies), and recommended instead its replacement with a wholly new body politic (in fact, several) whose new boundaries (ethnic, linguistic, territorial, symbolic, economic, military) had to be drawn *after* its establishment.

There is nothing traditional, let alone ancestral and medieval in this. Southern Slav nationalism, or Illyrism, was an *irredenta* movement aiming at national unity like Bismarck's Germany, Cavour's Italy, Maniu's new Rumania, or Masaryk's improvised Czecho-Slovakia.²⁰ But now a nation, Yugoslavia, was given and it had to be chopped up into “natural” bits along the internal frontiers Machiavellistically and Josephinistically contrived by Tito and his minions for their own funny games, deliberately disregarding ethnic fault-lines. The Albanian-Yugoslav conflict was political in nature, too, not ethnic or racial. Enver Haxha's Albania was “left deviationist,” and Tito's Yugoslavia “right deviationist.” The KLA is an ultra-Maoist group like Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge or Öcalan's PKK in Kurdistan.

So Yugoslavia blew up. It is mostly the fault of the politically ambitious regional elites who, ironically, had been

¹⁹ See Duncan Wilson, *Tito's Yugoslavia* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 193-207, about veto rights of the Federal Republics. Joseph Stalin, in this respect a vulgarizer of Rosa Luxemburg's, Lenin's, Martov's, and Trotsky's ideas, advocated a federal system in 1922 and proposed a federation with a right of secession for a future Yugoslav Communist and multinational state in 1925 in a characteristically brutal and straightforward article of great clarity. See Stalin, *Marxism and the National-Colonial Question* (San Francisco: Proletarian Publishers, 1975), pp. 184-256, 301-303. Also, Wayne S. Vucinich, “Nationalism and Communism,” in *Contemporary Yugoslavia: Twenty Years of Socialist Experiment*, W.S. Vucinich, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 236-284.

²⁰ See Miriam Gross, “Croatian National-Integrational Ideologies from the End of Illyrism to the Creation of Yugoslavia,” with comments by Arnold Suppan and Charles Jelavich, *Austrian History Yearbook* vol. XV-XVI (1979-80), pp. 3-46. On the antecedents see Stanko Guldescu, *The Croatian-Slavonian Kingdom 1526-1792* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970). On Bosnia and Kosovo see the deservedly famous books of Noel Malcolm, Miranda Vickers, and Tim Judah. On Yugoslavia's dissolution see Misha Glenny's reporting; on the Bosnian war, David Rieff's; on contemporary Croatia, Marcus Tanner's. On the origins of the KLA, see Christophe Chiclet's article in *Le Monde diplomatique*, May 1999. Its leaders were all pro-Enver Hoxha Marxist-Leninist-Maoists, not nationalists.

fashioned by socialist federalism precisely to be *apolitical* guardians of ethnic culture. The supra-national elites of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy (the church, the officer corps, the civil service, the socialist trade-union bureaucracy, Jewish radicalism, the Court) had been the glue of the state that could not withstand defeat in war and the unleashed democratic *and* national passions of dissatisfied groups. It lay in pieces, and the peace treaties of 1919-21 made a meaningless mishmash of it, insuring future wars.²¹

The only supra-national glue of the Soviet Union and of Yugoslavia was the Communist Party. With its disintegration under the blows of a chaotic democratic revolution, the takeover of the separate pieces by the second-rate, bottom-drawer regional bureaucracies and elites, and the defection of the all-powerful secret services to various politico-criminal conglomerates, the fate of non-regional, Titoist or Gorbachevite elites was sealed. With politics confined to the

²¹ One Austro-Marxist, a World War II Belgian resistant and Trotskyist militant, tried to explain transnational, non-territorial groups. See Abram Leon, *La Conception matérialiste de la question juive* [1946], translated as A. Leon, *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation* (New York and London: Pathfinder, 1996). Leon's theory of a "people-class" hopes to explain not only the Jewish case (there was no whole social and occupational "pyramid" in Jewish communities), but also the case of the ex-territorial, itinerant German-speaking proletariat in Eastern Europe, East Indians in Africa and the Caribbean, and ethnic Chinese in South East Asia. They all were decisive components of the imperial order—"disembodied" and rootless.

center, the regional elites always represented ethnicity without politics. When the center disappeared, politics as commonly understood disappeared too, and ethnicity remained as the only focus. (Does anyone know or care whether the New Thugs are on the right or the left, are state redistributionists or market fanatics, partisans of the jury system or proportional representation?) But ethnicism is not nationalism. Ethnicism does not care about non-ethnic fellow citizens: it does not want their exertions, taxes, contribution—only their departure or their death.

Indeed, the only citizenship known in a community bereft of religion and Enlightenment seems pre-politically, naturally—that is, racially or ethnically—"given"; it cannot be acquired or deserved. Ethnic minorities thus seem an aberration, a logical contradiction, a non-story. Less than human. Hence deportation, expulsion, mass murder, mass rape: in short, humiliation and extinction.

For the third time the West wants to force upon an intricate multi-ethnic mosaic the logic of the Gallo-American, civic-republican, assimilationist, or "melting pot"—but of course ethnically flavored—nation-state. It has ended twice in disaster and it will end so again. Does anybody still remember why there are no significant autochthonous ethnic minorities in Germany, Austria, Bohemia, Poland, or Hungary—central European countries that more easily approximate the ideal of a Western-type nation-state? Because they are in mass graves, or displaced by thousands of miles from where they were originally from.

But mostly they are dead.

After having helped destroy two imperial-federal arrangements, the West will either tolerate the extreme consequences

of the nation-state logic, entirely inapplicable to countries where Enlightenment modernization took supra-national shape (and under this destroyed shape there isn't anything but further destruction)—or it will construct an empire of its own, pacify the native peoples with awesome military might, and pay to keep them alive.

After Hapsburg self-colonization and communist centralization—what now? In a world without citizens, the options are ugly. In the former Yugoslavia, the West can rebuild a partial federal structure and keep policing it (for in the absence of an imperial civil service or a federal communist party, it will have to). Or it can acquiesce to partition, with ethnically pure separate entities—either a Serb-free Kosovo or an Albanian-free Serbia, with some internationally patrolled borders in the next couple of hundred years.

Or else, the continued carnage.

The thugs are in place because of this simple vision of race. They won't give up their little fiefdoms and baronies. Milosević is not Bismarck. Tudjman is not Clemenceau. These guys are not statesmen. They are strong because they care about their groups, not about fellow citizens. But there are no citizens, men and women possessing anything that would transcend immediate need, prejudice, fear, desire, or violent hatred. Transcendence is forbidden, period. Even in that modest sense that is necessary for the simple co-existence of different people in an imperfect community that works, where you pay your taxes, and you may reasonably believe that the trains will run, more or less on time. ■

Identity Politics

Forced deportations threaten to turn the Ethiopian-Eritrean border war into ethnic conflict.

Noah Benjamin Novogrodsky

Early on Thanksgiving morning, in the long shadows cast by the bombed out shell of Haile Selassie's one-time winter palace, the freighter "Salam" lumbers toward the port at Massawa, Eritrea. Standing on the deck of the Red Sea tanker, 1,500 people wave at the small crowd assembled on shore. The human cargo, former residents of Ethiopia expelled during a war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, are relieved to have arrived after 24 hours exposed at sea. Some wear Nike and Reebok t-shirts; others are wrapped in traditional *gabisa* to protect them from the coming heat. When they are within earshot, the expelled burst into song, clapping and ululating for the soldiers and aid workers who rise to greet them on the pier.

By afternoon, the mood turns somber. Eritrean relief officials have relocated the deportees to a desert refugee camp 10 km outside of Massawa where the temperature rarely dips below 90 degrees. The boat people lie shaded in Norwegian tents waiting to be registered as refugees by Eritrean relief officials. In groups of sixty, they file through makeshift immigration offices to answer a once simple question: what is your citizenship?

Yemane Binega, a 41-year-old union federation president from Addis Ababa, replies "Ethiopian"—although he identifies his nationality as "Eritrean." Born in the former Ethiopian province of Eritrea, Yemane¹ moved to Addis Ababa as a teenager. At 10:00 in the evening on November 9, 1998, armed Ethiopian security personnel knocked on his door and arrested him without charge. After 48 hours in an Ethiopian jail, he was forced onto a bus and driven for four days to Assab, a small town on the southern tip of Eritrea. Ten days later, Yemane boarded the "Salam" for the journey north up the coast to Massawa. On arrival, he says, "I



always thought of myself as Ethiopian but since this journey began, I've started to feel more Eritrean."

According to an Amnesty International report issued in late January, Yemane is one of 52,000 Eritrean-Ethiopians who were arbitrarily expelled to Eritrea during an eight-month lull in the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. (The two countries resumed hostilities on February 6, 1999, with heavy fighting along two fronts.) Although the war has been overshadowed in the media by events in Kosovo, the international community has registered its alarm at the bloodshed and urged a negotiated settlement to the territorial dispute. The United Nations, the Organization of African Unity, and a US delegation headed by former National Security Council head Anthony Lake have all attempted to mediate the conflict without success.

But the voices calling for peace on the Eritrea-Ethiopia border have largely ignored persecution based on ethnopolitical classifications inside the two countries. Certainly the fate of those expelled from Ethiopia on the basis of a newly fashioned system of identification is less tragic than that of the many thousands killed—at least 40,000 combat casualties, according to reports²—since fighting resumed. Still, the deportations, and the state-sponsored assignment of identity used to mark people for expulsion, pose a grave threat to the people of Eritrea and Ethiopia. That threat is rooted in the divisive classification system used to distinguish "the other," a phenomenon that for want of a better term I refer to as *ethnic identification*. (Eritreans in Ethiopia con-

¹ Ethiopians and Eritreans refer to each other by their first names; their second name is their father's first name.

² See "Trench Warfare," *The Economist* (March 13, 1999): 56.

stitute an ethnicity for Ethiopian government I.D. card purposes.)

In the social and economic cracks opened by mass expulsion on such bases, ultranationalist identities take root among perpetrators and victims alike. Generalized ethnic hatred is played out year-after-year, in endless cycles of recrimination. Indeed the ethnicization of a seemingly inconsequential border war explains the ferocity of the fighting and adds a totalizing dimension to the conflict. Where this phenomenon has occurred before, such as in the former Yugoslavia, territorial disputes are quickly subordinated to deep social antagonism.

In 1951, the United Nations joined the former Italian colony of Eritrea with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown. For a decade, the province of Eritrea enjoyed broad autonomy within the state of Ethiopia. In 1962, however, Emperor Haile Selassie dissolved the federation and formally annexed Eritrea. Ethiopian rule in this arrangement repressed the cultural and political distinctiveness of Eritrea and sparked a popular rebellion. After a three-decade war of liberation, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and their Ethiopian allies drove Selassie's successors, Mengistu Haile Mariam's Soviet-backed Dergue, from power. At war's end, in 1991, roughly 150,000 Eritreans had died in fighting or because of war-related famine. By the time Eritrea finally won its independence—in a peaceful 1993 referendum—perhaps a quarter of Eritrea's pre-war population lived abroad, in Sudanese refugee camps or in other parts of Ethiopia, many in Addis Ababa.

The revolution, which took a generation to accomplish, forged an unparalleled intimacy among highly mobilized Eritrean citizens. Today, ex-fighters gather at Italian cafes on Asmara's Independence Boulevard to drink cappuccino beneath faded blue and white posters of Eritrean revolutionaries planting the flag at Massawa—a taste of Iwo Jima in the desert and a constant reminder of the “martyrs” who died in the “struggle” for independence. The veterans embrace with the *Sha'abia*³ handshake, a hug, and three bumps of the right shoulder that signals inclusive camaraderie. To the unemployed deportees crowded into the homes of relatives and generous strangers,

the strength of these bonds is difficult to comprehend, much less replicate, in civic life.

Moreover, the Eritrean revolution was achieved without substantial foreign assistance. Largely ignored by Cold War powers as socialist revolutionaries opposed to a Marxist government, Eritreans survived by raising money in the Eritrean diaspora, refurbishing abandoned Sudanese trucks, and engaging citizens in educational and cultural life. Many of the EPLF's weapon stocks were stolen from occupying Ethiopian troops or captured in battle. Instead of appealing to the West for military assistance, the EPLF joined forces with the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), of Northern Ethiopia, to defeat the Dergue. As a result, Eritrea has developed into a powerfully independent society steeped in the romance of its own revolution. If Eritreans were divided about the need for independence at the time of federation, the results of the 1993 referendum, in which 98 percent of voters chose independence, suggest that the nation is gripped by powerful nationalist resolve.

In Ethiopia the TPLF, now reorganized as a political party known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), has broken from the centralized autocracy of the imperial Amharic rule and its mutated relation, the Dergue. The EPRDF now rules the fractious Ethiopian state with a federalist slant. Ethiopia is a national amalgam of heterogeneous people who self-identify on the basis of race, region, language, religion, and national origin. Since 1992, the Ethiopian Government has issued to all residents identity cards which provide an ethnic designation (although a close reading of Ethiopian ethnicity reveals that the term is used to encompass geographic and tribal affiliations, like Southern Peoples and the Oromo, as well as traditional ethnic groups). In 1993, the EPRDF convened a legal drafting process that ultimately rewrote the Ethiopian Constitution defining Ethiopia as an ethnic federation and including a controversial self-determination clause promising the right of independence to ethnic constituencies. The EPRDF acceded to Eritrea's separation over the objections of the

³ *Sha'abia* is the Tigrinya phrase for the EPLF; *Woyone* refers to their Ethiopian counterparts, the TPLF.

former regime and those who refuse a vision of Ethiopia that does not include access to the Red Sea. Far from devolving power to other provinces, however, the EPRDF maintained centralized control of state instruments and relations between Tigrayans in authority and other ethnic groups—including the previously-dominant Amharic group—sourer.⁴ (In that context, the expulsion of an ethnic minority is a message to disaffected Ethiopians, principally the Oromo liberation movement, that self-determination will not come cheaply.)

Significantly, the border between the EPRDF-led Ethiopia and the modern state of Eritrea was never clearly demarcated. In the euphoria of the post-revolutionary honeymoon, the former allies concentrated on reconstruction and development initiatives without establishing national boundaries. Compared to the anarchy of Somalia and the endless civil war of the Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia seemed to embody the concept of an African Renaissance advanced by South African Presidential hopeful Thabo Mbeki, and were quickly counted as American allies.

But in May 1998, an administrative dispute over a triangle of territory near Badme on the Ethiopia-Eritrea frontier escalated into a firefight between border patrols. Three Eritrean militiamen and an Eritrean officer were killed. Eritrea's President, Isaias Afwerki, responded by ordering three mechanized divisions to occupy Badme and surrounding areas. In the battle that followed, Eritrea's military pushed beyond their country's acknowledged boundaries and into the Northern Ethiopian province of Tigray, a strategic high-ground—and the home of Ethiopia's ruling party. The EPRDF responded to Eritrea's muscular offensive with feelings of shock, shame, and anger. By June, posters depicting Ethiopian schoolchildren killed in the bombing of Makelle appeared in Addis Ababa. Former allies of the EPLF, including Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, soon echoed the rhetoric of EPRDF hawks who called on Ethiopians to repel the Eritrean aggressors and march on Asmara. Like Eritrea, Ethiopia rearmed for further

⁴ *Human Rights Watch Report*, “Ethiopia: The Curtailment of Rights,” December 1997, Vol. 9, No. 8.

fighting by purchasing weapons from Bulgaria, Ukraine, and other former Eastern Bloc states. But by intentionally targeting ethnic minorities for expulsion, the EPRDF injected a human dimension into an already explosive contest of national egos.

On June 12, 1998, Ethiopian government officials began a program of identifying, concentrating, and expelling from Ethiopia persons classified as Eritrean. Ethiopia's Office of the Government Spokesperson announced that Ethiopia's security apparatus had uncovered lists of Eritreans living in Ethiopia "who were found engaged in spying and mobilizing financial and other resources to support the Eritrean aggression."⁵

In the early stages of the deportation program—as Ethiopia calls the policy of mass expulsion—Ethiopia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs offered both legal and political justifications for its treatment of Ethiopians of Eritrean origin. The Ministry first identified all "Eritreans," previously an ethnic designation used to identify persons from the former colony and province of Eritrea, as non-Ethiopian—and therefore non-citizens. By decree, people who had lived, worked, paid taxes, voted, intermarried, carried Ethiopian passports, and traveled internationally as Ethiopians became candidates for deportation on the basis of their birth in Eritrea, their parents' birth in Eritrea, or their participation in the Eritrean referendum on independence. Ethiopian Foreign Ministry publications invoked the Ethiopian Nationality Law of 1930 to argue that an Ethiopian citizen forfeits his or her citizenship if he or she assumes the nationality of another state.⁶ Though participation in the 1993 referendum did not automatically confer Eritrean nationality on its participants, nor were voters advised that by voting they jeopardized their Ethiopian

nationality, Ethiopia's Foreign Ministry asserted that appearance on the referendum voting rolls constituted a renunciation of Ethiopian citizenship—irrespective of how one voted.

Next, broad categories of now alien Eritrean-Ethiopians were classified as war-time security risks. In particular, individuals holding office in the Ethiopian government or accused of affiliation with Eritrean community organizations were declared threats to the state of Ethiopia. The Foreign Ministry affirmed its right to expel "statutorily defined categories of deportable foreign nationals" as an expression of sovereignty and as a matter of administrative and executive action.

Finally, Ethiopian authorities maintained that the deportation program would respect due process and the right of appeal while safeguarding the property interests of those required to leave Ethiopia. In press releases directed at the sizable international community in Addis Ababa, Ethiopian Foreign Ministry officials promised that the removal of selected aliens would be executed in a manner consistent with international human rights laws guaranteeing minimum standards of treatment.

Politically, the expulsions were accompanied by charges that Eritrea was deporting equal numbers of Ethiopians. Selomme Tadesse, head of Ethiopia's Office of the Government Spokesman, alleged that Ethiopian refugees from Eritrea had been beaten, raped, and robbed. In the first months of the deportations, Tadesse's office issued regular statements accusing Eritrea of tit-for-tat deportations and relating stories of human rights violations committed against Ethiopians in Eritrea. Eritrean-Ethiopians came to regard such claims as a harbinger of further expulsions. Many future deportees found their names or the names of their businesses published in Addis Ababa newspapers, a public naming reminiscent of *Kristallnacht* or the expulsion of Indians from Uganda. Ethiopians, supposedly, would not want to buy from indebted Eritreans who might be regarded as a flight risk. As incredible as the government's statements appear to outsiders, they played well in Ethiopia: with the exception of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), a small civil liberties organization, no one protested against the mass deportation of a formerly enfranchised minority.

The pogrom against ethnic Eritreans began overnight and without notice. ("Deportation" is a misnomer, since it suggests a legal right of a sovereign state to rid itself of undesirable foreigners.) The deportees have had no means of challenging their designation as aliens. Many, particularly those who speak Amharic (the predominant language of Addis Ababa) rather than Tigrinya (the most prevalent language in Eritrea and the Ethiopian province of Tigray), have never been to Eritrea and are better described as persons of Eritrean destination than people of Eritrean origin. Although many Ethiopians whom the government classifies as Eritrean hold identity cards stating that the bearer's nationality is Eritrean, neither the state of Eritrea nor the affected population believe them to be citizens of Eritrea.⁷

To be sure, states in the international arena set limits on the grant of citizenship to foreigners for a variety of reasons, ranging from residency requirements to cultural affinity to ethnic membership. But to revoke a minority group's citizenship is a political decision that involves manipulating individual identities through a shrinking definition of the state—one based on a contrived concept of national origin rather than residency or membership in a political community. The logic of Ethiopia's conduct—Eritrea is an independent state, therefore Ethiopians with ties to Eritrea are no longer Ethiopians—threatens to erase the very category of Eritrean-Ethiopian that appears on the identity cards of so many deportees.

Ethnic Eritreans—many of whom blame Eritrea for the border conflict—are learning that the identity ascribed to them by Ethiopia's Immigration Office matters more than their subjective loyalties. The threat they pose to Ethiopia's national security derives from an assigned nationality in a time of war-driven hysteria. For them, "due process" consists of a post-arrest appeal whereby certain deportees claim that they are not really Eritrean. To challenge one's determination as a national security risk in Ethiopia's courts,

⁷ In the absence of Eritrean nationality, ethnic Eritreans reasonably assumed they were Ethiopian citizens pursuant to the 1962 Ethiopian annexation of Eritrea, which conferred Ethiopian nationality on all Eritreans.

⁵ "The Legal Aspects of Ethiopia's Deportation of Undesirable Eritreans," Zakir Ibrahim, Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, referring to Updated Memorandum by the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia on July 16, 1998.

⁶ Ethiopian Nationality Law, Article Eleven (a), published in *Berhanena Selam* newspaper, vol. 6, No. 30, July 24, 1930

says Daniel Haile, an Eritrean-Ethiopian who is the former dean of the law faculty at Addis Ababa University, is to invite arrest, deportation, and other reprisals.

What began as a round-up of prominent Eritrean-Ethiopians has developed into a systematic, country-wide operation to arrest and deport all people of Eritrean descent. Amnesty International reports that by late January, school children, pensioners, and hospital patients were being arrested and detained, often in the middle of the night.⁸ The fortunate expellees packed suitcases in anticipation of their eventual arrest and sold their televisions, calculating that it is better to take cash than luxury goods on an uncertain journey; the less fortunate were arrested in their pajamas and arrive in Eritrea with nothing.

The expelled have been stripped of their citizenship, deprived of education, and separated from their families. Their businesses, pensions, and bank accounts are subject to expropriation. Many deportees report that they were compelled to sign powers of attorney granting property rights to "full Ethiopians." Several thousand other Eritreans of military age have been arrested and are currently being detained in Ethiopian internment camps.

When I visited Ethiopia and Eritrea in November and December—at the height of the expulsions—I encountered numerous refugees whose middle-class lives had been torn apart. Social worker Elsa Tefari was one of the earliest deportees. Elsa's name appeared in an Addis Ababa newspaper on a list of Eritreans accused of owing money or of having failed to repay debts. The day before she was due to visit her three children in the United States on her Ethiopian passport, she was arrested at her place of work, the Scandinavian children's aid society, Red Barna.

On the bus to Eritrea, Elsa realized that several of the deportees were unaccompanied teenagers and that passengers were hungry or sick. They were subjected to the additional humiliation of being guarded while they used the toilet. In Gondar, the buses stopped at a picnic area where the International Committee for the Red Cross was invited to film the

deportees enjoying a buffet lunch. Elsa refused the food. Several weeks after she was deported, Red Barna received a letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stating that Elsa had been declared *persona-non-grata* "because [her] continued presence in Ethiopia [was] deemed incompatible with the national security interest of the country."

Another early deportee, Fekadu Anemeskal, was arrested at his Addis Ababa home last summer in front of his wife and youngest daughter. Fekadu's wife, Rigad Berhane, was so afraid that her baby girl would be deported that she gave the child, Wintana Fekadu, to Eritrean friends en route to Nairobi. They, in turn, gave the girl to a third family as they left for the United States. Fekadu subsequently traveled across four countries on a new Eritrean passport to find his daughter in the care of her third set of guardians. He later confided that he traveled in shock. "I was doing my best for Ethiopia and for the government and then I was deported. I felt totally naked, like a new-born."

On the other side of this crisis are Ethiopians who have left Eritrea since the war began. The vast majority of Ethiopians in Eritrea are originally from the province of Tigray and they are among the poorest of Africa's poor. Until the conflict erupted, most of them worked as maids, gardeners, day laborers and port workers. Since then, many have been laid off and are without food, shelter or diplomatic support. Roughly 25,000 Ethiopians have returned to Ethiopia, victims of joblessness and discrimination against Ethiopians in Eritrea.

Ethiopians leaving Eritrea have experienced delays at the hands of an Eritrean immigration bureaucracy reluctant to issue exit visas to persons counted as "deportees" on their arrival in Ethiopia. In a tuberculosis-riddled refugee camp in Nazaret, Ethiopia, I found refugees from Assab who had waited four months in a city of dwindling food stocks before obtaining permission to leave.⁹ In a camp on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, impoverished Ethiopian repatriates from Asmara detailed the ultimate irony, passing

⁹ Neither Amnesty International nor the US Embassy in Asmara's investigation supports Ethiopia's claim that more than 40,000 of its citizens have been forcibly deported from Eritrea since May 1998.

Eritreans headed across the border in the opposite direction.

There are distinctions between the two groups: Eritrean deportees are the victims of state action (notwithstanding the efforts of many sympathetic Ethiopian neighbors to assist deportees) while Ethiopian refugees are forced out of Eritrea by less direct means. Abrehet Woldegarima, a fifty year-old Ethiopian who has lived in Eritrea for most of her life, described how her Eritrean friends in Assab turned on her when she told them she was leaving. Their refusal to buy her property rendered her destitute when she arrived in Ethiopia. By contrast, some Eritreans continue to manage properties in Addis Ababa through Ethiopian intermediaries—though those colleagues will suffer reprisals if they are discovered by Ethiopian authorities.

Mass deportation has clear costs: as refugees lose jobs and businesses, economic activity declines and new expenditures are required to absorb the displaced. Indeed, the uprooting of Eritrean-Ethiopians and Ethiopian-Eritreans threatens to disrupt the social and economic infrastructure of both vacated and resettled areas. Though Eritrea has made optimistic claims of a deportation-related "brain gain," experience shows that forced transfers of civilian populations can lay the foundation for future cross-border violence. Already, diminished cross-border work migration and closed roads between Assab and Addis Ababa have contributed to interpersonal enmity and commercial atrophy.

Yet the policy of expulsion has a perverse appeal to the Ethiopian leadership: the expulsions impose resettlement costs on Eritrea, provide revenue in the form of expropriated properties, and unite other Ethiopians against an enemy in their midst. The international community, for its part, has failed to dissuade Ethiopian authorities from uprooting persons of Eritrean origin, though both the US State Department and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights have condemned Ethiopia's actions.

Unlike Kosovo, the latest Eritrean-Ethiopia war ranks low on the list of international conflicts, all the more so because it requires preventative peacekeeping and sociological bridge building in Africa. NATO is not about to bomb Ethiopia in defense of pluralistic identities. Unchecked by outside

⁸ See Amnesty International news report, January 29, 1999 (www.amnesty.org/news/1999/12500299.html).

parties for want of strategic significance, the Eritrea-Ethiopia war thrives as a conventional state-to-state conflict fueled by supra-nationalist xenophobia, a marked contrast to the tragedies attendant to the dissolution of the state in Somalia, Rwanda, and Congo.

Persecuted by one state and unable to receive assistance from the other until they cross the border, the deportees must nonetheless hope for the normalization of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea if they wish to return to Ethiopia or fashion a cross-border existence. Appealing to the international community for legal or political intervention is unlikely to breach the impunity with which Ethiopia's government has selected ethnic Eritreans for expulsion.¹⁰ Instead, the victims of assigned identification and expulsion must look to a bilateral political process contaminated by distrust and demonization. In that dynamic, both states are guilty of building new national identities on the basis of enmity and neither has seriously pursued even modest steps to quiet the hostilities such as staged demilitarization or a compensation commission for the uprooted.

At risk is a proliferation of falsely ethnicized politics in the Horn of Africa.

¹⁰ Although Ethiopia is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, none of these treaties provides the deportees with the means to enjoin mass expulsion or to gain individual redress for their suffering. Article 12 (5) of the 1981 African Charter on Human and People's Rights explicitly proscribes mass expulsion but neither Eritrea nor Ethiopia is a signatory to the Charter.

Mass deportation poses a threat to pluralistic cultures and ethno-national diversity. Eritreans have lived in Ethiopia as long as either country has existed within defined boundaries. Until recently, Eritreans in Addis Ababa constituted a successful merchant class. Ethiopia's actions represent the erasure of established Eritrean communities and the ethnicization of political differences. The history of Palestinians, Bosnians, and Kurds suggests that individuals forcibly deported from their homes on the basis of national origin rarely return.

Equally disturbing, mass expulsion has the power to shape individual identities. Yemane Binega's search for a nationality is echoed in the experience of Eritrean-Ethiopians who are uncomfortable with their newly assigned identities. (Yemane's child, born of an Ethiopian wife and a recently classified Eritrean husband may some day have to choose a means of self-identification. Between two warring nations with universal conscription, that is not an insignificant choice.) The hesitation deportees feel in embracing an assigned nationality is apparent in the school children who carried their homework on the "Salam" hoping to mail it back to Addis for grading. If these people are powerless to prevent the depopulation of Eritreans from Ethiopia, they are nonetheless refusing to self-identify as entirely Ethiopian or Eritrean.

In the main, Eritreans and Ethiopians, especially Tigrayans, have no problem identifying one another as different. Their ethnic antennae have been raised to differences in speech, family networks, and appearance. Contrary to the claim of many Amhara Ethiopians in Addis Ababa that Eritreans and Ethiopians are the same—Eritreans generally consider the "sameness" argument antagonistic since it contains a

suggestion that all Ethiopians suffered equally under the Dergue or that their independence was "granted" by Ethiopia—there are important distinctions between people of the two countries. But those differences—in professional expertise, class, and accent—come from historical experience, not invented ethnic traits. The challenge is to contain the current conflict to statist interests without confusing citizenship with national origin, to recognize separateness without vilifying difference. For Eritreans accustomed to defining themselves in opposition to Ethiopia and for Ethiopians who are practicing ethnicized governance, this is a formidable obstacle.

The danger of mass expulsion is that it will sever the familial, cultural, and civic links necessary for reconciliation and reconstruction. Heavy battlefield casualties coupled with the expulsion of civilian populations spreads a human stain across bilateral relations. Therein lies the danger to states beyond Eritrea and Ethiopia. Negotiators who have focused on the territorial controversy may be correct that in the absence of a border dispute, there would have been no deportations. But the deportations have contributed to the intensity of recent fighting and could well provide the fodder for the next war. In February, Ethiopia reclaimed part of Badme, raising hopes of a cease-fire. But Ethiopia's territorial advance has not quieted the guns, and Ethiopia has continued to deport Eritreans to Assab, 1,200 kilometers to the east.

"The border" says Professor Mesfin Wolde-Mariam of EHRCO, "has become a pretext for the deportations. And the deportations are causing a build up of hatred. If this tension continues, it will lead to indiscriminate violence that will go on for generations." He adds, "I believe we should be bigger morally." ■

Eric Rohmer's Canvas

The Autumn Tale finds a world of beauty in the lives of women.

Alan A. Stone

Unlike other long-lived but more celebrated filmmakers—for example, Kurosawa, Hitchcock, and Huston—Eric Rohmer has never made a film that stands on its own as a masterpiece. Indeed, he has not even made the attempt. His modest films come in groups organized around a general theme—*Six Moral Fables*, *Comedies and Proverbs*, and now *Tales of Four Seasons*. Rohmer is best known in America for *My Night at Maud's* (his only Oscar nomination) and *Claire's Knee*, two parts of the *Six Moral Fables*, which came out in 1969 and 1970. But Rohmer has since been unable to reach American audiences, and certainly lacks the cachet of Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut, Alain Resnais, or Louis Malle—other French film-makers of the so-called *Nouvelle Vague* who rebelled against “commercial” film-making. Unlike these others, Rohmer is a conservative aesthete, interested in the spiritual promise of ordinary human beings. He has been described as a Catholic film-maker.

Rohmer is also a reclusive man, who spent the first eight years of his career teaching literature in a lycée. In the 1950s he became editor of *Cahiers du Cinema*, the magazine of film criticism that published the auteurs whose theory and practice made the French Film Renaissance of the 1960s. Keeping faith with those beginnings, Rohmer has written all his own screenplays. Those artists wanted the audience to encounter the “auteur” who created the film, not the studio that produced it, and Rohmer's films have the stamp of his artistic personality.

Like Monet, Rohmer does not try to get everything into one work. It is difficult to appreciate Monet's significance until you have seen a group of his paintings or (better still) attended a major retrospective. Unfortunately for Rohmer the practical obstacles of a film retrospective are such that he can never expect to find a wider and more appreciative audience

audience. Rohmer is the antithesis of Hollywood: he does not work the demographics, his plots are not thrilling, his pace is slow and leisurely, there is little sex or violence, and no aliens. Nor has he hitched his wagon to a star: no Bardot, Moreau, or Deneuve. His actresses are never larger than the women they portray. Film retrospectives preach to the converted and Eric Rohmer does not have many American converts (the quality of his work is lost on a small screen, so he is not likely to be saved by video). People will not sit in the dark hour after hour for several days until they realize that Rohmer is an extraordinary filmmaker who has found a world of film in the lives of women, much as Monet found a world of beauty in water lilies.

Rohmer's latest film, *The Autumn Tale*, is the last of his *Tales of Four Seasons*, and it outshines its predecessors. The film earned best screenplay at Cannes and it has more plot than most of Rohmer's films, which often are no more than aperçus. It also powerfully illustrates Rohmer's approach to filmmaking, which bears striking resemblance to the approach to winemaking taken by Magali (Béatrice Romand), one of the female leads. True to the French vintner's tradition, she treats winemaking as art, not as industry. On the small parcel of land left to her by her parents, Magali produces a local Côte du Rhône aimed at the connoisseur who, she hopes, recognizes that it is as good as a Gigondas, and that if all goes well it will age like a Burgundy. Such connoisseurs are rare, even in the Rhône Valley.



And, as Rohmer shows us in this film, even they may need a little prompting. Like Magali, Rohmer seems more committed to his art than to his consumers.

The three women at the center of *The Autumn Tale* (Magali, Isabelle, and Rosalie) are played by actresses you might expect to meet in real life (Romand, Marie Rivière, Alexia Portal). Rivière makes it clear that Rohmer does not choose his non-celebrity actresses so that he can push them around. In an earlier film, *The Green Ray*, she was allowed so much room to improvise that she earned a collaborative credit. But Rohmer is not the cinema of improvisation: as auteur, he knows exactly where he wants his films to go.

Much has been written about the “male gaze” of the director attempting to penetrate the mystery of the female. That was the font and the limit of Roger Vadim's creative talent as a filmmaker; he did it first with Bardot in *God Created Woman* and later with Jane Fonda

in *Barbarella*. When he was not directing, he obsessively painted pictures of women masturbating—as though he could master the female orgasm by objectifying it. Bergman and Fellini were male gazers but in a class by themselves as filmmakers; their films were self-reflexive about what they were doing.

Rohmer is quite unlike these other directors. His women are certainly revealed in all of their vulnerability but he does not focus through the lens of sexuality. He is interested in women the way Ibsen and Chekhov were: not in orgasms, but in the mysteries of the self and what a woman wants from the next day in her life. Rohmer does not have the genius of a Chekhov who can find something universal in the very particular social historical context of a provincial Russian woman. That is one reason why Rohmer does not travel well; his characters are decidedly French and he seems as interested in their French soul as in any universal quality he might capture.

It would be difficult to say which of the three decidedly French women in *The Autumn Tale* is the “heroine.” There is neither a star nor a heroine; the film is a triptych, with three panels of equal size. But there is a psychological triangle and the winemaker Magali is at the center. To cope with an empty nest, she has thrown herself into winemaking. She is lucky and engaging enough to have two women friends who seem devoted to her: Isabelle is her own age and a friend from childhood; Rosalie is her son’s girlfriend but attracted to her and bored with the son. So Magali is not the prototypical isolated and alienated middle-aged woman. She is youthful, perhaps even shy but by no means desperate. One could imagine her toughing it out, walling up her emotions, and making a life of her vineyard without a man and without Prozac.

But Magali’s friends want more for her. They want to fix her up with the right man, each for her own self-interested reason. Throughout this film one senses that both the characters and the audience are in the hands of a great psychologist—if one knew more about the Rhône Valley, its old towns and its new factories, one would appreciate even more how Rohmer’s women are suited to their local social reality, which is filmed as carefully as they are.

Rosalie, an extraordinary young woman, is wise beyond her years but perhaps not quite as shrewd or strong as she pretends. Like many of Rohmer’s heroines, she is young, vulnerable, willing to choose impulsively, and spiritual. She is coming off an affair with her philosophy professor and she finds men her own age boring. So she has filled the philosopher’s spiritual place in her life with her boyfriend’s mother, the winemaker. Rosalie has a crush on Magali and is quite open about its intensity. One of the themes in the *Tales of Four Seasons* is the young woman searching for a mother to love. But neither the abandoned philosophy professor (Didier Sandre) nor the son, mystified that anyone his age could be interested in his mother, seem to be aware of spiritual attachments. Rosalie and these two men constitute a bedroom triangle. The philosophy professor is still sexually interested in his student; it is she who left him. Her immature boyfriend tries to be possessive, but she is calling the shots. She plays the two men off against each other. Rosalie seems to realize that neither of them is for her, but she is still struggling with her attraction to the philosophy professor. She wants to be his friend, not his lover. And then she hits on the idea of fixing him up with the winemaker, making them both into parents. The audience, particularly those who have watched *Tale of Springtime*, which has a similar theme, can see it coming long before she does—the question is whether the philosophy professor will be interested in a woman his own age after a long series of nubile student conquests. Magali isn’t betting on it; she is of the opinion that the older such men get the younger the women who interest them.

A professor with a seriatim harem of students will seem an outdated character to most Americans. In our context Rohmer’s philosopher is closer to a high-school teacher than a university professor. French students are given a course in philosophy in the last year of their lycée, when they are the age of first-year college students in America. Certainly a middle-aged teacher who had affairs with such young students would be some sort of loathsome pariah in any American film. But in the provincial Rhône Valley there is no politicized reaction, just a raising of

eyebrows. And against them, Rosalie repeatedly insists—perhaps too much—that she initiated the affair by pursuing him. Rohmer, like Sartre and de Beauvoir, began his career as a “professor” in the lycée and is genuinely interested in that year of philosophy. In the *Tale of Springtime*, an earlier part of this “Season” series, a central figure is a woman professor of philosophy at a lycée who is quite serious about the enterprise. She wants her students to realize that philosophy can play a role in their lives, as it does in hers. In this film Rosalie is clearly having an affair with philosophy as much as with her philosophy professor. That is what makes her character so remarkable and so quintessentially Rohmer.

These two triangles are completed by a third. Magali’s best friend from school days, Isabelle works in a bookstore and her daughter is about to be married. She too is coming up on an empty nest. In the midst of all the arrangements for her daughter’s wedding she gets the idea of putting a lonely-hearts ad in the newspaper for her friend. Her plan is to spare Magali the humiliation of placing the ad and meeting the men by doing it for her and finding one who is suited to the winemaker. It is not difficult to believe that this escapade is as much for herself as for her friend. And when she meets an eligible man, Gerard (Alain Libolt), it is clear that she is as intrigued with him as he is with her. It is only at their third meeting that she tells Gerard, who by then is obviously smitten with her, that he is meant for her friend Magali.

As a psychologist, Rohmer works from the outside-in. His tool is the camera, capturing Isabelle as she plays her game of pretending to be Magali with Gerard; making up the rules as she goes along to have the pleasure and excitement of a dalliance under the guise of altruism. Not surprisingly Gerard—who is delighted from the moment they meet—feels used by the time Isabelle lets him in on the game.

Under Rohmer’s directorial gaze Gerard is more vulnerable than Isabelle. The audience has no foreknowledge of what Isabelle had planned or how far she will go. The camera reveals but it does not judge or catalogue. The result is a touching glimpse of human good will and fallibility as two people reach out for each

other. Gerard overcomes his pique and agrees to meet the real Magali at the wedding party of Isabelle's daughter.

Now Isabelle has produced Gerard for Magali and Rosalie has offered up her philosophy professor. Suddenly two men may be in her life but neither friend of Magali knows what the other is planning. It will all come together at the wedding party.

Rohmer's outside-in psychology respects and reveals the particularity of his characters; his style leaves the mystery of the woman's self intact and unpigeonholed. Interestingly Marie Rivière has reported in an interview that—working from the inside-out of her character as an actress—it was her idea that Isabelle would want to take things even farther with Gerard. But Rohmer said no, "That wasn't how he saw things." Going farther would probably have meant something like having an affair. This would have decisively changed the triptych balance of the three women. Rivière would have become the large center panel of the film, and she would have changed the subtle nuanced script into a soap opera of sexual infidelity. The charming Isabelle would have become another cheap imitation of the provincial Madame Bovary. Rohmer's artistic scruples are best revealed in this contrast. But Rohmer's

characters, though seen from the outside, are not entirely opaque. Although we do not know exactly what they want from life and neither do they, we do see their lives and their moral choices, and we glimpse their souls.

Rosalie and Isabelle add excitement to their lives by helping Magali find a man. It gives them purpose and a promise of happiness where they seemed to have none. Each is solving her own problem by solving Magali's. Isabelle is proving she can still get a man and Rosalie that she can control her men. Of course they cannot both succeed. By the time we get to the wedding party, all the triangles come together and Rohmer's plot takes on all the complications of a farce. Magali knows that Rosalie plans for her to meet the professor but knows nothing about Gerard. Gerard, who has been prompted about Magali and comes from a family of winemakers, says all the right things about her wine, which is being served at the garden party wedding. It looks like sparks are struck and something will happen when Rosalie drags Magali away to her professor, leaving Gerard at a party where he knows nobody but the hostess and the woman he has just met. Magali does not give the professor much of a chance to show his interest,

and he quickly consoles himself with the company of another former student who is eager to join the harem. Magali is more than ready to go back to Gerard but finds him in intimate conversation with Isabelle and suspects he is her lover. It seems that everything is ruined and Magali's worst fears about men have been realized.

But all the triangles get straightened out. Rosalie goes home with her philosophy professor. Magali sends Gerard home with the promise they will meet again. And Isabelle ends the film dancing in her husband's arms, with a melancholy gaze fixed on the distance. This melancholy look is what is left of the actress' inside-out interpretation of her part, and Rohmer allowed it. Even this inward psychologizing goes against the grain of Rohmer's aesthetic of less-is-more filmmaking.

Rohmer's "endings" typically come upon us unexpectedly as we wait to see how it all comes out. But in Rohmer as in life it does not "come out"; one simply lives. His art is about the moral adventure of living, not the fiction of clarifying outcomes. Rohmer is no realist—no more than Monet. One can never hope to see in a water lily what Monet saw. Still, one can admire his artistic achievement, and so it is with Rohmer's gazing at women. ■

For Whom the Bells Toll

From post-literary America, ringing praise for Ernest Hemingway.

Neil Shister

On April 10 and 11, the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston honored the Ernest Hemingway centennial. The two-day symposium brought out some of the leading lights of American and international letters—Nobel Laureates and Pulitzer Prize winners, writers like Tobias Wolff, Robert Stone, and Annie Proulx. More significant, though, were the non-writers in attendance: a sell-out crowd paid \$125 apiece to fill the hall. The turn-out shows that in an America that is hardly literary—indeed, barely literate—Hemingway shines with the luster of a pop star, even 100 years after his birth.

Wendy Strothman, who heads up Houghton Mifflin, America's last major independent publishing house, launched the proceedings by underscoring its unlikelihood in this era of glitzy infotainment. "In contrast to last year's O. J. Simpson cast of characters and this year's Monica Lewinsky," she observed, "Hemingway's fame followed his books." The venerable bookshop maintained by Scribner's on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan since the days when it published Hemingway (along with Scott Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe) may have recently become a Brookstone—the literature on its shelves replaced by such spiritual essentials as the world's most powerful hand-held vibrator and a barbecue fork with built-in thermometer. But the Hemingway mystique somehow manages to survive this, and other, onslaughts.

True, Hemingway's stature no longer equals its height during the 1950s, when, Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. suggests, he was "arguably the most famous person on earth." Back then his face regularly appeared in magazines (three times on the cover of *Life*), testimony to his legendary stature as an adventurer, big game hunter, and drinker. Not to mention as a writer. Hemingway was not merely a writer but *the* writer of the first half of the century, the high prince of modernism. In sparse, direct language—so different from the opaque arabesques



of, say, Henry James—he retooled the novelist's craft, repudiating inherited genteel manners to address primal questions with urgency. He set the standard for several generations that followed him, until his manly code of "death in the afternoon" itself became dated.

Since then, critics have had at him, and his reputation has correspondingly suffered. He's been called a racist, an anti-Semite, and a cultural imperialist. He is consistently bad on gender. As one panelist observed, "He wrote not about women but what men thought of women. Women ask questions that men answer, the woman plays the complete dummy and the man the all-knowing hero." But regardless of his cultural politics, the legacy of his work remains intact. Saul Bellow summed up that inheritance as "a preoccupation with the sensations of selfhood" through themes of moral char-

acter, honesty, sincerity, self-control, and above all personal courage. "People used to form themselves on the Hemingway code," Bellow recalled, as if speaking of the distant past. "The consistent question one asked was, 'Is he one of us?'"

Indeed, Hemingway's mythic status may have started with his books, but it transcended literature. By displaying physical virtues—hunting lions, fighting bulls, boxing—he slipped beneath the radar of mainstream America's none-too-secret loathing of the artist. True, he had to go to Europe to escape the restrictive conformities of his suburban Chicago home—Oak Park, the same place that spawned Frank Lloyd Wright—and "the hopeless separation of small towns in the middle west and any kind of intellectual awareness," in keynote speaker Nadine Gordimer's telling phrase. But the America he fled eventually came to

embrace him, as much for his vigorous persona as for his words. In our popular culture, manliness excuses most faults.

Hence the intriguing connection to John Kennedy. Although the two men never met, the young politician saw in the older writer a cultural touchstone for his version of manly fellowship. Kennedy and his entourage freely employed Hemingway's definition of "grace under pressure," as a template for their own style and as the measure by which they sized up others. For Hemingway's part, he wrote upon Kennedy's inauguration that "it is good to have a brave man as President." The Hemingway vision provided a kind of personal road-map to a new generation that had outgrown the pieties of the World War era ("a war to make the world safe for democracy"), but found little to replace them. Courage, as Hemingway wrote about it, physical and moral, constituted the only reliable form of redemption in a social universe where virtue is divorced from ideology. Humphrey Bogart saying good-bye to Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca* is the classic Hemingway hero, stoic and solitary, doing the right thing without inflated nobility, a lineage that carries through to Tom Hanks' character in *Saving Private Ryan*.

Aware of the importance of Hemingway to her husband and his generation, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis personally intervened with Hemingway's widow to secure the author's papers for the Kennedy Library.

He is the last of his trade who will ever occupy such popular esteem. Norman Mailer? Tom Wolfe? John Grisham?

Talents all, but not the stuff of personality cults. No American author will have access to the same kind of clout as Hemingway because literature has long been eclipsed as a source of social codes, replaced by talk shows and fashion magazines. With publishing now just another concentrated industry extracting a high rate of return on invested capital, editors are less willing to bet their chips on long-shot originals with unproven sales. At the outset of his career Hemingway spoke in just such a strikingly singular voice, challenging the reigning genteel orthodoxies as he wrote about taboo subjects like sexual impotency, venereal disease, and homosexuality. Today, were his point of departure equivalently radical, he'd face a tough time getting published. And even if he were, it's hard to believe that his protagonists would still seem admirable. The aristocratic values of Hemingway's silent warrior were esteemed by Kennedy; but in today's therapeutic culture an emotionally bottled-up figure is as likely to be pathological as heroic.

So what are we to make of Hemingway today? What utility does he as icon play in public discourse? The answer lies where he started out, with words. Hemingway's prose set a new standard of clarity and impact: he made the exotic familiar and the familiar exotic. Never more so than in his writing about war. Take this passage from his great story, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro":

He remembered long ago when Williamson had been hit by a stick bomb someone in a German patrol had thrown as he was coming

in through the wire that night and, screaming, had begged every one to kill him.... That night he was caught in the wire, with a flare lighting him up and his bowels spilled out into the wire, so when they brought him in, alive, they had to cut him loose. Shoot me, Harry. For Christ sake shoot me.

Contrast the visceral, unambiguous horror of that description with the brain-numbing obfuscation of America's leaders in the first weeks of the Yugoslav conflict: Clinton pledged not to send U.S. ground forces into a "hostile environment," which then became Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and National Security Adviser Sandy Berger promising not to use American troops to "invade" Kosovo or enter a "combat situation." Then that transmuted into the possibility that U.S. soldiers would be sent into a "permissive environment" which then had to be defined by Presidential Spokesman Joe Lockhart as either (a) "one where there is a political settlement" or (b) "an environment where the Serbs and Milosevic don't have the ability to impose their will."

One can only shudder in despair wishing Hemingway were still around. To the end he remained a story teller—no ordinary story teller but one who, in his bold bravado, refused to make peace with the civilized duplicities that numb the soul. He portrayed a world where the best people—those who won't compromise with dishonor—speak truths directly from the heart. And suffer the consequences.

For this the popular culture embraced him as it has no other writer. ■

Duet

by Pamela Erens

Georgia Avenue on an afternoon in mid-September! Pennants panicky in the rough wind outside the newest commercial establishments—a drugstore with a banner blaring, “Take Hoyle’s Vitamin Capsules for Everyday Vitality!”; a shop whose window is crammed with new, used, and broken radios. This is a land of men in hats and coarse sleeves, of cigar ash ground into showroom floors by lady assistants in great heels, of spit gobs shining in the slant light on the sparkle sidewalks, of errand boys—not boys at all—with grins full of gold teeth. This is not a place for children! This is not a place for mothers!

All the same, if the two of them are to succeed, if they wish to triumph, there is no choice. This is where anything in the world one might need (anything, that is, besides love, family, God), is obtained, sorted, and put in its place; is ordered, tagged, sold, accounted for. This, the girl knows, is the work of men: to classify, file, calculate. To bestow names: *Frigidaire*, *Murphy bed*, *therapeutic formula*. How the girl hopes that someday, although she will never be a man, they will let her file, alphabetize, add numbers in svelte double columns.

Her mother clamps her hat against the wind, smashing the blond puff above her forehead, a desecration that will make her weepy and angry all through tonight’s dinner—maybe all the way until bedtime. The girl, because it is exciting to imitate her mother even when she’s angry, brutally clamps her own hat, although she knows this wind is a coward wind, and will not dare take her hat.

The wind continues its tattoo: rat-at-tat. The wind whines like a violin.

Her mother, in a cream-colored dress printed with tea roses and tiny cream-colored fabric buttons up to her breastbone, passes through the entranceway in one courageous burst, and the girl hurries in as the door swings back at her.

Her mother is tiny; even the girl knows it. She knows it would be better if she saw her mother as a warrior queen, a mama lion like the other mothers at her

school, who come in with their painted eyes and large hands and tell the teacher: *No, my Nancy won’t be saying The Lord’s Prayer with the Christian children; or, Henrietta should not be made to finish her lunches*. But she has seen the fact of it: both of them side by side in the mirror at Woodward and Lothrop, her mother almost visibly crumbling beside her daughter’s upthrusting shoulders, chin, forehead, nearly swallowed by her daughter’s rich brown expanding eyes.

“Bad nutrition,” her mother has explained. “The bones got stunted. The limbs didn’t grow.” But the daughter knows that this is not the whole truth, that her unstoppable increase has something to do with a power inside her, a power her mother has never had. Her size is an entitlement, a reward for her greater strength, courage, purpose—maybe even greater goodness.

The men behind the counter do not seem to notice her mother’s stature. They do not shift their cigars into the side-pockets of their mouths and smile, just a little, as if amused at the manifold forms nature sports with. They behave as if someone perfectly legitimate, a lady, a shopper, has just walked through the door. “Hallo!” one of them cries, jumpy, a very fat man who makes tiny nervous waving movements with his fingertips and chin, looking as if he is just barely airborne behind the counter, his stout toes skimming the black-and-cream-checked linoleum. There is a second man, too, also quite fat, who calls out *Guten Tog!* and the girl knows that he has made a terrible mistake. Her mother grows rigid under her soft, shapely dress, her lipstick deepens a shade. Her mother knows Yiddish perfectly well, murmurs it under her breath in the kitchen when the broiled chicken goes dry. But she pretends not to know it, and she turns away as if struck when anyone gazes at her with that look that says: *Now there’s a face with the old country all over it*.

These men are twins! Twins born fat, wearing matching thin burgundy cardigans with wide yellow ties, looking equally uncomfortable about the neck.

Behind them, shelves packed top to bottom with phonograph albums, the slender spines facing outward, the printing barely visible to the customer, just a low pleasant hum of naming: Mussorgsky. Chopin. Rubenstein. Horowitz. Also Bing Crosby, the Andrew’s sisters, Sinatra.

Then, because her mother is tiny and because she would not in any case wish to rumple her dress, one of the men grips the girl around the middle with two pillow hands, and she is flying into the stratum where the music lives, all the names momentarily tilting sideways as the man grunts basso. She is seated with her back to her mother, her legs kicking free. She is aware of the grittiness of the linoleum counter beneath her, but not surprised: This is what it is like in places where men are; they do not wipe up after themselves. The cigar in the man’s mouth has disappeared but it has left its cloud behind. The cloud travels slowly away from her as she watches, drifts toward the more spacious precincts of the store, where teenage girls with cinched waists, smelling of rose water, dart their heads over the low partitions of the listening booths to attract the attention of peacetime-idled boys.

“She heard it on the radio,” her mother explains.

“Which station?” jokes the other man, the more talky one, the one who bludgeoned her mother with Yiddish; the other, the one who lifted her up, is more silent, and sad. He has been thwarted somehow; he thinks he has no right to speak.

They wait. It’s true: silence sometimes says more than words! The silence acknowledges what they all can see, that a girl of ten has no business searching for things on a fast-moving street, a street with pennants and spit, with errand boys baring their teeth—things it will take not one but two grown men to find for her. On a fast street, yes, where newspapers strangle in the curb drains, gurgling forth details that are still supposed to be kept

from her: murders, car thefts, tribunals avenging the war slaughter of millions.

In the silence some girl laughs over the sound of "You Make Me Feel So Young" and a boy answers her in low tones, urgent, coaxing. Even now, ten years old, it is one of the things the girl knows: how it will end. The boy will win the laughing girl, then cool to her, and she, who at first did not need him, will dwindle for the lack of his love. The talky twin leans forward, kindness corkscrewing effortfully in his face. And—as if she were Lily Pons, flower of the Metropolitan Opera House, who has been Lucia di Lammermoor and Madama Butterfly and Mignon, who has been twice married and has even appeared on television—he waits, adjusting his tie, practically breaking out his Junior Mints!, for her to sing.

Hark the herald angels sing! ... And Señor Don Gato was a cat / On a high red roof Don Gato sat ... and If you've ever navigated on the Erie Canal—during music period at school, as Mrs. Howarth nods her wattled face, the girl's voice circles and rises with the other girls' voices, flows into the mass and is dispersed, just like the molasses her mother folds into her flour batters, staining them slowly a deep purple. She has never thought about her singing voice; it has simply been part of this general conversation of voices. And sometimes, in the thrill of this harmony, she finds that at the end of class she has an embarrassing desire to embrace one of the other girls, hold her and not let her go until they have exchanged some token that says: Friend.

"Sing for us, *shayne Madele*," urges the talky twin.

The duet sung by Lakmé and Mallika in *Lakmé* is introduced with an alarum of oboes, French horns. The girl has imagined a procession of women, diminutive, delicate, strolling with their parasols in a garden. A garden near a castle, medieval times, late summer when the castle's pageantry is folded up inside. The women are somehow Chinese. The girl does not know the opera's name, or the names of the characters. She had been listening to the radio; her mother had called to her, emphatically, from the kitchen—all was lost. But she does know that the two women who sing are in love. In love with their friendship, with the gentleness and goodness and delicacy of women. Their ladies-in-waiting are just as genteel:

light-hearted, good-humored, able to find delight in a stalk of straw or a butterfly. They are speaking, in their song-voices, of the breeze and the grass, of their idleness, of lawn games, of the sun off their umbrellas. The girl sees that she must begin from the beginning. She must convey the entire scene: the sun, the day's warmth, the gorgeous fragility of the entourage, before she can even attempt the first solo.

The men's faces grow dusky, concerned. The quieter twin claps his hand silently, irhythmically, against the tweedy tube of his pants leg. One shoulder rolls backward, twitchy. The talkier twin seems to grow deeper into the ground. His entire middle becomes heavier, his hips sink like dewlaps. He drops the lids of his eyes.

Her mother's hand rests heavily on her shoulder, and the girl knows she would give anything to leave right now. Her mother does not like strangers, does not like stores run by fat men and stocked with hundreds, thousands, of items, items only minutely distinct from one another, items one has to ask for, maybe even exchange some small talk over. Her mother does not like small talk. The world, she has said, should be as simple as pie: you sew a button on a dress when one needs to be sewn, you cook fish or meatloaf because you need to eat. She does not understand this other business: the talking, the smiles that say both, "Give me something" and "If I owe you...?"

"*La donna è mobile*," guesses Tweedledum, apologetically.

"Idiot! No, the *Miserere*—Leonora's part, of course," says Tweedledee, and now it is a game: "*Una voce poco fa*!" "*Habanera!*" The talky one clutches his belly as if in pain, chokes out: "The Valkyries! Those damn Valkyries!" "*Musetta's Waltz Song*," replies the other reproachfully. "Did you put out that cigar?" demands the talky one suddenly, and the quiet one stares: "Yar, I put it out, Maxie. How would I not put it out?" "Well, you're no housekeeper," says his brother. "No housekeeper!" the accused responds, indignant. "And you who never puts powder in his reeking slippers!"

What is noise to some is silence to others—the silence of the withdrawal of interest, in which hope can hear itself breathe. The girl is ready to begin

again. Her voice comes out with more force now, but this time she also hears her squeaks and skids, like a needle running off its disc. Or like the squirrel that got stuck in the tree outside her window last month, its tail pinned by a bough flung sideways by a late-summer storm. Which, because she knew better than to bother her mother over an animal—her mother is afraid of animals—she listened to cry for three evenings and nights, until, sometime during that third night, there was death or a rescue, because when morning came again, the creature was gone.

The song flees from her, curling its slender fingers, beckoning. She catches its bright tail, shakes it; it quivers free; she lunges forward. The tune rises up on the gusts flogging the shop window, drops, shudders, runs ahead and then turns back like an uncertain child. The girl is tiring, her voice flags, she pushes along. Sing! Sing! Sing! Sing! Sing! The notes are like puzzle pieces that the picture on the box proves fit together: if she turns and fondles each one long enough, with enough patience, the picture will come together. Beauty is the spoil of those who insist.

The talky twin—but perhaps the quiet one had it figured out long ago and was waiting for his brother to steal the victory—slams his hand on the counter and cries, "Ah! *Viens, Mallika!*" He is exhilarated, as if a personal problem has been solved, such as a lost invoice or a case of indigestion. He sweeps the girl off her seat—his hands are harder, more calloused, than his brother's—and now she is behind the counter, where children do not go. She sees compartments filled with letterhead stationery curling at the edges, bills written out in spiky script, pencils neatly lined up with their "2"s all facing skyward. There is a smell here of burlap, old glue, pencil shavings, and, oddly, peaches. Did one of the twins file and then forget an old pit?

"Please," says her mother, as if nothing has been settled, as if their servant is not right now on his way past the flirting teens to pluck the recording, as if perhaps these two strange men are planning to overcharge her because she speaks Yiddish, or because she pretends she doesn't speak Yiddish, or because she is under five feet tall, or because her dress has fabric-colored buttons, or simply because they are twins.

The quieter twin reaches behind the girl's shoulder and pulls out a lollipop—its cellophane corners droopy, a thumbprint of dust on its face. The wrapping, the girl finds on the way home, won't come off: she works diligently, in a fever of indebtedness, but the invisible shards stick everywhere. Her mother holds her package, a paper bag that when it has been emptied will be carefully re-folded and added to a stack under an unopened gift box of cordials, where it will never be used again.

The wind whirls them in ever-tighter circles away from the commercial district

toward Emerson Street, where home is: two stories with a beech tree outside that squirrels sometimes run up and down, and where a little creature may be saved from a drawn-out painful death by, say, an eagle winging over the state of Maryland or even—for she knows that as He sweeps His face slowly over the face of the universe, covering China, Russia, and South America, He must necessarily at times light on her very own neighborhood—by God, whose heart is pained by the suffering of the small.

Her mother (the girl can see by the way she walks ahead, swinging her hand-

bag with relief), will let her play *Lakmé* all afternoon and even past bedtime, because she herself loves to shut the door of her bedroom and put on *Rigoletto* or *Madama Butterfly* until long after the errands are supposed to have been done, or the coffee date at the Willard Hotel been kept, knowing as she does what the girl is just beginning to suspect: that one need not emerge to survive. In her mother's dimly lighted room, heated almost to choking, the voices of fastidious maidens and fearless queens swell and wail, fall and expire, singing their complaints in many languages. ■

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Jordan Davis

Jordan Davis's poetry is alert, startling, discerning, and strange. He is one of the young poets who make me confident that poetry is busily being born. He is a learned poet, in the sense that he has been in love with the poetry of the Metaphysicals and of the more recent past, and poetry of many languages, and his poetry reflects the fact that he is still more intrigued by adventures than linguistic museology. He has not been satisfied by reductiveness, and his poetry is full of stories, gossip, charms, observations, art criticism, and mordant innuendoes. There is an unexaggerated quality throughout this work, which makes it seem healthy and wise, like the light and repose in certain paintings of Fairfield Porter. While young poets are often sentimental or chiliastic, this is a poetry of balance and buoyancy, where the everyday drifts into exaltation.

—David Shapiro

This page is sponsored in part by Utah State University Press and the May Swenson Poetry Award Series.

When I Was The Subject

How we or anything exists
Is cranky extravagance
Forthright New Year's hibiscus chaos

O note card on the floor
I can't speak to you
Like someone at the end
Of a nine foot wall
But if you have a birthday
I will sing to you

Flashing christmas lights
Is it your yes that's many-colored
Or like the tree in silhouette
Is it no

I am the love of a pullet
For the hoseman
Which shines whiter
Than a new refrigerator

I am the color
Of the sweater the woman
For whom I have many
Little feelings wears
My eyes are that color

Candle squiggle on ceiling
Copper connects its way
Across the room
As a woman whose
Neckline is cut to show
A stone necklace
Lifts the shotglass

Candle to light
Her smoke

Look deep into the street
A glass of glass

The cat you have
To let come to you

The arc of the moral
Universe bends toward
Who plainly say
Recline on pillows

Warm day I'm surrounded
By what beauty wants
Catfish in restaurants
Followed by old meanings

The song of plaid paper
And plastic around roses
Is step all the way in

Kid screams her head
Can't take my eyes off of you
Trumpet solo in Times Square

She isn't anyone I know
Bystander camera crew
Looking for the mole of the week

Governance all afternoon
And context in the evening
Set their tuning forks
On a sleeping head

Graffiti on shoulder strap
Imagine being that far gone
They could actually tag you

For a dollar I'll
Tell you a poem:
Bad career move

Coconut oil out of control
O no! Symmetry

Sleepy woman at a payphone
My love never mind my love
It's your love that means
She going to make it? Reeling
Counting her change

New poem
Come up from
The earth
The south
The minors

O it performs functions
Like a pocket knife

What are the questions
Anything asks

Education or sex?
Laundry or painting?
Sadness or weight gain?
Computers or square feet?
Laughter or knowing looks?
Quasars or piñatas?
Carbon-dating or bichon frises?
Restocking the wilds or hovering
overhead?
Companion volume or appellate court?
Deep or homely?
Quiet or common?
Reply or sonogram?
Wanton abandonment or annuities?
Justice or victory?
Tragedy or periplus?
Arabic or cellular?

What funny thing
Has the caffeine

Persuaded you I need to see?	O so-what, do you ease An anxious smile into its case	Whether true or false So I was getting ready Is unarguable
Can't keep it in your wallet Can't hide it in your shoe Beauty is asleep	So-what zipper on a tight lace boot So-what blue jeans on old people The crowds massed For the celebration Of the year of so-what	Anxiety like love a state Of looking for an object
Star Trek is Burger King		I'm so far from the border Of being in love and not Being in love
If I had forty youths to give this art Each of them youngly angry and amused I'd relegate the sidewalk sidelong crush To one or two and with the balance make Plays, movies, ways that words move people, light	To so-what I send my resume I show up for the interview In my interview suit Am casual but poised And so-what and I Get along I get The job!	Lightning is my cello of The person-place continuum
Word to word grant us Match-sulfur Then tears in the eyes	O so-what We go walking Where the oxygen flows And nothing knows Either of us	The things I notice when I want to write are Not the things I think about Or feel they are what Gets sucked through the Hole I punch in time
In constant danger of eye-contact Not that anything you want is a rockstar	You think I smile Because anybody Notices but Laughter as insulation Is all this life Sparkles To the order of We like you	When I see a man sitting On a stool in front of bricks I know I am the firing squad
Small stuff or clue?		
Remember liking the word constellation In a poem? And I was a stranger to you		The tough guy voice I parodied to get it To take me over
The keys receipts candy wrappers in The unwashed clothes of the dead	I am in love Does not function as An emotional declarative The way So I was getting ready For my father to die Does	Doorways Grinning as stupidly as me
Whose poem was that?		And when the energy has Almost finished going Through I can work Out a few sentences
Those people Locked in game		
Would I could need What I was thinking Like I need a thing	This doesn't have to do With truth value or even Meaningful probability	Without the sharp Points sticking out

Deconstructing Stefan, or Destructing Stefan

*So, I am lost in your eyes, ears, nose, throat—
You have enchanted me with a single kiss
Which can never be undone
Until the destruction of language*

—Kenneth Koch

from the lips of monks
there falls the extolling
of conglomerate masses,

the hitherto, the and or but
a hiss, oversimplified

if in fact there
was to be a rebuke
it might go along
these lines, paint
yr damn picture,
write yr damn book,
love yr damn girl

the deconstruction was a painful process
a reinvention to open eyes,
to bitchslap, to awaken
a sideways glance might tell you as much

one drag leads to another, you say,
one poem to the next, levels exp(ou)anding
in the florescent light of Brooklyn,
neutral territory, strange and harsh language fraught with
real masculinity, a hard edge to all the plastics and the
baby boomers so neglectful, strange

how we ended up here

there's a sculpture of an angel
pointing her fingers like a gun,
French like us, similarly employed,
the "intended function of the benign"
diligently stable

a reserve
seldom found
a quiet like
lonely fallen trees
is this too loud?

in twenty years i pray
for you, like now, on this eve,
to be tweed clothed and wire rimmed
stained with the splash,
jaded, like now
a postcard, a photo, a breath
inhaled and blue

o sweet ruddy boy ten more minutes
couldn't hurt

again it's the agility of the dissonances, the clashing, c'est la raison que je t'aime

i will expose you
you are exposed

—Emma Straub

Laurie's House

The sea otter strokes its beard and flies in through the window to peruse the toiletries. "I like deodorant," offers Laurie, but the otter pays no attention. Laurie doesn't mind, her doors are open to all creatures, hers is a house built of love, love and that pale, pink stucco that draws the flamingos back each year. The penguins downstairs in the freezer feel naked without their iceberg. Laurie ties a loud Hawaiian cummerbund on a penguin she knows can pull it off, and it stands in front of the mirror as if held in a trance. Laurie is always mindful of the mirror and tiptoes past it so as not to disturb its reflection. She did, however, throw a shoe through the television set once. The seven years that followed were the happiest of her life.

—Jamey Dunham

The Mutiny on the Bounty

featuring a cemetery, a horizon where the sea lies, and exotic stones.

It came again tonight before I put my hand
to the porthole, anticipating a long night plucked.
My shiny new dream wondered patiently, its streamers
wild, anticipating the dropping of my head to the side . . .
As I'd put it now on not one of my best days, my ship
had come in. I wasn't bossy, harsh, tyrannical.
I was windy, a bit naive, and easily seduced.
I came to be seduced. The atmosphere was lax,
if anything. The days were sunny and damp. It was
my ship, and it had come in.

In the moonlight footsteps huddle together—footsteps!—
yet even delusions crush. This dream loves its dream
and ripples under fingers. *Listen*, my first love began,
it is the same addiction. It *is* the same addiction:
a wheat field's chattering in the wind, the first birds in weeks.
The sounds of birds is the same thing. It is the same song.

It came again. With no exceptions, I've wanted it.
The wave dissolves into rays. The rays echo a moon song;
they sing right through like bottlerockets.
A carefully considered reply below me doubles
and gains lightness—pumice stone, the body's surface,
sad questions outside the window. They mouth themselves,
obeying only the firmament and the storms of clouds
dying in the places where clouds are stored.

—**Karri Harrison**

At first you don't succeed

Because the pathetic aspire
to be sympathetic, need is often created
out of desire. It's as if you innocently planted the seed
of destruction in your vegetable garden
but forgot to water it: now you'll have to discontent yourself
with what you don't have. A long, fallow period follows
during which, as they say, one learns to do without
a specific dream while waiting for the raincheck,
but when you think about it you're forced to conclude
that all those clouds of consolations massing ahead
aren't necessarily (in fact probably aren't) storm clouds,
just some steam let off
by the lake. And what a disappointment that is.

Oh, I know, sometimes we almost feel
that if misunderstandings gradually accrue
at the rate of even one per day, it is only a matter of time
before a cloudburst will bring it all back
down to earth. No matter what one says it is bound
to be taken in the wrong way...
But inadequacy works in both directions: we miss each other
because we miss each other. Nobody thinks through their
fingertips anymore.

Perhaps it is a pity that we lack
a word to capture the unique aroma of coffee,
that our speech is wizened and anemic, remote
from taste, touch, and our other six senses. Conviction must thicken its own texture,
grow gnarled and close-grained but in doing so remain
as transitory as a summer wind whispering through trees
with the sound of running water... Something like this
ought to find its way into a conversation someday: a break
or lull in the interaction that broaches and breeches
the subject in a single, spontaneous gesture
not yet hardened into habit. Which brings us

to the next point, namely that
we are pacing the circumference of an enormous circle,
and in this, our arena of action,
a perpetual “and yet” has been inscribed
so that a kind of running solution is effected:
we must take our cue neither from the good old things
nor from the bad new things, but, as it were,
from the bad old things and their more equivocal recent
apparitions,
savoring the scents of the instants
the way couples in a park love each other so effortlessly. And yet,
surely to do this, even in gesture, is a blunder. It may turn out
that it bears a superficial resemblance to the world around
or inside of us, though superficial is no doubt the word—
it’s amazing what some people will do in the name of intimacy.
Soon the storm blowing from heaven to which we’ve come
to give the name “progress” will disperse as suddenly as it erupted,
and since there seems to be no way of getting around the notion
that we all rely on a certain “authenticity effect,”
there is also no lack in trying
having failed, so that even now we are not quite failing
to deviate from what we never exactly already were,
or as someone I care about very much once said,
“Almost everybody has this theory that everybody else
has a fascinating social life.”

Not everything we will need or desire to know
will be satisfied in the question and answer period
that follows the event: this much seems certain.
But just as pedestrians and cyclists can’t ever really
peacefully coexist, there is a tension involved,
and to involve ourselves with the dispute makes us realize more
often than not we are the product of choices
we never made, so that the so-called “timeless”
are really no more than rhetorical questions
and in fact may be said to have acquired in poignancy
what they’ve lost in relevancy: desire is conserved,

but only at the cost of living, which is rising, but then
it's always the moment when you're about to say something
in the tone of "a postcard would have been nice"
that fresh possibilities unfold the way flowers do
in time-lapse photography,
and every time you step into the shower
another day goes by.

To think that it all began with the kid
who was caught with his hand in the cookie jar,
wrenching chaos out of order.

—Steven Monte

The Definite Article

was much like the dry-green sea-set Mediterranean island
the princess went to, but longer back, and in a movie
in black-and-white, but sea light, *L'Avventura*,
the name was, the adventure doubly definite, *the man*
and the girl, the yacht—that one—and the, not an island,

or not just any island. The entire point was indirection,
chasing *among the rock formations or boulders, and then*
in the town. Everyone hiding or searching for which,
unable to derive any further clues from the mystery, or else
(late light) almost everyone's fright at all the assuming.

The bejewelled lit people in the grand hotel's lit mirrors!
Not recognizing the others, *the ones walking out, outdoors,*
to sit in the darkness. The definite article
asked me, after I'd asked to be told the truth
—about *the woman? the man? the night spent*

calling and moving, retreating, advancing?
—when I asked for the truth, the definite article
answered, asking but definite, "The truth?"
and instantly repeated, definite, "The truth?"

—Elizabeth Macklin

Rainbows

Once the memory of the Spring Flood had receded
I noticed that on account of “faulty navigation”
Noah’s Ark had gotten stranded on the top of Mt. Big Aigert:
despite its considerable dimensions no one seemed to notice it
stuck there as it was with its stern tipped slightly upwards,
leaning over the precipice. All the mountain animals
had begun to pour out of its interior,
and seemed almost to tumble down the steep—
lemming and lynx, bear, squirrel, fox,
otter, moose and wolverine and certainly not least the hare
who in the early morning sun down on the Dårå headland
was to lift his prayer to the rainbow
there among the twinkling waterdrops of the grass.
Rimbaud himself came walking down the mountain
dressed in a blue coat common among Laps
who lived and fished in Norway say a century ago;
he was bareheaded and his lank black hair
blew like wild in the western wind!
When we shook hands, I felt at once that his were strong.
He was in high spirits despite the grounding
and he told us he’d been heading “north-wards,” Nor-wege—
towards Norway in the etymological sense—
to study fjords, rains, and sun right on the spot.
His real name of course was Rainbow!
That’s why Tjulträsk Lake suited him so perfectly—
everything was here, and most of all there was a slope
which he was planning to use one day in his paraphrase
of the Gospel according to Matthew, where
Jesus feeds the people
on the mountainside: five loaves and two fish
would suffice, no need for a miracle at all
since there were only such a few of us
here at the tree line, among the increasingly whiter
silver branches.

—Jesper Svenbro

(Translated from the Swedish by John Matthias and Lars-Håkan Svensson)

Happy Jack's on Our Saturday Morning

No, she could barely speak about peaches
—suns in baskets on tables—on the
table inside. She'd seen them!
short-furred, late-light-colored,
edible creatures, she told me,
hanging like apples in Eden. "And even

the light was like I'm dreaming!" A dream
like a movie: impatient—so clear-
alarm, so cool you could see machines
helped make it. A long picture of hanging
peaches, a pair of sun-hot juice-cool peaches
with human faces under green-blue leaves,

from which, one said aloud to the other,
hung not far but separately: "So. Even we
are afraid just now," as if their bees
had been suddenly killed. And "Yes,"
said the other, "but the fear may end."

Said the first: "Will it end soon?"
The air was white and orchard-blue
with smoke. She saw them in closeup.
"But wait," one said, "I *loved*
the knife that pushed, pushed harder,

against my self—sharp, on edge,
cold as metallic water." Last night
it broke the silence: "It cut my
brown, sweet bruise out!" speaking wildly.
"It cut my too sweet heart right out."

—Elizabeth Macklin

Saint-Merri

Apollinaire's poem about the flute-player
who, accompanied by "a bevy of languishing women,"
walks the streets around Saint-Merri one day in May 1913
caused problems for the translator:
some of them I thought I could master
simply by heeding
the topographical directions given in the poem itself
and walking the same way the flute-player does
from the moment when he unexpectedly
turns into rue Aubry-le-Boucher from the "Sébasto"
—boulevard de Sébastopol—
until he disappears into a house
over on the rue de la Verrerie.
So, half a century after Apollinaire's musician
I turned into the street
carrying the Pléiade edition in my hand.
It was just before the block was leveled and rebuilt.
Today it is difficult to imagine what it was like:
ramshackle houses all propped up
by makeshift supporting beams,
the gutter full of refuse and garbage...
When I arrived in the rue Saint-Martin
what then was called the "plateau Beaubourg" opened up:
an enormous space full of parked cars
and heaps of trash as after a market day.
The sun was blazing down.
A gushing hydrant turned the street to a lake.
I traced the flute-player's shimmering steps,
continuing north on the rue Saint-Martin
until I realized that I had come
to the vanished intersection at the rue Simon-le-Franc
where the flute-player stopped to drink
from the fountain in the corner of the street.
But the rue Simon-le-Franc now passed directly
through the present Centre Beaubourg
and so this part of its extension
was no longer there.

My street corner was theoretical. Where was the fountain?
Just here, however, the flute-player and I turned around
returning down the rue Saint-Martin
the same way we had come.
The flies led their fly-lives
in the sunshine on the plateau Beaubourg.
If you came near them, you could see their dazzling splendor...
I passed before the portal of Saint-Merri,
a medieval church
with demons and angels.
Today no bells were heard from the tower
as the flute-player turned to the left by the corner of the church—
into the longish rue de la Verrerie.
The women following him
moved to the sound of his flute, it says,
they had flocked together like mad from the little side streets
of which there are so many on this block
and had kept on gathering.
They had names like Ariane, Amine, and Pâquette
with the variant *Pâquerette*—"Daisy," that is.
When I had turned the corner myself
I wanted to know where I was:
First I had a look at the *Pléiade* volume and then
at the street sign.
The opening of the rue de la Verrerie
seemed to grow larger like a stage: I remained standing
in the middle of the plot
without understanding what it was all about.
The summer afternoon had an acoustics all its own—
murmuring voices, breezes, the odd laugh.
A woman was improving her make-up.
With her back to the street
another one talked to somebody in the dark
at the side entrance of the church,
a third one slackened her pace, watched the youth
who had the *Pléiade* edition in his hand:
was he walking around here reading the Bible or what?
The daisy smiled as if requiring an answer
this sunny afternoon—
when it suddenly dawned on me what she was up to.
"Tu viens?" I was so surprised by her question

that I couldn't think of anything to say!
Luckily, I had the poem to think about
and continued straight ahead—
until I suddenly thought I had found the door
where the flute-player had entered
accompanied by the women. . . .
The house dates from the 16th century.
Here Apollinaire and the priest of Saint-Merri
had entered half a century before me.
Of course they found neither the flute-player nor his women.
There was a remarkable stillness.
Now they had been gone for a long time,
and the yard was even more deserted than then:
the wagons of the haulage contractors had disappeared
and the windows had been nailed up.
Only I was here.—And so it will be for you
and for you and for you
who will once more take this walk
in the block around Saint-Merri.
But as yet you're standing in the echo there
of the flute's faintest tone.

—**Jesper Svenbro**
(Translated from the Swedish by John Matthias and Lars-Håkan Svensson)

Poetry

Shelmalier

Medbh McGuckian

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Ciaran Carson

Wake Forest, \$16.95 (cloth), \$10.95 (paper)

by Thomas O'Grady

At times, the work of contemporary Northern Irish poet Medbh McGuckian seems to testify directly to a principle of poetry articulated by W. B. Yeats in "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," the opening poem in his *Collected Poems*. "Of all the many changing things," Yeats wrote in 1885, "Words alone are certain good." Both by reputation and in actuality, McGuckian is a difficult poet to come to terms with. Invariably, her poems are evocative and provocative "verbal contraptions," engaging the reader in a densely textured world of words—of unexpected image piled upon unexpected image and of singular thought conjoined with singular thought, all with decidedly marked effect. The third stanza of "The Sofa in the Window with the Trees Outside" typifies McGuckian's poetic strategy:

The dead among the spices of words
brush their eyes over me, as if
all my limbs were separate.
They are pearls that have got
into my clothes, they stir about
briskly with a form of tenderness
like a bird on its nest. I may
glide into them before they become set.

Compounding ambiguous pronoun reference with a curious mixture of elusive metaphors, McGuckian produces a lyrical concoction which seems intentionally evasive of ultimate "meaning." In this case it may not be quite so, as this poem is one of many in her latest book, *Shelmalier*, in which she registers both the desire for and the difficulty of recuperating a lost essence. In a sense, this poem's

uncertainties are mimetic of the enterprise of recuperation.

Specifically, as McGuckian explains in an introductory note to the book, *Shelmalier* attempts to recover some notion of the spirit which prevailed in the blood-drenched Irish summer of 1798, the true seedtime of modern Irish militant nationalism; apparently the name of both a barony in Wexford and of a seabird-hunting tribe from that county (the principal site of Irish insurrection and British massacre in that fateful year), the word "Shelmalier" represents for McGuckian "an integrity I had never learned to be proud of." As she expresses this sentiment in "Dream in a Train," "Some part of my pine-wooded / mind sleeping or dead / was a tightened-up light / I was sheltering for years." Thus the poems in this volume orbit around a new-found thematic center for a Northern Irish poet who, until her book *Captain Lavender* (1994), had cultivated a pronounced disinterest in the political dimensions of her native province.

Even here, though, her interest lies not so much with the legacy of violence persisting two centuries after that season of rebellion and retribution which resulted in upwards of 30,000 deaths, but with her own attempt not just to revisit but to inhabit, through the transporting power of language, the place and the time inhabited by her idealized Shelmalier: "I court his speech, not him." "Mantilla," the penultimate poem of the volume, seems to record her overall intention:

My resurrective verses shed people
and reinforced each summer.
I saw their time as my own time,
I said, this day will penetrate
those other days, using a thorn
to remove a thorn in the harness
of my mind where anyone's touch
stemmed my dreams.

Yet, notwithstanding the real capacity of language to extract other thorny constructs—political, social, and economic as well as linguistic—from the wound of history, McGuckian's emphasis throughout this book seems more facetiously elliptical ("Between meaning and meaning, matching words") than daringly analytical. Granted, in "The Society of the Bomb" she does glance at how "Before violence was actually offered / to us, we followed a trail of words / into the daylight"; but the full potency of words—in particular, the rhetoric of violence in Ireland, the true "trail of words" which remains as much a legacy of 1798 as violence itself—never emerges from what Yeats might term the "melodious guile" of McGuckian's verse. Words alone are indeed certain good, but as Yeats implies in the complementary lines of "The Sad Shepherd," their self-delighting, self-deceiving allure must find its counterbalance in the weight of the world.

From the evidence of his two latest books, Ciaran Carson, another Northern Irish poet, certainly has taken the measure of the worth of words. Freshened by at least a whiff of the "tourdeforcicity" that Irish novelist Flann O'Brien detected in James Joyce, the companion volumes *The Alexandrine Plan* and *The Twelfth of Never* are composed of 34 and 77 sonnets respectively—each sonnet employing faithfully the six-foot twelve-syllable "alexandrine" line associated with French verse. In the first instance, this metrical decision has a self-evident logic as all of the poems in *The Alexandrine Plan* are facing-page translations from French sonneteers Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé. In a note at the back of the book, Carson acknowledges modestly that his "versions" are based on standard English translations of the originals; yet a reader with even a smattering of French might appreciate how thoroughly Carson both

translates—that is, carries across—and then *transplants* in an altogether different soil and climate the richness of those originals. Transferring the Belgian city of “Charleroi” to “Kingstown” (the former name for Dun Laoghaire in south County Dublin) and rendering “Depuis huit jours” in idiomatic Hiberno-English, the first stanza of the first poem in the book, Rimbaud’s “Au Cabaret-Vert,” establishes Carson’s distinctive angle and accent for the volume as a whole:

I’d ripped my boots to pieces on pebbly roads
 Since Monday was a week. I walked into
 Kingstown.
 Found myself in the old Green Bar. I ordered
 loads
 Of cool ham, bread and butter. It was nearly
 sundown.

Clearly, Carson exercises great poetic license in his reworking of his French models. Just as clearly, he takes unabashed pleasure in his undertaking: “At the Sign of the Swan,” for example, closing with the phrase “a Swan, or sign,” both nods and winks toward the homonymic single word “Cygne” which concludes a poem by Mallarmé. Remarkably, however, the Irish mist which falls lightly throughout this book never seems to dampen the spirit of the original sonnets; in fact, as exemplified by the Swiftian endowments added to Baudelaire’s “La Géante” in “The Maid of Brobdingnag,” it may occasionally enhance them noticeably.

In light of *The Twelfth of Never*, Carson’s sonnet sequence published simultaneously with *The Alexandrine Plan*, his adaptation of Mallarmé’s “Le Sonneur”—a title conventionally translatable as “The Bell-Ringer” but translated by Carson as “The Sonneteer”—takes on additional reso-

nance: “one of these fine days, abandoning all hope, / I’ll hang myself, O Satan, with the self-same rope.” Indeed, dazzlingly allusive from start to finish, the 77 poems (perhaps mock-modestly, half of Shakespeare’s famous output) in the sequence reveal how Carson himself “dangle[s] on / An anxious tangled cable, while my entourage / Of sins flit round me in their gaudy camouflage.” They also reveal Carson as a poet not just of rapier wit but also of razor-sharp subtlety, part of which relates to his ongoing adherence to the alexandrine line. Arguably, Carson’s willful variation here on the conventional iambic pentameter line of the sonnet may be one more of many instances of an Irish writer not only appropriating but also subverting a form associated so immediately with Wyatt and Surrey, Spenser and Shakespeare, Milton and Donne, Wordsworth and Keats: in short, with the British poetic tradition. But Carson’s alexandrines have other telling effects as well. One is that in deferring the line ending for another two syllables, they tend (as Irish poet Austin Clarke once said of assonance) to take the clapper from the bell of rhyme, an important consideration with such a large number of similarly-constructed poems. An equally important consideration for Carson, however, may be found in Alexander Pope’s description of an alexandrine: “That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.” Obviously allowing greater flexibility of expression within the metrical contract of the poem, in the hands of Carson, an accomplished player of Irish traditional music, the extended line of the alexandrine at times also replicates the whimsical rhythmic improvisations of an Irish melody.

Appropriately so, perhaps, for *The Twelfth of Never* reads both literally and

figuratively like a wonderfully irregular air. Literally, the book contains an impressive catalogue of musical allusions as poem after poem on page after page makes reference to jigs and reels and planxties and ballads; a number of the poems even borrow their titles from the Irish repertoire: “The Rising of the Moon,” “Wallop the Spot,” “The Wind That Shakes the Barley,” “Wrap the Green Flag Round Me,” “Let Erin Remember.” Figuratively, each poem—each of the 77 sonnets gathered here—also has a “musical” vitality at least approaching that which Helen Vendler describes in *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*: the capacity “to unfold itself in a dynamic of thought and feeling marked by a unifying play of mind and language.” A poem like “Spraying the Potatoes” typifies the dynamic nature of a Carson sonnet. Borrowing in the first two quatrains numerous details from a poem of the same name by Patrick Kavanagh—a romantic evocation of rural Irish life in 1940—Carson suddenly subverts in the concluding tercets not only (if at all) the British poetic tradition but also, in the context of this book, any and every simplistic notion of Ireland that has ever been advanced. Words alone are certain good, indeed. Transforming a farmer’s cart in Kavanagh’s poem into an executioner’s “tumbrel,” Carson explodes, as he does throughout *The Twelfth of Never*; the entire corpus of Irish social, political and cultural myth:

A verdant man was cuffed and shackled to its bed.
 Fourteen troopers rode beside, all dressed in red.
 It took them a minute to string him up from
 the oak tree.

I watched him swing in his Derry green for
 hours and hours,
 His popping eyes of apoplectic liberty
 That blindly scanned the blue and white potato
 flowers. ■

Jackstraws

Charles Simic

Harcourt Brace, \$22 (cloth)

by Brian Henry

Charles Simic continues to revel in play and menace in his most recent collection, *Jackstraws*. A jackstraw is a scarecrow—a non-living thing brought to life through its function—as well as a man of no worth or substance. Jackstraws, though, is a game played with a pile of straw or sticks; the object is to remove each piece without disturbing the pile. It is the final meaning to which Simic refers in the title poem:

My shadow and your shadow on the wall
Caught with arms raised
In display of exaggerated alarm,
Now that even a whisper, even a breath
Will upset the remaining straws
Still standing on the table...

Simic implicitly acknowledges the scarecrow through the image of the raised arms, but the game itself governs the poem, which becomes a theatrical event complete with dramatic flair, lighting, and suspense. Simic's rendition of jackstraws reminds us of the seriousness of games and of the value we often attribute to them. Because the game of jackstraws requires dexterity, patience, and force of will, it becomes a metaphor for that most serious of games: poetry.

Simic's recent poetry demonstrates the fruits of such skills; but at this stage in his career, complacency, with its resulting predictability, emerges as the foremost threat to his work. Simic has published thirteen full-length books of poetry as well as two editions of *Selected Poems*, four books of non-fiction, a book on artist Joseph Cornell, eleven anthologies and books of translations that have brought into English such influential poets as Vasko Popa, Tomaz Salamun, and Novica Tadic. At what point, though, does the poet start to coast, become entrenched, depleted?

The atmosphere of Simic's poetry has changed little since *Hotel Insomnia* (1992), and the titles of poems such as "The Street of Martyrs," "My Little Utopia," "School for Visionaries," and "Insomniacs' Debating Society" could appear in any number of his recent books. The ingredients of Simic's poems—"tail of a black cat," "divine breasts," "batty schoolgirls," "Head of a Doll," "the Madonna with the mop,"

"blind pickpockets," "a blind beggar"—remain mostly the same from book to book.

One justification for this style-dwelling is the potential for the poet (if up to the task) to extract much from little, to bring out nuance and meaning from similar landscapes, as in the poetry of Charles Wright and Yannis Ritsos. To call Wright and Ritsos repetitive is to miss the importance of their projects—a physical and spiritual expanse that requires rereading and revisitation. In an interview in *Harvard Review*, Simic explained this stylistic constancy by pointing out, "Most of us know only a few tunes." And his description of Thomas Campion's poetry applies equally to his own: "The subject and the manner is almost always familiar; all invention is concentrated on variation and departure from convention." As if by design, few of Simic's recent poems are singular—for him, it is the repetition that makes his project appealing.

Simic's style carries the advantage of familiarity-in-strangeness (we must "strike a match to orient" ourselves) and the disadvantage of repetitiveness (we become oriented quickly, and then realize we aren't that dislocated). This familiarity comforts critics, who know what to expect of Simic and either praise or blame him for it (he has been heralded as the most original American poet and accused of writing translationese). Readers looking for formal ingenuity, lushness, or lyrical experimentation probably will find Simic's style disappointing. He favors the common tetrameter- and pentameter-based line, and nearly half of the sixty-two poems in the book are composed in regular stanzas of four, five, or six lines. He reveals a fondness for colloquial American speech—"bummed out," "lucky fellow," "chump," "Mr. Hot-Nuts," "fat chance"—and prefers a plain diction and flat rhythm. Exacting in word placement, Simic writes poems that demand slow reading. By stripping everything extraneous from his poems, he has arrived at the essence of the English language—"a few words surrounded by much silence," as he has said of both Ales Debeljak's and Tadic's poetry. Because of their unadorned

language, Simic's poems generally rely more on content and perspective than on music and rhythm. His way of seeing, his ability to find and illuminate details in the shadows, recommends his poems as much as his style does: "To find clues where there are none, / That's my job now."

While many of the poems in *Jackstraws* seem typical of Simic's recent poetry, some reveal him testing new strategies. The only prose poem in the book, "In the Street" formally resembles Russell Edson's work while using the absurd and wistful tone of James Tate's latest work:

He was kneeling down to tie his shoes which
she mistook for a proposal of marriage.
—Arise, arise, sweet man, she said with tears
glistening in her eyes while people hurried
past as if stung by bees.
—We shall spend the day riding in a balloon,
she announced happily.
—My ears will pop, he objected...
—Don't worry my love, she hugged him. Even
where the clouds are darkest, I have a secret
getaway.

More common are poems like "Live at Club Revolution," Simic's version of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," in which the apparently experienced Corinna stands in for the newlywed Faith:

It's time to burn witches again,
The minister shouts to the congregation
Tossing the Bible to the ceiling.
Are those Corinna Brown's red panties
We see flying through the dark winter trees...?

These lines represent the bulk of the poetry in *Jackstraws*: they present a recognizable yet unsettling narrative, upset expectations of detail and development, and force the reader to see differently.

Frequently morbid (in one new poem, the "mother tongue" is wrapped in newspaper by the butcher), Simic in recent years has become increasingly preoccupied by mortality. *Jackstraws*' epigraph, taken from Adam Zagajewski—"this moment—what is it—just a mosquito, a fly, a speck, a scrap of breath..."—gestures toward one of Simic's primary concerns in the book: locating and capturing the ever-vanishing scraps of breath that make a life. Many poets in their autumnal years become staid or dull; but as "The Gang of Mirrors" demonstrates, Simic

will not sing quietly in the face of his own mortality:

And the one that's got it in for you,
That keeps taunting you
In an old man's morning wheeze
Every time you so much as glance at it,
Or blurt something in your defense,
Screaming, raising your chin high,
While it spits and chokes in reply.

Here and elsewhere in *Jackstraws* Simic achieves the personal without resorting to autobiography; we learn much about the poet, but little about his family, marriage, and childhood.

This personal element rubs against the supposed surrealism in Simic's work. Although often labeled surrealist, Simic's poems do not conform to any brand of surrealism, French or otherwise. The worlds in his poems might not confirm our own, but they still are fundamentally realistic, since Simic takes the world and refracts it through his imagination and perceptions. He is ultimately a romantic poet, albeit one who has learned from surrealism the effectiveness of surprising juxtapositions, dream-like imagery, and absurdity.

With its simplicity and strangeness, Simic's style assists in his pursuit of the "Mystic Life," which is "like fishing in the dark, / If you ask me: / Our thoughts are the hooks, / Our hearts the raw bait." His linguistic whittling also has its spiritual counterpart; although Simic has not pursued the *via negativa* as consistently as Charles Wright, the constant process of paring and sifting has allowed Simic, at times, to empty himself of his self. But Simic's sense of humor—as subversive as it is youthful—keeps him on the rogue side of the spirit/body divide.

Simic seeks to deflate and defame (religion, governments, the machine of history), thereby perpetuating the romantic poet's privileging of the self. "The task of poetry, perhaps, is to salvage a trace of the authentic from the wreckage of religious, philosophical, and political systems," Simic writes in "The Flute Player in the Pit." Lyric poets, then, "must assert the individual's experience against that of the tribe." A poet who believes "only the individual is real" and who champions "the need to make fun of authority, break taboos, celebrate the body and its functions, claim that one has seen angels in the same breath as one says that there is no god" will never divest himself of self to lead the "mystic life." But he still can nod toward it.

In addition to numerous signature Simic poems, *Jackstraws* presents one of his major achievements to date, "Talking to the Ceiling," a suite of eight unrhymed sonnets that prove "the insomniac's brain is a choo-choo train." Most of the lines evade continuity and, thanks to the heritage of the sonnet, benefit from the appearance of fluidity and from the startling juxtapositions of language and imagery that result:

Cassandra with a plastic rose between her teeth.

Is this then the cabinet of Dr. Caligari?

Who is that milking a black goat under the blanket?

[...]

My uncle, the general, never came out of the closet

Because he could not find his beach ball.

Along with discontinuity, the poem relies on the pun ("The undercover agent under my covers stayed hidden"), the bizarre ("A baby, you say, smuggled inside a watermelon"), twisted wisdom ("Coming down from the trees was a big mistake"), and incongruity ("Long hours of the night; St. John of the Cross / And Blaise Pascal the cops in a patrol car"). Through their rejection of narrative and their acceptance of randomness, the eight parts of "Talking to the Ceiling" resemble Simic's unconnected notebook entries (especially "The Minotaur Loves His Labyrinth"). Here, however, the possibilities offered by the form of the unrhymed sonnet, though not fully realized, energize this insomniac's jottings, gesturing toward completion without finding it. Although Simic has created a potentially new style with "Talking to the Ceiling," the poem's title diminishes his accomplishment, reducing the leaps and restraints of the poem to a disconnected monologue (one person "talking," not to another person but to "the ceiling"), when the poem itself leans toward polyphony and indeterminacy. Because Simic has made essential his own poetic style, he now faces the choice of continuing to refine and extend that style or using it to push his poetry into new territories by modifying his strategies and, therefore, his vision. In *Jackstraws* he seemingly has opted for enhancement and repetition, but the strengths of "Talking to the Ceiling" and a handful of other poems quietly, yet firmly, call for further breakage, further risk-taking. ■

The End of the Alphabet

Claudia Rankine

Grove Press, \$20 (cloth)

by Calvin Bedient

She broods, like a bird whose nest has never felt a birth, with a grief that “needs to be and is in the end, anyway.” (As Paul Valéry put it, the body is “in the end ... our most redoubtable antagonist”). An umbilical cord. Complications. An unspecified difficult choice. Asphyxiation. A life lost in a life lost. Lost but hanging around, hanging on: “We can enter into hell and still sit down for Sunday dinner.”

The father of the child is, well, inadequate as she presses her face on the wood floor as if to close its wound: floor, grieve no more, I am your ceiling. The man she lives with now (perhaps the same man) doesn't know how to bring her all the way back, either, but has wiles: “His hand urging out of her deep surrender what / on its own could not. How he holds her down holds him down.”

The poetry she heroically writes to “unhyphen the self from the past” threatens to free her—“Shut up, Shut up”—from the loss that has become the “it,” the only proof, the negative metaphysics of her life. How to live with “all the loss lost”? Does she make too much of her stagnancy, “the drainage blocked by ... leaves, moss, dirt the wind put here?” So be it: “*I apologize but I do not apologize.*” It's both wrong and right, this grief. Sweetness is greater (“I know to desire / sweetness”), but only in a way, for there is an *integrity* to grief. And the mind—here at once analysand and analyst (“to sit next to the self. // to wait”)—is freeing, but, again, only in a way: “Forgive me. / this struggle to exuberance, for as much as I love the mind // it is there we lose.”

Something of all this, but much more complex, wavering, crumbling, *outside* (“*Dear, heart, you break in two. You do not break into*”), and dogged, is the severe “plot” of Claudia Rankine's second book of poems, *The End of the Alphabet*. But no one will find it quickly or easily. (Turn first to page fifty if you want some basic facts.) Its twelve titled sections made up of separated but untitled sub-poems, the poem consists of successive, unhurried, *spent* waves (*not* exuberant) of narrativized contemplations, fragmentary brightenings of

the rough particles of glum feeling spread around anyhow, in the womb, in the mouth. It cleanses, that is to say, at its own grieving pace. For this sorrow is both enormous and (so it must feel, however against hope) eternal. Utter economy would be futile, because superficial.

What we have here is not an event, but a life. The poem might seem to end with section nine, “Where is the sea?” in a metaphysical sounding of the physical tragedy:

*Come out
of the-rain pickle.* Though vexed as it is

it is not time that moved the lightning inside.
Before existed in
such dark unsaid—though I expressed it.
Preposterous

Who kiss them teeth?

What craziness she? ...

Or it might seem to close its eyes once and for all in the next “poem,” to see the sweet hereafter: “*There must be an uninvolved and there, outrageous calm.*” But it goes on, nonetheless, for sixteen more pages of verse, and with justification, if not with an acute formal necessity—for who can have done with one met in death? Besides, as Kafka thought, writing is an acceptance of endlessness. Here is Rankine: “Unable to leave off, to shut up— // the railing is gone.”

Nothing is so impressive in *The End of the Alphabet* as this poet's ability to sustain over one hundred pages an examination of pain so sensitive, so *painstaking*, that it nearly outdoes the exquisiteness of the pain itself, its superinventive, invasive, and pervasive “life.” Here, wits at once keen and tenacious match themselves against grief's genius for devastation. They run everything in and out of the wringer of abjection and *resistance* to forgiveness (of the mother herself, the father, the child, and—but here I'm guessing—the doctor, happenstance, and life which returns nothing it takes away), even as, constrained by aesthetics, they *are* such forgiveness as composition itself always is. (Yet how often this poet conveys unease over the falseness of a final, masterful accomplishment.)

Here is no heroism expectant of garlands. The poem slowly secretes itself like a shell. The speaker's head is forcibly kept bent down, her gaze required to direct itself at her body's taking form, its memory of a catastrophe, of what must feel like—murder. (Hence the scarcity of description in the book. Appearance, after all, requires a spectator who can raise her head and look around.) Unmercifully honest, an ordeal and catharsis of honesty, Rankine's mind cannot properly leave off (as if to say, *Resolution is served*) because it knows the impossibility of securing the heart. What is behind is the wilderness around the river ahead.

At the end of the alphabet is the flesh, at least those of its needs and wants that come from the unsaid (as cubs come to a lioness). But language itself is not unlike the incarnadine womb—alive, dead? Rankine creates for her speaker a style at once carefully abstract—touch me not, life—and nervously edgy—*filth touches me, I am already always its “hoarse brawl.”* One reads her, word by never-expected word, with fascination. It is “something strict,” this writing, “a thing more violent / than the violence of / broken, burnt, worn, disorder” which it nonetheless *bears* and bears along within it: it is art, art as near to experiencing “the railing ... gone” as an art that is fundamentally classical—*forsworn* (or very nearly so) to the goodness of calm—could possibly be.

Rankine's style is the sanity, but just barely, of the insanity, the grace, but just barely, of the grotesqueness, of having been the sight of a “monstrous graft,” as Julia Kristeva put it in her essay “Stabat Mater”—a shocking graft of life on itself, inside. Her body is none and all of her:

Did they take a vein from her thigh to mend
her heart?
She pulled a pant leg up. Her face, undressed,
was more
interesting.
[...]
Da daa daa. She repeated,
Da daa daa. She wanted to leave.
I got a lot of life for a dead woman.
She laughed. She was laughing. She was lying.
The rain.

Style, another involuntary graft, also springs from the body—style, as Roland Barthes proposed in *Writing Degree Zero*, whose “frame of reference is biological or biographical, not historical,” a

“personal and secret mythology ... a closed personal process, though transparent to society.” Style makes for Rankine a new and separate carnal structure, a continuation of her body, in which forgiveness, if not happiness, can be *thought*. “Fragments of a reality alien to language lie deeply beneath style,” Barthes said. Body-stunned, Rankine’s protagonist is of the Barthesian kind.

Of all such elations (and writing is elation), the sensual rapture of Rankine’s style is among the least joyous, the least reassured by a successful desire outside the law. Snip and eke and feel one’s powerlessness to locate oneself, even in the larger, penumbral body of one’s own style, now that the star in the actual body has fallen out of it—such is her (second) confinement. The maternal lining and the stylistic lining cannot be aligned.

Rankine’s Latinized abstraction is yet all sorrow of precision. It has something of T. S. Eliot’s authority of generalization (as in “Gerontion”), without (usually) the salt and dash of his sharp, compelling images. If overproper on rare occasion (as witness “milk on the tongue tasted rude, unfortunate,” which is a touch too prophylactic), it’s often intellectually and imaginatively (and emotionally) demanding—it has an intentional, keep-off and be-delicate difficulty in the face of the equally intentional rage for understanding that drives the poem.

Rankine both rushes into and outflanks rhetoric. Hers is an art neither of epiphany nor story: its justification is, in Blanchot’s words, “the intimate perception of ... suffering” (of godlessness, absence, exile, remorse, regret, despair). It attempts to peel back the layers of forgetting and at the same time not to see the hurt and the horror naked. The tension between the two impulses is the civillest thing just this side of havoc. Whenever before has autobiography (or at least an autobiography-effect) been so elusive with respect to the gross facts of a life, so unbound by any logic of linear narrative circumstance, yet so ferocious and refined an act of self-scrutiny?

“The thinking ego,” as Hannah Arendt put it, “is sheer activity and therefore ageless, sexless, without qualities, and without a life story.” Thought is Rankine’s tractor and plank across the waste, excremental past which, however, won’t stay past: “like when feces is stuffed in the mouth (an image woken / into)”. Her thinker’s vocabulary, her dignified educated lingo, distances her from the offending (betrayed and betraying) body. With few exceptions (which are startling but welcome) her language is a distillate of the “discursivization”—the word is appropriate in its unembraceable quality—which is one of the “acids,” as Bruno Latour says in *We Have Never Been Modern*, producing

“the ironic despair whose symptom is post modernism”:

(ripped out night, your core untranslatable.
preverbal,
paralyzed, out-of-place syllable outcried.
tacked up sequences
of daylight. distrusted though crossed over,
miscounted,
wanting.

Rankine’s style at once shakes with, mourns, and cleanses itself of the abjection of violated fertility.

What has been canceled deep down is not just a sense of being a being amidst Being, as the clouds are in the sky, but of being able to add to Being from the body itself, as opposed to offering only the rehabilitated moans of style. Rankine or her heroine is not in the mood to answer the feminist criticism—as herewith stated by Vicki Kirby in *Telling Flesh*—that in the Cartesian schema woman “remains stuck in the primeval ooze of nature’s sticky immanence.” What is sticky for Rankine’s crafted, projected “I” (a.k.a. a distancing “she,” like a marble rolling toward the table’s edge; or Jane; and rarely and more healingly a “you”) is only the clot of rotten leaves that took the place of a second life growing in her body. The hidden religion in *The End of the Alphabet*—this poem as assured as it is unprecedented, this brilliantly struck off and extended performance—is that of life, itself (we have never been modern). ■

Prose

Juneteenth: A Novel

Ralph Ellison (edited by John F. Callahan)
Random House, \$25

by Scott Saul

Ralph Ellison, who died five years ago at the age of 81, is at this moment singing a graveyard blues. I cannot prove this of course. But it stands to reason that Ellison, who was intrigued with the logic of practical jokes, would be both vexed and fascinated by the publication of *Juneteenth*, the centerpiece of the epic he pursued in the four decades following his classic, *Invisible Man*.

This is how the joke goes. An obscure young black writer crafts his first novel painstakingly for seven years. Upon its publication in 1952 he becomes an overnight sensation—National Book Award, fellowship in Rome, lectureships across the United States, and so on. When he undertakes a new novel, however, his imagination is so prophetic that he is consistently overwhelmed by newspaper headlines: he launches his book with an assassination, for instance, then watches presidents and Civil Rights leaders cut down in hails of gunfire. In the mid-1960s, just as he has made his peace with current events, his summer home in the Berkshires catches fire. He loses more than three hundred pages of revisions and hits a new block. By the 1970s he is a venerated essayist and man of letters, specializing in precisely controlled meditations on the interplay of vernacular styles, the blues aesthetic, and the nation's cultural debt to its black citizens. Meanwhile, what he calls his "novel-in-progress (*very* long in progress)" hangs over him like an electrical storm, a fury of possibilities. When he dies, his second novel is a matter of folklore and no longer anticipated in fact—yet his executor discovers a mountain of manuscripts, remarkably polished and in decent order.

So now we have *Juneteenth*, the novel that Ellison's executor, John Callahan, has ably quarried from that mountain. The book is more than Ellison fans could expect, yet less than Ellison probably hoped—an ambivalent masterpiece. It celebrates the promise of interracial love

even as it cannot square its black and white points-of-view. It flares with stylistic pyrotechnics—passages that match *Invisible Man* for energy—even as its plot feels unfinished and its monologues too windy. Perhaps most strikingly, *Juneteenth* aims to speak to our current racial dilemmas even as it harkens to an age before "the inner city," "black power," and the "underclass." It is easy to see why Ellison could not wrap up his epic: the novel revolves in an intelligence too complex and too quick, ironically, to come to completion. As his *Invisible Man* might say, Ellison was trapped in a groove of history.

That groove was the widening crevice of the mid-1950s, when Martin Luther King Jr. first came to national prominence with the Montgomery bus boycott and white politicians like Orval Faubus and Strom Thurmond took heated stands against the integration of schools and other public facilities. *Juneteenth* builds on an ingenious fantasy: What if King was father to Faubus? The novel's main characters are Alonzo "Daddy" Hickman, a black jazz trombonist-turned-minister, and race-baiting Senator Adam Sunraider, who was raised, as a child of indeterminate race named "Bliss," by the reverend. It begins in Washington, D.C., where Hickman rushes to avert an assassination plot against the senator—without success. The rest of the novel unfolds in a gauzy blend of rumination and retrospection: Sunraider/Bliss reliving the thrills and traumas of childhood and his subsequent hitch as a movie-maker and con man; Hickman, who tends the senator's hospital bed, remembering their shared life together.

In form, *Juneteenth* is a spiral, slowly circling back toward the mysteries that first bind Hickman to Bliss and then tear them apart. Its narrative owes much to Faulkner's notion that trauma cannot simply be unveiled—it must be approached gingerly

and tentatively, even evasively. The story wheels around the central ritual of the book, the tag-team sermons of Bliss and Hickman. Hickman places his young ward in a pint-sized white coffin while he preaches the glory of Jesus's resurrection. At the sermon's emotional peak, Bliss rises from his box and preaches the word himself. The ritual is both generous and cruel to the child—generous in the power, even ecstasy, it bestows on Bliss, cruel in its Gothic compulsion to orphan him again and again from the world of men. As Bliss/Sunraider remembers, "at the sound of Daddy's Hickman's voice I came floating up like a corpse shaken loose from the bed of a river and the terror rising with me."

The tie between Hickman and Bliss finally breaks during a sermon on June 19, or Juneteenth, the holiday commemorating the moment when Texas slaves realized they were free. A white woman tries to kidnap young Bliss in the middle of the sermon, claiming him as her son, and shouting that he has been robbed of his birthright. She fails, but Bliss becomes haunted by the fantasy of finding a white mother—a fantasy that leads him away from the ministry and toward the silver screen. He sees his mother in the image of Mary Pickford and other white starlets, and deserts Hickman for a career in movies and politics. Their father-son relationship endures, but in peculiar ways. Hickman captures their intertwined fate with a paradox: "little Bliss was father to the man and the man was also me."

Ellison clearly understood Bliss and Hickman's relationship as an intimate parable of our democracy, a uniquely American drama of independence and codependency set in a world of conspicuous racial fractures and invisible solidarities. Their relationship is reminiscent of Twain's Huck and Jim, as are their dilemmas: like the boy and slave drifting down the Mississippi, Bliss and Hickman both seek deliverance even as their imaginations operate at cross-purposes. In the pair, the vast dream of redeeming America clashes with the Franklinian dream of self-invention. As Ellison wrote in his notes, "Bliss symbolizes for Hickman an American solution as well as a religious possibility"—the hope that a common love and a common culture can heal the wounds of the past. So Hickman shouts to his black congregants that "a little child shall lead them," but Bliss cannot step

into this role. How can you deliver a people if you do not know where you come from? For Bliss, Juneteenth is not a celebration of collective freedom, but a reminder of his desperate need to free *himself* from the bonds of the black community. Stripped of its varnish, his American dream becomes, quite simply, the fantasy of being white.

Bliss and Hickman's relationship tested more than just the principles of American democracy: it taxed Ellison's capacities and expectations as a novelist. After *Invisible Man*, he found it much easier to capture the indivisibility of American culture through eloquently declarative essays than through the elusive workings of fiction. Part of this resistance was a matter of stylistic perfectionism: Ellison explained, somewhat ruefully, that "an act of faith is necessary" when an author departs from the "tidy dramatic form" of novels like *Invisible Man*. *Juneteenth* has little of the locomotive urgency of that first novel, which "keep[s] [its] nigger boy running" from misadventure and deception to heroism and insight. At times *Juneteenth's* plot recedes into the background and it veers toward conceptual art—work that is more interesting to think about than to read.

The high concept, in this case, was to create a novel whose form was commensurate with America itself, one that refused to smooth the country's rough edges. The "mystery" of the "many in the one"—Ellison's favorite encapsulation of the American promise—drew him to a more disjointed collage aesthetic that cut up and threw together clashing personalities, clashing vernaculars, clashing worlds. In a eulogy for his painter friend Romare Bearden, Ellison explained that collage was an aptly American technique because "we are a collage of a nation ... ever shifting about and grousing as we seek the promised design of democracy." Collage meant that *Juneteenth's* narrators would alternate from chapter to chapter; that passages would root around the past and hop back to the present; and, most crucially, that the language would be shot through with the different social registers that each narrator had experienced.

Put another way: there were no better instances of the many-in-the-one than the characters of Hickman, who blends the cadences of the ministry and the cadenzas

of jazz, or Bliss/Sunraider, who fuses evangelicalism, pop culture, statecraft, and childhood games. Here, for instance, is Sunraider ruminating guiltily on why he went from black preacher's sidekick to race-baiting senator:

Here in this country it's change the reel and change the man. Don't look! Don't listen! Don't say and the living is easy! O.K., so they can go fighting the war but soon the down will rise up and break the niggongraphy and those ghosts who created themselves in the image won't know why they are what they are and then comes a screaming black babel and white connednation! Who, who, who, boo, are we? Daddy, I say where in the dead place between the shadow where does mothermatermam-mymover so moving on?

Sunraider has become an echo-chamber; we hear his life played back in snippets, from the end to the beginning. He starts with the newfangled dreams of film and music, the fantasies of Hollywood ("change the reel") and Tin Pan Alley songs like "Summertime" ("and the living is easy"). His imagination turns more apocalyptic as he enlists the black troops of World War II ("they can go on fighting the war") in a Biblical prophecy ("the down will rise up"). These intimations of vengeance yield to the parodic fears and practices of the minstrel stage ("black babel and white connednation" and "who, who, boo, are we?"), mixed with patches of T.S. Eliot ("the dead place between the shadow," which echoes "The Hollow Men"). Finally he comes to the nub of his personal trauma: the mystery of his ancestry ("mothermatermammy") and his flight from Hickman ("mover so moving on").

Such passages suggest an art of extreme compression, and they are the most surreal and perhaps least expected parts of *Juneteenth*. The novel also offers some more familiar Ellisonian delights: Hickman's exhilarating Juneteenth sermon, which recasts the crucifixion as a profoundly tragicomic trial ("NAILED to the cross-arm like a coonskin fixed to the

side of a barn, yes, but with the live coon still inside the furry garment!"); Bliss's lyrical interlude with a black woman ("her surrender was no surrender but something more, a materialization of the heart, the deeper heart that lives in dreams—or once it did"); and the supple, teasing jive of Bliss, his childhood friends, and the black women around him. The rituals of black culture—from the exhortations of the pulpit to the deflating wit of the Dozens—enliven Ellison's book.

Yet behind the novel's strengths lurks a wry twist of fate: *Juneteenth* may be remembered less for its scenes of compassion and humor, and more for the retrospective light it casts on *Invisible Man*. Ironically, its gentleness clarifies how much that first book relied upon the pulp menace of Theodore Dreiser and Richard Wright for its appeal in the canon of American modernism. *Invisible Man* was a literary balancing act, an existential potboiler: its black picaro was repeatedly walloped by the jokes played by fate—so much so that he was compelled to remake himself, with brutal humor, in the teeth of each new reality. His last question—"Who knows but that, in the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"—captured this ambivalence perfectly. It was an invocation of democratic promise—the artist broadcasting in tune with his audience—but also a veiled threat.

Juneteenth, by contrast, is a plea for reconciliation, and it prefers the probings of memory to the wallops of circumstance. It has a more autumnal and afflicted question at its center: as Sunraider asks from his hospital bed, "HOW THE HELL DO YOU GET LOVE INTO POLITICS OR COMPASSION INTO HISTORY?" The question bedevils the senator to the end, and it should hound us too: it is Ellison's riddle for a more ethical country, one that could reconcile the dueling beliefs that we are only as free as the least free members of our society, and that everyone must achieve their own freedom. Such is the message of Juneteenth the holiday and *Juneteenth* the book. Ellison raised these democratic conundrums indelibly; the brilliant and unfinished *Juneteenth* suggests that he refused—or perhaps could not finesse—the consolations of a happy ending. ■

POETRY

Things Are Happening

Joshua Beckman

American Poetry Review/Copper Canyon Press, \$23 (cloth), \$14 (paper)

Gestures of affirmation in the face of uncertainty mark Joshua Beckman's *Things Are Happening*, winner of the 1998 APR/Honickman First Book Prize. In scope and generosity, the six lengthy poems which comprise the book recall at times Whitman and the Williams of *Paterson*, as well as O'Hara's genius for the daily and Lorca's and Machado's musicality. Beckman's poems, though, make their own mysterious sounds in varied scenes of travel and domesticity. In "Purple Heart Highway," a great road poem, the speaker falls asleep at the wheel and "[wakes] up to a plate full of no options / echoing through the cupped ear of my life, / spinning the wheels that wouldn't, / for anything, take me away." The contemplation is typical of how familiar moments and landscapes are made extraordinary by the speakers' strange internal journeys through them. *Things Are Happening* gives us plenty of darkness. "[T]he kitchen opens up / ...the staring promise / of something completely hollow." And "Winter's Horizon" wryly advises us of the voice within "say[ing]... / that if you try / and you will try / you can expect a not inglorious / moderation / from the rest / of your life." But Beckman's characters muddle through, refusing didacticism and despair, comforting themselves when they must: "There is no one to tell me this / but everything's going to be all right."

—Lisa C. Beskin

Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996

Seamus Heaney

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$25 (cloth)

"Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground." From this first line of "The Glanmore Sonnets," Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney derives the title of his

new volume of selected poems. *Opened Ground* supplements Heaney's *Selected Poems* of 1990 with excerpts from *Seeing Things* (1991), *The Spirit Level* (1996), and his verse-play *The Cure at Troy* (1990), as well as his Nobel acceptance speech, "Crediting Poetry" (1995). The volume also includes an increased number of poems from Heaney's earlier collections. *Opened Ground* stands as an archeology of Heaney's own archeological lyric vision, which mines more than the material world. It ranges from the famous "Digging," in which the poet's pen becomes a metaphorical spade opening Irish turf, and his series of imaginative meditations on unearthed ancient corpses ("The Tollund Man" and "Bog Queen"), to his both terse and elegaic rescripting of Agamemnon's tragedy in *The Spirit Level*. Tellingly, the phrase "opened ground" is not unique to the first Glanmore sonnet: in an earlier poem, "Act of Union," it describes a woman's body made raw by childbirth. Such is the versatility of Heaney's musical "ground." His poems harness the formal to the everyday to become, in the poet's own words, "not only a surprising variation played upon the world, but a retuning of the world itself."

—Christina Pugh

On Love

Edward Hirsch

Alfred A. Knopf, \$22.00 (cloth)

In the long title-poem of Hirsch's fifth collection, we find such literary titans as Diderot, Apollinaire, H.D., Emerson, and Lorca making sense and song of Eros as only they can (or could). Especially well-voiced are Oscar Wilde (citing Shakespeare), Milena Jesenská (friend and translator of Kafka), and Gertrude Stein (sounding more like herself than her own sweet self). Still, however keen these monologues, however authentic these personae, what makes them compel and impress as poems is Hirsch's ever-dexterous versification. An agile, plainspoken lyricist with

a penchant for engrossing narration, he is fully equipped to pull off villanelles entitled "Margaret Fuller" and "Tristan Tzara." But "On Love" is only part of the volume, and—perhaps surprisingly—it is the poems in the other part that more acutely enchant. Love is every poet's trump card, but Hirsch's verse also has much ado about memory, art, America, music, and other such muses—and it's these articulate if subordinate themes that haunt and heighten *On Love* in ways Eros flying solo can't (or couldn't). In the sturdy blank verse of "American Summer," the forthright yet otherworldly imagery of "Blue Hydrangea," or the spooked, disjunctive tercets of "Hotel Window" ("the passengers flinging themselves into cabs / never noticed they were setting forth / on a voyage away from their bodies"), Hirsch seems driven more by mood or emotion than, say, irony or conceit, so his gift for balancing form and feeling comes across more clearly. "On Love" is the big centerpiece of *On Love*, but it's the other lyrics whose scents linger longer.

—Scott Pitcock

In the Grip of Strange Thoughts: Russian Poetry in a New Era

J. Kates, Editor

Zephyr Press, \$19.95 (paper)

The 32 contemporary poets in this bilingual anthology represent a dizzying array of backgrounds, prosodies, and voices in post-Soviet literary culture, ranging from the intensely personal, baroque quatrains of Akhmadulina ("I'm the ballerina of your music! / I'm the frozen puppy of your frost") and folk singer Okudzhava's wistful ballads ("Ah, Nadya, Nadyenka, would that the bus fare were / the token granting entry to your soul"), to the stark minimalism of Nekrasov ("I really want to go to Leningrad // Only I really want to go // To Leningrad // And back"), Iskrenko's erotic free-for-alls ("hair on the chest and in the groin // hair in the tomato sauce in a duffel on the beach / on the velvet bodices' border just over run / and immediately abandoned"), and Dragomoschenko's effusive pyrotechnic

disjunctiveness (“a boundless knife point / (o procrastinating blades...) // The fir is heavy with eyes”). The editor emphasizes innovation and experimentation, summarizing recent trends as “a break-down of establishments and a break-up of language.” Twenty-nine translators further complicate this mixture of aesthetic persuasions and fail to resolve the difficulty of translating metered, perfectly rhyming Russian verse. Despite omissions and odd ordering, the inclusion of much previously untranslated verse makes this an invaluable introduction to the poetic renaissance fostered by the fall of communism.

—Michael Dumanis

Half Angel, Half Lunch

Sharon Mesmer

Hard Press, \$10.00 (paper)

This first full collection not only relies on the juxtaposition of the surreal and the mundane, the “sardonic” and the “sanguine,” but also on the idea that the origin or “bones” of each poem should remain visible. This insistence on leaving process exposed allows Mesmer to envision “The Rose of Sharon” as “hominic,” “homebound,” “fatherless in the dark,” and an “ankle birthmark where the wings were”—without claiming that any one association is more real or important than the next. Through a use of eerily convincing multiple voices, *Half Angel, Half Lunch* reveals the “brain’s multiple pathways,” achieving moments that feel as if Mesmer were voyeur to her own creation: “You are seeing the mirror that reflects the place of the place, which is your face.” Her poems are collages of “syllables flying

off, frayed, hasty, in jerks,” of talking and listening, of the “Word made fleshy,” and of a broken singing that appears to be sung from “a plastic-covered couch” as much as any angel’s podium. Never shying away from declaratives, Mesmer interrogates the language that love depends on until it is darkly funny and brutally raw, until “The whole of Chicago is a shrine to his first romantic line: / ‘Is that your real hair color?’”

—Sabrina Orah Mark

Seamus Heaney

Helen Vendler

Harvard University Press, \$22.95 (cloth)

In *Seamus Heaney*, Helen Vendler reads Heaney’s poems with characteristic insight and extraordinary sensitivity to poetic language. Responding to critics who have read Heaney solely in thematic or political terms, Vendler focuses instead on his development as a poet: the evolution of his form, syntax, and lexicon from the richly material rural “anonymities” of his first three books to the many faces of stoicism outlined in *The Spirit Level*. Vendler charts each volume’s poetic “argument” in specific poems and lines. Yet she brilliantly complicates her own schema in a series of chapter codas entitled “Second Thoughts.” These Second Thoughts discuss Heaney’s later revisions of the poetic positions each chapter treats, and in this way they insist on the poet’s “vigilant willingness to change.” The pace of the book is lively, but Vendler’s vision is comprehensive; and though she never reads Heaney’s poems as political statements, she remains attentive to the historical and social forces—particularly the violence in Northern Ireland—informing a language “unusually rich in simplicity as

well as ornateness, each where it suits.” This quotation also aptly describes Vendler’s elegant prose.

—Christina Pugh

Deepstep Come Shining

C. D. Wright

Copper Canyon Press, \$14 (paper)

“To see and to feel WHOLES” is one of many phrases that recur in *Deepstep Come Shining*, C. D. Wright’s tenth collection of poems, and the pun (whole/hole) instructs: many of the language-strands woven through this book-length piece concern blindness, loss of vision, loss of the eyes. The book’s achievement is to make its preoccupation with eye-holes into a meditation of and about wholeness. Wright accomplishes this by combining and recombining bits of southern vernacular, idiosyncratic observations (“Cold eyes are bad to eat”), song lyrics, literary and medical references, and a host of images and phrases (a white piano, a God named Louise, and Vidalea onions, to name a few). The result, while resolutely non-narrative, is nonetheless a “light-bearing path” to a place that is, among other things, Milledgeville, Ga., and the place “between the *a* and the *t* [in the word *at*].” Here, language-consciousness and non-sequitur don’t destroy intonation; in Wright’s hands the associational weave illuminates in a way that is devoid of sentimentality and feels very nearly autonomous. In the poem’s final section Wright articulates what we have already seen feelingly: “In the hither world I offer a once-and-for-all thing, opaque and revelatory, ceaselessly burning.”

—Cort Day

PROSE

Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum

Martin Malia

Harvard University Press, \$35

Russia has always figured large in the Western imagination, not only for its bi-continental span but for the cultural questions it poses. Lying on the fringe of the European land, Russia also occupies, we tend to believe, an ideological periphery. But what that periphery is, and how it fits our Western sensibilities, is never settled. In *Russia Under Western Eyes*, Martin Malia takes on the complexities of the Russia-West relationship, making a sensible home for Russia within the continuum of Europe. At the heart of his argument lies, appropriately, a recognition of the relationship's innate subjectivity. Malia points out that Western thought on Russia is typically more a reflection of the thinkers than of their subject, that the West has created its images of Russia—images which may or may not reflect the enigmatic land bridging West and East. Western opinion has reliably glorified or vilified Russia; thus we have alternatively considered it an enthusiastic prodigy (during Peter's recasting of Russia toward a European model of secular enlightenment or in the lurching democratic reforms of the last decade) or a menacing Other (as a megalomaniacal Oriental despotism under Nicholas or, familiarly, as the haunting Red Spectre). In creating different Russias for different times, the West has overlooked the likely truth: that Russia, as Malia puts it, is simply "a poor power trying to modernize in the real world." He argues that Russia is staggering toward a convergence with Europe; whether this is actually so could be discussed at length. In any case, the book is a fascinating study for all students of the Russian riddle.

—Susan McWilliams

Arcade: Or How to Write A Novel

Gordon Lish

Four Walls Eight Windows, \$22

Life is a grapple bucket in an arcade. You bring your penny and rarely leave with a

prize. But don't you get something? The thrill of "the old college try"? The hope and anticipation that precedes the let-down? Or is it simply a loss, deep and enduring? Whatever it is, that's life—and Gordon Lish's point of entrance. A map of how to write a novel, *Arcade* has a poem for jacket copy, forty blank pages as a form of "moderation," the bulk of the novel in one paragraph, no traditional plot line, and much humor. He writes, "Believe me, if I made the rules, it would be a different story from start to finish." In early childhood the narrator, "I Gordon," went with his extended family to Laurel in the Pines each summer. As an "old" man, memories of those visits intermingle with adult ones: camellias at a summer cottage, a woman who "rolled out the welcome mat" for him, the filth in a kitchen ceiling grate, an injured foot, his cousin telling him not to fall. With writing reminiscent of Stein or Beckett, Lish reminds his readers that the actual past and the remembered past are different, and he fleshes out every possible perspective. Lish's recurrent and vague approach to detail can be frustrating, but its collective significance is like chaos to its theory. These details—haunting, funny, ordinary, pitiable—are the real stuff of life.

—Camille Renshaw

The Secular Mind

Robert Coles

Princeton University Press, \$19.95

In *The Secular Mind*, child psychologist, Harvard professor, and Pulitzer-Prize winning author Robert Coles is tough-mindedly open to inspiration wherever it may be found. He begins by addressing the secular mind's relationship with its opposite—the sacred—and finishes with a turn toward self-exploration. Throughout, Coles is admirably alert to the costs of both worldviews: as novelist Walker Percy puts it in one of the book's compelling interviews, "there ain't no free lunch." While the terms "sacred" and "secular" are potentially elusive, Coles handles them in a consistent but nuanced way. On the one hand, he reminds us that distinctions are difficult to make: Abraham's readiness to

sacrifice his son may be sacred, while churchgoing is frequently an expression of secularism. At the same time, Coles insists that the distinction is great: a life of obedience to sacred call departs radically from a life meeting the demands of success, of the self and its extensions (family, friends), of the here and now. Driven by self-concern, the secular intellect can lead us away from "a moral or spiritual kind of awareness," and thereby shortchange the complexity of the lived experience. Coles' own mind seems to avoid this pitfall: it refuses to dismiss the claims of Other—whether the God of whom he suggests most of us are "unsure" or the various writers and interviewees (Kierkegaard, George Eliot, a factory worker) whose struggles to face both the big questions and everyday life he manages to recover with all due urgency.

—Bob Reeder

Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism

T. J. Clark

Yale University Press, \$45

In the introduction to this book, T. J. Clark makes it clear that his series of books, which began in the 1980s with *The Absolute Bourgeois* and continued through *The Painting of Modern Life* (both dwelling on the nineteenth century), is now concluded. This is his say on modernism. Clark is, notoriously, a Marxist, and struggled in those earlier books to find a theory and a method encompassing enough to merge radicalism with interpretation, sounding a historicist note that alarmed critics on the right (like Hilton Kramer) and left (like Pierre Bourdieu). But his present book is less concerned with mounting cases based on historical minutia than defining modernism—in his reading the epoch bracketed by David's painting of *Marat* in the Year 2 of the French Revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1991—as that framework within which capitalism could be contested on the level of immediate effect (the aesthetically difficult, the dissonant, the ironic obstacles to commodification, the use of the ephemeral). For the left, the struggle with capitalism led to something Clark, following Hegel, terms "unhappy consciousness." The unhappy consciousness is simultaneously aware of freedom and aware that the

conditions of that freedom are buttressed by a capitalist necessity that exploits the cultic value of nature to veil its business of accumulation and exploitation. The book is not exclusively theoretical jaw-breakers: Clark never presses too dogmatically on the Marxist terminology, and he is also a marvelous looker at paintings. (The best moments in the book are on artists with which he is politically akin, such as David and Pissarro.) But if he is right on the theory, we have to view the expectations of modernist work as either coopted or collapsed in the intellectual pallor of the late 1990s, and not as unworthy.

—Roger Gathman

Who's Irish?

Gish Jen

Random House, \$22

In this collection of short stories, Gish Jen's characters explore what it means to be Chinese, American, Chinese-American, and, in one case, Irish. The title story opens up the identity question in the matter-of-fact voice of a Chinese immigrant who lives with her daughter, her Irish son-in-law, and their undisciplined daughter, Sophie. Designated the babysitter, she remarks, "In China, daughter take care of mother. Here it is other way around. Mother help daughter, mother ask, Anything else I can do? ... I tell daughter, we do not have this word in Chinese, *supportive*." Jen uses the gulf between Chinese immigrant parents and

their American-born children to document the contradictory set of values emerging within the Chinese-American community. When the narrator of the title story gets dubbed "honorary Irish," Jen shows how difficult it is to ultimately define any of these terms: immigrant parents lament as the Confucist emphasis on family gives way to self expression, but they adopt material success standards over scholarship endeavors. Duncan Hsu's family celebrates his brother's import-export business and BMW, and deplore Duncan's fascination with his Chinese heritage, "the China of scholar officials, the China of ineffable nobility and restraint." Jen approaches these cultural dilemmas with succinct and lively prose; her writing moves fluidly through humorous and serious episodes alike. With empathy for her characters and a flair for the comic, her writing captivates.

—Shivani Reddy

If I Should Die: A Death Row Correspondence

Jane Officer, editor.

Bob Paul Publishers Consortium, \$10.95.

Hidden away in the Louisiana woods is an important chapter of American history. "The Classification Officer just brought me the Death Warrant," writes Andrew Lee Jones to his British "pen-friend" Jane Officer, who has edited this volume of Jones's letters and journals. On July 22, 1991, Jones became the last

man to be executed in Louisiana's electric chair. He had written to Officer about seeing the graphic photos of Robert Williams's burned, electrocuted body published by *The Angolite*, the newsmagazine of the Angola penitentiary. These may have helped push the legislature toward changing the method of killing. Jones's letters are also filled with references to Robert Sawyer, who, in March 1993, became the first man in Louisiana to die by lethal injection. But Jones's principal worry about his own body seems to be where it will be buried: "So if there is a after life, I won't wake up looking at these bars." The writings collected here bring us within hours of Jones's death. They are also filled with the unsensationalized day-to-day realities of life on death row, raising issues that are ignored in the policy debates. When Jones is locked up in "the Hole," he makes socks out of a cut-up shirt to keep his feet warm. He is so estranged from his family that he finds out from TV about his sister's murder. Meanwhile he tries not to make friends with other inmates "because it's no telling when [they] might get executed." *If I Should Die* begins with Officer's informative introduction and ends with a powerful afterword by an attorney who watched Angola guards literally wash their hands of Jones's body after his execution. "The way it seem," Jones writes, "they are just going to take us completely off the map." This book can help keep "them" on it.

—Mark Dow