
— COMMENDABLES —

An Arsenal Stockpiled with Arguments

Paul Johnson: *Enemies of Society*; Atheneum; New York, 1977.

By Robert Nisbet

Society, for Paul Johnson, is capitalist, middle class society, the only possible society, he emphasizes, that can, in our era, make possible political freedom and a genuinely civilized culture. This society came into being roughly in the sixteenth century, and, with only occasional setbacks, prospered, developed, and spread until the twentieth century. Despite the fact that capitalism has, on the record, given freedom and security to more people than any economic system in all history, and despite the fact that in our century wherever capitalism has broken down or been destroyed, despotism and poverty have followed, this economic system has nevertheless been under attack for well over a century.

Johnson's chosen "Enemies of Society" do him and our middle class society honor. They include ecological fanatics and doom-sayers, philosophers whose logic-chopping has virtually destroyed a once great tradition, social scientists whose left-wing ideologies are masked in pseudo-science, professors who have abandoned true scholarship in favor of class room political militancy, teachers in the schools who have substituted pap

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for curriculum, indulgence for discipline, and artists and writers whose hatred of capitalism has taken the forms of adulation of everything evil from schizophrenia to permanent terror. All in all, this is a powerful and necessary book even though I find occasional lapses of critical judgment or interpretation and signs of haste (such as misspellings of proper names) in the book's preparation. ■

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"Mr. Johnson is immensely entertaining, but the reader may not share his sense of urgency—his feeling that Western culture may be doomed by these trends"—*The New Yorker*.

Berger's Good Sense

Peter L. Berger: *Facing Up to Modernity*; Basic Books; New York, 1977.

Peter Berger takes on the widespread myths of the technological age. He argues that by tearing down our old belief structures and replacing them with overdoses of "freedom" and "liberation," we breed bogus relationships, loneliness and self-doubt. He goes on to give horrifying examples of what happens when the current value-neutral attitude is taken to its logical conclusion. He analyzes modern culture's aberrant search for a new basis of values. He concludes that the authority of traditional religion still remains the supreme source of insights and explanations. He'll be hated by liberal pundits and thanked by anyone who has still preserved a modicum of good sense. ■

Trilling's Appeal

Diana Trilling: *We Must March My Darlings: A Critical Decade*; Harcourt Bruce Jovanovich; New York, 1977.

A collection of lucid, thoughtful essays written in beautiful English prose, a delight difficult to find amidst the contemporary racket and shrillness of the reviewers—pushy journalists feigning to be critics. Mrs. Trilling's concern is criticism. She expresses a worry:

"We are accustomed, of course, to the reluctance of our critics to submit to rigorous examination any political or social idea which is presented to them under the aspect of enlightened dissidence."

This is not an easy book to read for those unaccustomed to the form of the literary essay. However, in its finely chiseled phrases and elaborate reasoning there is a multitude of clean-cut, accessible-to-anyone explanations and conclusions. Anyone who has given a thought to what has happened to the ideas which once successfully governed our daily lives, will find in this book his own thoughts, feelings, anxieties and pre-sentiments formulated in a way that makes them clearly understandable in spite of the refined language. ■

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Burditt's Happy Ending

Joyce Burditt: *The Cracker Factory*;
Macmillan; New York, 1977.

A housewife's autobiographical novel about a human being's recovery from alcoholism and mental trouble. Burditt committed two grave mistakes: her story glorifies a good husband and ends on a happy note. A liberal book-club turned down her book as "politically regressive." As Burditt said in an interview: "They objected to the main character going back to her husband in the end . . . Well, my husband supported me financially and every other way for a year and a half while I worked on it. He maintained his own writing career as well as cleaning, cooking, and taking care of three cats, a dog, and three teen-agers." ■

White's Serene Talents

E.B. White: *Essays of E.B. White*;
Harper & Row; New York, 1977.

The sizeable checks from magazines go nowadays to people who know how to use terms like "role models" or "role-playing" in their writing. Applying this nomenclature to an assessment of E.B. White, man and work, one might say: He is an American cultural model whose role is venerable simplicity. He certainly

is too, in our opinion, one of the few "men of letters" in our contemporary literary tradition. This distinguishes him from writers and novelists. Eudora Welty, a woman of letters, wrote recently about White in *The New York Times Book Review*: "The writing is itself dateless as a cloudless sky, because the author has dateless virtues . . ." And: "In this collection, Mr. White has made such scenes as the summers of 'the American family at play' fadeless for us." Such a literary feat seems incredible in our epoch of frustration and abomination perceived by writers as the gist of life. However, it seems to have been wrought in the pages of this book. ■

Caputo's Probity

Philip Caputo: *A Rumor of War*;
Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York, 1977.

This is perhaps the first honest journalistic attempt to tell us more about Vietnam than the modish stereotypes. It exceeds journalism and attains the art of a thoughtful, literary documentation. The author obviously cares for integrity—his work's and his own. The war can now be seen not through political slogans, but through the human mind and human sensitivities. Caputo knows the taste of man's humiliation in the face of the unacceptable, and he values man's faculty for reasoning without relying on modish clichés. For this he has been uniformly acclaimed in all quarters of American cultural opinion. ■

Eidelberg's Keen Insight

Paul Eidelberg: *Beyond Détente*;
Sherwood Sugden & Company;
LaSalle, Illinois, 1977.

How to be right and honorable in foreign policy without being sentimental or jingoistic? This is the perennial quandary of statesmen and leaders. Dr. Eidelberg, Salvatori Research Professor at Claremont College, is a scientist's scientist gifted in the selection of apt quotations, and impressive in the multitude of statistics data adduced in support of his conclusions. He extrapolates from the writings of Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, Washington and Lincoln a projection of how they might behave if faced with Castros, Brezhnevs, the problems of the Export-Import Bank and our hamletic dilemma with computers sought by communists: to sell or not to sell? If you suppress your inclinations to comment on foreign policy, in fear of being accused of "imperialistic" and "reactionary" instincts—you would find in Professor Eidelberg a fountain of irrefutable arguments to fend off such incriminations. ■