

Great Expectations

by Frederick Turner

"There is only one step from fanaticism to barbarism."

—Diderot



Anna Mycek-Wodrecki

In Defense of Elitism
by William A. Henry III
New York: Doubleday; 212 pp., \$20.00

In *Defense of Elitism* joins what is now a spate of books documenting the madness of contemporary "political correctness." It is an amusing, readable, and journalistic work, full of the most delightful anecdotes about the absurdities of our times, unusual in that it locates the problem in the cult of egalitarianism, fed by the self-esteem movement: one of its more original observations concerns the rise of karaoke as a substitute for the art of the professional singer, of the snapshot as a substitute for art. Significantly, like many recent books on the same subject, it comes from the pen of a confessed and accredited liberal, staunchly loyal to the Democratic Party. It is now not only the

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right that is warning of the threat to our culture; perhaps a new consensus is emerging.

William Henry, who died last year, was a cultural critic for *Time* magazine. He begins his book by describing the current radical egalitarian attack on elitism, which, he postulates, springs from nostalgia for the experience of the Baby Boomers in college in the 60's, who shared an illusory and temporary condition of total equality until persistence, hard work, luck, and talent sorted out losers and winners. Henry traces the enshrinement of mediocrity through affirmative action, feminism, multiculturalism, and the nature-nurture controversy, and concludes by suggesting radical changes in the educational system, including a cut in the proportion of each generation to whom we attempt to give higher education, a greater concentration on vocational education, and the abolition of academic tenure. These suggestions are interesting, and we should study them while keeping in mind the experience of Britain, where Margaret Thatcher tried something similar with the result that the leftist faculty survived but many valuable programs in

the sciences and humanities were cut. Still, something indeed needs to be done. In our universities, the artistic and humanistic heritage of the past is either ignored or vilified; at Johns Hopkins one year the only Shakespeare course was entitled "Shakespeare and Sodomy." Students are introduced to Mozart as a white racist, Aristotle as a sexist, and Austen as a sellout to male oppression. Instead, the young are urged to read the works of the Nazis Martin Heidegger and Paul de Man, the wife-murderer Louis Althusser, or the sadomasochist Michel Foucault (who spent his last years in the Bay Area knowingly infecting other homosexuals with AIDS).

Let us grant Henry's hypothesis that our culture is sick and needs cure. But surely the problem is older and deeper than the illusion of equality at 60's universities. To understand its roots, we must look at the cultural history of the last hundred years, summed up in the

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words “modernity,” “modernism,” “postmodernity,” and “postmodernism.” “Modernity” can be defined as the period within which the following conditions obtain: science establishes matters of fact; political theory, the left-right political axis, and the nation-state determine collective social organization; technological progress drives the conditions of life; secular values override all others; and the fundamental unit of political reality is the individual. “Modernism” is a movement in the arts, humanities, and cultural life, like the Renaissance or Romanticism, that has lasted roughly through this century. This movement is dominated by the thought of Marx and Freud. At its best, modernism was a grand intellectual and aesthetic adventure, a bold experiment on human nature. It is not entirely the fault of its pioneers that the adventure has largely come to grief; the experiment has shown the traditional wisdom to have been right after all. But there was a darker side to modernism, driven by the imperative of the denial of shame. Traditional institutions, myths, and rituals accepted the shame of our destructive relationship with the rest of nature, our innate inequalities, our sexuality and animal nature, and our painful economic relations with each other, and transformed the shame into epiphanic beauty and moral insight. In the absence of these institutions, modernism denied shame by means of right-wing and left-wing ideologies, displacements, and scapegoats. Modernism accepted the 19th-century scientific belief that the world is made of matter and works deterministically, that we are only animals, and that the brain is a machine. Right-wing modernists interpreted this condition as *carte blanche* for the ruthless survival of the fittest: the winner is the most successful predator, and is absolved of moral responsibility by the fact that he could, after all, do no other than follow the command of his nature. Left-wing modernists, faced with the choice between deterministic order and “free” disorder, identified creativity and morality with randomness, and advocated what the existentialists called the “*acte gratuit*”; the only morally praiseworthy person is the loser, and moral discourse becomes a sort of loud, persistent whine. Given these premises, many distinctions of quality became meaningless. Nevertheless, certain ideals persisted in modernism: progress, virility, rationality,

coherence, the purity and unity of artistic form, artistic genius, psychic integrity, individualism, and the ideal of the enlightened state.

“Postmodern” is usually taken to describe the last 15 or so years (also a period extending indefinitely into the future). But many, including myself, believe that it is only a transitional period between the decay of cultural modernism and a truly new vision of the world: one of those periods like the mid-16th century in England—C.S. Lewis dubbed it the Drab Age—which preceded the English Renaissance, or like the Picturesque, which ushered in Romanticism. “Postmodernity” is the social, economic, and technological condition that has succeeded modernity. Its characteristics include the emergence of the postindustrial information economy; the replacement of hydraulic and mechanical metaphors with cybernetic and electronic ones; and the overthrow of the old class structure consisting of the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and the working class by a new one consisting only of the middle class and the underclass, in which the aristocracy has already disappeared, the industrial proletariat begins to be absorbed into the middle class, and an underclass emerges which has no place in the economic system. In postmodernity, the unified, secular, efficient, logistical ideology of the modernist nation-state is questioned and criticized by a whole collection of different worldviews—ethnic minority ideologies, feminism, resurgent religious and cult perspectives, gay consciousness, environmentalism, etc. Old scientific certainties are “called into question”—a catchphrase usually meaning “dismissed without consideration”—outside the scientific community, and profoundly revised and transformed from within it.

“Postmodernism” is an intellectual-cultural-artistic movement taking note of the postmodern condition and adapting itself to it. It is largely negative in its attitudes, being motivated by the elites’ disappointment at the collapse of socialism. The intellectual core of postmodernism is poststructuralism, which includes deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida, reader-response theorists like Stanley Fish, new historicists like Michel Foucault, neo-Marxists like Frederic Jameson and Frank Lentricchia, radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin, Susan McKinnon, and Mary Daly, radical multiculturalists like Edward Said, deep

ecologists like Arne Naess and George Sessions, neo-Freudians like Jacques Lacan and Gilles Deleuze, ecofeminists like Caroline Merchant, critics of science like Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, and Jurgen Habermas, and cultural critics like Roland Barthes, Jean-François Lyotard, and Henri Baudrillard. At present, the dominant themes in the postmodernist academy are radical feminism and radical multiculturalism—really a new form of ethnic chauvinism in disguise. Postmodernism rejects the modernist ideals of progress, virility, rationality, coherence, the purity and unity of artistic form, artistic genius, psychic integrity, individualism, and the ideal of the enlightened state, but it resembles left-wing modernism in its hatred for capitalism, its contempt for traditional morality, its commitment to disorder and radical egalitarianism, and its unstated distrust of democracy. The final step in the postmodernist journey has been the rise of political correctness, the attempt to purge dissenting opinion from the ranks of the academic/artistic/professional brahmin caste; and, as William Henry points out, the systematic attack on excellence in all fields.

Deep intellectual flaws in modernism, partly inherited from the utopian hopes of the Romantics and the French Revolution, have ripened into hideous consequences. We are in serious trouble. But too broad a diagnosis would encourage the cultural despair that we must purge ourselves of if we are to regain our health. Our culture can be roughly divided into four aspects: the folk culture of traditional arts, crafts, customs, and rituals; the popular culture of the corporation, show business, professional sports, and the market; the public-service culture of the military, the professions, and government; and the brahmin culture of intellectuals, professional artists, and academics. The infection has not uniformly penetrated these different spheres of life.

The folk culture, by and large, is healthy and flourishing (despite recurrent reports of its imminent demise). Because of improvements in communication, it is increasingly hard to distinguish the traditionally rural folk culture from the traditionally urban popular culture—Nashville, for instance, is a threshold where the one is metamorphized into the other—but country musicians, high school bands and cheer-

leader teams, local craftspeople, storytellers, and folk poets continue to be a vital source of cultural material. The folk churches are flourishing and full, and the exposed peccadilloes of their pastors testify, oddly, to the vitality of the cultural energies they exploit. Local and regional peculiarities and dialects persist. The popular culture is also relatively sound, despite or perhaps because of its inherent limitations—the compromises required for a mass audience, the need for profit, the rarity of true connoisseurship in a busy working population, and the compromises of commercialization. The public-service culture is partly healthy, partly sick—the cynicism has penetrated government, the press, and the public-service unions, especially secondary education, but has not deeply affected law, medicine, or the military. Even within the most deeply infected areas—journalism, teaching, politics, and the “helping professions”—a large number of workers in the field maintain high standards of cultural integrity and creativity. But it is the brahmin culture—the very people whose social function is to guide, inspire, enlighten, and challenge their community—that has let us down. Even here all is not lost. The sciences and the technological disciplines are as yet largely untouched by the infection, and will be one of the most important sources of cultural renewal. The secondary schools, which have always rightly taken their lead from the brahmins, have, however, fallen victim to the disease, as have many of the mainstream denomination clergy, who, though formerly the cultural leaders, now struggle to maintain their status by following *avant-garde* trends. The basic source of the problem is the academic humanities and the *avant-garde* arts; yet even here there are enclaves of healthy and creative work. It is in the official academic culture that the sickness is at its worst. Tragically, some of the antiletism that Henry attacks is justified in practice, if not in theory, by the elite itself.

But why should it matter to society what a small group of alienated intellectuals, in their airtight hothouse of *ressentiment* and arrogance, should choose as their current fashion? Have not *avant-garde* thinkers always sought to upset solid citizens with their posturings, and should not the rest of us tolerate them, because of the occasional miracle that they seem to produce from time to

time? From a practical, social point of view, the function of the humanities is therapeutic, normative, and visionary—it helps heal the pains of life, encourages us to virtue, and sets up ideal goals to guide our aspirations. Might it not be argued that contemporary egalitarian polemic is bitter medicine for our ills, a chastisement for our complacencies and injustices, an unrealistic and exaggerated but liberating vision of human freedom? We can cite countless examples of discomforting social criticism, from the indignant poetry of the Old Testament prophets and the sacrificial violence of Roman and Greek sculpture, that remind us how terrible and tragic is the divine economy, through the humiliating depiction of human frailty and corruption in medieval theater and theology, to the vicious but cleansing satires of the Enlightenment and the moral questionings of the Romantics.

The situation now, however, is different from that which produced the Jeremiads of the past. Much contemporary *avant-garde* theory does not heal but rather wallows in the disease, and takes money for the exhibition of its sores. Its effect is to produce rage, despair, racial and ethnic hostility, sexual disgust, and hatred between the sexes. It does not encourage us to virtue, but to activities and attitudes that have always been considered harmful to society: violence, cynicism, a sense of the meaninglessness of everything, sexual promiscuity and perversion (however we define perversion—I do not consider homosexuality in itself, for instance, a perversion), immediate sensation rather than foresight and self-restraint, and disrespect for the dead, for the family, for hard work, for innocence, for heroism, for science, and for religion. It does not in fact contain any visionary ideal of the future or of a better world than this one, though its apparatus of social theory still faintly echoes old modernist ideas of a society of perfect equality, total freedom, love, and harmony with nature.

Though to the citizen the effects of such academic polemics and apologetics might seem safely confined to a small circle of *aficionados*, such is not the case; indeed, this confinement is a dangerous illusion. *Avant-garde* fashions affect university students through their professors, and university students become the elites and alumni of the future. Those who do not inhabit the academy can have no idea of the thought-control, the

censorship, the paranoia, the terrifying cruelty that are common there, because their results appear so trivial: an academic suspension, the suppression of a publication, a bad tenure decision, the hiring of a second-rate member of a preferred ethnic or sexual category over a first-rate member of one of the pariah groups. But it is not only students who are corrupted by postmodernist theory; wealthy patrons of the humanities and the arts, wishing to appear *au fait* with what is going on, adopt the styles and attitudes of their academic *protégés*; and everybody else who wishes to be rich—which is almost everybody—then imitates *them*. Thus *avant-garde* ideas trickle down to the population at large, without improving in subtlety, decency, or breadth of tolerance as they do so. The universities are the nurseries of culture, and what happens there will affect all of society in the future.

The effects are tangible. The primary and secondary educational system, desperately looking for ways to justify its failure to educate an increasing fraction of our population, has seized upon secondhand postmodernist notions of cultural, ethical, and sexual relativism as a means of justifying the collapse of its standards. If present trends continue, we will end up with two systems of education, one funded at great expense to give the illusion of democratic training and accreditation to the masses—bread and circuses—and the other for the elites, the Grand Inquisitor caste, the children of the *avant-garde* mandarins themselves.

The problem with books like William Henry's is that they are strong on symptoms, weak on diagnosis, and weaker still on cure. We need a positive vision of the next phase of cultural history. It is not enough to complain about the abuses of the present and indulge in an ahistorical nostalgia for the past. The past, properly understood, is a fiercer and more shocking spiritual challenge than any right-wing conservative can imagine. I am not alone in seeing a huge and wonderful opportunity even now for our society and our culture, but it depends upon coldly recognizing the mistakes that we have made. The potential gains, intellectual and artistic, are worth the risk. Would it indeed be so bad once again to abandon a worldview and reach out for another? Would it not be in the best and boldest spirit of modernism itself to do so?

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Friends All Over the World

by Philip Jenkins

The Revolt of the Elites
and the

Betrayal of Democracy

by Christopher Lasch
New York: W.W. Norton;
276 pp., \$22.00



In this final book of his splendid career, Christopher Lasch seeks to answer two questions, one that is increasingly heard in political debate, the other still too subversive for consideration in polite society. The first is "What's wrong with America?"—an issue not too far removed from the "Condition of England" so lengthily debated by Disraeli and many other Victorians. Closely related to this is the question "Can democracy survive?"—a natural corollary to the first topic, given the fundamental role played by democratic ideology in every phase of the nation's history.

Lasch identifies a familiar roster of American problems and crises, including urban decay, media sensationalism, the decline of traditional community loyalties, the deterioration of public spaces, and the collapse of popular interest or involvement in the political process. Thus far, the book might seem to resemble a hundred other counterparts over the last quarter of a century, ritual contrasts of the heartless and soulless present with the imagined communal past, with obligatory jibes at the liberal elites, Spiro's "nattering nabobs of negativism," and at modern faddism. Of course, given the author, this is not at all what we find. Lasch indeed enumerates the symptoms of cultural decay, but then proceeds to analyze them in a manner that is both novel and thought-provoking.

Lasch takes as his point of departure *The Revolt of the Masses*, in which Ortega y Gasset argued that the rise of mass politics posed a terminal threat to democratic practice, which had evolved

within the more stately republican models of the 18th and 19th centuries. Not at all, says Lasch. In fact, the real threat in contemporary America arises not from the masses but from the elites, who have so detached themselves from the common beliefs and mores of the wider community as to have become thoroughly deracinated. They are "far more cosmopolitan, or at least more restless and migratory, than their predecessors." Their own beliefs are defined in contrast to a nightmare Middle America of the spirit, an imaginary land of Babbitry, "technologically backward, politically reactionary, repressive in its sexual morality, middlebrow in its tastes, smug and complacent, dull and dowdy." We are everything *They* are not. Though Lasch does not cite this particular example, the contrast is nicely epitomized by virtually every cartoon published in the last five years on the subject of guns and private gun ownership. The vicious, mentally defective sadist labeled "N.R.A.," Bubba with his Freudian attachment to his semiautomatic rifle, is more or less how our new bicoastal elites view a large majority of the American population, or anyone with the temerity to resist the abandonment of centuries of deeply ingrained traditions when called upon to do so at the drop of a syndrome. The propaganda is savage, unrestrained, and monstrously unfair, but not untypical.

In Lasch's view, the new elites simply hate the values and beliefs of traditional communities, to the extent that they are no longer capable of comprehending them, and venerate instead the ideals of diversity and multiculturalism. For them, the future will be characterized by a lack of borders, of restraints on the movement of people or money, and above all by the abandonment of any restraints that they see as preventing human fulfillment, namely the constrictions of sexual roles and of the family. Life becomes as unconstrained as the Internet or the Web, where one has no idea whether the information one uses is ultimately derived from Tulsa or Tibet. Not quoted here, but still relevant, is John Lennon's complex manifesto "Imagine" ("Imagine there's no countries . . . a Brotherhood of Man"). The model megalopolis of the new era is the

utopian city of Los Angeles, with its "correct" orientation toward the Pacific rather than to what was once the American heartland. To fulfill our destiny in the Pacific century, it is first necessary to abandon those financial and economic restraints which prevent the ultimate merger into the nationless world federation. And someday, the final frontier will be attained: "Next year in Tokyo . . ." is the ideal.

In domestic terms, the consequences of the new internationalism are summarized by the immortal words of the English comedian Tony Hancock, who in his character as a radio ham pronounced that "I have friends all over the world . . . none in this country, but all over the world." While the new elites move into the science-fiction Pacific Rim of the soul, they increasingly lose what vestigial contact remains with middle-class and (God forbid) poor Americans, as the rich increasingly secure themselves on luxury reservations protected by security guards, leaving the public schools and police and streets to a desperate and brutalized plebs. The political conclusion of all this would presumably be Spenglerian, and the most optimistic outcome might be termed "Caesarism." Even worse scenarios were foreshadowed by the 1992 riots in that paragon of multicultural harmony, Los Angeles.

So much about this imaginary future appears familiar, even inevitable, that Lasch performs a major prophetic service by pointing out the many problems that arise when a society seeks to detach itself fully from its traditions and commonplaces, from family, community, and religion. The task might have been done somewhat better by *Brave New World* (written by a contemporary of Ortega), but Lasch's jeremiads gain power from their strictly contemporary relevance. His central theme can be seen as profoundly un-American, nothing less than an assault on the evil consequences of mobility and a celebration of the fixed landmarks. Democracy, he argues, pre-

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