
Art, Media, and Culture in a Time of War

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As human society grows older, its best art and its best cultural analyses have revealed how *simultaneous* life is in the midst of all its events, experiences, and the reported “news” that takes place. In the past, we tended to regard everything as being what it immediately seemed. If a war had begun, we concentrated on the threat it posed to ourselves, our families, and our neighbors. All classes in a society seemed to pull together, to regard the other side in a war as the common enemy, to see the leaders of the country and its military as the agents for preserving the nation, its institutions, and its values.

Today, we are told by some that because notions such as “enemy,” “evil,” and “victory” are ambiguous, we should run away from them. We are coaxed, in the name of ambiguity, to avoid perceiving true threats by con-

tinuing to accept the commonplaces and other clichés of our art, media, and culture. Unfortunately, ambiguity is not the same as simultaneity, and the very institutions—arts, media, and culture—that are meant to enable us to perceive accurately and to understand may, in the end, stand in our way.

Winston Churchill, in one of those memorable rhetorical exhortations that exemplified so much of his wartime discourse, exclaimed in November 1942:

Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.

Employing the richly acrobatic diction of the English language, Churchill gave a geometrical precision to the circumstance and time. He was, of course, also attempting to give a sense of singularity to a complicated moment.

Those very lines, and that very singularity, might be uttered by President George W. Bush today, as he attempts to rally his country and the world to what lies ahead.

For decades now, the dominant voices of the institutions of American culture have promoted and elevated the principle that certain rights and freedoms have a greater weight than others; further, that some of these can be considered to the exclusion of others. This often has been argued in abstract terms, but has frequently taken the physical forms of protest, demonstration, and violence. I am not speaking of the national resolution of genuine injustices, including providing civil rights to minorities and to women, the reform of education and welfare, and others. I am speaking of the subsequent development of issues involving free speech and legal rights, most of which has occurred in an environment of economic well-being, technological euphoria, and an absence of major international war. In this period, over the past three decades, the language of our American culture has acquired a rhetorical structure that is abstract, distracted, and ultimately (contrary to its stated intentions) self-destructive and inhumane.

I am suggesting that while we are in a Churchillian-described moment of commencing a strategic and military journey (the end of a beginning), we are *simultaneously* near a cultural and social destination (the beginning of an end). It is the proper work of an American president, also the commander-in-

chief, to lead us in the former. It is the necessary work of the media, art, and culture to illuminate the latter.

Werner Heisenberg, who won the 1932 Nobel Prize in physics, formulated what has famously become known as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Although it was originally applied to the tiny world of subatomic particles, it can be applied to much else in the world closer to, and including, human scale. The uncertainty principle, simply put, says that when something is measured, the measuring device alters the object that is measured.

We are now relatively far from those resonant moments of World War II that, in being retold, still move us and shape our actions. But we know that historical time, itself a device of measuring human activity, ruthlessly alters everything we do and perceive. Now, almost sixty years after World War II, we are further from the events of World War I, and even further from the Napoleonic political earthquake and its transformation of European society, all of which continue to have a cumulative, albeit receding, impact on our own time.

The provocations of September 11 describe only the crude outlines of a confluence of historical acts. The attacks themselves—including the probably unintended result of the World Trade Center towers collapsing into a pile of rubble and the probably unrelated assault of anthrax mailed to certain public figures—were filled with so many consequences that it may not expand our understanding to assign

ultimate cause to one man or group. (Although it was, and still is, absolutely necessary to identify those individuals and groups who perpetrated these violent crimes, and to punish or destroy them.)

As they unfolded in implacable images in our various media, the aggressions provoked and coalesced conclusions of a state of public mind that has been forming over the past sixty years. The result, which seemed to surprise some on the far left, was an immediate and overwhelming expression of support not only for the president and his administration, but also for the military and the war effort in Afghanistan.

The wars of the twentieth century, perhaps more than most wars in previous centuries and millennia, each had **rapidly** shaken the character of a generation with the scale of their savagery and violence, and the intensity of their public terror. World War I wrenched Victorian presumption into a stunned mood of uncertainty that was perceived almost worldwide. Between 1918 and 1939, the literature, music, and art of the Occidental world turned from romantic and optimistic to tentative and cynical. World War II showed the intentional and malign force of emerging large-scale totalitarianism. The so-called Cold War from 1946 through 1989 tested the resolve of the democratic capitalist nations and peoples to resist newer forms of totalitarianism, which, like viruses, seemed to be adapting and resisting attempts to contain and destroy them.

The Masses Revolt

The conservative Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, now out of fashion, described uniquely a long evolution of Occidental civilization in his classic **The Revolt of the Masses**. Ortega contended that, while we may observe and describe each historical case of change and revolution in recent centuries, there is a powerful theme, a motif, that links all of them in historical time. They are, Ortega said, part of a laborious, often violent, always expanding revolt of the world's masses—that is, of those great numbers in the population who historically have been ruled by the few. Presumably, in the beginning, it was by a headman or chieftain ruling a nomadic or cave society, which then evolved into a tribal society in a particular region. This, in turn, evolved into the early urban settlements ruled by nobles. Settlements interacted and traded with each other and made associations for self-protection. The nobles, often out of military necessity, chose a king as leader to ensure their ability to resist attack, or to be able to attack others. Kings became absolute rulers until the technologies of transportation and communication, combined with rapidly growing populations, created new classes of tradesmen, entrepreneurs, intellectuals, teachers, scientists, and others who clamored for a greater and greater share of the common wealth.

The so-called industrial revolution accelerated this transformation, simultaneously creating not only new social classes, but new political structures as

well. All of this seemed to climax in the century just passed, when political organizations, armed with radical ideologies such as fascism and state communism, appeared, and in brutal fashion overwhelmed existing political states, reintroducing the principle of subjugating masses to new types of elite totalitarian leaders and ideologies. The twentieth century was, in fact, a colossal wrestling match between an almost millennium-long evolution of the democratic impulse of the masses to take power in the world and a reactionary human impulse to revert to totalitarian and autocratic social organizations.

At the end of this series of revolts of the masses, it has become inescapably clear that democratic capitalism is the most effective, albeit imperfect, form of the present evolution of human society. (This should not lead certain free-market ideologues to the premature conclusion that democratic capitalism is the *final* destination of human society. It is imaginable that new conditions, either positive or negative, could alter the utility of this form of society irrevocably. If, for example, science were to make a dramatic advance in the theory of nuclear fusion or some other new principle of technology, the conditions of scarcity, supply, and demand could be so profoundly altered worldwide that the market system we now have would almost surely cease and be replaced with a new set of human social and economic principles. Conversely, if a sudden disaster or series of disasters, human-made or natural, would strike more than a local and containable place, some current

democratic market institutions might become untenable. This does not suggest that socialism or communism would return to the center of the world's ideological stage. These systems have now been exposed, beneath their rhetoric, to be always linked to totalitarianism, and they could not be resumed without imposing centralized and overreaching controls that are probably unacceptable in most developed societies in the twenty-first century.)

The vital notion of human freedom is the central value of this extraordinary phenomenon of human history. (While the human species has probably existed a million years or more, recorded history of what we call human civilization is less than ten thousand years old.) The impulse of human freedom, which is a concept today's liberals and conservatives can agree about more or less completely, is, it would appear, under an almost perpetual attack by an "anti-matter" totalitarian impulse that takes form on both the extreme left and the extreme right. The popular prophecies, abetted by George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and others, that technology would become the tool of a modern revival of dictatorship have not been fulfilled. To the contrary, technology has seemed to accelerate the enduring revolt of the masses, promoting longer life and better medical care, faster and more affordable transportation, and, finally, through computers and the Internet, a suddenly universal and low-cost method of communication—all of which work to defeat the totalitarian impulse.

The End of the Beginning

And now we find ourselves in one more large-scale conflict between fundamental forces in human society. The war against terrorism is thus the end of a beginning. New conditions, however, reveal a larger, long-term threshold of culture: the beginning of an end. I put forward here two specific examples, one narrow and the other broad, that reveal these new conditions and the changes they are bringing to American society.

The media (themselves relatively new phenomena), in one form or another have been measuring wars for more than a hundred years. Photography by Matthew Brady powerfully expressed the images of the U.S. Civil War to the public. The reporting of two world wars using motion pictures, and the introduction of television images during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, gave immediacy to the battlefield as it reached virtually every household. The short Persian Gulf War, with its live, eerie images, seemed almost to be a video game without the joystick. As we continue to conduct the war in Afghanistan, media measuring has seen further expansion, primarily through the newest technology of satellites and wireless communication.

The presence of the media in a war zone creates an inherent conflict. Sun Tzu in his classic *The Art of War* said that all warfare is based on deception. To deceive the enemy, for example, you cannot disclose where your soldiers are, where they are going, and when they will arrive (not to mention describing their numbers and what equipment

they have). In the past, governments of warring parties have more or less successfully limited the media to reporting after the fact, even if they were able to observe battles as they were happening.

Technology and commercialism seem to have overrun common sense and prudence as hordes of journalists now swarm military actions, hoisting white flags called “free speech” and “the public’s right to know” to justify their presence. Of course, these are well-established principles in the democratic, affluent West, and, taken at first glance, they are intimidating. At second glance, however, they are in direct conflict with other principles that are more important during the actual waging of war. As Sun Tzu suggested, and thousands of years of warfare prove, you cannot fight a war in total view of everyone. No secrecy, no victory. In fact, without secrecy, you are likely to lose.

Many in the media today cite abstract principles to justify their commercial and personal preoccupations. Reporters often put themselves in harm’s way and intrude on the military conduct of war. A BBC television interview precipitated the uprising of the prisoners in Kunduz. The uprising might have happened anyway, but the presence of the reporters in the prison compound enabled the insurgents to distract their guards. Almost a thousand persons eventually died as a result of this incident. Several journalists are now dead in Afghanistan. Daniel Pearl was kidnapped and murdered in neighboring Pakistan as a direct part of the conflict. Some might think they were

brave. Others might say they were reckless. The use of television images significantly provides an enemy easy access to intelligence. CNN and BBC broadcasts are easily available now in even the most primitive settings. The enemy in Afghanistan had some technological sophistication. A potential enemy in a location such as Iraq has many more communications capabilities. Military strategy today is complicated enough; should its strategists have to factor in civilian journalists intruding on the battlefield?

In Afghanistan, notwithstanding the examples of unfortunate and sometimes tragic incidents for American and international media, the Defense Department has been able to follow good sense and keep the media off the battlefield. As a *New York Times* reporter noted:

Defense officials would not let reporters accompany troops in the initial overseas military deployment after Sept. 11 and have since based pool reporters at a single United States operating base in Afghanistan. Reporters in search of action elsewhere have often had to go it alone on dangerous roads and under the protection of local gunmen for hire. Pentagon officials have generally defended the stringent policy, saying the often covert nature of the war has made sharing too much with news organizations a risky proposition for United States troops.

The media today are not unaware of their impact on events. James Fallows recently wrote in *Slate* that “journalists

should stop kidding themselves about their ability to remain detached from and objective about public life. They inescapably change the reality of whatever they are writing by whether and how they choose to write about it.”

From Matthew Brady to Afghanistan, Heisenberg goes to war.

Common Sense and Democratic Traditions

There is also the curious modern phenomenon that the media are almost entirely on one side. America's enemies in most recent conflicts have been ones that do not believe in democratic principles, including a free press and the public's right to know. They are delighted, of course, to manipulate the democratic media, and thereby democratic public opinion, free of charge by holding press conferences and rigging photo ops for propaganda purposes. The enemy is not unaware that a largely liberal media often accept their rigged tableaux and press statements at face value while reserving their skepticism and most blistering criticism for their own side.

The savage murder of Daniel Pearl has probably eliminated this tendency in the American press, but a large contingent of media from other nations continues to be hostile to American interests and actions. (It is one of the ironies of the present crisis that while the British government has been America's most loyal ally and friend, much of the British media continue to be mostly negative about American conduct in the war.)

Of course, the principles of free speech, a free press, and the public's right to know are vital to that "little experiment" of ours, also known as representative government and a free society. Going to war does not mean that we abolish these rights, nor that we censor or curtail at home free discussion of a war and how it is being waged. But an equal, and timeless, principle—one based on survival and common sense—implies that the media have a limited role *where* the war is taking place, and that the media have an obligation not to put the nation's soldiers in greater harm's way *when* a battle is being fought.

Fred Barnes, a prominent conservative critic of the liberal American media, has made a strong case in *The Weekly Standard* for the exemplary domestic reporting and analysis of the September 11 attacks and the subsequent military actions now taking place. But Barnes, in illustrating his point, cited Geraldo Rivera for his apparent reversal of form in leaving CNBC to go to Afghanistan for the Fox Network, explicitly stating that he had been transformed from a "dove" into a "hawk."

A few weeks after Barnes wrote this, Rivera was toting an automatic weapon as he went about getting his "stories," and, according to the *Baltimore Sun*, he was misrepresenting facts while he was broadcasting and reporting from the battlefield. He not only presumably got in the way of the military actions, he also seriously endangered his journalistic colleagues, who

operate, as journalists always have, as noncombatants.

The war in Afghanistan went well in spite of these added risks, but that was probably because of the overwhelming force on our side, and the validity of our military strategy. The president and his spokespersons, however, have consistently warned that the battle of Afghanistan is only an overture in a prolonged war against terrorism all over the world. In other locations, in other circumstances, our advantages might be diminished, the battles more prolonged, and the successes less rapid. Common sense *and* a persistent respect for our democratic traditions should inform a serious and ongoing discussion of how the media, doing their duty and fulfilling their role, should cover the dangerous struggle in which we are now so profoundly engaged.

The Naysayers

In the important discussion taking place in the aftermath of September 11, a narrow focus on the role of the media illuminates a larger discussion that so far has mostly not taken place. This larger discussion, and the second focus I am speaking of, is the role artists and the nation's arts culture take in the discussion of this national crisis.

The American media, by and large, have performed well in their domestic coverage of recent events. There has also been a vocal response from other groups in our society: labor unions, the travel industry, the legal community, police and firefighting organizations

across the country, and many others directly and indirectly affected, as indeed the whole country has been, by the sudden attack and our military response. Democrats and Democratic leaders, to their great credit, have demonstrated that patriotism is not a partisan issue. Although these responses have not been unanimous, the overwhelming majority of them have been supportive of President Bush, his administration, and our military forces.

Some groups and individuals, however, have been critical of the president since the first hours of the attack. They have opposed our military response. In many cases, they blamed America for what has happened and, if not defended the attackers, pleaded for “understanding” of why the attackers were “compelled” to attack. These critics, in fact, have an almost totally negative analysis of what has happened. Yet, in our country and under our Constitution, this is entirely possible and proper. The right to criticize even a widely held view is what distinguishes our country and our democracy from the societies of the past. It is why our “revolt of the masses” has succeeded beyond any other.

But these critics, these professional naysayers, these persons who see blame only here and not elsewhere, go one step further. They are willing to criticize all others; to find malign motives in everything our government and political leaders say and do; to find malice in our way of life, our values and principles; and to find evil in our friends and allies in the world. They want to use the rights of protest and

demonstration, and the privileges of our legal system, to try to force their minority view on an overwhelming majority—in short, they want all the advantages and rights—but *they* do not want to be criticized. They do not want to be labeled or described in any way other than by their own self-serving standards. Nor do they want to be held accountable to demonstrate their claims and allegations with facts. Since many of them occupy protected and privileged economic positions in American society, particularly in educational and cultural institutions, they do not want to risk their tenure, their public reputations, and their elevated positions, all given to them by the very society and system they so relentlessly attack.

After September 11, Americans, especially liberal Americans, began to take a second look at this self-loathing radical clique. In the *Wall Street Journal*, Andrew Sullivan observed:

Of course the initial response of left-wing intellectuals to Sept. 11 was one of jerking the collective knee. This was America's fault. From Susan Sontag to Michael Moore, from Noam Chomsky to Edward Said, there was no question that, however awful the attack on the World Trade Center, it was vital to keep attention fixed on the real culprit: the United States. . . . It may be, in fact, that one of the silver linings of these awful times is that the far left's bluff has been finally called. War focuses issues in ways peace cannot. Leftists would like to pretend that any criticism of their views raises the specter of domestic repression.

On a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio interview a few days after September 11, Sontag responded to the interviewer's question about U.S. prospects in the then-imminent war in Afghanistan by saying it was a task *capitalism* just could not handle.

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, both well-known figures in American journalism, reflected a common bias in the media when they complained recently in the *New York Times* that "less than 10 percent of the coverage evaluating administration policy offers significant dissent. Most contains no dissent at all." The presumption, of course, is that government policy automatically requires dissent, even if the dissent is wrong. This was further illustrated in a *Wall Street Journal* article in which the "significant dissent" of Arthur Schlesinger, Maureen Dowd, Nicholas von Hoffman, Charles Krauthammer, William Arkin (NBC News military analyst), expert panelists on *Larry King Live*, Katha Pollitt in *The Nation*, and Daniel Schorr on National Public Radio in the weeks after September 11 were shown to be so off-base that most of them freely recanted their comments as events proved them wrong.

In fact, regular public radio listeners who hear nightly hours-long programs from the BBC (Great Britain) and CBC (Canada) have heard hardly a positive word about American policy in months. When these permanent critics claim that journalistic and cultural dissent helped bring an end to the war in Vietnam, they fail to mention

that there were valid reasons and facts in that dissent when public opinion in the country turned. Before that, dissent was primarily far-left ideological criticism of the war that failed to interest most Americans.

Of more concern to Kovach and Rosenstiel, as well as all professional reporters who want journalism to do its job well, and to be respected (though not necessarily *liked*) by the public, should be the quality and accuracy of the media in wartime. Chris Bray concluded in *Reason* that "reporters who cover the military without understanding it don't just muff basic facts. They end up swinging in a wild arc between breathless adulation and naive condemnation."

Why, one might ask, should there be any commentary about the biased and obviously wrong views of ideological Cassandras who make no real impression on public opinion, and whose right to speak no one is challenging? The answer is that a great many of these individuals, until recently, have been a large part of the American literary, cultural, and media establishment. Their lectures, books, and opinions have been hailed (mostly by themselves) as the "leading" and "most important" ones of their generation. Their ideas often have dominated liberal arts curricula in the most prestigious American colleges and universities. Their elitist and ideological notions of "political correctness" have attempted to intimidate the media and American intellectual thought for decades, and they often have succeeded.

Counterrevolution

The good news is that, prior to September 11, a cultural counterrevolution had already begun in the artistic, academic, and intellectual communities of America. The attacks in New York and Washington have accelerated this counterrevolution profoundly, and for the same reasons why it might be concluded that journalists on the battlefield are so inappropriate. As critic Richard Taruskin recently wrote: “Art is not blameless. Art can inflict harm.”

American art and culture have been acting out a monumental misunderstanding for more than half a century. Early American art was heavily influenced by Europe (where most Americans of that time had come from). In the early years of the Republic, many artists, particularly painters and writers—among them Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, Mark Twain, and James Whistler—made pilgrimages to Europe. After the shattering experiences of World War I, a new generation of writers, painters, sculptors, and composers left America to become expatriates in Europe. Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Aaron Copland were only a few of the many who went abroad in this era. Their work sometimes reflected European tastes or styles, but almost always reflected European cultural and political views.

This was a cataclysmic moment for Europe. Recovering from the virtual destruction of a whole generation of its youth in the war, and hobbled by the myopic Treaty of Versailles, Europe became the political battleground for

the emerging totalitarian ideologies of fascism and communism, and the murderous struggle that was to unfold between them. Neither of these ideologies made much impact on the United States, where a centrist democratic capitalism was continuing to flower. But many of our artists, under the thrall of Europe, began to absorb and follow European models. Just as so many British, French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Czech, Polish, and Scandinavian artists and cultural leaders became either right-wing fascists or left-wing communists, the American expatriates living in their midst took up their causes, their attitudes, and their preoccupations.

We have collectively forgotten that many of Europe’s leading intellectuals, artists, and cultural figures—including Martin Heidegger, Gabriele D’Annunzio, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Richard Strauss (who became disillusioned with the Nazis at the end), Wyndham Lewis, Antonin Artaud, Knut Hamsun, and Werner Heisenberg—were profascist, antidemocratic, and often anti-Semitic in the period between the world wars (and before). The fascist governments in Germany, Italy, and Spain tolerated no other public view. With a communist government in the huge Soviet Union, tolerating only Marxist views, the relatively new democracies in the rest of Europe became culturally engulfed by a confrontation that was also, and more threateningly, economic and military. The Spanish civil war (1936–39) removed any illusion about this soon-to-be-tragic duel to the death, and American artists, both expatriates and those who had

remained in the United States, took up arms in what was originally perceived to be a romantic civilization-saving crusade.

Today, we read only about the Lincoln (communist) brigades because the Soviet Union (which first signed a treaty with Hitler) changed sides after Germany attacked it in 1941, became our ally, and ended up on the winning side. But there were American artists and writers who sympathized with the Axis powers (most notably Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, but also several others) in this period. In America, just beginning to recover from the Great Depression, the preoccupation was staying out of the imminent European conflict. The greatest American celebrity of that time, Charles Lindbergh, was openly pro-Nazi, isolationist, and perhaps anti-Semitic. After Pearl Harbor, most American fascists retreated or recanted. Lindbergh tried to join the war effort. Eliot renounced his earlier views. Only the demented Ezra Pound persisted, settling in fascist Italy and making broadcasts there during the war in which he denounced his countrymen while he extolled Hitler and Mussolini.

The large group of American artists and intellectuals who had become enamored with the left ignored the facts of the Soviet murder of intellectuals, artists, and Ukrainian farmers in the 1930s and, only briefly silenced by Stalin's short alliance with Hitler, increasingly came to dominate American cultural life. After World War II, and as the new Cold War expanded, their preoccupation with the left only grew. They created an almost sacred

myth for themselves, transforming the Joseph McCarthy era into ritual martyrdom. McCarthy, a throwback to earlier failed American fascist bullies, became the foil for creating new generations on the left, even though most leading Republicans and conservatives had rejected his smear tactics and denounced him. The American jingoism of the Spanish-American War—"Remember the Maine!"—was replaced with a new jingoism: "Remember McCarthyism!" (It's still playing in theaters and movie houses, where McCarthy-era tract stories are being newly rewritten and performed over and over again.)

The Beginning of the End

But something happened on the way out of the postwar era. Just as the American cultural left was running out of steam, the decolonization of Southeast Asia, simultaneously taking place with the decolonization of Africa and the Indian subcontinent, was transformed, by American presidential choice, into a Cold War military confrontation. To the so-called baby boom generation, especially the large new affluent and privileged class of baby boomers, the threat of being drafted and possibly killed in a distant country, Vietnam, that had not attacked us was an inexplicable intrusion.

With the aid of the cultural left, now already being mobilized to exploit the domestic desegregation movement, this intrusion became a moral evil. As these middle-class students avoided the draft through college deferments, it fell

mostly on poor and minority Americans to fight the war. In addition, American political and military strategists fundamentally misunderstood their enemy and how to fight the war, inevitably leading to the debacle that resulted.

Once again, the American cultural left had avoided confronting America's centrist national roots. (The various far right and far left movements that have briefly sprouted in the United States have never gained popular support.) Once again, many American artists and cultural leaders felt justified in employing their work, their art, their imaginations, and their educational and clarifying function in political propaganda. Once again, legitimate domestic issues such as women's rights and expanded civil rights were used to politicize American culture to the far left, even as the far left was itself disappearing from the world stage in the collapse of the Soviet Union. It should not surprise anyone that this cultural left establishment and the "mainstream" of its art should rapidly become ignored by the mass of American society.

Whereas Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and so many other classic American authors had been best-selling novelists in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, it is now rare for a serious American writer to become "popular." Poetry, which is widely read in most of the world, has deteriorated for many in the United States into a plaything for a tiny group of Americans who shout political slogans, promote political correctness, and flatter them-

selves with hyperbole—while most of the country ignores them.

Only forty years ago, Broadway and off-Broadway stages were filled with original, serious dramas. Today, they are filled with nostalgic musical re-creations of works that are often a hundred years old, and boring propaganda plays that are politically correct and relentlessly negative about American history and culture. (A recent *New York Times* entertainment section listing of upcoming theater productions shows that at least thirty of the forty-nine productions scheduled to open in the next six months are revivals or adaptations of previous works. Several are imports from Great Britain and Europe. Only a very few are new dramas by major American playwrights, two of them by Edward Albee, who is in his seventies.)

The other arts, less explicitly political, have been overwhelmed by abstractions and imitations. Art museums and orchestra halls are filled today, as are opera houses—but they are mostly filled by those who want to see lavish revivals of the classics of the past, not new work, which has become abstract and polemical, and alienated from contemporary American life. The key here is not that the far left cultural elites criticize American life and values—always a legitimate function—but that they *reject* the whole American model, much in the manner that European critics do. Is it any surprise, then, to observe the reaction of this artistic and cultural elite to the crisis following September 11? Is it any wonder that their critiques of America resemble the

critiques found in the far-left European press?

In a recent *New York Times* article on American music, Richard Taruskin wrote:

Announcing that it preferred “to err on the side of being sensitive,” the management of the Boston Symphony Orchestra recently canceled its scheduled performances of choruses from “The Death of Klinghoffer,” the notoriously controversial opera—masterminded by the director Peter Sellars, with a libretto by the poet Alice Goodman and a score by John Adams—that re-enacts and comments on the murder of an American Jew aboard the cruise ship Achille Lauro in the fall of 1985. For thus showing forbearance and discretion, the Boston Symphony has taken some pies in the face [from music critics]. If Sept. 11 could not jar some artists and critics out of their habit of romantically idealizing criminals, then nothing will. But isn’t it time for artists and critics to grow up with the rest of us now that the unthinkable has occurred?

After a long discussion of censorship issues in music, Taruskin concludes:

Censorship is always deplorable, but the exercise of forbearance can be noble. Not to be able to distinguish the noble from the deplorable is morally obtuse. In the wake of Sept. 11, we might want, finally, to get beyond sentimental complacency about art. Art is not blameless. Art can inflict harm.

In reviewing Susan Sontag’s most recent book in the *New York Times Book*

Review, William Deresiewicz notes that “her references to America are as superficial and dismissive as ever. She has the right to revile American culture, art and thought, but if she wants to be a true American intellectual, let alone the ‘leading’ one, she doesn’t have the right to ignore them. Her claim that ‘New York isn’t America’ only underscores her incomprehension of both place and self.”

The cultural far left perceives this crisis to be—as they did the voting rights/desegregation movement, the antiwar movement, the women’s rights movement, and the expanded civil rights movements in the 1960s through the 1990s—a galvanizing event to revive their crusade against democratic capitalism in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

By taking over the liberal arts curriculum in many American colleges and universities, they were able to keep their radical ideology alive and well. But one partial ally of the far left, the American liberal community, seems to have had enough. Loyal Americans, well-meaning and idealistic, these liberals have been shocked by the self-loathing and hypocritical reaction of the far left’s self-styled cultural elites. As Andrew Sullivan also pointed out:

But in a country with a First Amendment no suppression from government is likely, and in the citadels of the media and the academy, the far left is actually vastly overrepresented.

The real issue, as pointed out by Britain’s *Labour* prime minister, is that some on the left have expressed “a hatred of America that shames

those who feel it.” The left’s howls of anguish are therefore essentially phony—and they stem from a growing realization that this crisis has largely destroyed the credibility of the far left. . . . Many liberals are already listening and watching—and the tectonic plates of politics are shifting as they do.

In a *New York Times* article about artists responding to the September 11 attacks, Anne Midgette began:

On Sept. 11, catastrophe struck. By Sept. 19, one critic was asking why artists had not responded yet. “Art has lost its facility for rapid reaction or even considered response,” wrote Norman Lebrecht, a columnist for the *London Daily Telegraph*, who is known as a “provocateur.” “What Picasso achieved in ‘Guernica’ [Lebrecht continued] and Brecht in ‘Mother Courage’ is no longer acceptable, or perhaps available, to painters and playwrights of the postmodern age.” On the surface, this is a little silly. For an artist to process the events of Sept. 11, respond to them, and promulgate the resulting work on a stage large enough to attract Mr. Lebrecht’s notice, all within a space of eight days, would have been remarkable even with the speed of modern technology. The examples he cited, “Mother Courage” and “Guernica” . . . each took several months to complete. . . . But Mr. Lebrecht’s assumption that art has a responsibility to respond to crisis is common currency today.

What Midgette does not state explicitly, however, is that most of the

critics and “provocateurs” who demand “instant art” in response to crises are advocates of the point of view that art is “propaganda” and should be a weapon in the cultural war against American democratic capitalism. Midgette goes on to suggest that the very few great works of art that became icons in response to a historical crisis all rose above the specific details of the event to reveal a lucid insight into the human condition. *The Crucible* by American playwright Arthur Miller is another example. Miller was one of the few artists writing about the McCarthy era who, by employing the Salem witch trials as a symbol, captured the true depravity of Joe McCarthy without sinking into ideological cant.

The political far left has run out of gas for now. (Just as the political far right, with its attacks on liberals, immigrants, and minorities, has faded.) But they will not go away. They will not shut up. Nor should they. In fact, we should all pray that they continue to express their views and opinions, freely and unhindered. Free speech means exactly that. But the time when the cultural far left’s ludicrous assumptions and allegations will go unanswered, when its excesses and absurdities will be ignored or excused, when its attempts to kidnap American education and culture will be invisible—that time is over now.

It is the beginning of the end of all that. ■