

ernment revenues plunge, governors and mayors who today confidently boast that they can take care of welfare, health care and other social burdens without Washington will be fording the Potomac in search of a bailout.

If progressives are to gain in that event, they must tell their own story of how the economy ought to work for ordinary people, a story based on economic class, one that unites around

issues of jobs and incomes rather than separates on issues of race and gender. The story can be told in many ways. In this election, the public rejected the line the right has peddled for years about how to make our society work. The establishment/New Democrat agenda entices the pundit, but not the public. The progressive task is to provide a new story. This election could be chapter one. ■

TODAY, MEANING IS THE PRIME COMMODITY AND ATTENTION THE SCARCE RESOURCE.

Celebrity, Irony & You

THOMAS DE ZENGOTITA

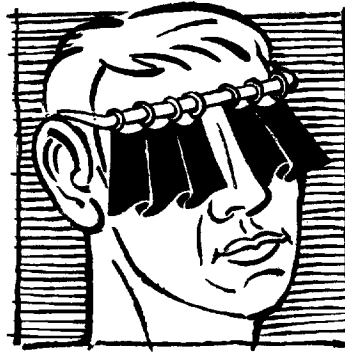
I spoke recently with a former student, a senior in college, feeling the pressure to “decide” what she “wants to do” (can one *decide* what one *wants*?). Her contemporaries seemed to fall into two camps: some, like her, apathetic and uncertain; others, having already decided, working twelve-hour days for the right internships and mentors, the right papers or portfolios, the right conferences or workshops. The overarching imperative? Commit, get busy, “whether it’s investment banking or Nicaraguan rainforests or whatever.” We noticed the “whatever,” and joked about it. She told me young Parisians have adopted this expression.

On to whys and wherefores and, inevitably, to the sixties and how it was different then, and I wondered if maybe there isn’t anything to be clearly *against* anymore, to which she retorted, “No, there’s a lot to be against; there’s racism, and AIDS, and antiabortion people, and ozone depletion, and...” (and here—for this is a young woman of fine intelligence and sensibility—she lapsed smiling into irony) “and whatever.”

So many choices, all on lists that invite a concluding “whatever.” Why? No doubt the cultural transformation, so much discussed under rubrics like Information Age, Third Wave, post-modernism, is responsible for this, as for everything else nowadays; but how, exactly? Another item:

Back in the mid-seventies, Merv Griffin introduced his late-night audience to Truman Capote, then keeping company with the likes of Jackie O., as follows: “Our next guest is not only one of America’s greatest living authors but a real celebrity in his own right.”

A direct line to O.J., we sense that, but what is this phenomenon of celebrity culture, the “total social fact,” as they used to say at *L’Année Sociologique*? In *The Image* (1962), Daniel Boorstin took a line that still dominates High Culture commentary, showing how advertising and P.R. fabricate “pseudo-events” in entertainment, commerce and politics. Popular culture manipulates the masses, while intellectuals rise above it, unmasking, criticizing,



revealing something like “the truth” in the “real issues.”

But isn’t that privileged enterprise outdated by the very postmodern values now prevailing among High Culture intellectuals? Wasn’t the rise of identity politics informed by power-over-truth accounts of meaning that construed intellectual work as a politics of culture, a fabrication and debunking of images, a “social construction of discourses”? Isn’t that activity, though more elaborate in its constructions and deconstructions, fundamentally similar to what goes on in popular culture? Isn’t every conference of academics or activists a little pseudo-event, dominated by the performances of celebrities on the dais, by the stars of High Culture firmaments? To understand the shaping of political attitudes since the sixties, we need an analysis that includes the analyzing class.

May I pitch a concept? I know how busy you are, so it won’t be as long as *Das Kapital*.

Once there were workers (rural and industrial) and capitalists and their retainers in the bureaucracies and professions. In a Postindustrial Info Age, meaning is the primary commodity, attention is the scarce resource and the class division that counts separates Spectators from Celebrities and their adjuncts in the culture industry. A new class rules over not just information but meaning. That is why actors and athletes can be authors and politicians, and ordinary people allow TV cameras to record their reactions to the slaughter of loved ones. Deep in the soul of every spectator is the sense that life has no significance without the light of celebrity upon it. The aim of the most primal of specifically human needs—to be acknowledged, to matter—has been appropriated by the celebrity class. Celebrities know one another, and spectators know them, but are themselves unknown. Celebrities say and do the only things we have in common. Celebrities coin the terms, gestures and attitudes through which spectators must define themselves. Spectators live derived lives.

In the small-scale communities in which human nature took shape, everyone was known, everyone was famous in the tribe. A recent *New Yorker* cartoon showed a little girl introducing a friend to her playmates, saying, “This is Robert Shapiro, except he’s not the real Robert Shapiro.”

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Consequently, this dialectic: on the one hand, a market-driven intrusion on the private lives of celebrities, an avalanche of gossip expressing the resentment of the meaningless class even as it concedes celebrity's value. On the other, spectators demand a share of their own attention, and the fragmenting media profit from providing it, especially on TV talk shows. Personal intimacies anchor public identities, as the anonymous line up to bare their souls in forums catering to the longing to matter. Will the homophobic killer return to *Jenny Jones* someday, enabled, through therapy, to "get in touch with himself" and express appropriate regret? He will be applauded, certainly, for the therapy industry provides the model for the talk-show hostess, just as it offers Everyperson an audience of one—at a price: a dramatic equivalent of the vanity press.

This fusion in popular culture of public and private realizes a central claim of High Culture postmodernism. Academics as otherwise dissimilar as Raymond Williams, Michel Foucault and Richard Sennett have construed the history of the modern self as a deepening of the private/public distinction across social and psychological experience. From the Protestant conscience to the artist's impressions and the psychoanalyst's interiors, in a nutshell. But does this postmodern development suggest a retrieval of the premodern, in the spiral manner outlined by Ong and McLuhan? Not really. Tribal settings, where public and private are not elaborately distinguished, are notorious for gossip—but not for irony, and the age of celebrity values irony above all.

In *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (1989), Richard Rorty imagined he had shed a liberal metaphysic (the modern) for a liberal ironism (the postmodern) at a level of culture defined by the likes of Mann and Derrida. Rorty believed the masses were far behind him in this, for he could not imagine "a culture whose public rhetoric is ironist...a culture which socialized its children in such a way as to make them constantly dubious about their own process of socialization." Apparently he never saw T-shirts marked BECAUSE I'M THE MOMMY, THAT'S WHY or bumper stickers reading AVENGE YOURSELF: LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO BE A BURDEN ON YOUR CHILDREN or watched *The Simpsons*, *Beavis and Butt-head*, *The Cosby Show*, *Married...With Children*, *My So-Called Life*, *Clarissa Explains It All*, *Roseanne*, Chevy Chase's *Vacation* movies—or the entire *oeuvre* of Nick at Nite retro television (archetypal spot: "How to Be Like Donna Reed"). In fact, the whole culture is drenched in ironism only a professor could miss, and

the examples listed show that a primary target is precisely the child viewer's process of socialization—how else could children of the sixties raise children?

A prime value among purveyors of celebrity (agents, producers, publishers, journalists) is this: It is not cool to have naïve spectator attitudes. Indifference to celebrity signals fulfillment of a dream—arrival at the center of events—but more deeply, it is expressive of the spectators' grudge. The satisfaction can be detected in the way the suits manipulate the talent at all levels of the meaning production process: the icy thrill in the critic's heart as she writes Madonna off in print. But they also live derived lives. At least, they did.

Settings have lately emerged in which producers and purveyors of fame have moved to claim some for themselves, especially in talk shows of the *Crossfire* type. Spectators learn from the example of these celebrity journalists, learn that the horse race is what matters to grown-ups—and today that means learning, above all, about "spin."

Listen again to the call-in voices on talk-radio and C-Span. Many of those people are *not* naïvely venting feelings and voicing opinions. They are playing the game, and not just because some interest group is working the phone bank. This is the key to the popularity of these new forums. The people are spinning, the circle is closed, story and event are one; the postmodern business of politics is simply to manage this hybrid entity as it makes its way across the screen of our attention. This is why a politics focused on traditional issues doesn't cut it, while a politics focused on process and scandal does: The latter focus, inherently ironic, makes insiders of us all.

Why do voters stay home? It is demeaning for insider-spectators to participate *as if they were taken in*, to act the part of the ordinary person that celebrity politicians address so unctuously from spotlit perches. Not voting is refusing to play a particular role in the political script of celebrity culture because that role is pathetically insignificant, not without its aggregate consequences but without public meaning in the anonymity of the deed. Alone in the booth you pull the lever, press the button—who cares? Much better to be in a focus group; at least then you have an impact.

But surely "issues" still matter—perhaps more so at this moment than at any time since L.B.J. or even F.D.R. Newt's Contract, made law, would transform the polity. So how is it with issues in the age of celebrity and irony? How do postmodern issues differ from modern ones?

It's the vision thing, the thing Bob Dole so manifestly lacked, as dramatized in his own compulsive use of "whatever." But in order to understand what that really means, progressives must face a fact: George Bush's original phrasing betrayed his own lack in terms that were easy to mock; quoting was enough. But quoters got away with implying, just by quoting, that, unlike Bush, they had authentic social vision—or at least understood what one was, the value of it. In fact, progressives have no such vision, none that is shared, none that links issues together reasonably, given some philosophy of human nature and analysis of history, none that implicates policies designed to advance that vision

Listen again to talk-radio: These are not naïve callers—the people are 'spinning,' the circle is closed, story and event are one.

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as a whole—nothing like classical liberalism, articulated and modified over centuries from Locke to Smith to Mill, or Marxism, spawning descendants in Bolshevism, anarcho-syndicalism and democratic socialism...how quaint it all sounds! Call issues under those modern visions “grounded issues.”

Today’s issues are, as Shelby Steele put it, “iconic.” That means, above all, they are severed from serious thought about the human condition. Take a position on an iconic issue—immigration, abortion, gay marriage, minimum wage, whatever (see?)—and you are doing three things *implicitly understood to be contingently related*:

- 1) dramatizing a value expressing your identity;
- 2) promoting the immediate material interest of the group you identify with;
- 3) promoting yourself.

But why did grounded issues evaporate in the age of celebrity and the culture of irony? Because the basic scarce resource is attention. We experience that scarcity most directly as time pressure.

One of the Lincoln-Douglas debates took seven hours, with one break. In 1960, uninterrupted speech by a presidential candidate on nightly news coverage averaged forty seconds; in 1992, 9.5 seconds. Explaining why he was resigning, Senator David Boren described “fourteen-hour days” in which there “was no time for reflection, no time to exchange ideas with fellow sena-

tors,” as when “the President...asked four senators from each party...to work on a civil rights compromise” and, even then, the “eight entered and left the meeting at different times” so that “no more than four were ever together for more than fifteen minutes.” Sound familiar?

This particular quality of rushed busy-ness expresses in action the absence of vision under which issues become iconic rather than grounded. Busy-ness is a way of hiding from a truth that must be faced if our politics is to be renewed in the postmodern age. The phenomenon has been glimpsed as “the end of ideology,” but that locution eludes what most needs to be faced—namely, that *no one really has any idea what’s going on anymore, let alone what to do about it*.

So there is no vision in popular political culture for the same reason that High Culture mavens have eschewed universalizing intellectual enterprises. Everyone realizes that some expert authority has said or will say just about anything, and, in accordance with the job description, in an authoritative way. The pervasive consequence of failures of the Great Society, the ideal of racial integration, socialism (whatever!), is simply this: Things didn’t happen the way they were supposed to, but celebrated authorities talk on, doing the real work of the Info Age, no matter what actually happens, serving only one imperative. The play’s the thing—and they’re the players. ■

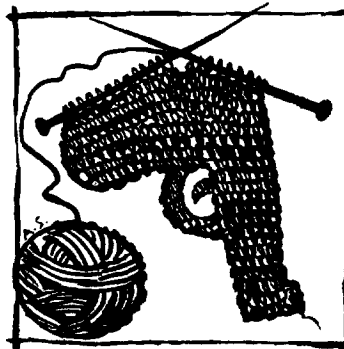
WE BADLY NEED AN ANTI-TERRORISM POLICY THAT FITS REALITY, NOT HYPED RHETORIC.

The Terrorism Trap

RICHARD J. BARNET

The war on terrorism was a linchpin of Bill Clinton’s foreign policy rhetoric during his re-election campaign, and at his first post-election press conference the President has put it high on his list of international responsibilities. In August at the Democratic convention the President thundered against so-called rogue states that were out to spread panic and destruction in the United States. A week later the Administration proclaimed U.S. missile attacks on Iraq to be a courageous blow against terrorism. At the United Nations General Assembly Clinton called upon the members to “isolate states that refuse to play by the rules we have all accepted for civilized behavior.” The Leader of the Free World is recasting himself as Leader of the Civilized World.

The rhetoric is seductive. In a chaotic world for which the United States has yet to articulate clear goals, other than opening up economies everywhere to private investment, protecting access to cheap resources and staying top dog in the next century, international terrorism serves as the successor myth to interna-



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tional Communism. The idea that the Soviet Union was waging a relentless worldwide struggle to destroy the “American way of life” was critical for enlisting public support for almost fifty years of cold war. As easy as it was in those days to label even anti-Communist reformers as Bolsheviks (Mossadegh in Iran, for example), designating a brutal Middle Eastern or African government a rogue state is even easier because the criteria are vague and they are capriciously applied. (One would think that a state that has armed, trained and supplied torturers in other countries and published manuals for assassins would qualify, but nowhere on the State Department’s list of rogue states has the United States ever appeared.) The Clinton Administration, boasting of its unique role as “sole remaining superpower,” seeks to legitimize its increasingly unilateral approach to foreign policy by proclaiming the United States the global avenger of terrorism.

The war on terrorism is being used not only to unite the country behind a confused foreign policy but also to polish the President’s image. Who dares speak of youthful draft-dodging when the leader of the civilized world is hurling missiles at rogues in Iraq? Who has the nerve to question why the United States maintains a military force far more powerful than that of

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