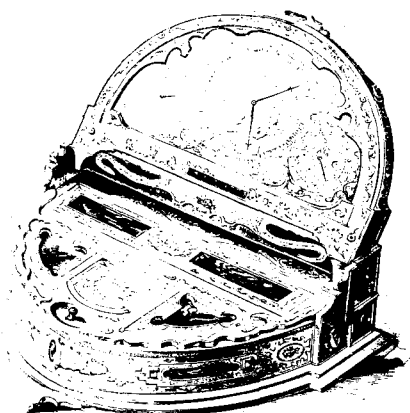


Brazil has the highest accident rate per capita in the world. In São Paulo, according to a Brazilian newscast, someone is run over by a car every 20 minutes. There are waiting lists for new fenders.

But even more alarming than the example of speed and recklessness provided by American movies and advertising is the general model of consumerism that we export. A certain car that in 1981 cost 433,000 cruzeiros now costs more than 3,700,000 cruzeiros. Consider the consequences when the example of American advertising stimulates consumer appetites in a country with this kind of inflation, a country in which drought-stricken people are dying of starvation, a country in which many people are homeless and live out of garbage cans. Moreover, the consumer appetite is linked with the impatience for technological advancement that is creating environmental disaster. As a Brazilian columnist noted, Brazilians suffer from an incurable ailment: the overevaluation of everything foreign and the correlative underevaluation of their own things. He went on to point out the folly of a country at Brazil's state of development, on the verge of bankruptcy, imitating America's immoderate brand of consumerism.



It is hard to believe that the skyrocketing crime rate in Brazil is not linked with the increasing appetites and expectations aroused by American-style advertising. Wherever I visited around the country, everyone had a personal rob-

bery story to tell. One woman who told me such a story on Tuesday was fatally shot on a bus on Thursday by a thief demanding her jewelry.

Veja, Brazil's answer to *Time*, recently published an interview with David Ogilvy, "the father of advertising," as they called him. When asked if it is advisable to expose people in underdeveloped countries to advertising for products most of them will not be able to buy, he answered, "I think that is something for philosophers and politicians to decide. I am just an advertising man who knows how to sell products." So there we are.

I encountered much more anti-American sentiment this visit. Perhaps it is partly a result of indebtedness; we seldom like people to whom we owe lots of money, particularly when the interest is gouging. Perhaps it is partly due to the increasing animosity throughout the world toward America's alleged inter-

ventionist foreign policy. I am afraid it is easy to think of a number of reasons why Brazilians should think less of us, many of those reasons having as much to do with our image in the international press as with genuine grievances. But I wonder if one reason is not the values we export, the values expressed or implied in the popular music, advertising, television programming, and movies we send their way. They clamor for such stuff, or at least the promoters among them do, but there may be an only partly conscious resentment born both from the low quality of those values and the Brazilian self-disgust for being so vulnerable to them. In any case, I return to the United States with a heightened critical awareness of the dangers inherent in the cheap, self-indulgent, profligate, and morally debilitating characteristics of American mass culture. And I am even more deeply puzzled as to why the best things in our culture seem unexportable. □

THE AMERICAN PROSCENIUM

At the Crossroads

Not long ago, Mr. Theodore White, connoisseur of presidential elections, crafted a well-reasoned, though intellectually prefabricated, article for the *New York Times Magazine*. His was a solid analysis of this country's shifting political geology: some major social forces are in the process of crystallizing into defined political powers, moved by ideas which would aspire to "sharpen" the notion of equality—the prime component of America's ethos. Blacks and women will soon constitute—according to Mr. White—powerful blocks of concentrated social and political efforts that will translate themselves into new electoral realities. Correctly, even astutely, Mr. White observed that these exertions will promote a new element in the American political geography, namely a potential to fight not only for group interests but for the entire system of group values.

This practice, Mr. White was keen enough to notice, may generate a fundamental conflict between the newly promoted, particular group values and the traditional, time-honored notions of equality of the kind which form the bedrock of the entire Western democratic civilization and whose triumph in America was essential to the origin of interest groups in the first place.

This was as far as Mr. White went in his exploration of the new social phenomena. What he failed to mine are the more profound and more disturbing implications of his findings. The fragmentation he describes is not only sociopolitical but, above all, moral and cultural in its nature; it may even have an eschatological dimension. What is ultimately at stake is our future as a nation. Modern nations are communities with a sense of common tradition, destiny, and system of existential and moral values. If a nation allows

separate, alternate, or autonomous systems of values to evolve within its body, it ceases to be a nation and becomes a society—an organism unable to survive in larger stretches of history. In the past, the formative substances of a nation derived from commonly shared perceptions of ethnic homogeneity, or religious beliefs, or acquisitive instincts nurtured by feelings of tribal superiority.

America, of course, in spite of all its inherent centrifugal forces, is still a nation—as she wished to be since her inception. She evolved the most modern norms of a commonwealth, that is, a functional body of laws, tradition, and conventions; she possesses the most advanced tabernacle and holy scroll which endow her with an exemplary nationhood envied by other polities. It is an ideological nation, conceived in the name of common faith and a vision of future that transcended the immediate and coalesced into a historical ideal. Up to now, when blacks and women sought an improvement of condition, everything was acceptable. Once they wish to superimpose their particular code of values over the hitherto generally accepted *nomos* and *ethos*, we are in a danger of becoming a society—at a time when statehoods without nationhoods can no longer survive on this planet. Once black and feminist tenets become more important than, or prevail over, American tenets in individual consciences, we all are lost. However, fortunately, reading Mr. White, one soon notices that he, in fact, deals in synthetic summaries. And once we realize that both among blacks and women there still exist a plentitude of thinking individuals, things do not look so gloomy. □

Little Ado About Something

The United States Information Agency—a government outfit that's appeared under various names and which is little known for either the originality of its ideas or for its bureau-

cratic lightness of touch—came up with another poky script for a new *School for Scandal*, D.C.-style. Allegedly, it concocted a proscription list of people who should not represent this country's amalgamated genius and savvy abroad because of their ideological untrustworthiness. The list, as it was furiously propelled by the liberal press into the national awareness, is, in fact, an exercise in the bizarre. What James Schlesinger, David Brinkley, and Stansfield Turner did to get on it, we will never understand. However, the mere fact that a Federal agency of conservative administration is reluctant to send out into the world Messrs. Ralph Nader, Allen Ginsberg, or Tom Wicker as spokesmen for America's sociopolitical concerns should not be surprising. Delegating Mr. Walter Cronkite, our telegenic sweetheart (the man who recently found Orwellian big brotherism in American technology but failed to notice it in the Soviet power structure), as a standard

bearer of American intellectual potential could be seen, in some European countries, as a parody—certainly not a field of creativity for our government's propaganda arm. The fact that Prof. J. K. Galbraith, Mrs. Coretta Scott King, and Ms. Betty Friedan are viewed with unwillingness by Reagan's USIA people should be put into proper perspective by a simple question: Were Prof. Milton Friedman, Phyllis Schlafly, Irving Kristol, Russell Kirk, James Burnham ever asked by the Kennedy, Johnson, and Carter information agencies to represent American mind and principles in foreign countries? (For that matter, Nixon's and Ford's agencies were not much better: some men on the very top have changed, but their operating staff culled all their wisdom from the *New York Times*-Ivy League-*Time*-CBS axis as ever before.) Certainly, American pluralism suffers, but it was not Reagan's people who began to gnaw and nibble at its living flesh. □

In the Mail

Center Journal (Winter, 1983) edited by Kerry J. Koller; Center for Christian Studies; Notre Dame, IN. On things Catholic, in every sense of the word.

Taiwan: Facing Mounting Threats by Martin L. Lasater; The Heritage Foundation; Washington, DC. Chances are, given the U.S. government's overtures to the People's Republic of China, officials in Taipei don't sleep well.

Rights and Regulation: Ethical, Political, and Economic Issues edited by Tibor R. Machan and M. Bruce Johnson; Pacific Institute for Public Policy Research; San Francisco, CA. Mr. Machan concludes: "In the last analysis, government regulation has no proper place within a just legal and political system. Human reason, not force (except in response to force) marks the genuine humanity of a system of law." Blueprint for Utopia?

Greek Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism edited by Erich Segal; Harper & Row; New York. Given his knowledge about true tragedy, we are even more astonished at Dr. Segal's *Love Story*.

A Need to Testify: Portraits of Lauro de Bosis, Ruth Draper, Gaetano Salvemini, Ignazio Silone by Iris Origo; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; San Diego. An aristocrat, an actress, an academic, and an artist versus Mussolini.

Bedbugs by Clive Sinclair; Allison & Busby/Shocken Books; New York. Infectious.

The McNeil Century: The Life and Times of an Island Prison by Paul W. Keve; Nelson-Hall; Chicago. Isn't it a bit much to designate the 20th century with the name of a prison in Puget Sound?

The Age of Charisma by Arthur Schweitzer; Nelson-Hall; Chicago. The point: it takes more than just a pretty smile and a firm handshake. But do charismatic people read books like this?