

Tocqueville Redivivus by Clyde Wilson

"America does not repel the past or what it has produced."

—Walt Whitman

John Lukacs: *Outgrowing Democracy: A History of the United States in the Twentieth Century*; Doubleday; Garden City, NY.

Were some power, either republican or princely, to entrust me with a classroom of promising youth who were to be educated to become the best possible historians of the future—well, I would find the works of John Lukacs indispensable. Why? Simply because I can discover in our time no better example of creative historical thinking and practice.

of apprehending the world and uniquely characteristic of the West. He has also practiced what he has preached. Each of his books—*A New History of the Cold War*; *The Passing of the Modern Age*; *The Last European War: 1939-1941*; *1945: The Year Zero*; *Philadelphia: Patricians and Philistines*, and the latest—has provided a working example of how to apply historical thinking to the understanding of some part of the awesome and overwhelming experience of our century.

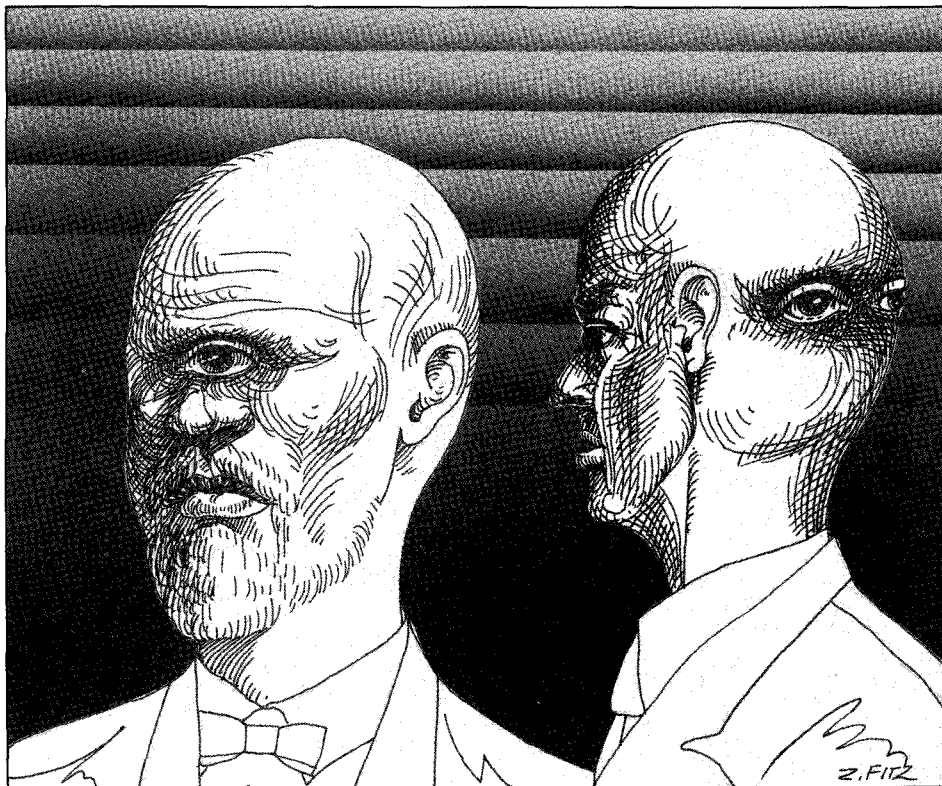
Many of our best historians, after their first few insights, have tended to

growing Democracy is no exception.

Basic to Lukacs' performance was his realization, early on, that the canons of historiography created in the 19th century were not fully applicable to the historical reconstruction and understanding of the 20th. History, by these canons, was to be written from a thorough and thoroughly detached examination of the documentary record. This was and is an eminently sound doctrine, but the secret of all good rules is in knowing when to apply them. (For instance, computers are marvelous aids for accounting and for analysis of empirical data, but to apply them more than incidentally to matters such as education or warfare merely reveals that the researcher does not know what he is doing. This, Lukacs would say, is a characteristically American error.)

The canons of historical research simply do not fit our century. Our century is the century of inflation (another of Lukacs' themes), including inflation of the documentary record. Like dollar bills, there are more and more documents worth less and less (not to mention the shift of large segments of communication and consciousness away from the written word to electronic and pictorial media). To write the history of the 20th century from documents alone is both impossible and irrelevant. Historical understanding must, rather, be an imaginative act—faithful to the factual record but embodying a process closer to that of creative literature than scientific investigation. Lukacs has dramatically demonstrated the utility of this approach successfully once more in *Outgrowing Democracy*, though the book has received less favorable attention than some of his other works.

The challenge that Lukacs has set himself in *Outgrowing Democracy* is Tocquevillian—the interpretation of the nature and status of American democracy as it has evolved through our century. For his purpose, the title is perhaps unfortunate, for it gives an unjustified authoritarian connotation to his analysis. What Lukacs' analysis seeks is not the abandonment but the maturing of American democracy. It is just such a work as Tocqueville himself would have written—could he have added to his knowledge of the Jacobin revolution a sad wisdom acquired by



One of Lukacs' themes has been the defense, at the same time innovative and reactionary, of history as a form of knowledge—distinct from other forms

Clyde Wilson is editor of *The Papers of John C. Calhoun* and professor of history at the University of South Carolina.

repeat themselves. (This, perhaps, is more a criticism of national standards of discourse and the degradation of American publishing than it is of historians.) By contrast, Lukacs has in each book set himself a new challenge. Purposes and themes recur, of course, but each book has been an exhibit in creative historical practice, and *Out-*

observing the Bolshevik, National Socialist, and sexual revolutions. *Outgrowing Democracy* is the work of a European, friendly to the aspirations of the American people, but distant enough and culturally conservative enough to observe the blemishes as well as the accomplishments of America. That is, the work examines us sympathetically, but with historical perspective and from outside rather than inside the accepted conventions of American thought.

It is just such an approach that finds Americans, and probably any people, most resistant. Large numbers of Americans will accept any totalist rejection of their society that can be invented, because that is compatible with their categories of thought. To be required to examine and expose the flaws in these categories of thought themselves is an uncomfortable and unwanted experience. But this kind of examination and exposure is just what historians should supply. We may argue forever about the merits of internationalist or anticommunist policies. That is for politicians and journalists. What the historian can and should give is the underlying pattern. For instance, Lukacs points out tellingly that in 1942 the Luce publications declared Lenin to be perhaps the greatest man of the century, but in 1953 they theologized that Communism *per se* was mortal sin. Lukacs' point is that both positions fell short of an intelligent assessment of reality and of a prudentially responsible patriotism, and that the flipflop is characteristic of the American way of going about things.

To tell Americans that their sentimental celebration of the family has been demonstrably accompanied by a massive breakdown of sound domestic relations; that their vast expenditures and pretensions in education and culture have been largely counterproductive; that their national feeling has often served ideology rather than patriotism, and that their generous internationalism has been merely a naive nationalism; that their prosperity has often been synonymous with rootlessness and declining standards and their equality with conformity; and that their religion has been more sociology than faith; or to point out the obvious truth that the American national char-

acter has been at least twice destabilized by massive immigration, and that each ethnic group has brought negative as well as positive additions to the melting pot—none of this is what we want to hear, whether we are radicals dedicated to a vision of endless tampering with the social fabric or “conservatives” who think the sufficient ends of life have been found in the marketplace and anticommunism, perhaps held together by a synthetic “civic religion.”

Many of Lukacs' familiar historical themes have been worked into *Outgrowing Democracy*: the immateriality of materialism and especially of economics, the destructive Wilsonian straitjacket of American thinking about the outside world, the passing of the bourgeois age, the falsity of “public opinion.” There are many new (at least to me) themes as well. These, I suspect, are intended to offer historical perspective on the emergent establishment of “conservatives” and “neo-conservatives” and are not apt to please its leaders. For instance: the Eisenhower era was not the halcyon time of American goodness, but a tragedy of missed opportunities and the seedbed of later disasters and degradations; bureaucratization of mind is as endemic in and characteristic of the American private sector as the public; our anticommunism has sometimes been as shortsighted as our international do-goodism—that is, that Americans have often exhibited nationalism rather than that older and better sentiment, patriotism.

My recapitulation badly slights the subtleties of Lukacs' account of American history in the 20th century, for nearly every page is freighted with subsidiary insights. Now and then, naturally, the American who is largely persuaded will yet be provoked to an objection. In picturing, correctly, the pernicious effects of the devolution of American Puritanism and the dilution of American Catholicism, for instance, Lukacs has left out of the picture the continuing widespread vitality (obvious in the South) of a healthy, non-Puritan Protestantism. And American literature, one can argue, despite the decline perceptively identified by Lukacs, has in some ways reflected the Western tradition better than has that of jaded Europe. True,

there is not much doubt about the American obsession with physical comfort—but I have never heard of a single other nation that has not shown the same tendency when it could be afforded. There might even be something to be said for American naiveté and “exceptionalism” (as long as it is not messianic), when one considers how regularly the wisdom and maturity of Europe has stumbled over the brink of disaster.

I happen to think Lukacs is correct on nearly every point. But even if he is not, he has fulfilled the historian's duty in the highest manner by expanding our ability to understand ourselves and our situation. He is the friend who loves us enough to be objective when we need objectivity. I began by indulging in the fantasy that I was charged with the education of the best of future historians. Allow me the teacher's ultimate fantasy: that I am charged with the education of future statesmen. The first thing would be to make sure that the promising youth learned to ride hard, shoot straight, and tell the truth. Then, I would set them to master the ancient and English classics (including the Bible) and the Founding Fathers. When that had been accomplished, it would be time for them to begin to understand their century, their nation, and the task demanded by their future—which Lukacs correctly formulates as the development of a mature American conservatism, aimed at the intelligent adaptation and preservation of the substance of the West. For this stage of the education of future statesmen, I can think of no better place to start than *Outgrowing Democracy*. ☺

REINVENTING THE WHEEL

a tribute to public education

“... Robert Hayden—who once said that ‘nothing human is foreign to me ...’”

Edward Hirsch in
The Nation,
December 21, 1985

King, Queen, Knave—Mind, Brain, and Body

by Thomas Fleming

"Where so'er I turn my view
All is strange, yet nothing new;
Endless labour all along,
Endless labour to be wrong."

—Samuel Johnson

Stephen R. L. Clark: *From Athens to Jerusalem: The Love of Wisdom and the Love of God*; Clarendon Press (OUP); Oxford.

Owen J. Flanagan Jr.: *The Science of the Mind*; Bradford Books/MIT Press; Cambridge, MA; \$12.50.

Ruth Garrett Millikan: *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories: New Foundations for Realism*; Bradford Books/MIT Press; Cambridge, MA.

Robert Ornstein and Richard F. Thompson: *The Amazing Brain*; Houghton Mifflin; Boston; \$16.95.

John Searle: *Minds, Brains, and Science: The 1984 Reith Lectures*; BBC; London, England.

Epicurus had an answer for everything. The universe consisted of nothing except atoms and void; the qualities of matter and of our sensory experience—hardness, color, heaviness, etc.—were determined completely by the size, shape, and motion of the atoms. The qualities of human life were largely a question of pleasure and pain. Right living consisted in maximizing the one and minimizing the other. The best way to do this, he thought, was to withdraw from the active life and to contemplate life's mysteries, as Epicurus did in his garden. A materialist philosophy was necessary for peace of mind, because it eliminated all the supernatural terrors of Hell. What common people called soul or mind, since it consisted of atoms, could not survive the dissolution of the body. After death, there was

nothing, therefore nothing to be afraid of. The philosophic man could face the universe with equanimity if he kept in mind the central doctrine of materialism: that every phenomenon had an explanation, a materialist explanation. Any given account might not be the right one, *but*, he insisted, there was a right one waiting to be discovered.

The fly in the Epicurean ointment was the problem of the will. How could a person *choose* to live rightly, to join the Master in the Garden, if his mental life were determined by the iron laws of physics? Epicurus' answer (which satisfied none but the Epicureans) would have gratified the heart of many a modern physicist: while the motion of atoms was generally "downward" (as Democritus had said), there was an unpredictable swerve in their descent. If the atoms of the mind are unpredictable, this must mean that they are free. Many moderns, especially Christians, have derived a similar comfort from Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics. While C.S. Lewis warned against pinning our hopes on the ultimate irrationality of the universe, most of us have not been so cautious. But how we get from the subatomic level to the level of ordinary existence is a problem that has seemed to bother few people.

It bothers the philosopher John Searle. Near the end of his 1984 Reith Lectures given originally on the BBC—a book that cannot be praised too highly for its lucidity and readability—Searle points out what should have been obvious all along:

Indeterminism at the level of particles in physics is really no support at all to any doctrine of the freedom of the will; because first, the statistical

indeterminacy at the level of particles does not show any indeterminacy at the level of objects that matter to us—human bodies, for example. And secondly, even if there is an element of indeterminacy in the behavior of physical particles—even if they are only statistically predictable—still, that by itself gives no scope for human freedom of the will; because it doesn't follow from the fact that particles are only statistically determined that the human mind can force the statistically determined particles to swerve from their paths.

What we know of physics, Searle argues, indicates the impossibility of free will; however, it is not physics but biology that inspires Searle's philosophy of brain/mind.

Such a philosophy has been a long time in coming. In *The Science of the Mind*, Owen J. Flanagan Jr. does a creditable job of tracing the rise of scientific psychology. His introductory chapter on Descartes raises (as Descartes did himself) most of the fundamental questions. Descartes' basic answer—that there is a split between mind and body—unfortunately poses the serious problem of how an immaterial mind can influence the physical body. Perhaps the worst effect of a radical mind/body dualism was that it freed whole centuries of philosophers from the need to consider the brain. Without too much exaggeration it can be said that the whole history of psychological speculation—from Locke, Hume, and Kant, all the way down to Freudians, Behaviorists, and cognitive psychologists—has been a flight from reality: the reality of the central nervous system.

One of the oddest features in this history has been the paradox of philosophers prating about nature without taking the trouble to examine it. While Flanagan accurately represents William James as the modern Socrates who took psychology down from the

Thomas Fleming is editor of
Chronicles.