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A MAGAZINE OF AMERICAN CULTURE

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## On 'Enemies of Society'

Arthur Eckstein has written a generous review of Peter Collier's and my book *Destructive Generation* (August 1989). In responding to the one substantive criticism he makes, it is my intention only to clarify our view of what is undoubtedly an interesting question: what is the nature of the post-Khrushchev (and now post-Gorbachev) left? Eckstein chides us for not identifying our target specifically as the *hard* left. He invokes such nontotalitarians as Irving Howe and Michael Harrington as evidence that "the left" is in reality a pretty big place."

Well, yes and no. If we are speaking of theories and manifestos, the left can indeed be spacious: proclamations in behalf of democratic principles are routinely to be found alongside paeans to totalitarian agendas and systems. But in terms of real political choices the radical terrain tends to be far more constricted.

During the last decade, for example, it has not been possible to oppose the latest Marxist "experiment" in Nicaragua and retain one's left-wing credentials. Robert Leiken and Ronald Radosh, two second-thoughters like ourselves, provide a case in point. Both regarded themselves as social democrats but were subjected to vicious denunciation by the left—as "spokesmen for Reagan" and "CIA agents"—when they condemned the Sandinistas. In effect, their opposition to totalitarians in Nicaragua caused them to be expelled from the ranks. Radosh was banned from writing about Nicaragua in the pages of *Dissent* by Irving Howe, personally. (Radosh still regards himself as a social democrat and is still an editor of *Dissent*, though effectively silenced. His fellow editors, with Howe's backing, have pressured him to resign.)

Or consider Eckstein's other exam-

ple, the late Michael Harrington. In the 60's, Harrington was an outspoken and principled critic of the New Left's alliances with Communists and other totalitarians. But because of his commitment to the anti-totalitarian principle, he was consigned to political irrelevance during the era of the great Movement upheavals. Following those upheavals, Harrington spent the last years of his life apologizing for the principled stand he took in the 60's, while embracing the same political alliances (with Communists and Third World totalitarians) he had once so roundly condemned. Harrington's organization—the Democratic Socialists of America—featured Sandinista foreign minister Miguel D'Escoto as a speaker at its last convention, while Harrington's cochair Barbara Ehrenreich wrote the following comment in the November 1988 issue of *Mother Jones*:

"But the only thing that really bothers me [about the 1988 presidential elections in the US] is the millions of people whose very lives may depend on the outcome of the elections—but who aren't allowed to vote at all. I'm thinking, of course, of the three million Nicaraguans, and the endangered residents of various U.S. enemy and client states scattered throughout the world. So no matter how cretinous the candidates are, no matter how insulting the campaign, I grit my teeth and vote the way the Nicaraguans, etc., would if they were given a say."

In short: domestically, America is a poor excuse for a democracy and there is no point in leftists taking its politics seriously; abroad, America is a world oppressor; the task of the left, therefore, is to provide a solidarity fifth column for America's totalitarian enemies and other "victims" of American imperialism. This is an 80's version of the same old 60's claptrap. Not a very big place at all.

—David Horowitz  
Los Angeles, CA

## On 'Rock and Roll Never Forgets'

Never did I think the day would arrive when I would feel compelled to come to the defense of the music of Irving Berlin and Cole Porter. I felt pricked by the darts flung at their genius by Thomas Fleming (Perspective, August 1989).

I suppose that first I should cast Berlin and Porter in their rightful roles as two of the greatest composers of popular music in the first half of the 20th century. They are also among the very few of their genre who, like the rock and roll entertainers, wrote both words and music. Cole Porter's "Let's Do It," which Mr. Fleming finds to be "a theme song for sophisticated hypocrisy," is a perfect example of his outstanding talent for creating original rhymes and turns of phrase. The latter half of this century, as Mr. Fleming points out, has been dominated by the product of the rock and rollers.

I have no argument with Mr. Fleming's determination that rock and roll started out as a reaction against the liberal status quo, turned into a vehicle for left-wing protest and so continues today. Mr. Fleming deplores the fact that business and commercialization have corrupted the spontaneous rock and roll of the 1950's. I would be remiss if I left unmentioned the effect of rock and roll on the music business. Compared to 40 years ago, sheet music sales have become insignificant, and many piano and organ manufacturers have closed down. Where are the old music stores of which every town of 15,000 had at least one? Gone the way of the Barton chocolate shops.

I recently watched a video of Rod Stewart singing a rock and roll number called "She Drives Me Crazy." The melody consists of one bar of three notes played over and over again. No, Mr. Fleming, if it is singable music you are claiming for rock and roll, we are reduced to discussing the emperor's new clothes.

Now for the lyrics. Several of our legislators' ladies in Washington have had some success recently in forcing the recording studios to affix warning labels on those numbers with the raunchiest words and descriptive phrases. Mr. Fleming, who considers Cole Porter and his colleagues hypocritical for writing of love instead of the sex act, states

that these new lyrics hark back to the Anglo-Celtic roots of American music, to the violence and authenticity of the old Anglo-Celtic Border ballads, to a confrontation of real life as it is led by passionate men and women. This may or may not be true, but I have read cleverer rhymes and descriptions on the walls of men's toilets both here and in the British Isles.

As a gratuitous aside, Mr. Fleming describes a well-known disc jockey as "arguably the worst influence on American popular taste since Irving Berlin." For my own part, I am unimpressed by the huge and continuing popularity of rock and roll. Unlike Mr. Fleming, though, I find my explanation in H.L. Mencken, whose life extended into the rock and roll era and who also wrote, "No one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American people."

—Charles A. Strange  
Milford, CT

### Mr. Fleming Replies:

Mr. Strange is only being naive in his refusal to understand what Cole Porter meant by "do it." Noel Coward, who used to perform the song in a particularly salacious manner, knew better. The point of comparison was not technical but moral, and the bisexual and dissolute Mr. Porter does not stand comparison with a family man (however wild he was when younger) like John Mellencamp. Porter was, and I do not deny it, a clever songwriter, and the big band era did produce more than a few memorable arrangers and performers whose technical standards were well above those of rock and roll. But comparing "Crazy About Her" (the Rod Stewart song Mr. Strange has confused with the Fine Young Cannibals' "She Drives Me Crazy") with Kern and Porter is as ridiculous as calling Irving Berlin a genius.

Nonetheless, the lyric writing of the best popular composers of the past 20 years is unarguably better than most of the lyrics of the previous 20 years. (I will grant you that the farther back one goes, the tougher the competition. The team of Jerry Kern and P.G. "Plum" Wodehouse could occasionally rival Gilbert and Sullivan.) The texts of Lou

Reed's "Sweet Jane," Bob Dylan's "Tangled Up in Blue," and Hank Williams, Jr.'s "I Got Rights" are decidedly literary in quality and explore areas of experience that were untouched by even the best tunesmiths of the 40's.

Finally, there is the question of technical proficiency in music and verse. What would Mr. Strange make of Leonard Bernstein's argument that rock music employs a broader variety of modes than has been available for some time, citing "Norwegian Wood" and "Paint It Black" among many examples. There is also the metrical versatility displayed even by so poor a composer as Elton John in "I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues," which a classical metrician would describe as an ionic/choriambic lyric in the vein of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

For the most part, rock music is disgusting and incompetent filth. But the same generalization is true of the television, film, novels, and verse of the 1980's. On the other hand, there are also, working here and there, a few good poets, novelists, filmmakers, television producers, and even rock musicians. What I find difficult to understand, as an aging member of the Baby Boom Generation, is the holier-than-thou posture sometimes assumed by the generation that elected Franklin Roosevelt, gave a large part of the world away to the Communists, and presided over the worst political-military-ethical disaster in our nation's history, the Vietnam War. Mine is not a generation I should choose to brag about, but why does the potter curse the clay?

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Two corrections in Jack Miles's September piece "The Economics and Politics of Book Reviewing" that did not reach us until after press time: the separate circulation of The New York Times Book Review is 75,000, not 100,000 as reported, and contrary to Mr. Miles's argument The New York Times did in fact review Pete Dexter's novel *Paris Trout* before—not after—it received the National Book Award in 1988.

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**THE PHENOMENON** of popular movements of protest succeeding and then being swallowed up by the Establishment is not a new story in American history, but the fate of "conservatism" in the last decade or so gives a remarkable case study. Not long ago, after ages of liberal dominance, conservatism seemed to be in the ascendancy both intellectually and at the grassroots level. Somewhere between the election of 1980 and now, a vast popular demand for reform was captured and emasculated by party politicians and literary spoilsmen, so that conservatism has ended up as nothing more than a vague rhetorical label for a very slightly modified form of Liberal Establishment.

These reflections are ignited by the sad fate of two erstwhile fighting conservatives, Jack Kemp and William Bennett. Both these gentlemen were youthful (as national politicians go), energetic, and articulate. Both have ended up in petty administrative posts in a "moderate" Republican admini-

stration — posts from which they cannot possibly draw any credit. In fact, I will bet a bound volume of, say, the last good year of *National Review* (1968) that they are politically dead.

That Kemp accepted the post of Secretary of HUD and Bennett that of "Drug Czar" speaks well for their honorable desire for public service. It speaks poorly indeed for their political judgment. In fact, only a very slight and healthy bit of paranoia would suggest that they have been deliberately tricked into corners where they could be finished off as rivals and critics of Bush. Can one detect the quick and dirty hands of Mr. Atwater and Mr. Baker at the bottom of this smooth and barely noticeable coup?

Maybe so or maybe not. We won't know for a long time, maybe never. The media don't notice intraparty dirty tricks (quite as common as the interparty ones) because they would take too much work to ferret out, and they are really only interested in dirty tricks against liberals. If neither Kemp nor Bennett can possibly emerge from the present posts except as weaker public figures than they were, then *cui bono*? The party operatives have disarmed youthful, energetic, articulate, and potentially troublesome figures, and we are left with the Vice-President, who is a handpicked man and who is, well, youthful. Not long ago there were half a dozen solid aspirants to the leadership of "conservatism" in the Republican Party. Now there are no conservatives at all, just Republicans.

It is a shame to see useful men destroyed by their own virtues. Both of them have accepted the major premises of the Liberal Establishment, which they have attacked only on marginal and instrumental questions. Both have been fairly popular with the media, which is a certain sign that they are not too serious a threat to the Establishment. But they had the virtue of standing for *something*.

Mr. Kemp seems an honorable man, no small accomplishment for someone who was a denizen of the House of Representatives for so long.

His arm-waving invocations of 19th-century egalitarian mythology disgust conservatives, but they energized the Republican electorate, or at least three percent of them. (When a Kemp-for-President rally was held in my very conservative area, no one showed up except some fraternity boys looking for free beer, and two very rustic libertarians from the Pee Dee Swamp.)

The appropriate thing for Mr. Kemp to do was to go back to New York (or even his native Southern California, where earnest superficiality would be an asset) and run for senator or governor. He would have lost but gained credit. There must be some strange defect in judgment in a free marketer who takes on a government boondoggle in the hopes of transforming it by the spirit of enterprise. (His assumption seems to be that the spirit of free enterprise can be created by government subsidy.) Surely every public figure in Washington on Kemp's level knew the HUD scandals had to break soon. Completely guiltless of wrongdoing, his name will hereafter be indelibly associated with a scandal from which he cannot possibly gain any credit, especially after his naive and premature defense of his predecessor.

(Since HUD exists totally and entirely for the purpose of bribing contractors, white collar "experts," local politicians, and the more clever and less scrupulous members of minority groups, how are we to distinguish the illegal graft that is supposed to have taken place from the legal graft that goes on as a matter of course?)

Mr. Bennett, for all his eloquence and wit, has fallen into the same trap. Does he or anyone really believe that the drug-taking portion of the American public can be educated into giving up their hobby with exhortations to "democratic values"? There are only two ways that drug-taking will be stopped: effective local enforcement against users, with swift, long, and certain prison terms; or the return of a very muscular form of Christianity to the hells of the streets. Neither of these things is going to happen. There is no way Mr. Bennett can win his war, and

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