

we live.

I suspect that the agrarian poet Wendell Berry puts together a book of poetry in much the same way that the biblical sower plants a field. Some seeds fall among the thistles, others by the side of the road. And even some that are planted end up inextricably bound with the chaff. But enough ripen to produce a harvest beyond our expectation or deserving.

Mark Royden Winchell's latest book, Reinventing the South: Versions of a Literary Region, was published by the University of Missouri Press last January.

The Point Left Unprotected

by Herbert Arthur Scott Trask

**The Trouble With Diversity:
How We Learned to Love Identity
and Ignore Inequality**

by Walter Benn Michaels
New York: Henry Holt; 256 pp., \$23.00

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This book will surely be widely denounced. Its merit, which is considerable, is suggested by the vast coalition who will want to deride it: the corporate elite, Republicans, Clinton Democrats, neoliberals, the politically correct lobby, libertarians, neocons. Any author who can provoke such an array of enemies must be onto something.

Walter Benn Michaels' argument can be summarized as follows: A vast gulf of inequality is growing between the richest Americans and everyone else; it is a serious problem; no one is doing anything about it; and the reason for this inaction is the current American obsession with race and the politics of identity, which has substituted a faux egalitarianism for the one that really matters and a phony threat (racism) for the real one (economic inequality).

Both sides, liberal and conservative, play this game. "What the right wants are culture wars instead of class wars, because as long as the wars are about identity instead of money, it doesn't matter who wins." Corporate America has embraced the diversity agenda with enthusiasm and cash: "What CEO doesn't find it easier to respect his employee's culture than to pay

them [sic] a decent wage?" Meanwhile, the left prefers fighting "racism" and other forms of "intolerance" instead of poverty, because it is easier and because so many leftists are beneficiaries of disparities in income.

The University of Illinois at Chicago, Michaels' employer, is proud of the diversity of its student body: The institution is ranked among the top ten in the country. Yet its classrooms are overcrowded, the "physical plant is deteriorating," and new appointments cannot be made. One result is that students may find themselves standing in class or sitting on the floor—but not to worry: Their ordeal is mitigated by the rainbow coalition represented in class. Professor Michaels thinks this preposterous.

Consider the ratio between the incomes of corporate executive officers and their employees. In 1982, it was 42 to 1; in 2004, it was 431 to 1. Or contrast Allison Schiefflin, who earns approximately \$1.2 million per year selling bonds at Morgan Stanley, with the average female Wal-Mart employee, who earns less than \$21,000 selling Chinese-made Tupperware. The latter would have to work 60 years to earn what Allison earns in a single year. Or, rather, what she used to make: Allison recently won a discrimination lawsuit against her company resulting in a \$300,000 raise and \$12 million in "damages." (Allison was earning less than her male counterparts, having been excluded from the male culture of bond-trading good times.) Female Wal-Mart employees also earn less than their male counterparts, but the gap is only \$1,100 per year. Michaels argues that it is ludicrous to claim that the two women are victims of sexism. In his view, Allison is no victim at all, and, if Wal-Mart women are underpaid, so are the men.

What of the vaunted mobility of American life? Michaels argues that it is largely a myth. In 1996, 64 percent of Americans under the age of 30 thought it likely that they would become rich, which they defined as making at least \$100,000 per year. Ten years later, the median *per capita* income remains much less than half of that, and the share of the population making the cut-off is only about seven percent. Michaels' conclusion is sardonic but just: "Young people in America have about as realistic an assessment of their economic situation as, say, the contestants on *American Idol* have of their singing ability." The single best predictor of one's net worth is neither race nor

intelligence, but the net worth of one's parents.

Michaels argues persuasively that a primary function of our educational system is to "convince rich people that they deserve their wealth"—in other words, to disguise the reality of plutocracy with the fantasy of meritocracy. Most people are aware of the very considerable economic advantages conferred by graduating from an elite university; hence, the importance of persuading everyone that those who get in do so on the basis of merit alone. Affirmative action accomplishes this by suggesting that the chief obstacle, which used to be racial discrimination, is now intelligence, allowing whites who attend these institutions to congratulate themselves on their worth and achievement. "The fact (and it is a fact) that it doesn't help to be white to get into Harvard replaces the much more fundamental fact that it does help to be rich and that it's virtually essential not to be poor."

Michaels asks important questions that no one else is asking. As racism continues to recede into the past, why does antiracism become ever stronger? Antiracism involves not only a strict policing of speech and behavior but a continued mobilization of citizens against a perceived threat. But why fight something that no longer threatens?

And, perhaps, never threatened at all. Michaels wants to know why there is a government-funded Holocaust Memorial Museum on the Mall in Washington, D.C., in a country in which the event itself never took place, and why Philip Roth's counterfactual history, *The Plot Against America*, which imagines an antisemitic reign of terror unleashed by President Lindbergh, was received so enthusiastically by critics. Why invent a racist crime that never happened?

Walter Michaels sees a country suffering from a collective form of schizophrenia. Science has supposedly demonstrated that race doesn't exist, yet the government continues to classify citizens according to their race, and universities continue to practice affirmative action. Americans pretend to be color blind, yet they are obsessed with race and determined to keep it at the center of their national experience. Why?

He thinks the answer is that the race issue serves the interest of the powerful. But it never occurs to Michaels that, had the Immigration Act of 1965 not been enacted, there would be much less diversity to

celebrate, just a European-American majority and an African-American minority—a situation as old as the republic itself. The politics of multiculturalism is impossible to imagine without the mass immigration that both created and sustains it. Is it mere accident that the surge of inequality since the 1980's has coincided with the tidal wave of Third World immigrants to this country? Or that the same thing happened in the late 19th century?

Tom Ashbrook's *On Point* (an NPR program) recently broadcast a four-part series about inequality, on which one of his guests was Robert Rubin, the former treasury secretary under Clinton. Rubin's opinions would not have surprised Murray Rothbard, who was well aware of how successful elites seek to control and neutralize the reform process. Rubin was not sure what we should do about the income divide (his answers were vague and evasive), but he was sure about what we should *not* do—interfere with “free trade” or curb immigration. He brought this up five times in one hour.

Readers of *Chronicles* will have some serious disagreements with the author, but that should not prevent our recognizing an important and valuable work. “Inequality,” Montesquieu warned, “will enter at the point not protected by the laws, and the republic will be lost.”

Herbert Arthur Scott Trask is the author of “Condy Raguette and the Northern Laissez-Faire, State-Rights Tradition,” soon to be submitted for publication, and is at work on his Civil War book, “Copperheads and Conservatives: The Northern Antiwar Movement, 1861-65.”

All Honorable Means

by Clark Stooksbury

Beating the Powers That Be
by Sean Scallon
Baltimore: Publish America;
203 pp., \$19.95



The political culture of the United States is cramped and stunted by the narrow range of acceptable viewpoints and the utterly banal, subliterate tone of our political campaigns—to compare American elections to the marketing of soap is an insult to the people

who sell soap. If, as Sean Scallon notes in *Beating the Powers That Be*, culture precedes politics, the state of American politics says nothing good about the state of American culture.

Beating the Powers That Be is, in part, a story of the constriction of the American political spectrum since World War II. Scallon describes three related political movements that began in the Upper Midwest in the first half of the 20th century: the Progressive Party in Wisconsin, the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota, and the Non-Partisan League in North Dakota. These organizations were representative of the far left in this country at a time when the left cared more for working people than about securing the civil rights of the transgendered.

Scallon begins his narrative with a remembrance of the late Sen. Paul Wellstone of Minnesota, the latest in a line of “Minnesota Mavericks” that include U.S. Rep. Charles Lindbergh, Sr., and Sen. Eugene McCarthy. Wellstone was a professor who wanted to make a difference. “He wanted to link academics with social activism the way professors did back during the Great Depression and the New Deal years of the 1930s . . .” Wellstone entered politics and served two full terms in the U.S. Senate before his untimely death in a plane crash in October 2002, only days after courageously voting against the then wildly popular Iraq-war resolution.

The tradition that Wellstone represented began in 1918, when the Farmer-Labor Party was founded. (It later merged with Minnesota's Democratic Party.) Unlike the fringe third parties we are used to today, Farmer-Labor was once powerful in Minnesota, winning elections for governor and senator. Scallon describes the factors that lay behind the alliance between farmers and laborers:

A farmer owns his land and pays taxes on it, no matter how small the plot. Holding onto that land

and making a profit from it to provide for [his family] and pass [it] on to [them] is his primary concern. . . . He can be radical if ownership of his land is at stake and be quite conservative in order to use that land as he . . . sees fit. . . . Before World War II a laborer didn't own much more than his or her labor power. A laborer can be conservative if that labor is perceived at stake . . . Or he . . . may turn radical if working conditions are so tough [that he feels he has] nothing left to lose.

Owing to the efforts of Floyd B. Olson and the suffering of the Great Depression, the Farmer-Labor Party dominated Minnesota in the 1930's, but it couldn't long survive the death in 1936 of then-governor Olson. Although the party still carries the name Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, Scallon pronounces it dead as of November 5, 2002.

The election results declare that Minnesota has officially become suburbia just like everywhere else—and the Democrats will adjust accordingly. There are far more soccer moms and office-park dads in the land of 10,000 lakes than there are farmers, factory workers and the Scandinavian socialists who once formed the DFL's backbone.

To Minnesota's east lies Wisconsin, a state whose political culture is described by Scallon as “clean, high-minded and infused with a civic tradition and ethos.” Here, Robert La Follette, Sr., disgusted with corruption in the state Republican Party, became a progressive reformer, advocating regulation of banks, railroads, and insurance companies. A very successful politician, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives before serving as governor and senator from Wis-

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