

Letter From Oxford

by Jason Jewell

Left Implosion



A debate I attended at the Oxford Literary Festival highlighted growing tensions between classical Enlightenment thought and postmodernism—tensions that threaten to cause a fissure on the British left.

Hosted each year by the *Sunday Times*, the festival affords authors the opportunity to discuss and tout their recently published works. This year's lineup included Richard Dawkins, John Julius Norwich, P.D. James, Philip Pullman, Niall Ferguson, and David Starkey, along with a host of lesser-known writers. Not surprisingly, given the state of British culture, the presentations were of varying quality, with talks on, for example, Kingsley Amis and W.H. Auden competing with lectures bearing such titles as "Filthy Shakespeare" and "The Dirty Bits—For Girls."

The festival's final day featured a debate between Nick Cohen and Christopher Hitchens. Cohen, a columnist for the *Observer* and *New Statesman*, has been making waves among British liberals since his book *What's Left? How Liberals Lost Their Way* was published in February. Americans are more familiar with Hitchens, who now lives in the United States and is a frequent contributor to *Slate* and many other publications. Since defecting from orthodox Marxism (though not from the left) some years ago, he has enjoyed a rather bizarre popularity among neoconservatives in America, thanks, in large part, to his support for George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq.

The room rapidly filled with earnest leftists, eager to hear the comments of two eminent British journalists affiliated with their movement. An ardent feminist near me on the front row gushed that "this will be the best event of the whole festival." She seemed a bit offended when I told her that the only reason I was present was that my first choice of session at that time slot, a panel discussion on the Tudors, had sold out.

Despite the billing, the Cohen/Hitchens exchange was not really a debate. Cohen commented on the mixed reception of his book, the thesis of which is that the left has betrayed its historic identity by embracing the cultural relativism of Michel Foucault and other postmodernist writers. In so doing, it has come to support radical Islam and other movements that deny everything it claims to hold dear, such as egalitarianism and secularism. To support this contention, Cohen cited, among other things, the pandering of Ken Livingstone, London's communist mayor, to the city's Islamic groups; statements by prominent British journalists; and the Communist Party's granting of concessions to Muslims at its conferences (e.g., separate facilities, segregated by sex) that it would never afford to any other group. Cohen repeatedly called cultural relativism "racist," accusing its advocates of holding that "liberation is good for white women in Britain, but not for brown women in Afghanistan."

Hitchens spent his time discussing his new book on Thomas Jefferson, whom he has reinterpreted to be, along with Thomas Paine, the wellspring of all American progressivism. Like others before him, Hitchens cherry-picks quotations from Jefferson and other Founding Fathers to demonstrate that the American project has never had anything to do with religion. According to Hitchens, America is great because she embodies secular Enlightenment values and spreads them around the world to such places as Iraq, and we have Jefferson to thank for this. In this framework, Jefferson's action against the Barbary Pirates is the model for all subsequent American intervention overseas—the rational, secular West confronting the superstitious and oppressive bad guys who hate it and want to destroy it. George W. Bush is simply following in Jefferson's footsteps. (Hitchens' referencing the current Iraq conflict was his only point of contact with Cohen's remarks.)

Cohen and Hitchens seemed essentially in agreement that the left has taken a wrong turn, but not all of the audience members appreciated their consensus. In fact, the Q&A session became fairly heated at times, particularly when the speakers criticized the tens of thousands of Brits (some of whom were in the room at that very moment) who had participat-

ed in the protest marches against the Iraq invasion in early 2003. Cohen argued that the marches had been coordinated from Cairo in meetings at which representatives of Saddam Hussein's government were present, and that the demonstrators had carried signs bearing slogans that were simply translations of Ba'ath Party propaganda. Hitchens made the stunning claim that, before the war began, no prominent opponent of the invasion had argued that Iraq possessed no weapons of mass destruction; this assertion was greeted with many cries of "Rub-bish!" from the crowd. One humorous exchange involved an audience member's attempt to associate Hitchens with "far-right Christians" who supported the Iraq invasion. Hitchens replied in kind, saying that his accuser's bedfellows in opposing the war were such unmentionables as Pat Buchanan.

Eventually, the discussion turned to Iran. Here again, Cohen decried the numerous figures on the British left who have made public statements in defense of a "fascist" regime. In perhaps the session's most ludicrous moment, Hitchens attempted retrospectively to psychoanalyze Michel Foucault, who embraced Ayatollah Khomeini in the early 1980's despite the latter's vigorous persecution of Foucault's "co-sexualists." Neither discussant took a stand on a hypothetical invasion of Iran.

Although the majority of the people in attendance seemed to appreciate the positions articulated by Cohen and Hitchens, it was evident that many were very dissatisfied. Afterward, outside the lecture room and even in the streets surrounding Christ Church, I overheard heated discussions. The gist of these conversations was that the identity and future of the British left are at stake over the issues raised during the debate. Cohen had pointed out that, whereas the left had a more or less unified program in the 20th century (e.g., the nationalization of industry), the left of 2007 has little to hold it together save antipathy toward the U.S. government and the American "Religious Right." Now a split seems possible between, on the one hand, those who hold to egalitarianism as a universal ideal and, on the other, those who are willing to put up with the beliefs and practices of almost any group (such as Muslims) who

will help them tear down whatever is left of Western civilization.

A pox on both their houses. If the left in Britain does tear itself apart, however, it should be at least mildly amusing to watch.

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Letter From the Upper Midwest

by Sean Scallon

Diversity Through Sport



Because spectator sports play a dominant role in American culture, many have tried to use them to change our society. Such social engineering happens in America's inner cities, which would come as no surprise to most people. But it also happens in such unlikely places as the Arrowhead Region of northeastern Minnesota and, specifically, in the Mesabi Iron Range that lies within it.

Minnesota has an extensive junior-college system, and several schools are located within the Arrowhead Region, including Hibbing Community College in Hibbing; Lake Superior in Duluth; Itasca in Grand Rapids; Mesabi in Virginia; Vermillion in Ely; and Rainy River in International Falls. These schools have athletic programs (with the exception of Lake Superior Community College), which include football.

Hibbing's football program is over 80 years old. Yet these days, there appears to be a shortage of football players in the frozen tundra. Last season, a good many of the Hibbing Cardinals were African-American, recruited from high schools in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. Why did they leave their homes in the sunny South for the icy cold of Minnesota? These students will say that they just want to play football and will go wherever and to whomever will take them, even if they have never seen snow before or morning temperatures of 32 below. And Southern schools can afford to be choosy when it comes to finding players, as there is a surplus of football talent in the South. (One might see a

similarity here between football recruits and our urgent need for industrious illegal immigrants who do the jobs we are unwilling to do.)

Like all community colleges, Hibbing tries to draw in students closer to home. In the not-so-distant past, football players at Hibbing were locals. But economic downturns in the region's mining industry led to depopulation, which resulted in fewer students enrolling in the local junior colleges and even fewer signing up for football. With rosters to fill and dorms for student-athletes already in place, coaches in the Iron Range began looking South. Why not recruit players from across Minnesota—especially from the inner cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, where kids would have jumped at the chance to play college football? Well, for one thing, Southern schools, in general, have spring football. In Minnesota, many of the school districts don't have the funding for junior-high teams, and local Pop Warner leagues aren't as popular as hockey, wrestling, baseball, and even soccer. In the Gopher State, a kid who is good at football is not going to play at the junior-college level.

So, to get an edge on their opponents, Minnesota's junior-college coaches and athletic directors go out of state for players, which takes them South, where good African-American players are in abundance. Besides, who wouldn't guess that black athletes from the South would be better at football than Minnesota white boys, especially local jocks from the Mesabi Range? Coaches believe in the stereotype just like most everybody else. On Hibbing's 2006 squad, out of 63 players, 3 were Minnesotans; 22 were Floridians.

Of course, Iron Range recruiters don't exactly get the pick of the litter athletically, let alone academically. After all, if these student athletes were the best, they could afford to stay closer to home. Many of these transplanted players don't even remain after their first season. A combination of academic deficiency and homesickness sends many of them back South, saddled with student loans. "They're just using us," one Rainy River player admitted to a KSTP-TV (St. Paul) investigative reporter. The Hibbing Cardinals' 2006 squad finished with a 4-5 record. The team's cumulative GPA was 1.8. All but five of the players were freshmen.

In late October 2006, three Hibbing players and a former player were charged with the gang-rape of an 18-year-old female high-school senior. Two of the

HCC players were from Miami, and the third was from South Carolina. A string of similar incidents on the Range involving the local whites and African-American athletes goes back to the early 1990's. "It's a tension issue, and it has been for a lot of years," Bill Hanna, editor of the *Mesabi Daily News* said in an article about the incident written for the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*. "And then also, there is a certain racial component that's included." To allay local concerns about the potential for more violence, and because of poor academic performance, Hibbing administrators decided that the prudent thing to do was to shut the whole program down. This also prompted the governing board that runs Arrowhead's junior colleges to admonish football coaches to review their programs' academic and admission standards and to recruit more players from Minnesota and the Upper Midwest.

Not everyone was in favor of shutting down the program. At a community forum, one player put the question in stark terms. "I beg you, please don't take this away from us. Where I come from, either you sell drugs, or you do something academic-wise or athletics-wise to stay out of trouble. We might go home and do worse." Others could only come up with one word to justify retaining the football program: *diversity*. After all, supporters of the Hibbing football program had gloried in the diversity that their school's recruiting efforts had brought. (For some, having Poles, Italians, Serbs, Croats, Finns, Irish, Swedes, and Indians on the same roster isn't diverse enough; besides, all whites look alike nowadays.)

But what price diversity? Is it worth importing gang rape and general racial tension? Is diversity worth promoting poor academic performance and lowering academic standards? Is diversity worth taking kids far away from their homes and their families, leaving them with debt and broken promises of gridiron glory?

For Hibbing Community College, diversity proved too expensive.

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