

## Beyond the Laboratory: Scientists as Political Activists in 1930's America

By Peter J. Kuznick  
University of Chicago Press  
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By Benjamin Harris

**T**HIRTY YEARS AGO, TO BE BOTH A scientist and a political activist was considered a form of multiple personality. Today, the ranks of activist scientists include such public figures as Carl Sagan, Ruth Hubbard, Stephen J. Gould and Helen Caldicott, as well as scores of members of Physicians for Social Responsibility, the Union of Concerned Scientists and Science for the People.

If asked to identify the origin of the modern role of scientist-activist, most would probably cite the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This demonstration of the science of unlimited destruction made physicists confront the inherently political nature of their work. And it was the debate of the atomic physicists that helped inaugurate similar discussions of science and social responsibility in other natural sciences, social sciences and medicine.

What is little known today is the existence of an earlier era of political organizing and militancy by scientists during the '30s and early '40s. It was in this period that scientists in the U.S. first developed a national movement to address political issues such as war, fascism, racism

# Scientists try to neutralize volatile forces of reaction

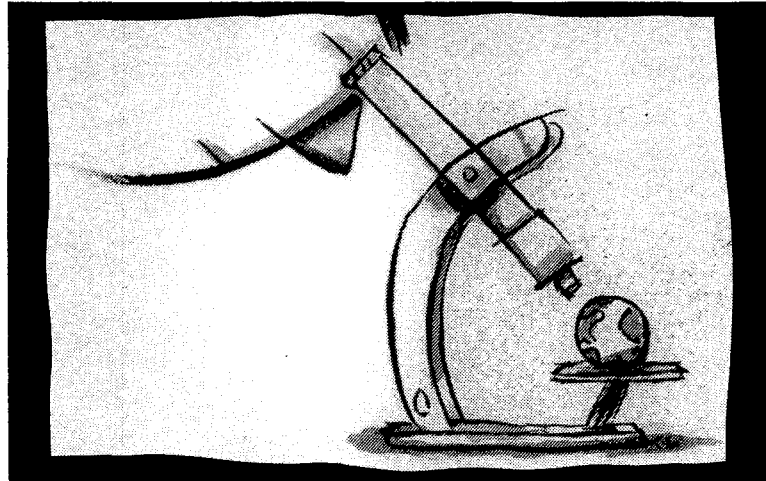
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and radical political change. This movement of liberal and radical scientists, neglected in histories of the left and of modern science, is described in fascinating detail by a young cultural historian at American University, Peter Kuznick, in his book *Beyond the Laboratory*.

In the early 1900s, Kuznick explains, most scientists in the U.S. were anti-collectivist in their professional outlook and politically conservative. Because they contributed to automation and often sided with management, they were also distrusted by the labor movement. Faced with the Depression, however, scientists soon radicalized both as individuals and as members of professional associations.

**Philosophical outrage:** As individuals, scientists such as the physiologist Walter Cannon believed in the rational organization of laboratory work and in the orderliness of the natural systems they studied. Confronted by the irrationality of laissez-faire capitalism, they felt a philosophical outrage

that spurred many to public action. Most prominent in this movement was the American Committee for Democracy and Intellectual Freedom (ACDIF), a Popular Front-style alliance of socialist, communist and liberal university professors, first organized in New York to rally academics in support of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. Led by anthropologist Franz Boas, the ACDIF soon became a national organization carrying out anti-fascist and anti-racist publicity campaigns. At the New York World's Fair of 1939, for example, Boas and his colleagues staged a series of public relations events, including the opening of a traveling exhibit of racist and non-racist school textbooks and a forum explaining the scientific validity of liberal democracy.



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A second organization of scientist-activists in the late '30s was the American Association of Scientific Workers (AASW), an implicitly anti-capitalist offshoot of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Modeled after a similar organization in Britain, the AASW pursued the same anti-fascist goals as Boas' ACDIF but was organized on a more local level.

Although this movement to unite science and society was highly visible and broadly supported by leftists and prominent scientists, its organized forms did not survive the end of the Popular Front, the rise of anti-communism and the U.S. entry into the war. Yet the '30s science and society movement confronted a host of issues that were both theoretical and practical, including such questions as how to politically organize professionals, how to relate to similar movements abroad and whether the socialists and communists should consider themselves "scientific."

*Beyond the Laboratory* contains both organizational history and a selective review of the public image of science from the '20s through the '40s. Its strength is its author's familiarity with his material (often the unpublished papers of participants) and his smooth, non-technical writing style.

The result is an account full of minor characters and organizational detail (perhaps too full for some). And those familiar with this topic might fault the author for his neglect of the theoretical and organizational perspectives of the Communist and Socialist Parties, and of other left groups during this period. Overall, however, this is an essential guide to an exciting era for scientist-activists, one in which the phrase "political science" could be taken literally.

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## Politics of Letters

By Richard Ohmann  
Wesleyan University Press  
321 pp., \$14.95

By William E. Cain

**R**ICHARD OHMANN'S *POLITICS OF Letters*, first published in 1987 and recently reissued in paperback, has not received the attention it deserves. It is a serious, lucid examination of the dehumanizing impact of monopoly capitalism on culture.

Ohmann divides *Politics of Letters* into four main sections. In the first he explores "the profession of humanist" in American colleges and universities, and extends the skeptical stocktaking of academic practices and managerial techniques that he registered in his pioneering earlier book, *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession*. In the second section Ohmann surveys the teaching of American literature, with special emphasis on the formation of the literary canon and the financial power that shapes both the best-seller lists and the selection of books that "count" as high culture.

Section three concentrates on the origins and development of a national "mass culture," and includes historically astute accounts of advertising and mass circulation maga-

# Alma matters: examining politics of the old school

zines. In the final section Ohmann scrutinizes the widespread belief that students today lack basic knowledge and queries the frequently deplored "loss of standards" in contemporary American education.

Ohmann is suspicious of the worried talk about a "crisis" in education, and is especially dubious about the emphasis that many horrified pundits have placed on declining test scores. Some test scores have declined, but, Ohmann argues, much of the evidence is inconclusive and contradictory. A slight test score decline does not prove that young people have suddenly become shockingly ignorant. The real issue for debate and discussion should be, instead, the highly contested meaning of "basic" or "core" knowledge in a multicultural nation, and this is an issue that the panicky interpretation of test scores crudely distorts.

In Ohmann's view, the educational and cultural elite have sounded alarms about a "crisis" largely because they are troubled by the differences in student behavior and the breakdown of consensus that have accompanied more "open" enrollment patterns. Increasing numbers of women and minorities have entered the academic mainstream—and they have aggressively challenged the ideas, values and texts that white male teachers, critics and administrators have promoted for decades.

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"Each time the American educational system has expanded," Ohmann writes, "admitting previously excluded groups to higher levels, there has been a similar chorus of voices lamenting the decline in standards and foreseeing the end of Western civilization." And each time, too, the proposed remedy is tougher discipline, tighter control and greater regimentation, as those in authority call for reforms that make education "more mechanical, less humanistic, more classbound and less critical" of entrenched interests.

**Descriptive, not prescriptive:** Ohmann's analyses of literary studies, television and politics and bestseller lists also highlight the pressures of corporate power and

the anti-humanistic attitudes that purportedly "humanistic" intellectuals foster. Ohmann studies, for example, the amazing success and stature of J.D. Salinger's novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, which has sold millions of copies since its publication in 1951 and continues to be read avidly by high school students across America. Ohmann maintains that the exorbitant appeal of the novel lies in its melancholy unveiling of "phoniness." It tellingly evokes the disturbed and often unfocused feelings that many teenagers share about personal maladjustment and the shallowness of society's values.

A striking feature of *The Catcher in the Rye* is, however, that it avoids and conceals the "economic and social arrangements" of capitalist America that produce such rampant phoniness. Neither Salinger nor his

American society provides ample opportunities for leftist critiques.

central character, Holden Caulfield, envisions any possibility for political change: life consists simply of a slow, steady march toward an eventual, pained acceptance of bourgeois

identity. The novel thus reveals the emotional damage that capitalism inflicts even as it intimates that no alternative to it could ever exist.

Ohmann suggests alternatives himself, but these are surprisingly sketchy. A number of his chapters close with weak injunctions to move beyond bourgeois reality, create a new consciousness and strive for liberation.

American society supplies almost unbelievably ample opportunities for leftist critique, and Ohmann seizes adroitly upon many of them. But capitalism seems always to enjoy the last laugh, because the weight and intricacy of its oppressive structures ensure that better pathways remain extremely hard to describe persuasively.

The rigor and precision of Ohmann's critical analyses expose the thinness of his prescriptive ideas, which are too breezily presented to seem convincing. Readers are hence left with the impression that dissent is necessary but fairly futile. *Politics of Letters* is clearly a valuable book, but at critical moments in it, Ohmann inadvertently reinforces the system that he stringently examines and opposes, by making the possibility for significant change seem distant, even hopeless.

William E. Cain is a frequent contributor to *In These Times*.



By Joel Bleifuss

# Rushdie and the war of the words

IT IS SAID THAT THE BOOMING SALES OF *The Satanic Verses* are not due to the fact that the reading public has discovered that Salman Rushdie's latest novel, like his others—*Grimus* (1975), *Midnight's Children* (1981), *Shame* (1983)—is fun to read.

In all four novels Rushdie makes use of a delightful mixture of macabre slapstick, cultural conundrums and what-can-we-conjure-up-next narrative to examine issues such as: corrupted power vs. popular will, slavish adherence to a dominant culture—in various incarnations, and the problem of finding transcendent experience in the absence of faith. For Rushdie, his art provides that transcendence. As he wrote in the *New York Review of Books*, "Unable to accept the unarguable absolutes of religion, I try to fill up the hole with literature." It is on this last point that Rushdie has now run into trouble.

Rushdie writes to provoke, regularly contributing to *The Guardian* and the *Observer* of London as an intellectual agitator of the left. In 1983, despairing the absence of outrage at the re-election of Margaret Thatcher, he wrote, "Democracy can only thrive in a turbulent climate. Where there is acquiescence, cynicism, passivity, resignation, 'inaction,' the road is clear for those who would rob us of our rights."

**Against stereotypes:** It's a sure bet that before the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie was looking forward to the "turbulence" his new book would stir up. But it is equally certain that this one-time student of Islamic history did not intend to offend the Moslem faithful to the extent he has. "Anybody who reads any of my books knows how powerful the influence of Islam has been," he recently told London critic Tariq Ali. "The fact that I would not call myself a religious person doesn't mean that I reject the importance of Islam in my life."

Nor is it likely that Rushdie is pleased with the way some commentators in the West—armed with little knowledge and asserting that Islam is a dangerous thing—have reacted to the fundamentalists' lunacy. Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, Rushdie explained, "I tried to write against stereotypes; the zealot protests serve to confirm in the Western mind all the worst stereotypes of the Moslem world."

Not that all Western minds needed such encouragement. In 1987 on a visit to the States, Rushdie was told by a New York intellectual, "Now that I like you, I can tell you I thought I wouldn't. I didn't think I could like a Moslem."

Conversely, this non-secular Moslem would lack patience for those pundits who, drunk with the ethic of cultural relativism, write that one has to understand Islam and be sensitive to the rage *The Satanic Verses* has inspired. Though he is sympathetic to the origins of the Iranian

revolution, Rushdie "abhors" Khomeini's theocracy.

Such ambiguities do not make easy news copy. Wire service reports have described Rushdie as "arrogant." One misinformed Eastern Airlines picket explained last week

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in Chicago, "Frank Lorenzo is the Salman Rushdie of organized labor." Unfortunately, the uproar surrounding *The Satanic Verses* has led to a misunderstanding of who this writer is and what he is about.

**Epic anti-heroes:** In 1975, Rushdie, a writer of ad copy, published his first novel, *Grimus*. It is the story of Flapping Eagle, like all Rushdie's leading men, an epic character with anti-hero tendencies. A native of what was once the U.S. but is now known as Amerindia, Flapping Eagle sets off, via interdimensional travel, to an earthly island inhabited by both an invisible alien, who plays around at conceptualizing interdimensional realities, and a community of immortal earthlings, who maintain their sanity through obsessive-compulsive behavior.

Given this plot it is not surprising that most critics panned the novel. *Grimus*, perhaps more than Rushdie's other books, is not readily accessible to readers used to pre-

dictable narrative styles or traditional literary conventions.

His writing is not "dense," as national wire services have said. It is just that the reader has to be open to the interweaving of time and place, reality and illusion. Few things are constant in Rushdie's world. For Rushdie characters even the physical body, that last frontier of individual control, can from one page to the next undergo radical metamorphosis.

Ursula LeGuin, the queen of the fantasy-as-commentary genre, was among the first to recognize Rushdie's talent. Fourteen years ago she praised *Grimus* as a "fireworks of a book: beautiful, funny and endlessly surprising."

In his later books Rushdie merged his fantastic tendencies with the temporal world, and his subsequent writing was heralded by the literary establishment.

Take for example Rushdie's treatment of *The Satanic Verses* character Saladin Chamcha. An Indian expatriate, Saladin molds himself into the perfect English gentleman. The problem is that he can succeed in British show business only as a disembodied voice—his skin is the wrong color.

Saladin's big break comes when he gets the part as a space creature on "The Aliens Show," a children's TV program about a group of extra-

terrestrials. The most terrifying of this regular cast was Ridley, an alien "who looked like a Francis Bacon painting of a mouthful of teeth waving at the end of a sightless pod, and who had an obsession with the actress Sigourney Weaver." Rushdie writes that "as 'The Aliens Show' got bigger it began to attract political criticism. Conservatives attacked it for being too frightening, too sexually explicit (Ridley could become positively erect when he thought too hard about Miss Weaver), too weird. Radical commentators began to attack its stereotyping, its reinforcement of the idea of aliens-as-freaks, its lack of positive images."

**Revolutionary child:** What does not change amid continual flux of Rushdie's tales are the expressions of his world view. In an interview with *In These Times* before the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie said that historically, Third World writers have a role as active critics of their society. (He also said the U.S., as a world power, is in special need of critical voices like that of Robert Stone, author of *Dog Soldiers* and *A Flag for Sunrise*.)

Rushdie, born in Bombay the year of India's independence, describes in his Nicaragua travelogue *The Jaguar Smile* how he too is a "child of revolution."

"[T]hose of us who did not have our origins in the countries of the mighty West, or North, [have] something in common—not, certainly, anything as simplistic as a unified Third World outlook, but at least some knowledge of what weakness was like, some awareness of the view from underneath, and of how it felt to be there, on the bottom, looking up at the descending heel."

Rushdie, born in India, raised and schooled in Pakistan and England, is a product of both Indian and Western civilizations. And it is both his loyalty to and his outsider's understanding of these two worlds that gives his fiction a critical bite. But he is also, as he says, a "metropolitan citizen," an internationalist—a nec-

essary perspective in a world where the sun never sets on McDonald's.

Rushdie is often compared to Gabriel García Márquez, because both write in the style that has come to be known as "magical realism." But while García Márquez takes the everyday life of a village and projects that upon the world, Rushdie begins spinning tales in a present-day society where an Indira Gandhi, a Margaret Thatcher or a Benazir Bhutto (the thinly veiled "Virgin Ironpants") share the stage with the novels' protagonists.

Rushdie creates a world where the individual and world events matter, where what the hero does with his political circumstance is as important as what he does in his personal life.

**Anti-ideologies:** The only one of his characters that Rushdie admits is autobiographical is the patriarch Aadam Aziz in *Midnight's Children*, a tale about the fulfilled dream of India's independence and its subsequent demise.

As the story opens, Aadam, who has just returned to Kashmir from studying in Europe, tries to pray to Allah but discovers that, paradoxically, he is "unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve." As he faces west, Aadam recalls the years in Heidelberg and his ability then to ignore his friends who "scorn[ed] him for his Mecca-turned parroting... mocking his prayer with their anti-ideologies." What he found impossible to ignore, and forgive, was their belief "that India—like radium—had been 'discovered' by the Europeans... this is what separated [him] from his friends, this belief of theirs that he somehow was an invention of their ancestors."

In *Shame*, Rushdie moves from the birth pangs of a new nation to a fully evolving dictatorship. On the surface an allegory of modern Pakistan, *Shame* is also a universal tale of despotism, and the voice of Rushdie that of everyman.

Intermittently the novel's narrative takes on the voice of Rushdie the journalist visiting friends and family in Karachi. At one point he comments on the persecution of a poet friend who spent many months as a political prisoner, after having committed the "social crime" of knowing the wrong people.

Rushdie constructs an imaginary but, as current events suggest, timeless dialogue between himself and his accusers. He writes: "Wherever I turn there is something of which to be ashamed. But shame is like everything else; live with it for long enough and it becomes part of the furniture... nobody notices it any more. And everyone is civilized... *Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject!* I know: nobody ever arrested me. Nor are they ever likely to. *Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?* I reply with more questions: Is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories? Can only the dead speak?"

No. It is to be hoped that Rushdie will have the last word. Through *The Satanic Verses* and the international furor that it has wrought, Rushdie has transcended the boundaries of fiction. At a risk to his life, he has made literature matter. If we reject his authority, abandon his defense and allow only the dead to speak, the shame will be ours. ■

Salman Rushdie: a personification of tumultuous colonialism.



Jerry Bauer

## Rushdie's outsider understanding of East and West gives his work a critical bite.

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