

EDITOR'S NOTE

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 marked an extraordinary triumph of insurgent democracy. It was a repudiation of the Bush administration's attempt to install executive tyranny and a restoration of moral legitimacy to our public life. Small wonder that from the outset the Obama administration has carried a heavy burden of popular hope. It is too soon to predict policy outcomes, or to evaluate strategies with any precision. And it would be a big mistake to underestimate Obama's talent for building coalitions and getting things done. Still there is no denying that the initial tide of hope has begun to ebb.

In economics as well as foreign policy, the Washington consensus has reasserted its capacity to define the boundaries of "responsible opinion." Signs of centrist hegemony are everywhere: the domination of fiscal and monetary policy by the Wall Street titans who created the economic crisis in the first place; the celebration of failed counterinsurgency doctrines as a cornerstone of military strategy; the determination to "move forward" rather than hold the Bush administration responsible for its crimes. Dreams of transformation have run aground in a fog of politics as usual.

What characterizes the persistent consensus is its rhetorical commitment to *realism*—always an appealing word to Americans, and rarely more so than during times of war or economic collapse. Yet as Randolph Bourne observed of prowar arguments in 1917: "This realistic boast is so loud and sonorous that one wonders whether realism is always a stern and intelligent grappling with realities." Tough talk about reality masked assumptions clouded in vaporous sentiment.

Similar difficulties bedevil us today. While we face unprecedented opportunities to rethink fundamental political questions, the unrealities of realism still pervade our public discourse. Consider the work of Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, founders of the Breakthrough Institute and advocates of long-term investments in green technology—the sort of investments, they believe, that can transform environmentalism from a parlor game for prosperous times into a coherent policy program that survives the vagaries of the business

cycle. This is a powerful idea and an important goal. Unfortunately it comes coupled to a snide dismissal of the entire environmental tradition, especially the recognition that finite planetary resources place limits on economic growth. Promoting green investments does not require abandoning the emphasis on limits; indeed the two strategies could coexist. But Nordhaus and Shellenberger seem intent on denying the contradictions in the idea of "sustainable growth."

The disavowal of limits is nothing if not a utopian fantasy, but in a recent *New Republic* essay, Nordhaus and Shellenberger turn the rhetorical tables. For them, the advocates of limits are the utopians. The environmentalist vision of a simpler life—less dominated by the routine of degraded labor, less dependent on the compensation offered by the accumulation of stuff—is a world view "characterized by escapism and a disengagement from reality," they say. The core of the difficulty is "green anti-modernism." In fact, "we would all do well to be suspicious of revulsion at modernity and our longings to transcend it."

What is this "modernity" that is somehow coterminous with "our" reality? It is, apparently, the whole package of advanced capitalist civilization—the civilization deplored by critics from Wordsworth to Wendell Berry for its degradation of satisfying work and its destruction of the natural world. Acknowledging the basis for antimodern discontent, Nordhaus and Shellenberger admit that "there are, to be sure, negative and disorienting aspects of modern life: pollution, alienation, loneliness, inequality, and the proliferation of choices." But in spite of "our" longings for community, they claim, "we choose ever more privacy, autonomy, and personal freedom." And "few of even the most ardent greens could seriously imagine subsuming their individual identities to a pre-agrarian tribe, or abandoning their office jobs for a life of hard agricultural labor."

It is hard to know how to begin poking around in this stew of modernizers' clichés. One of the most familiar is the assertion that the only alternative to the current version of modernity is "hard agricultural labor" in "a pre-agrarian tribe." This demented dualism assaults antimodern sentimentalists, but it arises from a sentimental attachment to the values associated with modernity—though the factual

basis of that association is flimsy at best. Nordhaus and Shellenberger's claim that modernity has brought a "proliferation of choices" sits uneasily alongside their acknowledgment that modernity has also promoted inequality. Their notion that the freely choosing individual is the true maker of modernity is a fantasy worthy of Ayn Rand. As always in such sweeping formulations, the question remains: who are "we"? Not factory or office workers, trapped on a treadmill of earning and spending (if they are lucky enough to have jobs), not migrant laborers slogging from one field to the next, picking the fruits of multinational agribusiness (hard agricultural labor, indeed), not any of the populations who make up the majority of modern people—but instead, as usual, a handful of privileged professionals who resemble the writers themselves. The unreal rhetoric of realism allows them to fall back on familiar formulas and preach to the converted while posing as advocates of gritty actuality.

This is the kind of muddled thinking we are up against, as we try to reclaim our public discourse from the wreckage left by three decades of free-market fundamentalism. *Raritan* is not a policy journal—heaven forbid!—but we want to vivify political conversation as well as aesthetic expression. We continue that effort in this issue, which sports a handsome redesign by Jeanne Fountain. We offer two essays that bring clarity, rigor, and wit to the murky realm of money and politics in U.S. history, and another that demystifies (without debunking) the patron saint of independent political thought, George Orwell. Yet as the rest of the issue demonstrates, we remain committed to exploring those aspects of human experience that—however fraught with political significance—can never be reduced to mere politics: the persistent power of memory, the tangled ambiguities of moral responsibility, the mysterious pleasures of beauty, the inevitable encounter with old age and death. In private as well as public life, some kinds of reality are too important to be left to the realists.

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June 2009