

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Seldom has our public discourse seemed as detached from actual experience as it does today. Indeed there are times when the American scene of “objective reporting” and “responsible opinion” seems shrouded in an almost hallucinatory atmosphere. The White House and its allies, in collaboration with a largely compliant press, have created a contemporary “Bizarro-World,” as Saturday Night Live once characterized the Reagan administration. Consider just a few of the symptoms: the normalization of a secret mercenary army as an instrument of foreign policy; the emergence of euphemisms for invasion, torture, and mass murder among policy intellectuals; the acceptance of an unconstitutional seizure of executive power (in the Military Commissions Act) by nearly two-thirds of the United States Senate. The widespread willingness to abandon established traditions is simply breathtaking.

The detachment of debate from actuality arises in part from the abstract formulas that constitute common political speech. To take the most egregious example: with a few shining exceptions, politicians and the press continue to assert that the United States is engaged in a “war on terror.” In fact this phrase refers to no coherent policy (let alone a declared war); it is simply a slogan that characterizes the permanent state of emergency used to justify the assault on our civil liberties. So much of the damage done by the Bush administration is so obvious (beginning with the dead or maimed bodies of Iraqis and Americans) that it is easy to overlook the subtler forms of cultural wreckage—the legitimation of bullying moralism; the manipulation of a climate of fear; the restriction of foreign policy debate to a handful of interventionist options. Misconceived notions of patriotism strangle criticism in its cradle. The Washington consensus survives, despite its intellectual vacuity—and despite its repudiation by voters in the last midterm election.

Under these circumstances, journals that seek to nurture independent thought are more necessary than ever. *Raritan*, having just completed its twenty-fifth year of nurturing independent thought, is

committed to staying with that agenda. Our primary goal remains what it has always been: to encourage the free play of the imagination in criticism, fiction, and poetry—enterprises that may lead us mercifully away from contemporary political controversy. Yet the revivifying of creative life also involves trying to close the widening gap between the academy and public discourse, and that task veers back, at least some of the time, toward politics.

Here is a case in point. Some of the most inventive scholarship of the last twenty years has appeared in the field known as “postcolonial studies,” yet almost none of this work has penetrated the world beyond the academy. Consider the concept of “the West.” My colleague Ann Fabian and I have been exploring it in an interdisciplinary faculty seminar that includes many scholars with postcolonial perspectives, and we have been repeatedly reminded of the gap between public and academic discourse. “The West” is used every day in the *Newspaper of Record*, as if it referred to a political and geographical entity with its own “Western” values that—despite their particular origin—embody the aspirations of people everywhere; “the West” is used in postcolonial studies to refer to a cultural construction that serves the ideological purposes of specific imperial elites in specific nations under varying historical circumstances. Here is an example of how an analytical, academic perspective can fruitfully deconstruct journalistic formulas. The postcolonial version of “the West” is not only more complex but more accurate than the *New York Times* version; it could illuminate foreign policy issues if it were admitted into debate. But that’s not likely to happen any time soon.

Part of the reason is that most postcolonial studies are produced in the clotted, opaque prose that usually accompanies cultural theory. There is no excuse for it, and *Raritan* has always aimed to avoid it. Now we may have finally reached a moment in intellectual history when academic critics themselves are ready to jettison pseudoscientific jargon, allowing theory to inform but not imprison their interpretations. Two essays in this issue, Noah Isenberg’s review of recent literary studies and Bruce Robbins’s appreciation of Terry Eagleton, reflect on the possibilities of intellectual life “after theory.”

But the disconnection between postcolonial studies and public discourse is not simply the result of professorial prose. It also stems from the assumptions that set the boundaries of the Washington consensus—that the worldwide spread of “Western” values is beneficent and inevitable, and that the United States has a responsibility to promote those values everywhere (despite their inevitability), by force if necessary. This imperial vision must be challenged, if we are ever to get beyond the current crisis. *Raritan* aspires to be part of that challenge, less by criticizing specific policies than by criticizing dominant modes of thought, and by encouraging alternative ways of thinking about the role of the United States in the world. Some of those alternatives can be sighted from a postcolonial perspective; others can be located closer to home, in an indigenous anti-imperial tradition that has long posed a fundamental challenge to formulaic interventionist thought.

Apologists for American empire, eager to distance themselves from sordid material interests, have characteristically relied on abstractions: Manifest Destiny, Anglo-Saxon supremacy, America’s global responsibilities as the leader of “the West.” They have also displayed a consistent fondness for deterministic theories of history, often with a pseudoreligious aura. Theodore Roosevelt, a cult hero in Washington since the Reagan ascendancy, epitomized the imperialists’ substitution of cant for logic. Justifying his preference for military action over arbitration treaties, he insisted that a nation pledged to arbitration would end up “dishonored and impotent, like the man who, when his wife was assaulted by a ruffian, took the ruffian to court instead of attacking him on the spot.” The portentous vacancy of this formula, its utter lack of evidence or argument, its fundamental confusion of individual and national courage—these characteristics became all too familiar in imperialist apologetics. And if Roosevelt believed that the individual and the nation could be regenerated through imperial violence, Woodrow Wilson sought to regenerate the entire world, through a war to make it safe for democracy. Our current president combines Roosevelt’s adolescent bellicosity with Wilson’s schoolmasterish moralism, infusing the whole with a providentialist faith in America’s redemptive

mission—a faith that should seem little short of idolatrous to any believing Christian.

To move from empire to antiempire is to move from mystifications to plain speech—the language of the republican and liberal traditions. American anti-imperialism has taken many forms, not all of them admirable. But it is too rich and complex a tradition to be left to the likes of Pat Buchanan. In fact the true parent of anti-imperial thought in America is William James. His critique of the war against the Filipino independence movement combined republican and liberal politics with his own pluralism and radical empiricism—his distrust of orthodoxies, his openness to all varieties of evidence, his impatience with absolutes, or with such abstractions as “the little brown brothers” or “the uncivilized Malay.” In keeping with the republican tradition, James distrusted concentrated executive power as a threat to popular sovereignty at home and abroad; he also distrusted the too-easy resort to force, and remained painfully aware of its consequences. James’s critique of empire joined him with a disparate crew that included William Jennings Bryan, Mark Twain, and Andrew Carnegie. At their best their anti-imperial perspectives shared a quality of mind once held to be characteristically American—a refusal of euphemisms, a respect for the concrete realities of lived experience, a preference for the facts on the ground over the fictions of redemptive slaughter. The makers of those fictions were—and are—the true sentimentalists.

The anti-imperialists and their heirs have been realists by comparison, even as they realized—as Randolph Bourne did during World War I—how easily “realism” itself could become a mystifying abstraction. From Bourne through George Kennan and J. William Fulbright, the anti-imperial tradition has stood for the politics of lived experience and local knowledge against the vaporous exhalations of technocratic expertise and millennial nationalism. It is a tradition of magnanimity and restraint.

*Raritan* can resuscitate this tradition directly, as I did by reconsidering Fulbright in the Summer 2006 issue and as Robert Westbrook does in the current issue by reviving Bourne’s critique of liberal interventionism. Anti-imperialists (with the brief exception of Fulbright)

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have lost most of the arguments. Still there are worse tasks for contemporary intellectuals than redeeming the “losers” of the past (who happened to be right) from what the great historian E. P. Thompson called “the enormous condescension of posterity.” But if anti-imperialism is a way of thinking, rather than a set of policy positions, we ought also to be able to reclaim that tradition in the present, by refuting the spurious charge of isolationism brought against advocates of restraint, and by exploring alternatives to the stale formulations that still dominate public discourse. Andrew J. Bacevich, a recent contributor, has written elsewhere that the real debate over foreign policy is not between left and right but between those who still believe in the beneficence of the American Century and those who doubt it—in short, between imperialists and anti-imperialists. *Raritan* is ready to bring our commitment to the free play of the imagination into that debate.

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