

SPRING 2009 • VOLUME 4, ISSUE 3

THE MIDWAY REVIEW

A JOURNAL OF POLITICS AND CULTURE

Andrew Hamilton *on*
Nabokov's Ardent Political Quietism

Noah Arjomand *on*
Fear and Loathing in Dubai

Brian Libgober *on*
How Not to Write Like Richard Rorty

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Rethinking Morality in Animal Rights

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and

Ardevan Yaghoubi *discusses*
Politics and the Middle East
with Rashid Khalidi



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Without a doubt the most powerful social commentator of our day is William Gropper, who, in his paintings, lithographs, and cartoons, has continually pilloried the smug, the complacent, the over-privileged and under-brained of society. Equipped with a vigorous, graphic and scathing line, Gropper, like Daumier, sees with a burning indignation of injustice of every kind—human, social, and political. He does not spare the Legislature, that august tribunal for whom nothing that is human is alien—not even stupidity or injustice. The Speaker is a blistering indictment of blathering in high places. We have seen men of his kidney—and stomach—before, and know his peroration will end on the same not it began—complete and redundant vacuity.

NABOKOV'S ANTI-POLITICS

by Andrew Hamilton

The fact is that from my youth... my political creed has remained as bleak and changeless as an old gray rock. It is classical to the point of triteness. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art. The social or economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern to me.

—Vladimir Nabokov

You aren't any good at this kind of subject, which involves questions of politics and social change, because you are totally uninterested in these matters and have never taken the trouble to understand them.

—Edmund Wilson in a letter to Nabokov, criticizing *Bend Sinister*

Vladimir Nabokov seems at first glance to have very little to say about any political question. While he made his opinions on a wide range of literary and artistic topics quite clear, he often displayed a kind of contempt for political engagement of any kind, vehemently refusing to speak out for or against any number of political causes. There is therefore a fundamental irony in the existence of what are often called his two “political novels,” *Invitation to a Beheading* (1934) and *Bend Sinister* (1946). The subject matter of both novels is political—engaging stories of two heroes struggling against oppressive states—but on the other hand each is carefully constructed to avoid becoming the sort of “political novel” Nabokov himself abhorred. Thus they seek to avoid the didacticism or side-taking often characteristic of political fiction. In fact, their shared theme is precisely the rejection of that model through a demonstration of the glorious aesthetic possibilities of the apolitical. One might even take this a step further and classify them, in concert with the author’s own habitual recoiling from that branch of public life, as actively anti-political.

The term “anti-political” is much more than a classification for these novels: it is an attempt at understanding Nabokov’s conceptions of politics

and aesthetics in terms of one another. While the currents of this relationship run throughout much of his work, it is most apparent in these two novels, due to their subject matter. Each of them is, in fact, politically “engaged,” in the sense that each is written in response to political trends of the day, but for Nabokov, the writing of such a work has a meaning completely distinct from endorsing or denouncing a political position. Rather, he is demonstrating the power of the possibility, not of mere disengagement, but of actively tearing away from the political, an act which, for Nabokov’s characters, can become the genesis of artistic self-creation.

The premise on which Nabokov bases this construct is that true art is necessarily apolitical, that the pursuit of an aesthetic ideal cannot coexist with a political agenda in a work of art. However, rejecting politics in his art was not enough for him. He envisioned the artist as existing in a sphere completely removed from public or communal concerns, a sphere in which he could exercise complete freedom. “The work of art has no importance whatever to society,” he says. “It is only important to the individual.” This sphere, however, must be the product of the artist’s imagination; its creation is the first step down the path to true art. In Nabokov’s fiction, it is in contrast to the poverty and beastliness of the public sphere that the richness of possibility for the inner world of the individual is expressed.

Andrew Hamilton graduated from the College in 2008 and is presently working as a freelance poet and translator in Austin, Texas.

Invitation to a Beheading is the story of Cincinnatus C., a condemned man in a surreal, imagined country. The novel opens with his sentencing and ends with his execution (by beheading, of course). During that time, the reader gradually comes to understand the nature of the crime—“gnostical turpitude”—with which Cincinnatus is charged. It amounts to a kind of opacity: unlike the other people in this world, Cincinnatus is not transparent, is unwilling to reveal all his thoughts and feelings to those around him. In a word, he is charged with being a human being with a private, inner life.

The novel has been read as an allegory for Soviet Russia, or as a Kafkaesque critique of the modern world, a particularly tempting reading given the atmosphere in the prison where Cincinnatus is held: the jailers are presented as cruel but silly agents of an incomprehensible and inaccessible system. But the reader familiar with Nabokov’s imagination knows to dig past such readings. The core of the novel, in fact, lies in the contrast between the beauty of the possibilities of Cincinnatus’ inner world and the transparent phoniness of those around him who hinder its development. Although the same tensions between the individual and the forces of an oppressive world existed in Soviet Russia, they were not unique to it. Nabokov is concerned with the struggle in its purest form, divorced from any particular historical context. The reader must keep in mind that the Soviet regime and the nightmare kingdom of Nabokov’s imagination both show symptoms of the same struggle—and it is this struggle in itself that constitutes the subject matter of the novel.

Asked for his last request, Cincinnatus declares only that he wishes to finish something he is writing. The majority of the content of his text is not

revealed, but its effect on Cincinnatus is. From his writing he draws a sense of purpose, a continuously fomenting sense of self that strengthens him over the course of the novel. In contrast to his sense of beauty and purpose, Cincinnatus is surrounded by ridiculous fools. A central part of his surprising triumph over them is his recognition that their crude reality need not be his own, that it does not have a claim to primacy simply by grace of being shared. For instance, when visited by his mother, Cincinnatus tells her, “I can see perfectly well that you are just as much of a parody as everybody and

everything else.” And though it is supposedly raining outside, he reprimands her: “Why is your raincoat wet when your shoes are dry—see, that’s careless. Tell the prop man for me.” At this moment Cincinnatus begins to see the purported reality of the world around him as the farce that it is. Over the course of the

The premise on which Nabokov bases this construct is that true art is necessarily apolitical, that the pursuit of an aesthetic ideal cannot coexist with a political agenda in a work of art.

rest of the novel he rejects the clumsy world-view of those around him in favor of the inner one he is capable of creating himself.

Cincinnatus does not defeat the farcical forces of cruelty on their own terms, but instead rejects those terms, first by noticing and then by rejecting the “carelessness” of their world. By turning away from it, by actively retreating, he enables himself to enter the ultimate and highest stage of his development, as an individual and as an artist. Analogously, Nabokov does not attempt to refute Bolshevism; rather, he pulls himself out of the muddy waters of political discourse and finds himself on the higher and firmer ground of art. In the final scene of the novel, Cincinnatus, lying with his head on the chopping block, finally achieves the culmination of his struggles. “[H]e reflected: why am I here? Why am I lying like this? And, having asked himself these simple questions, he answered them by getting up and looking around.” Simply by answering these simple questions, and

thus recognizing the absurdity of his situation, he removes himself neatly from his entire conflict with this parody of a world; on this note the novel ends. Of course, such an ending would be nonsensical in a realistic political situation; only in an imagined artistic realm is it conceivable that an act of imagination, of imposing one's will on external reality, could in fact lead one to safety. Hence the final scene of the novel is a strong reminder that the conflict in question is neither historically specific nor in fact based on a political premise.

A decade later Nabokov wrote *Bend Sinister*, the story of a similar character struggling for individuality in a nightmarish world. This novel is also set in an imagined country; in this one the citizens speak a bizarre mixture of German and Russian, and the new party in power is the "party of the average man," which espouses a philosophy known as "Ekwilism." The reader sees where this is going. The novel was composed during the height of the Second World War; it is tempting to see this country as a caricature of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, and the novel, by extension, as a clear act of political engagement. Once again, however, such a reading would be ironically incomplete. Its plot is driven precisely by its hero's refusal to position himself against—or to collaborate with—the Ekwilists, although much of his behavior is misinterpreted as politically motivated by unwitting onlookers. That is, the novel has been systematically misread in the same way as the characters in the book misread the actions of its protagonist, whose constant purpose is to avoid political activity of any kind, at all costs.

Adam Krug, the protagonist of *Bend Sinister*, is a renowned philosopher. Through no desire of his own, he is uniquely situated to act in the public sphere: he is the small nation's greatest

intellectual celebrity, and his voice of support has the power to legitimize the new government abroad. He is also a former childhood playmate of the new head of state, and, it is hoped, may in this capacity be able to lobby the government for tolerance on behalf of those at the university, who oppose Ekwilism and yet would like to retain their positions. Despite constant attempts by one side or the other to claim Krug as their own, his only interests lie close to him: he is a grieving widower with a young, dearly loved son, whom he must care for. "The main theme of *Bend Sinister*, then,"

writes Nabokov in his introduction to the novel, "is the beating of Krug's loving heart." By the end of the

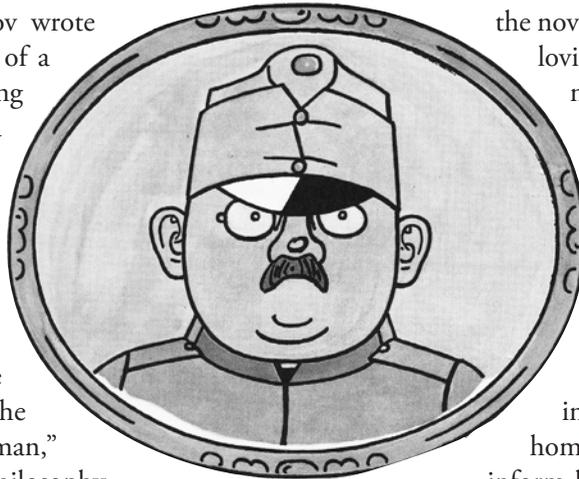
novel, he continues, Krug "suddenly perceives the simple reality of things and knows but cannot express in the words of his world..." And this is precisely true. The heartbreaking conflict of the novel is encapsulated in the image of this man, at

home with his son, preparing to inform him of his mother's death,

being constantly interrupted by knocks at the door: from colleagues, friends, secret police—it doesn't matter, they all boil down to interruptions from the business of the heart that in Krug's view takes priority.

It is, however, also true that the novel is politically engaged in a broader sense: it is a kind of response to the political climate and events of the day. That engagement, however, consists in broadcasting the message that all of us who would be caught up in the messiness of public life or in foreign affairs, have within us a beating, loving heart. All of those external matters can, in the end, be reduced to nothing more than distractions from that inner reverberation of life. Krug does not lose sight of this, Nabokov never loses sight of this, and neither, he believes, should the reader.

The structure of Nabokov's life can itself be seen as a result of a series of political events. Twice he disrupted the course of his life and fled from



dangerous political developments: from Bolshevik Russia in 1919, and from Nazi Germany in 1937, eventually landing in the United States in 1940. If it is possible to cite a single predominant theme in a body of work as vast and multi-faceted as Nabokov's, it might well be the difficulty of exile, the necessity of living with a constant nostalgia for a corrupted homeland, and the way the imagination reacts to that nostalgia. It is true that Nabokov did not respond to these political invasions of his private sphere by speaking out against the forces responsible, but it is certainly not the case that he was ambivalent toward them, or that they did not affect his art. Rather, in much of his art, and nowhere more apparently than in his two "political" novels, the state of flight and the ensuing exile, the active turning-away from those forces in public life that would do us harm, the refusal to join any political group, or the refusal to associate himself with any movement—these appear as acts of rebellion at the beginning of pure artistic creation. Directly from these acts emerges the artistic and aesthetic possibilities of the individual. In the sphere that the artist—Cincinnatus, Krug, or Nabokov—crafts for himself out of his imagination, he is able to exercise complete and meticulous control. Although Nabokov envisioned such control as essential for great artistic achievement, he also knew that it would be impossible and irresponsible in a shared reality or political context. Hence the retreat from the public sphere—particularly when it is the site of a crisis, as was much of the early twentieth century, as likewise are the worlds of these two novels—enables the artist to regain an otherwise impossible form of control, and to use it, as Nabokov and Cincinnatus do, to create a work of transcendent aesthetic power. ▀



DÉJÀ VU: RASHID KHALIDI ON THE COLD WAR MINDSET

by Ardevan Yaghoubi



Dr. Rashid Khalidi is the Edward Saïd Professor of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University, and is widely classed among the foremost historians of the Near East today.

Ardevan Yaghoubi: Let's start with the book itself: *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East*. Right off the bat, I was struck by your title; it's something of a curiosity these days to hear the Cold War invoked in public discourse. There seems to be the belief that we're past the Cold War—that the era is somehow over—so I'm curious how you came to write a book about something which is very much not in the public eye.

Rashid Khalidi: I've always been interested in the superpower rivalry of the Cold War. I've taught Soviet Middle East policy and American Middle East policy, starting in the 1970s at [the American University of] Beirut when I did research in the former. So it had always been an interest of mine, but I think what might have triggered my interest recently and what brought me to the book was a sense of déjà vu—that we're seeing an American-Iranian Cold War, a sort of replay or reprise of the old Cold War. There is the same kind of reductionism, stereotyping, and kinds of attitudes and patterns... I think it was those kinds of things that brought me to the topic. I thought the Cold War had not been properly treated in most of the literature, which obsessively focuses on the point of view of either Moscow or Washington rather than the point of view of the Middle East, which is what the book really tries to talk about. It doesn't so much talk about "The Superpowers" and their policies as it does the impact of the Cold War rivalry on the Middle East. I felt that it had not been treated in the quite considerable literature on both Soviet and American policy.

Ardevan Yaghoubi is a first-year in the College, majoring in Philosophy.

AY: You write that "the Cold War has now been over for two decades. For students of college age today, it is beyond their experience and their memory." Like most college students, I was born just as the Cold War was ending, which brings up the question of who you saw as your primary audience for the book. You identify on the one hand how the scholarship has been largely focused on America and the Soviet Union, which would seem to address a scholarly audience, but obviously this book has implications and relevance for the contemporary situation in the Middle East.

RK: I think it is addressed to two audiences. Firstly, to a general audience—people who are knowledgeable about history and politics but who are not specialists. Students as well would fit in that category. But also it's meant in some sense to be directed at scholars, as I try to lay out research agendas or ways of looking at this which I don't go into enormous depth about in some cases, but which I think might be fruitful avenues for people to look at. I have graduate students who've said to me that the book been helpful for thinking about certain things.

AY: On a purely factual basis, you wrote the book before the general election, correct?

RK: Oh yes. The book was finished in the fall before the election—long before the election, when President Obama was still Candidate Obama.

AY: Well, now we know some things we didn't then. There is a critical passage where you write, in reference to the Bush administration's "activist and

unilateral policy”: “For the foreseeable future and until it is explicitly disavowed and dismantled in its specifics by a successor administration starting in 2009, in 2013, or thereafter, this approach seems likely to continue to prevail in the Middle East, perhaps even more than elsewhere in the world, due to the extraordinarily extensive involvement of the United States in that region over the past few years.”

The question you pose here and throughout the book is along the lines of “Is the Bush administration a historical anomaly?” But of course, now we know who the President is—we know it’s Barack Obama. I wonder if now there’s an answer to your rhetorical question. Do you see the Bush administration as more of an anomaly now that Obama has been elected?

RK: I go back and forth in thinking about this. The central issue I deal with at the end of the book, which is this sort of mini-Cold War with Iran—it could clearly go either way—it could be that we’re in for a continuation of this. There’s no doubt that [Obama] during the campaign stuck very courageously to his position, which said that we could talk to Iran. He hedged it, he limited it, he was cautious about it, but he never, never, never backed down on that. Which, given the debased state of American rhetoric, given the kinds of things that Fox News and McCain and Palin were saying, given the “pack of dogs” mentality where weakness is seen as shameful, that was a pretty difficult thing to do. It’s clear he wanted to at least leave himself the option of changing things. On the other hand, the weight of conventional opinion, in Washington, in New York, and in this country, is enormous—I can’t stress how great it is. The fact that a policy is stupid, or that the

emperor has no clothes, has never stopped that policy from continuing for years, decades—

AY: That’s not only the United States, though; it’s true of many countries.

RK: Sure, sure. My point is that with this “mini” Cold War with Iran, which antedates the Bush administration, going back in some ways to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, [and] the whole

miserable course of intervention in Iran since the nineteenth century—the 1905 Constitutional Intervention, various occupations, and so on—it’s perfectly possible that we may see that the Bush administration was simply not an anomaly, and that we will, with a blip or slight divergence, continue on this (I would argue) fruitless and mistaken course of antagonism towards Iran. Having said

There’s no doubt that during the campaign Obama stuck very courageously to his position ... that we could talk to Iran. He hedged it, he limited it, he was cautious about it, but he never, never backed down.

that, that doesn’t mean there are no differences, real differences, in interests between the United States and Iran. I’m just saying that these don’t need to rise to the level of a cold war, or in the eyes of some people, even a hot war, which to my eyes would be an even greater folly than anything the Bush administration perpetrated.

AY: In *Sowing Crisis*, you analyze almost every single presidency since World War II, and the truly damning thing is how you demonstrate that even through the Carter administration or the Oslo Accords—which ostensibly supported democracy, peace, and the Palestinian statehood—attempts to do good really backfire in the end. That’s why I thought it would be wrong for people to read this and say, “Well, Khalidi says every single president since World War II has failed, but his friend and colleague Obama will be different.”

Keeping on the topic of elections, I was surprised by the lack of attention given to the recent events in Israeli politics. Given the circumstances of the recent (and some say ongoing) violence there, I thought there would be more discussion about it.

RK: Well I wouldn't have expected more discussion in the U.S. Simply, a government hasn't been formed. Especially since the greater fragmentation of Israeli politics recently, the Israeli system has seen a proliferation of parties, and it has become harder and harder to form a government over the last few elections. You'd be a fool to write about what the next Israeli government is going to do when it could take almost any shape. It's perfectly possible that a government will form and then collapse. It happened again and again in the 90s. It's a little hard to say very much.

AY: I remember when Professor Mearsheimer gave a presentation here earlier in the year on the Gaza crisis, he mentioned that he reads the Israeli papers every day, and subsequently that got me wondering as to why there wasn't such an interest in the elections, or in the everyday reality of Israeli and Palestinian politics.

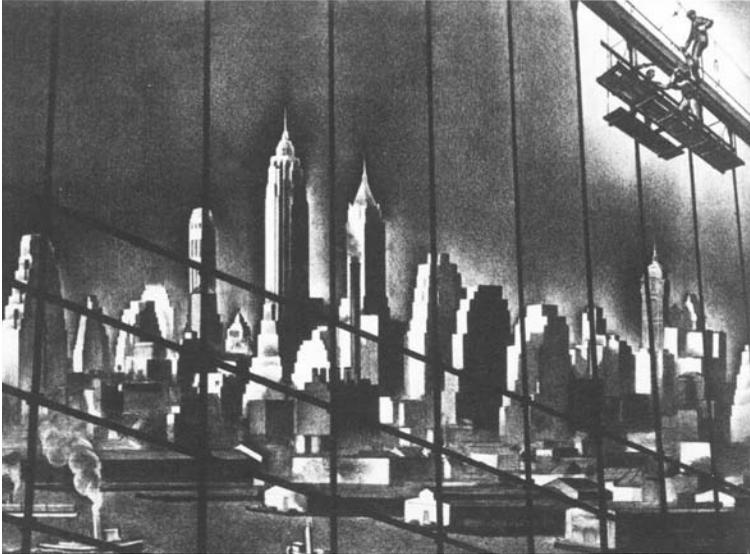
RK: It's tragedy that people who claim to be interested in Israel don't pay more attention to Israeli political discourse, the Israeli media, and dissident voices. They would learn something if they got out of their bubble—they would learn that in Israel, there's a greater diversity of views about Israel and Israeli policy than there is in the United States. What you get in the [American]

mainstream media or in Congress is a range of ideas, from right of Likud to the far right of Likud. You basically don't get good, serious discussion of these issues in the media.

You know, [Syrian President] Bashar Assad said yesterday in an Arabic newspaper, "We're going to negotiate with any Israeli government. The right and the left are the same. Right-wing governments are very right-wing and they kill Arabs; left-wing governments are left-wing and they kill Arabs." I'm not saying I agree with him—it does make a difference. I'm saying it will make a difference in terms of policy.

AY: This reminds me of your interview on Charlie Rose, where I seem to remember you saying that, essentially, a two state solution is a one state solution.

RK: Well, I didn't say that, exactly. What I said was that I don't think a two state solution is easy, if it's possible at all. What we're unfortunately likely to have is a very unstable, unequal one state, which is a projection into the future of the status quo, where Israel rules over almost four million Palestinians who have no real representation in the important decisions that concern them. I see nothing that's going to change that reality in the short term—it could change, it's eminently changeable—but it's going to require a level of political willpower I haven't seen in Israeli leadership, at least since Rabin in '95. I have yet to see one American politician who has been able to change one iota on the ground in the occupied territories. Settlement has never stopped. Expansion of settlements has never stopped in



forty-two years. And no American president has actually been very effective about that.

AY: It's interesting because you mention that no American president has been able to do very much. But in your account, it seems to me that the players in the Middle East are more or less pawns of two empires, which is now only one. If it were the situation that the Arabs and Israelis were caught between the Soviets and the Americans, the elimination of one of those two big players would make it seem that the United States, as the sole hegemon, would be able to easily solve the problem. Do you think the fact that no American president,

during the Cold War or after the Cold War, was able to fix the conflict, speaks to a lack of power (which wouldn't seem to be the case) or a lack of desire to fix it?

RK: Well, first of all, I don't think the Arab states were pawns—I'm going to set the record straight. In the book I repeatedly invoke Carl Brown, a Middle East historian at Princeton, who talks about the Middle East as having been the most penetrated subsystem in international relations for a very long period of time—a couple of centuries. And he's right. That means that external forces are deeply involved in the internal politics of the region. Having said that and having talked in many places in the book about external intervention determining outcomes—Iran in 1953, Lebanon and Jordan in the 1950s—I also say in the book that during the Cold War, larger client states were often able to force their patrons to do things. This is true of Egypt in its dealings with

the Soviets. This is true of the Shah in its dealings with the United States. And it's eminently true of Israel in dealing with the United States. It's not a case of the tail always wagging the dog, but that the tail *can* wag the dog. It works in multiple ways—sometimes the clients have leverage over the patrons, and in the case of the smaller, weaker, more penetrated countries, it is often the case that the superpowers trample all over them.

Fundamentally, I think it was a lack of vision, a lack of understanding about what had to be done to get a settlement, and I think there was a lack of real interest in a settlement on the part of many American

presidents. I don't think the last President Bush cared. It's very clear from the documents that Nixon didn't care very much about a settlement; he cared about the Cold War. President Reagan didn't care. They cared much more about American advantage, as the Soviets did, than about



peace in the Middle East. So could they have done it had they wanted to? Perhaps, perhaps not. Because, as I say, strong states in the region have the ability to twist and turn, but I don't think there was substantial interest in very many administrations.

AY: I'm curious to know what you make of the hypothesis put forward by Professors Mearsheimer and Walt regarding the Israel lobby, which obviously is more contemporary as opposed to historical. But that would seem to be one articulation of the reasons behind the failures of the post-Cold War era in the region.

RK: The way I would approach this is historically. I would show that the American-Israeli relationship was not particularly special until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Until then, this lobby was of little importance; it was of no importance in the '50s—none whatsoever, since it had no impact on preventing the United States from opposing Israel in 1956 and it wasn't able to garner much aid for Israel. So I think I would put this in a historical perspective. I would try to show, as I do in the book, how the Cold War played an enormous role in enhancing Israel's relationship with the United States, and how even after the Cold War ended, that didn't change. From that point on, Israel was locked in as the United States' primary ally in the region; it originally was locked in for what, to President Johnson, who really started this, seemed like good reasons. It happened that many of these people—[National Security Advisor to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson] George Bundy, [Kissinger's predecessor] Walt Rostow, [Supreme Court Justice and Ambassador] Arthur Goldberg—were not just dedicated, ferocious cold warriors; they were also committed partisans of Israel, so to them this was the best of all worlds. You were winning the United States a proxy battle against Soviet proxies by having Israel defeat Soviet-armed countries like Syria and Egypt, and at the same time bringing the US and Israel closer together. That Cold War justification has long since disappeared, but the relationship had developed by the 1970s, when the United States began giving billions to Israel and when the most advanced weapons, close intelligence, and other coordination was unprecedented. That would be how I would approach it, but as you say, they are approaching it from a "realpolitik" point of view rather than from a historical point of view.

AY: You mention in the book how Soviet forces

funded separatist regions throughout the Middle East and managed to break off the Azerbaijan and Kurdish regions from Iran. You mentioned on Charlie Rose the billions of dollars being funneled into Iran today.

RK: Well, we know where some of it is going. Some of the money is obviously going to disrupt Iranian nuclear activities and some is going to separatist movements. What the rest is going for, nobody knows. Seymour Hersh, Patrick Cockburn, and several other journalists have reported this; it's actually gone into the mainstream media because there were Congressional appropriations on

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the matter. I think that Hersh's report and other reports indicate that the amount of money was larger than what was in the official appropriations. But regardless, it's a chunk of change.

AY: This, in conjunction with some statements from Hilary Clinton and other members of Obama's team, would seem to indicate that things might not change on that front any time soon.

RK: On the one hand, when the President was a candidate, he said, at some potential cost to himself, that he was willing to talk to Iran. Then his envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan said that the U.S. welcomes Iran to a mutual conference to deal with Afghanistan. Senator Mitchell, the President's envoy for the Arab-Israeli issue, is reported as saying that the United States didn't necessarily oppose the formation of a coalition involving Hamas. That's on the one hand. On the other hand, the Secretary of State has reiterated American positions on Hamas and has appointed Dennis Ross, a man who talks about a narrow window for negotiating with Iran, followed by sanctions, which could lead to war.

So it goes back to my earlier answer: we could see

a new confrontation with Iran a year or eighteen months down the line, or we may see creative diplomacy. Now two things should be said. First, creative diplomacy will be hard as hell because there are three or four really hard issues, and not just the nuclear one. Second, it takes two to tango. A lot depends on the position Iran's leadership takes. A lot depends on Ayatollah Khamenei, who is the decision maker and whose ideas on this are not necessarily clear—to us at least. That's why I always say that the job description of a historian is not to predict. It could go either way.

AY: A lot of what we've talked about is language. You mentioned before the importance of Obama's words to the Islamic world and his use of the word "respect."

RK: Some of these words are important. Talking about respect is important. Actually following up by doing something that speaks to Iranians' sense of grievance would be more important than just words. Doing something serious to follow up on the President's answer to Helen Thomas's question about the Israeli nuclear arsenal, where he talked about nuclear non-proliferation, would be real action. If you actually started a Middle East nuclear non-proliferation regime, whereby Israel's nukes were put on the table, Israel's *huge* arsenal of nuclear weapons, matched with an unparalleled sophistication in its delivery systems—they aren't a primitive nuclear power that can barely put one warhead on a missile that probably won't hit its target—they have the most advanced warplanes on Earth, and so on. I think those are examples of words that could lead to actions.

AY: For me, I hear people all the time decrying how a war with Iran would be devastating, how it would hurt the United States as well as the people of Iran. But what they forget is the silent war, in the form of billions and billions of dollars lost in economic sanctions and frozen assets.

RK: Well some people are talking about upping the ante and turning this into a real blockade, say, of gasoline; this would be an act of war which would invite the Iranians to retaliate, which then would be the *casus belli* for a real war. That would

be folly.

AY: And you put it well when you described how the Bush administration has actually played into Iran's hand directly by eliminating its two—

RK:—"natural predators," I call them: the Taliban regime and the Ba'ath regime. The United States has strengthened Iran over the past eight years, inadvertently, of course.

AY: Wouldn't this make something like nuclear non-proliferation more difficult?

RK: Well it's had the effect, among others things, of driving a huge wedge into the Middle East, terrifying Sunni regimes—Saudi and Egyptian governments in particular, but others too, like the Jordanians—and of scaring them into the American camp. That's another inadvertent effect but it's something the United States has maximized. But it's led to a terrible polarization in the Middle East, for which Lebanon and Palestine have paid a huge price.

AY: In the remaining time, I'd like to turn to something a bit more personal. My references here are *The New Yorker* article from last April on the tribulations of Columbia faculty member and graduate student Nadia Abu El Haj in her research of Israel, and the clip of Fox News ambushing you on the Columbia campus to talk about your relationship with Obama.

RK: It was my apartment actually, while I was pushing my young grandson in his carriage. And these vermin assaulted me.

AY: In light of these unfortunate incidents, how do you see your own role as a public intellectual? Has it been more difficult to conduct your work since the publicity stemming from the Obama campaign? Has it become an obstacle?

RK: No. I was very careful to say almost nothing when I was faced with this tsunami of mindless media driven by Fox News, where they set the agenda, the terms, and the imbecilic questions, all of which were premised on falsehoods. [They

said] “The organization you headed”—well, I didn’t head it, I was on the board, and if you were journalists instead of gutter snipes, you would have checked and you would have known my name isn’t at the top of this organization. I just decided not to say anything. “When did you stop beating your wife?” You can’t answer that. It’s not designed to be answered; it’s designed to make you into a wife beater. It served me in good stead. No, it hasn’t changed anything, as far as I can tell.

AY: Ideologically, where do you see yourself? Is your scholarship an attempt to be as purely objective as possible? For me, the work of Edward Saïd, your predecessor, undermines the idea of an objective history. And this birthed this entire genealogy of postcolonial studies or subaltern studies, which seem divergent from your interests. So I’m curious as to where you see yourself positioned in that respect.

RK: Well if you look at Edward Saïd, and what he said about postcolonial studies, he became quite critical of it, as well as of trends in his own fields, English and comparative literature. I see myself to some extent as someone who is trying to correct what I see as mistaken interpretations of trends in both the larger history of the modern era and in

the Middle East in particular. In that sense I’m a gadfly or critic. I think the way the Cold War has been written is very biased towards the two poles, the American and the Soviet pole—it’s written as if that’s all that matters, as if trampling over all these countries or exacerbating their conflicts was not important in the least. And of course someone who doesn’t believe that there ever was democracy in the Middle East doesn’t care if democracy has been retarded. At the same time I try to set a standard of meticulous scholarship—I make mistakes, but I try to be as objective as one can be. You are obviously taking a position by the very topic you decide to do. Why did you take this point of view? That’s perspective. I started writing about this conflict in Beirut. It looked different in Beirut than it does today from the perspective of New York. But I still remember and try and channel how it might have looked from a regional perspective. Those are choices. Someone, like one of the reviewers of the book, might be offended because I seem to be critical of the US—well I’m not looking at the US. I bring it in, I discuss it as I do the Soviets, but that’s not my primary objective. My primary objective is how the Cold War impacted the Middle East and what we should take away from it to better understand the Middle East today. ♣



360°

by Noah Arjomand

My taxi pulled up to the front entrance of the five star Jumeirah Beach Hotel. As I fumbled stuffing change back into my wallet, one of the valets misinterpreted my delay in getting out of the car and rushed up to open the door for me. I said thanks, walked past some Brits on their way out, and continued to the hotel lobby through a revolving door guarded by a Santa Claus mannequin armed with a plastic bouquet.

Beyond the main lobby was a little bridge symmetrically bisecting an indoor pond with an island on either side. On one island was an unmanned grand piano and a speaker playing lounge music, and on the other, a Christmas tree decked out in gold and red ornaments. Past the bridge was a cluster of plush leather sofas where comfortably slouching white people were being served drinks, then a back patio where more guests lounged in the warm night air. Down some steps and past a little circular plaza where a handful of middle-aged Europeans were waiting for a golf cart shuttle, I followed a sign that said '360°,' down a walkway paved with pastel-colored stone and flanked by identical palm trees. Beside the path, a spot-lit setup that I first took for a nativity scene displayed a traditional Arab nomad hut with primitive tools and rugs. The walkway turned into a long curved pier that led past a legion of empty beach lounge chairs and then out onto the water, the seven star sailboat-shaped Burj Al-Arab hotel looming on the left. At the end of the pier was a manmade island topped by a seafood restaurant and, on top of the restaurant, the 360° bar. Past two bouncers who parted for my New York accent, I ordered a drink and then walked the bar's circumference. All the bartenders looked Southeast Asian and I heard Russian, Spanish

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and Arabic in addition to American and British English. A South Asian man in uniform walked around picking up garbage from the ground.

After being unsociable for a while, I maneuvered myself into a seat at the bar and a group of Iranians soon came over and sat next to me. There were two girls, both with bleached blonde hair and black spaghetti-strap tops and tight jeans, and two guys, both with hair gelled in no particular order and sloganed tee-shirts. They all looked about my age.

I eavesdropped for a moment, at first surprised to hear Persian from blondes, and then struck up a conversation with the guy sitting nearest to me, who had an effeminate voice, orangish-dyed hair and a good bit of acne.

He had worked in Dubai for the last three years, but was getting bored. He asked me if I knew why Dubai was boring, and after thinking a moment I said I guessed everything being so new and artificial made the city feel sterile. The reason, he said, ignoring this, was that there were no underground clubs. There was only alcohol here. And you could have one, two, three, five, ten drinks but so what? It didn't do anything. He asked me if I did drugs and said too bad when I responded no. He ordered another round of drinks for his friends and me. The four of them were drinking either Sex on the Beach or Long Island Ice Tea. Before he could get his credit card out, I handed the bartender a 500 dirham note I'd snuck out of my pocket beforehand. The Iranian looked at me like I'd just shot his dog. I'm buying you another drink after this, he sulked.

One of the girls was quite drunk and would sneak up around the circumference of the bar and then leap in front of me and ask in English, "Where are you from?" and "Are you okay?", and when I

answered, would die laughing and then run over to bury her face in the other Iranian guy's lap until she'd regained control of herself, relatively speaking. Occasionally she would slink over and whisper loudly about me in rapid slurred Farsi to the guy I was talking to. Once, gesticulating wildly, she accidentally mashed her cigarette a half-inch away from his eye. He bent over on his stool touching a hand to his temple and crinkled up his face like he was going to cry. I took another sip of my whiskey tonic and looked ahead. The girl bounced back over towards her other friends happily.

All of them chain-smoked, and each of them, except for the quiet guy on the far side, had three or four double shot drinks in the forty-five minutes or so they were sitting at the bar.

The wasted girl and quiet guy were there on business, my new friend told me. They were signing a contract to construct a factory in the Emirates. Oh, big business, I said and he said of course, if you had money in Dubai you could do anything and you didn't have to give taxes to the government like in America. He ordered me another drink, which I didn't want, telling the bartender to refill the glass I hadn't finished yet. He paid with his credit card, eyeing me with hostility to make sure I didn't try anything. The bartender told us they were closing up early—a new law had been implemented two days prior about playing loud music past 1:30 at night. My friend complained loudly that he was there every Saturday and they had never been so lame.

They cleared the bar out and the Iranians were going to a club after, but I opted for home and we said goodbye in the grandiloquent Persian style. I never learned any of their names.

Through the immaculate gauntlet of Christmas trees and grand pianos and rich white people in khaki shorts again and a valet waved a taxi over for me. My taxi-driver was one of those who work

twenty-four hours straight instead of taking a twelve-hour, five-on-five-off shift. He just caught sleep whenever he could and made about 470 dirhams (\$125) a day.

I said I'd just come from Iran and he asked about the girls. I told him it was different there, they all had to wear headscarves and he said it didn't matter, there were lots of Iranian girls here in Dubai and they were just 30–50 dirhams. Russia, Palestine, Kazakhstan, Iran, China, Philippines; they come from everywhere and they're all fucking. The whole world for twenty or thirty dirhams, he said.



When I asked if he were saving money to go back to India he said he couldn't save anything, Dubai was so expensive. It used to be just 10 dirhams a day for food and shelter, now it was 25 or 30. And there was no work back in India. He'd been in Dubai for seven years.

A red car full of passengers pulled up next to us and he exchanged a few angry words with them at a traffic light. Apparently the passengers had turned down a ride from him earlier and the red car was an unmarked taxi working without a permit. He pulled behind it after the light changed and, gesturing at its license plate, said that if he reported the car to his taxi company he got a 500 dirham bonus. But they're also just trying to make money for food, he said. What to do. He didn't write down the plate number.

We got caught in traffic because of roadwork on the bridge leading back to my own hotel's side of town. Roads were being built so fast in Dubai those days that the routes changed almost daily and if you left for a month you couldn't find your way around. Head against the glass of the passenger-side window, I watched the graveyard shift workers showering welding sparks down from skyscraper skeletons as we swung through a roundabout, circling back the way we'd come. 🌙

WE DESERVE EACH OTHER: RETHINKING DOMESTICATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ANIMAL RIGHTS

by Max Price



There is a popular misconception that domesticated animals are the passive receivers of human aggression and dominance. Generated through a Western discourse promoting the false dichotomy between nature and culture, this view suggests a conquest of nature by certain human cultures beginning in the Neolithic and increasing in intensity into the modern period. Since the 1970's, animal rights activists have appealed to the alleged human dominance over domestic animals to support their political agenda. Many have argued that the killing of animals for meat, clothing, and other products, along with raising animals in captivity represents an abuse of human power over animals. They feel that an enlightened culture should co-exist with nature separately and equally. However, by relying on this division between nature and culture, they fail to realize what domestication is, and what it means to the species involved. The morality to which these activists appeal is situated in a fundamentally flawed understanding of what anthropology and biology have taught us about the process of domestication.

In light of this, a more critical engagement of the anthropological and biological literature concerning domestication is called for. The following sections will attempt to outline such a rethinking by arguing for an understanding of the process that involves mutualism between humans and animals, and denying that domestication represents a one-sided exploitation. This mutualism occurs within the confines of cultural environments in which both humans and animals have agency.

Meat or Murder?

Most animal activists consider the slaughter of animals the main argument against the human consumption of animal products. It is certainly true that human practices cause the premature deaths of domestic animals; it is also true that, as the individual animals are concerned, they do not want to die. The popular animal activist view is that these practices are morally equivalent to slavery and genocide. This article will argue that this dominant view is not consistent within an empirical dialogue, that is, it does not fit with Western academic epistemology.

The docu-melodrama *Earthlings* (2003), narrated by Joaquin Phoenix, presents the activist view that animal slaughter and captivity are parallel to the Nazi Holocaust and American slavery:

The comparison here to the Holocaust is both intentional and obvious. One group of living beings anguished beneath the hands of another. Though some will argue the suffering of animals cannot possibly compare with that of former Jews or slaves, there is in fact a parallel, and for the prisoners and victims of this mass-murder, their holocaust is far from over.

This activist rhetoric describes a paradigm of animal suffering at the hands of human exploitation. The evocative language is sentimental and effective. It asks us to consider the moral implications of our consumption habits. But the activist morality relies on two false assumptions: first, it equates animals with humans (that is, it states that human suffering and animal suffering are morally equivalent); second, it assumes that domestication is fundamentally exploitative. The first assumption might be construed as a spiritual question—are humans and animals spiritually equivalent? This cannot be addressed in this article, since it is outside the Western empirical dialogue within which this article resides. I am not saying that

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the spiritual view is objectively ‘wrong,’ but it is impossible to evaluate under the structures of this article.

However, the logic of the second assumption can be discussed and critiqued. This assumption contains two claims. The first is that humans’ interaction with animals represents an unnatural domination of nature by culture, a practice which is both unnecessary and ethically unsound. The second is that animals do not profit from such interactions. I will address these two claims in turn.

The Conquest of Nature: Traditional Views, Recent Rejections

The traditional view, which many anthropologists and biologists in the last three decades have rejected, is that domestication amounts to the human subjugation of nature. That is, culture conquers nature. This notion was fundamental to the argument articulated by Charles Darwin in *The Variation of Plants and Animals under Domestication* (1875). Darwin proposed that humans exploited the inherent variation in plant and animal species to increase agricultural production (1875:1-14). Intentional selection, he claimed, was the foundation of the variation in domesticated species.

However, this conscious selection process is a recent development. It is not an intrinsic quality of domestication, nor is it the genesis of the practice, according to the archaeological evidence (Cassidy 2007; Leach 2007). In fact, for most of the past 10,000 years of animal husbandry, selection of traits has been unintentional. It is thus becoming apparent that purposeful human experimentation

and control of animals is but one recent feature of a far more complex history (Cassidy 2007: 2).

Addressing this topic, Helen Leach (2007: 73) proposed four stages of domestication:

1. The unconscious selections of certain animal forms “to cope with new environments and cultural practices”;
2. The unintentional selections to favor the types/breeds which originated in the first step;
3. The intentional breeding for traits;
4. The use of modern genetics to create new forms.

In her scheme, which draws on archaeological and historical evidence, the third and fourth stages began no earlier than the eighteenth century.

Thus, the history of domestication began with the adaptations of animals to human environments (stage 1). These physical and behavioral changes were not selected for by humans; they occurred in animals adjusting to the new environments created by early human culture. It was only around the third



millennium BC (Leach 2007: 81), some seven thousand years after the initial domestication, that an unintentional (stage 2) process of selection began. In this second stage, easily manageable animals were bred, and the rest were culled prior to breeding. Stage 3 saw the intentional breeding of animals for particular traits. This required a knowledge of inheritance and a careful recording of pedigrees. The knowledge of inheritance, known perhaps since Hellenistic times, was never fully applied to animals until the beginnings of the modern period (Leach 2007: 82-83).

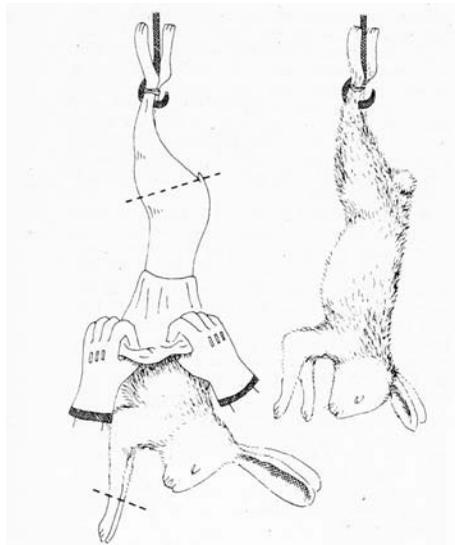
Importantly, the advanced stages of human control do not preclude the effects of previous stages. Thus, even with the present-day genetic manipulation (stage 4), unintentional and unconscious selections still occur (stages 1 and 2) (Leach 2007: 80). The alleged human mastery over “nature” is incomplete; although some conscious selection exists, these human decisions continue to generate unintended effects on animal evolution. Animals are still adapting to human decisions within cultural contexts. The implication is that human-animal mutualism, which defined the initial domestic interactions, is still at work. Therefore, the traditional view, the one to which many animal rights activists subscribe, is unfounded. Domestication is best thought of not as a conquest of nature, but rather the adaptation of animals to human culture. These adaptive responses continue even under today’s agricultural techniques.

Mutualism: Who Selected Whom?

From an evolutionary perspective, cattle, sheep, goats, chickens, and pigs are some of the most successful animals on the planet. According to the Worldwatch Institute and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization the 6.7 billion humans in the world share their resources with roughly 1 billion pigs, 1.5 billion cattle, 1.8 billion sheep and goats, and 13.5 billion chickens (Food and Agriculture Organization 2007; Worldwatch Institute 2008). The worldwide populations of each of these species were in the thousands at the end of the last ice age. Their rapid ascent to biological success from near extinction is remarkable. These animals found an ecological niche in human society, which they exploited over thousands of years in a gradual process that left each of the species physically and behaviorally altered. Domestication ensured the proliferation of their genetic lines through a mutualistic relationship (Reitz and Wing 1999:

279).

Steven Budiansky in *The Covenant of the Wild* (1992) and David Rindos in *The Origins of Agriculture* (1984) argue that animals (and plants) ‘chose’ us as much as we chose them: the biological success of animals is due to a symbiosis with human culture. This perspective allows a unique approach to the study of domestication by emphasizing the animal side of the process. Rather than treating animals as infantile humans, as animal rights activists seem to do, Rindos and Budiansky challenge us to look at domestication in terms of its biological advantages for animals. They point out, from an animal’s perspective, the advantages of adapting to culture.



These advantages were different to the species and circumstances involved, but there are a number of characteristics of human society in the early Neolithic which are obvious niches for animals to fill. The protection of human settlements and the constant sources of food from garbage pits and other refuse are two of the main ones. In fact, we can see these processes at work in the ethnographic record.

Protection and human waste seem to be the motivating factors for the reindeer that follow and co-exist with itinerant Sami settlements in northern Scandinavia (Budiansky 1992: 51-52).

Of course, humans did have a major part to play in the domestication of animals. After all, the economic and subsistence needs of people created the culture to which animals adapted. Nevertheless, Budiansky and Rindos have highlighted the ambiguity involved in the process of domestication. In particular, it becomes unclear who domesticated whom. Did humans make animals more docile so that they could supply us with meat, dairy, fiber, and labor, or did animals tame humans to act as guardians and feeders?

Archaeological evidence of morphological and behavioral changes in humans beginning in the Neolithic speaks to this ambiguity, e.g. stature and bone robusticity diminution, shortening of the jaw, reliance on a softer diet, reliance on clothing (Leach 2003). These physical alterations in humans parallel those seen in domestic animals. This shows that domestication is not a one-way street: Humans and animals adapted to each other within certain cultures. The process of domestication began because of the benefits of interspecies interaction within a cultural environment for both humans and animals. This mutualism continues to this day. Nevertheless, as discussed above, the popular animal activist view relies on an understanding of domestication that precludes mutualism and promotes the nature/culture dualism by treating animals as hapless victims of cultures exclusively created by humans.

Overcoming Assumptions of Nature vs. Culture

Humans' relationships with animals are diverse with respect to species, culture, time period, and idiosyncratic treatment of animals (e.g. as pets or food sources). Above, we have seen how the two assumptions made by animal rights activists do not stand up to critical evaluation. Domestication is not a process of domination of nature by culture, nor does it represent a one-sided exploitation. Rather, biological and archaeological data present a picture of mutual adaptation by humans and certain species of animals to the heavily modified environments that human cultures began to generate in the Neolithic. This implies that culture is not opposed to nature, but a part of it.

Rather than animals being the unconscious victims of human rationality, it seems that both human and animals have been subjected to the structural confines present in certain cultures. For the past three decades anthropological literature, especially the work of Clifford Geertz, has emphasized the fact that culture partially defines our behavior, our emotions, and our understanding of the world. While these works have focused on human interactions with culture, these insights can be applied to animals as well. Cultural structures

determine how a domestic animal moves, where it lives, how and when it reproduces, and how it behaves around other animals. Its conception of the world and its behavior are thus, in many ways, culturally produced. These cultural structures are not the work of particular individuals, but rather the result of complex interaction between people, animals, and objects. Thus it is not human action but cultural structures that act as environments for domestic animals.

This is not to deny each species its role in the generation of this environment. While humans and animals mutually depend upon each other and their cultural structures for survival, the cultures we inhabit likewise depend upon us for their constitutions. Although we are 'trapped' within culture, that does not make us victims. For without humans and animals, culture would be non-existent. The cell and body metaphor is apt; without cells, the body would not exist, but without the structure provided by the body, the cell could not survive. Like the body and other environments, culture is both constructed by and constructive of its resident cells or species.

Understanding culture as a part of nature is essential to rethinking domestication. This framework re-establishes animal agency by positing that animal species live within environments. Although they are not at the top of the trophic pyramid, domestic animals have nevertheless thrived within this environmental niche. In addition, conceiving of culture as an aspect of nature removes the "unnaturalness" from the domestication process, thereby reducing confusion in the moral problematic. Humans did not conquer animals; they mutually adapted to environments, albeit very unique ones. Since humans and animals depend on each other for survival, and since this process occurred in nature, domestication is not inherently immoral.

The Problem of/for Animal Rights

The popular activist view that animal domestication is a barbaric, enslaving process misunderstands the inherently mutualistic relationships between humans and animals in cultural structures of

domestication. Those who subscribe to this view fail to grasp that the relationships in which domestic animals exist with humans are not the products of a cultural triumph over nature, but rather the products of thousands of years of co-evolution. The false notion of human triumph is the basis for the alleged morality to which activists appeal. Ultimately, it is an illusion generated by the Western dissection of the world into diametrically opposed spheres of nature and culture. Thus, by conceiving humans as the sole actors in cultures, and culture as opposed to nature, activists justify their moral standpoint on the basis that humans have enslaved animals by somehow transcending nature. But this ignores the fact that humans, like animals, are but players in a broader scheme of cultural processes.

This raises serious questions about the morality of human-animal interactions. I propose that while moral deliberation on such issues should (and indeed does) take place, the concepts with which we construct and negotiate its terms must be coherent within an empirical dialogue for empirical communities. In this dialogue, one cannot extend the moral precepts of human-human interaction directly to animals, as argued by the more extreme activists. This is because such a position denies the very facts of human-animal mutualism, and the distinctive positions our species occupy in cultures. Killing animals, consuming them, breeding them in captivity, limiting their motion, and altering their genes through intentional or unintentional mechanisms are all a part of a very ancient and very entrenched relationship. We must understand these processes and relationships before addressing animal rights.

This essay has attempted to do just this by

drawing on recent academic literature concerning domestication, particularly with respect to the nature/culture dualism. I have not argued what animal rights should be, but rather what their basis should be. I have also not discussed the assumption that animals and humans are spiritual equivalents or relatives, and thus demand the similar rights (as, *e.g.*, in Jainism). This is because these arguments are not part of an empirical dialogue. I must stress that this does not mean they are objectively ‘wrong,’ but rather impossible to comment on in an article situated in Western empiricism, such as

this one. However, there have been attempts, especially by academic animal activists like Peter Singer, to equate humans with animals in an empirical dialogue.

It is important to recognize here that since animals and humans are both agentive in culture, and since they have different roles in that culture, it is not fitting to extend rights that are designed for Euro-

American humans onto

animals. This is not the same thing as restricting rights on the basis of class, ethnicity, or physical or mental ability (as Singer 2009 argues) because in these cases, the agency of the ‘subaltern’ individual is denied. Providing animals with differential rights, on the other hand, confirms their agency by recognizing that human-animal interaction is not a one-way street, and that animals have unique stakes in cultures. In human rights, we must account for cultural differences in the conception of the individual (*e.g.* Shweder 2003). In animal rights, we must account for the different ways that animals constitute our culture. Just because they lack voices does not mean we must give them ours.

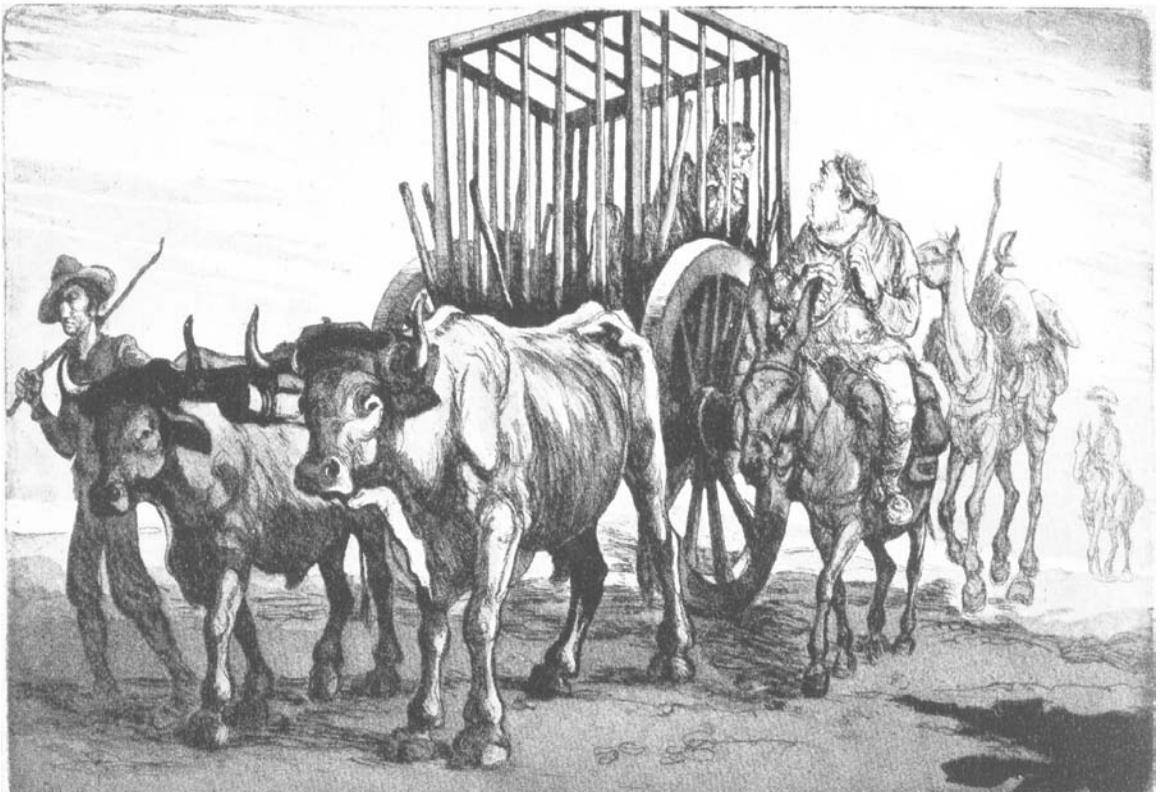
This is why Singer’s argument for extending

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rights to animals because they “suffer” fails. He equates humans and animals not in a spiritual or non-empirical way, but rather by projecting Euro-American concepts of humanness onto animals. This not only conflates humans and animals unfairly in a specifically Western manner, but it also completely ignores the recent academic developments in rethinking domestication. Singer’s philosophical critique, which attempts to be empirical, ultimately relies on the same misconception as popular activist arguments.

The issue for intellectuals and moralists who critically engage the topic of human-domestic animal ethics, then, is how to define and understand immoral cruelty in light of the realities of domestication. How do we place limits on human consumption and exploitation of these animals without misconstruing our proper positions within and as a part of a cultural environment? How do we define proper relationships with domestic animals without relying on the false dichotomy between nature and culture? What is needed in an academic, empirical dialogue is a body of ethics which does not conflate humans and other animals,

but at the same time recognizes animal agency in human culture. It calls for recognizing human responsibility, but at the same time understanding what that means. Humans and domestic animals deserve each other because we have co-evolved and mutually changed one another. This is not to defend the status quo as such. Indeed, I believe many of the ways that certain individuals in our culture treat animals is morally wrong, and that there should be a more serious code of ethics designed to address these issues. What this article has argued is that in order to discuss moral questions, we have to understand what exactly mutualism, domestication, and animal agency mean. We must move beyond thinking of animals as humans, or as natural beasts fettered by culture. The historical and biological facts concerning the continuing process of mutualistic interdependence between humans and animals must be understood before we can truly construct a moral thesis. Animals and humans deserve each other, depend on each other, and evolve together. Developing a moral code without recognizing these basic facts does an injustice to all species. ❧



A POINTED APOLOGY

by Brian Libgober



I first had in mind to write an essay, not about the limitations the essayistic form places on the writer, but rather about something quite down to earth, a comment about the politics of today. I felt inspired by Camus's analysis of the idea of "rebellion" in his long essay *The Rebel*, and thought to carry out something similar of my own. I wanted to talk about "vendetta" as an idea, and in particular the American vendetta against Islamic extremism. I wanted to show how our characterization of the Islamic extremists' political agenda reveals something about us, about our national desires, and aspirations. To be specific, we Americans say that they are romantically pining for a return to the historical apex of their civilization, the age of the caliph; but it seems to me that we too are romantically pining for a moment in our own past, namely the American liberation of Europe. In my essay, I would have tried to show why I think this is the case.

But as I was writing that essay I thought to myself, "Many people who read this essay will feel a certain hostility towards it, because it is not the type of essay they are used to reading." So I thought to write about that hostility, its conditions, and its consequences, instead.

When we read articles about international relations or politics we expect sources, substantiation, rigorous argumentation and so forth. We tend to say, "I'm not going to believe anything unless you prove it to me." But a fundamental belief of mine, which I think there is hardly any point in justifying, is that for certain claims there can be no substantiation besides resonance: the reader simply must feel that it is right. With matters religious,

we all accept this must be the case, and perhaps this is why many of us snicker at religion. But let us be clear: if we were to examine the truth-claims of many disciplines, including and especially those of the so-called "queen of the sciences," mathematics, we would find that they ultimately rest on nothing besides resonance. And yet in so many areas of knowledge we have become so wooden that it is becoming very difficult for us to feel resonance at all.

Of course, we have a perfunctory—and, frankly, wooden—way of responding to arguments that we *know* are supposed to resonate with us. For example, we know that with Nietzsche or Foucault or Freud we cannot expect well-evidenced arguments, because that's not their style, and this is half their genius. If you cannot feel the argument Nietzsche or Foucault is articulating, and ignore the dearth of evidence, then you are a hopeless reader, and you will never be refined enough to understand geniuses of the highest level. But of course we are encouraged put these writers on a pedestal before reading them; as a result, when they say absurd things, we conclude that these geniuses cannot possibly mean what it sounds like they are saying. An example: Nietzsche thinks that our paradigm for understanding the natural world should be to view every object as having a will to power, a *will* in the sense that you or I have a will. If this is not a species of animism then nothing is. Behold the man, Nietzsche, who has vehemently argued that we as a culture must move away from the nihilism of modern science and toward a view that trees and rocks have spirits. But my wooden antagonist claims, "No, that's not Nietzsche." He insists that Nietzsche was probably joking in that passage, and even if he wasn't, still we could split a million hairs to separate Nietzsche from animism.

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And I say to him, even though all those hairs must be split to understand Nietzsche's thought exactly, if we cannot even *entertain* the idea that someone could prefer animism, then our interpretation of Nietzsche will amount nothing more than—forgive my statement of the obvious—a lot of hairsplitting. We must be willing to risk animism if we are to go where Nietzsche has gone. If we are wooden to this timbre of Nietzsche's thought, then he has nothing to teach us. We must shake ourselves out of this torpor, which has deeply affected cultural criticism and the humanities as a whole.

In this spirit, let me offer a brave little observation as an aside, which I think may have some resonance with this topic.

With the scientific revolution, the natural sciences developed a way of accessing truth which was fundamentally unassailable.

They developed empiricism and the notion of evidence. They developed the notion of demonstrability as a criterion for something to be scientific truth, even fact at all. Philosophy, and the humanities as a whole, then faced a conundrum. Given this impossible ideal, how was it possible for these disciplines to say anything true at all? One way was mimicry. The study of society, which had theretofore been based on extrapolation from little more than common sense, became empirical in the form of economics, sociology, political science, and so forth. Some disciplines, however, could not be turned into empirical sciences—for example, metaphysics, which took a different “science” as its role model, namely mathematics. Descartes and Kant modeled their arguments on the unassailable deductive methods of mathematics, which allowed then, somewhat amusingly, to disparage the truths offered by natural science as inferior to the *a priori* certainties of mathematics. Of course, many misidentify the guarantor of de-

duction, the thing that makes a deduction valid. For Descartes it was the “natural light,” no doubt the same natural light he saw when working on geometry. At some point one sees why something is true, something feels right: one feels a resonance. In mathematics the feeling of soundness is still the be-all and end-all of proof, and mathematicians have never quite got beyond “natural light” as a gold standard. Nonetheless, as a methodology for metaphysics, the natural light was declared bankrupt in some court of public opinion somewhere, and ultimately failed to be remotely as compelling as the scientific truth offered by the new empiricism.

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Herein lies one of the great ironies of Nietzsche's work: as relentlessly anti-positivist as Nietzsche was, he created a way for philosophy to proceed scientifically, by combining philosophy with history in the form of genealogy. The idea was

that one could speak without fear of the biasing interference of personal belief by invoking the historical record. Here, at last, was something that could be demonstrated. The philosopher states his claim, and then offers evidence from the historical record. At last, with legitimate evidence of some kind, the philosopher can proudly stand on his feet and say something.

Of course one may wonder whether any of this history is any good. The historical philosopher works with grand themes, sometimes too grand for the history that is meant to serve as his evidence. For example, a philosopher once claimed that there are master moralities and slave moralities. Is it the case that every morality is one or the other? Couldn't it be that some moralities are essentially hybrid? The philosopher who expounded this theory did not seem to care that his hypotheses were rash. The resonance in general is what mattered to him. If one is to say great things

with deep resonance, it might be the case that one would have to be *wrong*, at least partially.

History as a method of philosophy thus has no guarantee of truth, and, it would appear, is probably doomed to be incompletely true. On the other hand, a second means to demonstrate truth had already been developed much earlier and has gradually risen to such prominence that it nearly eclipses the other means. This technique is called textual criticism. One cannot be sure whether what the text says is right, but one can be sure that *what one is saying about the text* is right. The result is that people quote other people as a way of providing evidence, and then proceed as if their argument was evidenced.

Take for example the book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* by Richard Rorty, a thinker of considerable merit who, even in this moderately silly book, occasionally says something that resonates deeply with me. The book itself is a manifesto for what Rorty calls “liberal ironism.” An ironist is someone who refuses to make their beliefs dogmatic, who does not believe that their own views are true in an ultimate sense. Such a person realizes that they hold their particular beliefs only as a result of a series of historical contingencies. Rorty devotes the first third of the book to explaining what has made such a view possible, and Nietzsche and Wittgenstein figure prominently in his account. He presses on to describe the virtues of a liberal world-view, by which he means a view that thinks “causing suffering is the worst thing that we do.” He then analyzes several prominent thinkers and illustrates what makes them liberal or not liberal, ironist or not ironist. He closes with the hope that in the future more liberal ironists will come along.

I am not interested in claiming that Rorty’s book is actually a manifesto of the oft-caricatured relativistic bleeding-heart liberal professor type, al-

though Rorty certainly seems to have thought not one minute about whether someone might read his book in this way. Nor do I want observe that Rorty also appears not to have considered what Nietzsche’s reaction to this book would be, despite the prominent role Nietzsche plays in his argument. It is safe to say Nietzsche would think the book abysmal in its expressing with utter earnestness the nihilistic sentimentality which defines our age. What I do want to point out is simply this: at the end of the book, Rorty gives a salutation to the liberal ironist of the future, who will contin-

ue to experiment with the form and content of art and thought and help us explore an as yet unknown part of human existence. Let us think for a moment about whether the book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* experiments with form in any way. It has helped us realize nothing about our humanity at all. In fact, its essential insights could have been given in no more than ten

pages, without quoting or analyzing text at all, and probably with infinitely more aplomb. Why does Rorty do it, then—why does he write this way? He writes a book praising the virtues of free expression, but he does it in the most cloistered, stifled style of today: textual analysis.

I think Rorty is afraid, afraid that what he would write in a free and uninhibited style would not be received warmly. He is afraid that he has no talent for writing beautiful things, even beautiful essays. There is a world of difference between the essays Rorty spent his life writing and the essays of an Orwell or a Borges. If Rorty were to try for beauty, well, he might not make it. And so he thoroughly evidences his argument, one that was supposed to be a statement of principles, was supposed to come from his heart. To be sure, Rorty is, as I said, a great thinker; the only really disappointing thing about reading his book is imagining how much richer it would be if its author had a little more faith in himself, in his ability to express himself,

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and had not used his textual evidence as a shield. Especially sad, given that the point of ironism was to escape from the tyranny of truth, and here we have our liberator holding it ever closer.

We must not repeat Rorty's mistake: we must believe in ourselves, and try to express good thoughts, clever thoughts, and free thoughts to the last. But now it appears we are no better off than before—how does one say something about the world, without the safety of speaking from an already enunciated position, say Foucault's or Marx's, or with the support of immense knowledge, as an es-

tablished expert in the field? My answer is simple: in any way at all. The principal duty an essay writer has to his reader is to not waste his time. The best way to do that is to challenge the reader with a new thought, conveyed with passion, written entertainingly and clearly, unless for some reason clarity would diminish enjoyment. To come up with an idea that satisfies these criteria, why, one could start anywhere, even with some homespun piece of folk wisdom. Something like, "Between every pair of enemies there is a mirror reflecting each one on the other." ♣

ANIMAL SPIRITS, BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS, AND THE GREAT RECESSION

by Dmitri Leybman



Animal Spirits: How Human Psychology Drives the Economy, and Why It Matters for Global Capitalism

by George A. Akerlof and Robert J. Shiller
Princeton University Press, 229 pp., \$24.95

In their new book, *Animal Spirits: How Human Psychology Drives the Economy, and Why It Matters for Global Capitalism*, George A. Akerlof and Robert Shiller remind their readers that prior to the economic crash of 2008, the prevailing conception of consumers by economists went something like this: Individuals are best understood as rational utility-maximizing agents—Homo economicus, if you will—who, when left to their own devices, can be trusted to act in a more-or-less predictable manner that, when unconstrained, usually yields a positive outcome, not only for the agents themselves, but for society as a whole. Even if individuals by themselves aren't always rational, we can still assume that an aggregate rationality exists if such an assumption helps us to construct successful predictive models of human behavior. Furthermore, even if one acknowledges that such an assumption is simplistic and unrealistic, that does not mean we should dispose of it. The most important consideration should be whether the assumption is useful and whether it makes relatively accurate predictions about how human beings behave.

In addition to the assumption of rationality within scientific modeling, there is a concomitant neglect of psychology, or more specifically, the impact of feelings and emotions on individual and mass behavior within markets. There are two reasons such neglect occurred. First, neo-classical economic theory appeared very successful in curbing busi-

ness cycles and dealing with recessions, inflation, and unemployment. Although the field of behavioral economics could provide a more accurate picture of how individuals interact, such insights appeared to be unnecessary in understanding how to maintain a healthy macroeconomy.

The other reason for the neglect of psychology concerns the reluctance of economists to abandon the older classical models that had served them so well in the past. After the Great Depression, there was an ideological shift from classical and neo-classical economic models to Keynesian ones. These latter models emphasized the need for government intervention within the economic sphere to reduce unemployment and spur demand during recessions or depressions. Once the Great Depression abated, there was a return to neo-classical economics, albeit tempered by the idea that free markets, left to themselves, can sometimes result in failure.

By the time of the crash in 2008, the Great Depression was a distant memory. Economists, it seemed, had figured out how to prevent the type of collapses seen in the 1920s and 1930s. For example, in his 1995 address as President to the American Economic Association, the Nobel laureate Robert Lucas, Jr. assured his audience that “the central problem of depression-prevention has been solved, for all practical purposes”. After the crash occurred, details emerged that the market had not acted in the manner predicted by neo-classical economic theory, but that, in fact, irrationality, overly confident speculation, and the emergence of a housing bubble had played a prominent role in bringing the economy to the brink of another Great Depression.

Animal Spirits is an attempt by two distinguished

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economists to urge a paradigm shift in the economic profession's understanding of human behavior. Akerlof is an economist whose contributions to understanding informational asymmetry helped garner him the Nobel Prize in 2001. His work led to the formalization of models capable of predicting and accounting for the impact of asymmetric information within markets. Shiller's academic work has largely focused on understanding the link between psychological biases on the behavior of stock markets and formation of economic bubbles. Since the 1980s, particularly after the stock market crash of 1987, Shiller has made his reputation by highlighting the inconsistencies between the predictions of the efficient market theorem and the actual movement of stock prices. The authors are then not strangers to studying situations that present obstacles—informational or psychological—to market-generated efficiency.

In their book, the authors argue for the incorporation of behavioral and psychological considerations into macro- and microeconomics. Even the very title of the book—*Animal Spirits*—would seem familiar to anyone who has read John Maynard Keynes' *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*. Keynes argues that individuals' actions, especially during time of uncertainty, are not the "outcomes of a weighted average of quantitative benefits multiplied by quantitative probabilities," but rather the result of "animal spirits," "a spontaneous urge to action" (3). Shiller and Akerlof seize on the idea of 'animal spirits' guiding individuals, and use it to espouse a new type of economics, no longer beholden to a mythical conception of individual rationality. Instead, the authors encourage research aimed at understanding precisely how individuals, by themselves or in the aggregate, behave in markets and respond to incentives.

The central thesis in *Animal Spirits* is that for too long economists have relied on a simplistic understanding of human beings. In conventional economic models, individuals are abstracted to such an extent that such models are no longer representative of how people actually behave. Furthermore, they claim, this adherence to a rationally-centered, self-interested conception of man, is actually very limited in capacity to explain and account for economic trends in the past and during the present.

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To supplant this rationalist view of individuals, the authors urge economists to adopt Keynes view that "that much economic activity is governed by animal spirits. People have noneconomic motives. And they are not always rational in their pursuit of their economic interests" (ix).

To demonstrate their thesis, the authors divide their book into two parts. Part One is divided into five chapters, delineating the five different types of 'animal spirits': Confidence, Fairness, Corruption and Bad Faith, Money Illusion, and Stories. The authors argue that these 'animal spirits' need to be accounted for if one is to understand how to prevent high unemployment, inflation, and depressions. To offer one example of these 'animal spirits,' the authors discuss how the notion of fairness drives individual behavior. The authors cite numerous psychological and behavior demonstrating that individuals value fairness more than they value selfish utility. For example, imagine the following scenario:

You are lying on a beach on a hot day. All you have to drink is ice water. For the past hour you have been thinking that you would like to drink a nice cold bottle of your favorite brand of beer. A companion gets to make a phone call and offers to bring back a beer from the only nearby place where the beer is sold [a fancy resort hotel, a rundown supermarket]. He says that the beer might be expensive so he asks you how much you would be willing to pay for the beer. He says he will buy the beer if its costs as much or less than the price you state, but if its costs more than the price you state he will not buy it. You trust your friend and there is no

chance to bargain with [bartender, store owner]. What price do you state? (22)

The authors tell us that the average respondents had higher reservation prices for the particular beer “when it came from the swanky hotel than from the run-down grocery store” (22). To Shiller and Akerlof, and presumably the researchers conducting the study, these responses indicate that fairness can sometimes trump rational economic motivation, for “if responders are considering only how much the beer would add to their enjoyment of

lying on the beach, they should pay the same amount for it, whether it comes from the hotel or from the grocery store” (22). If the grocery stores charges too much for the beer, then that person will

forego getting the beer even though economic rationality predicts that they should be willing to spend the exact same amount regardless of whether it comes from a bar or from a grocery store. The only reason, then, that they would forego getting a beer, would be because “they think it would be unfair for the grocery to charge a price that is more than their maximum” (22).

The second part of the book is divided into eight chapters, each purporting to answer a seemingly simple question about economics. Chapter six asks why economies fall into depression, while chapter eleven wonders why financial prices and corporate investments are so volatile. The authors then proceed to answer each question, first by showing the limitations of neoclassical economic theory, and then by arguing that “animal spirits” are actually

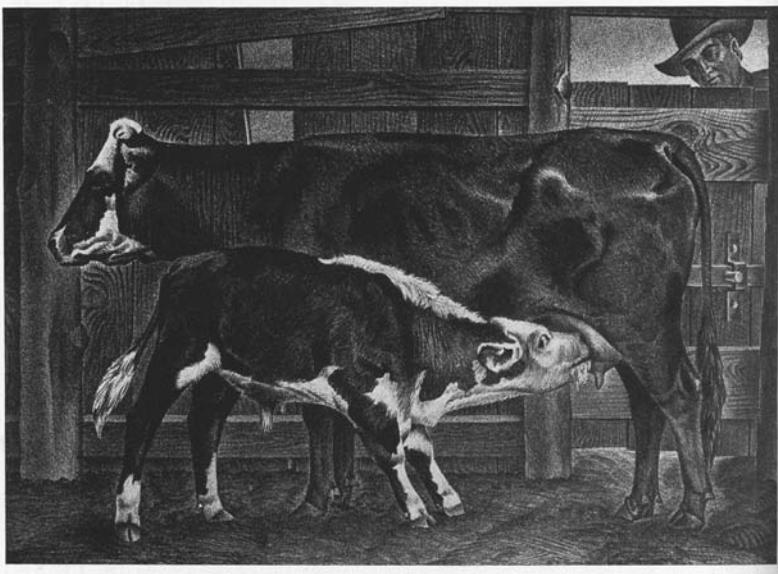
better suited to providing clear answers to such questions.

One of the most interesting questions is from chapter nine: Why is there a trade-off between inflation and unemployment in the long run? The question itself is actually somewhat controversial: the very idea that there is a trade-off between unemployment and inflation was until recently thought to have been discredited in economics. Prior to 1967, it was generally assumed that there indeed existed a short-term and long-term tradeoff be-

tween these two macroeconomic variables. The general consensus held that if the government was unwilling to tolerate high unemployment, it needed to encourage economic growth until just the right rate of inflation was reached to reduce unemployment in the country (43).

But on December 29, 1967, Milton Friedman delivered a presidential address to the American Economic Association that sought to discredit the inflation-unemployment trade off. Friedman argued that “the nominal wage increases that people ask for [do] not depend only on the level of unemployment” but that instead workers bargain only for real wages. The reason is that employees and employers only care about what wages will buy relative to the values of prices. People, in other words, have no money illusion. They know that nominal wages don’t matter: only real wages do.

To refute Friedman’s influential hypothesis, the authors cite many different examples, but the most important one, the one most damning to Friedman’s conjecture, is the stickiness of wages,



in particular during recessions. The argument goes like this: During recessions, the prices of goods diminish. Manufacturers want to encourage spending so they reduce how much various goods cost. As this occurs, these manufacturers, now acting as employees, want to introduce wage cuts into their work force. If Friedman is right and people only care about real wages, then they shouldn't have any problem with these imposed wage cuts. After all, their real wages will still be exactly the same, but their nominal wages will be lower. However, money wages don't decline during recessions. In fact, employers are often unwilling to reduce wages because it often leads to lower worker morale (107-108). Clearly, this is an example in which the money illusion persists.

Most economists would cite the stickiness of wages as a slight exception to the prevailing consensus. Akerlof and Shiller urge further skepticism by citing more studies, including one conducted by Akerlof, arguing that the impact of wage stickiness is actually a strong contributor to unemployment. Akerlof, along with William Dickens and George Perry, showed that a permanent reduction of inflation from 2% to zero increases the unemployment rate permanently by 1.5% (110). They obtained similar results using “econometric estimations and in hundreds of other simulations in which the parameters were chosen randomly over a reasonable range” (110).

The book ends with a conclusion designed to explain both the book's origins and its purposes. The authors tell us that they constructed this theory of “animal spirits” to answer the question posed to many economists recently: “Why did most of us [economists] fail to foresee the current economic crisis?” (167). The real reason for this oversight, they argue, is because of “the conventional wisdom that underlies so much of current economic theory [where so] many members of the macroeconomics and finance profession have so far in the direction “rational expectation” and “efficient markets” that they fail to consider the most important dynamics underlying economic crises” (167). By incorporating ‘animal spirits’ into economics, we can be better prepared to understand the economy in the future and prevent such a crisis from occur-

ring again.

Aside from one main scruple, the book is well-written and informative, chock full of interesting examples and perceptive insights into sociology, economics, and psychology. The most annoying aspect of the prose concerns the authors' incessant repetition of the phrase ‘animal spirits’ throughout the text. If they want their ideas to be taken seriously, surely a better name could have been assigned to it. With all these ‘animal spirits’ littering the prose, one feels as though one is reading a mediocre horror story, and not the work of two brilliant economists. “To understand how economies work and how we can manage them and prosper, we must pay attention to the thought patterns that animate people's ideas and feelings, their animal spirits [cue ominous music]” (1).

Although I find their argument compelling and even persuasive, there are several objections they do not effectively confront in their book. First, how are economic models supposed to incorporate ‘animal spirits’ into their descriptions of how individuals behave? Models, by definition, are imperfect representations of the reality they seek to describe. Their purpose is not to offer exact representations of reality, but instead to offer simplified versions of how things behave and interact.

Additionally, social science models cannot be faulted for not always being able to accurately predict outcomes. Instead, models, particularly ones in the social sciences, are probabilistic in their predictions. So the crash of 2008 cannot be used to discredit the entire edifice of neo-classical economic theory (the reliance on rationality, utility maximization, self-interest, etc.), since the models dependent on these theories never pretended to be perfectly accurate. Instead of incorporating animal spirits, why not simply construct regulations within the market to make information more transparent and thus make economic bubbles, panic, and hysteria less likely to occur? We did exactly the same thing with banks during the Great Depression. After the economy crashed, individuals panicked and went to banks in droves, demanding their money back. The way the government ensured that such a run on banks never

crippled the economy again, was to create the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), which not only alleviated depositors' worries, but also protected banks from the hysteria that could accompany economic crisis. No notion of 'animal spirits' was needed to make these regulations. Instead, we simply learned from our mistakes and made reforms to the financial system.

The other question Akerlof and Shiller do not address is how exactly the notion of 'animal spirits' helps us to predict people's behavior. It appears that psychological responses to various stimuli are often very unpredictable, as they are based upon culture, norms, and previous experiences to these stimuli. If psychological responses are the products of individuals' personal experiences and these experiences vary from person to person, then how can the notion of 'animal spirits' be used to construct a testable, that is to say predictive, economic model? Aren't there also too many confounding variables in being able to posit that one particular animal spirit caused such and such outcome to occur? To posit that these 'animal spirits' are psychological in nature seems to assume that they do

not arise from the particular circumstances of an individual as both a participant in and the recipient of their environment. To put it more bluntly: people have 'animal spirits,' but so what? How does this help us to delineate what conflux of so-called 'animal spirits' are responsible for the occurrence of economic bubbles or economic crashes?

Akerlof and Shiller's book is an interesting and thought-provoking attempt to understand how underlying human psychology drives the economy. The questions they pose and the examples they provide should be read by any economist seeking to better understand the differences between what economics predicts will occur, and how people actually behave as individuals and within larger groups. With more research into behavioral economics and finance, perhaps the arguments set forth by Akerlof and Shiller will be legitimated and incorporated within the profession of economics. There are still many more questions than answers about how useful these authors' particular approach will be to economic research. But at least they are asking the right questions. ☺



TAKING THE STREET OUT OF STREET ART

by Sean Pears



Nearly every American, whether he realizes it or not, is familiar with the work of Shepard Fairey. Fairey is a 39-year-old street artist whose stickers and stencils of French wrestler “Andre the Giant” swept skateboarding communities throughout the U.S. in the late 80s and 90s. His depiction of the 7’4”, 520 lb wrestler—whose immense size was the result of acromegaly—symbolizes the force of propaganda in shaping the American consciousness, and, according to Fairey’s 1990 *Manifesto*, is an “experiment in Phenomenology” (the capitalization is his). Fairey’s work was most recently thrust into America’s consciousness by his hugely popular poster for the 2008 Obama campaign. His design of the President’s face—red and blue above the word “HOPE”—has become as well known as the campaign itself, and can be seen on television, in street corners, on T-shirts, and in political satires.

While Fairey had been well known in his own right before the campaign, this design has given him a new wave of attention, not only from his former base of skaters and street artists, but also in the contemporary art community. In February, an exhibit encompassing twenty years of Fairey’s work premiered at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Taken individually, there is much strength and energy to many of the exhibited pieces; together, however, they appear at once stylistically monotonous and ideologically inconsistent, for a number of reasons.

Before discussing Shepard Fairey’s “art” as art, I want to make clear that I do perceive something

worthwhile and enduring about his project as a whole. Fairey has explained in interviews that his “Andre the Giant” posters are meant to defy meaning and purpose; the wrestler subject was not a premeditated or comprehensive idea, but an image he alighted on while paging through the newspaper. “Andre” came to symbolize the force of propaganda through a slow evolution; the “Obey” tagline was later adopted from Sprite advertisements. Fairey’s work enables this gradual development. He works with spray-paint and stencil, the city itself is his canvas, and his success is determined not by how many patrons show up to his gallery, but rather, like propaganda, by the persistent reproduction of his image.

The genius of street art lies in finding unlikely and difficult spots to tag, finding lots of these spots, coming back the next day when the city washes one’s work away, and running from the cops. It is less about the image and more about the act. The 2005 book *Wall and Piece* presents the work of Banksy, another world-renowned street artist, in just this way. It is full of photographs of his art in cities, often with people reacting to it, as well as many anecdotes from the artist, for instance a tale in which he became trapped in the animal cages while tagging the Barcelona Zoo. What makes street art remarkable is its engagement with the city: the art of Shepard Fairey is no exception.

The ICA exhibit did show Fairey’s work in an urban context. On the portion of a wall near the entrance, there hung a small collage of photographs. In the lobby was a plastic newspaper bin covered with “Andre” stickers. But that was all. The rest of the exhibit focused on Fairey’s “fine art”: his murals, collages, paintings, and prints.

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Walking through the exhibit, one is struck first of all by the stylistic monotony of Fairey's "fine art." Street art loses its effect when the images are dissimilar, indeed if they are not the same; but in a gallery, where patrons see one painting after another, room after room, they look for some variation. Despite a wide range of materials and a wide range of subjects—

newspaper, wood, metal, canvas; soldiers, weapons, families, politicians, celebrities—the exhibit was overwhelmingly monotonous. The pieces were similar, not in the sense that they all captured a certain emotion, feeling, or mood, but rather that they mostly failed to do so.

However, Fairey might not have intended to capture any feelings or moods: his project is fundamentally anti-propagandist. His prints of politicians and political activists run the gamut of ideologies, from Martin Luther King to Che to Stalin to a Zapatista soldier to—you guessed it—George Bush. But the exhibit also displayed a series of prints of musicians and celebrities. After seeing Notorious BIG, Jimi Hendrix, Johnny Rotten, Kurt Cobain, Flavor Flav, and Marilyn Monroe, one starts to imagine that obtaining the rights to all of these images must have been the hardest part of the project.

One also starts to wonder: what is this huge range of images, this hip fifteen-year-old suburbanite's conception of the last century, really meant to portray? One thing it suggests is an un-politicized attack on propaganda. Whatever the particular political aims of a piece of propaganda might be, viewers, Fairey's work seems to suggest, should be more attuned to the ways in which their thoughts and ideas are being manipulated. By appropriating with complete indiscriminatio

us that what we consider to be important is what we are given, not what we have found.

But this hypothesis renders the very effective Obama campaign posters somewhat perplexing. The exhibit proudly displayed a letter addressed to Fairey from the President, thanking him for his efforts. Is Fairey's support of

The genius of street art lies in finding unlikely and difficult spots to tag, and coming back the next day when the city washes one's work away, and running from the cops.

the Obama campaign meant to be part of his anti-propagandist "experiment," perhaps a tremendous joke he is playing on all of our consciousnesses? Or are we supposed to think that all propaganda is bad, except for liberal, Democratic propaganda, which is just fine? Fairey seems to be saying that it is actually alright to be seduced by the looming, all-encompassing force of

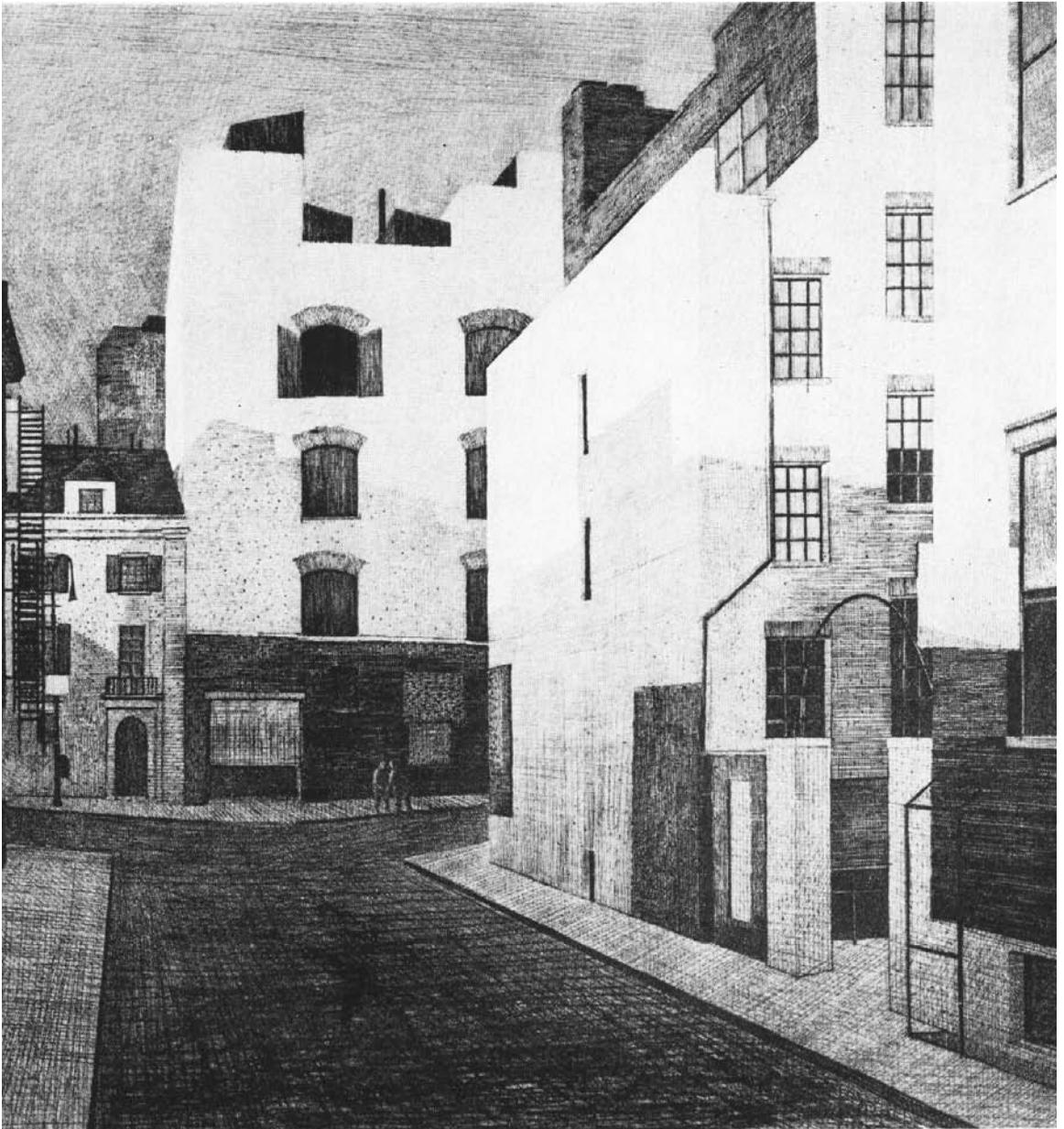
propaganda, as long as it supports his own political ideologies. And if Fairey's attack is aimed at consumerism or marketing, one should remember that he has done album cover art for the Black-Eyed Peas. This is a question of artistic integrity. The Black-Eyed Peas?!

Even if one wants to forgive this obvious contradiction, there is still the question of the anti-propagandist message itself, and how effectively it is expressed in art. In his *Manifesto*, which hangs in the last room of the exhibit, Fairey cites Heidegger in reference to the phenomenological nature of his work. Honestly, I can't speak to that. But, Heidegger aside, to successfully pursue an experiment in phenomenology, shouldn't one give careful and nuanced reflection to the actual problems of contemporary consciousness? This is not to say that the government and major corporations don't control our thinking—of course they do. But this looming Big Brother, this acromegalic—does he capture the anxiety of our consciousness? Does he symbolize the problems of

our time? Or is this rather a relic of a past society, one only just coming to terms with the first journalistic footage of modern war, rather than a society that watches amateur videos from Iraq on a screen held in the palm of its hand?

But, after all, one shouldn't be too hard on Fairey. It's not easy being a famous street artist. What is he supposed to wear? Besides, a number of recent legal preoccupations have no doubt distracted him from his art. In February, Fairey filed a preemptive suit against the Associated Press over his use of

their image to create the very Obama poster which has thrust him into the spotlight. However, far more interesting than copyright infringement is the question of what street art really is, and how it ought to be exhibited. My message for anyone trying to exhibit the unique beauty of street art boils down to this: you can take the art out of the street—and cities do! Street art is constantly being removed, and persistently redone, which is part of why it is so cool—but you run into some major problems when you try to take the street out of the art. ☛



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