Eric Lott

"I think what I need," Bob Dylan sang on *Time Out of Mind* (1997), "might be a full-length leather coat." How else to make it through the torpor of middle age? Then a sardonic rhyming afterthought: "Somebody asks me / if I'm registered to vote." Such bleak clarity is apparently lost on Dylan's primary audience, the white male baby-boomer cohort that grew up with him. They now occupy the American political and intellectual center in the form of a cadre of liberal writers and academics. These intellectuals have worked hard in recent years to make America safe for a pallid version of social democracy—they're registered to vote—while attempting to free the realm of culture from partisan political struggle and so-called identity politics. If President Clinton has resurrected FDR's "four freedoms" phraseology to distract us from his abandonment of the New Deal, then he has had a mimic chorus in this reconstituted intellectual center—a convergence of seemingly disparate cultural effects and generational ideologies. This, then, is the new boomer liberalism.

The grand march to the center of the 1990s, regularly announced by Richard Rorty in such places as *Harper's* and the *New Republic*, has been joined by all manner of erstwhile left-leaning suckers. This powerful new liberalism, which fuses a newfound Popular Front sensibility to a crotchety dismissal of new social movements (particularly race-based ones), now confronts us as a force in dire need of an antiwhite, antistatist critique. Its rise has all the seeming inevitability of a scrappy outsider speaking undeniable sense, and is all the more dangerous for that. Bring on your Dems: Michael Lind, former William F. Buckley acolyte turned normative nationalist in such works as *The Next American Nation* and *Up from Conservatism*; Todd Gitlin, the "common dreamer" who takes center stage in *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wrecked by Culture Wars*; David Hollinger, advocate of a *Postethnic America*; Paul Berman, Robespierre-iss-
DON'T FERGIT TA SMASH TH' STATE, KIDS!
everywhere soothsayer in A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968; Sean Wilentz, superb if color blind historian-cum-antimulticulturalist; Michael Tomasky, long-lost radical journalist and author of Left for Dead; Greil Marcus, backward-looking post-Situationist conjurer of Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes; Michael Kazin and Maurice Isserman, lesser-evilist Clintonian historians of populism and communism, respectively; Mary and Thomas Byrne Edsall, New Democrat nostalgics and authors of the influential Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics; Jim Sleeper, undriving denouncer of racial self-definition in Liberal Racism; Joe Klein, state romancer in Primary Colors; and Michael Lerner, Cornel West's straight man on the Jews and Blacks tour and creator of the Clinton-beloved Politics of Meaning. To name only these widely published and respected writers is to survey the sensibility of a good sweep of liberal intellectual publication today, from the New Yorker to the New York Times to the New York Review of Books to
Newsweek, from Harper’s to the New Republic to the Nation, from Common Knowledge to Tikkun to Transition, from Arion to Dissent. In differing ways, all of them lament the rise of identity politics and the decline of true populism, common dreams, or any other euphemism for class that can be conscripted to serve the interests of a white male cadre badly in need of a rationale. Their achievement has been to offer a definition of “culture” distinct from the “real” sphere of political struggle, and thereby to endorse the liberal nationalism that many of these writers began their careers protesting. And because cultural studies has done too little, until recently, to analyze the relation of culture to the state, the new liberals have been able to dismiss left intellectual work as turned off and tuned out, or, in Gitlin’s vapid aperçu, “marching on the English department while the right took the White House.” This fact has, of course, only exaggerated these writers’ sense of hard-won realism and self-importance.

You might say it began with Clintonista in 1992. Maya Angelou at the inauguration, Harvard’s Robert Reich in the cabinet—the liberal brain trust was coming back to Washington. Like the Baffler—seemed all the more autonomous and inevitable for that. (Transaction Press has duly reissued The Vital Center, and Rortyite fellow traveler John Patrick Diggins recently edited a hagiographic festchrift entitled The Liberal Persuasion: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and the Challenge of the American Past.) Lind’s The Next
American Nation (1995) and Gitlin's The Twilight of Common Dreams (1995) sketched up a left-liberalism perfectly situated to rush in where rightward sensationalism had run its course. Since then, events have conspired to gel the new vital-centrism into a public, self-consciously united force, with ideological coherence and mutually informing commitments. Some

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account of this trek is necessary to grasp the shape of the new center.

John Sweeney's victory in the 1996 AFL-CIO election harmonized beautifully with the emergence of this new liberalism, which desperately sought a publics political cause not associated with the radicalism of identity-based social movements. The organizers of the October 1996 Teach-In with the Labor Movement at Columbia University managed to broker a meeting between intellectuals (including the Rortyites) and labor (both leadership and rank and file). This rousing public event was an achievement in its own right, and one, further, that delivered the requisite sense of promise to both sides. It was arguably the most important convocation of intellectuals and unionists since the heyday of the labor movement—an era that more or less ended in 1948, when the Taft-Hartley Act effectively legitimated red-baiting in the unions in exchange for regular, collectively bargained wage increases. For the neoliberal intellectuals, the Teach-In inaugurated a grand new pact, since for most of them the AFL-CIO defines the labor movement in toto. (Never mind independent shop floor insurgencies, unorganized workers, or the radical democratic visions that attend laboring cultures everywhere.)

The hopes all around found their way into the pages of Audacious Democracy, a collection of Teach-In talks and speeches. But Audacious Democracy also attests to something disturbing in the events' conception and proceedings—a product, perhaps, of the organizers' allegiances. The organizing committee's cochairs were the labor historians Steve Fraser and Nelson Lichtenstein, authors and editors of numerous important books. Fraser, in fact, was one of the editors of a pathbreaking essay collection on a related theme, 1989’s Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980. Yet that book was distinguished by its almost wholly white and male authorship and focus (Elaine Tyler May on the postwar family was the lone exception); it also featured politically ambivalent essays by Edsall, Iserman, and Kazin. In retrospect, it's not difficult to see why struggles not predicated on a certain limited idea of the "working class" got short shrift at the Columbia Teach-In.

Of course, this suited the new centrists just fine, and many of them appeared on the Columbia panels to argue with the radicals who had brought them there. The result was to dull the edge of the radicals and to supply the liberals with labor credentials for their rearguard academic battles. Meanwhile, the white, male, boomerish profile of the Teach-In's organizing committee was disheartening evidence of the Old-Left-meets-New thinking behind the Teach-
In itself, this Popular Front-like approach, while dutifully attendant to racism, gender inequity, and other struggles alongside the fundamental issue of labor, only revealed the marginal status of the “extras” who would presumably be taken care of once the (implicitly white) working class had won.

If the Teach-In’s roster didn’t skew the event toward the center, it certainly did
bring to light the inescapable conflicts between a liberal-left realpolitik and a more socialist left. At the opening summit, for example, Richard Rorty—speaking in the company of historians Eric Foner and Steve Fraser, feminist (and former labor journalist) Betty Friedan, critical legal scholar Patricia Williams, AFL-CIO president John Sweeney, and reputed leftist Cornel West—defended labor activism and civil disobedience in the strongest terms. (Besides combating the right, this is one of the most useful things a liberal can do.) But then Rorty loudly lamented the sixties flag-burning antiwar left who “began to spell ‘America’ with a k” and thereby “did deeper and more long-lasting damage to the American left than they could ever have imagined.” That got him roundly booed. Surely Rorty knew that he would be booed, and in that moment I respected his courage. The point is that there are real divisions here, divisions that confound simplistic notions of left unity, divisions that spoil the Teach-In’s fantasy of a left that could buttress the new AFL-CIO. How much better it would have been for labor to make alliances with successful activist movements all over the country—people who might have been able to instruct the white guys on what it’s actually like to work in today’s strikingly recomposed labor force.
Instead, vital centrists policed the left from within its company, not only writing off the student left but also, in the addresses of Todd Gitlin and others, refusing to consider the way blacks, Latinos, women, queers, and others have transformed the very meaning of “the poor.” In fighting identity politics from the standpoint of “labor,” these guys have some thinking to do.

Since the Columbia gathering, the prestige of union affiliation has enhanced boomer liberalism’s credibility; their newfound ability to invoke the labor movement lent punch and currency to their timeworn arguments. Maybe it was time to go back to the fundamental issues of labor and class! Never mind the late discovery of labor by most of these writers, who only a few years ago were embroiled in trivial turf wars with phantom opponents—e.g., Richard Rorty’s debates with Jürgen Habermas, or Paul Berman’s tête-à-tête with political correctness—and had little concern for their new friends and allies in the unions.

Then, in September 1997, Teamsters president Ron Carey was indicted on charges of fraudulent financial practices during his campaign for reelection against James Hoffa, Jr. This unexpected scandal signaled an abrupt end to the honeymoon of the intellectuals and the unions: the labor movement had suddenly lost the momentum that served as the optative glue of the new liberalism. Its writers now aloft in a sort of speculative bubble, the new cadre feels free to opine in the most authoritative fashion about matters that were outside its purview as recently as three or four years ago.

The speculative bubble of boomer liberalism gained great girth in March of 1998. The release of Richard Rorty’s Achieving Our Country, the March issue of Dissent (with new format and carefully collected personnel), and the film of Joe Klein’s Primary Colors combined to achieve a rare aura of synchronicity. The whopper was the three-day neoliberal symposium at the University of Virginia—Rortypalooza, as I like to think of it—where Rorty convened Paul Berman, Louis Menand, Sean Wilentz, Michael Lind, Todd Gitlin, Mark Edmundson, and a host of bit players (Eric Alterman, Carlin Romano, David Rieff, Gayatri Spivak, Mark Lilla) to hail the muses of liberalism, Walt Whitman and John Dewey. Women and people of color from across the country were, for all intents and purposes, represented in the singular person of Spivak, the conference’s designated scourge. Berman proclaimed Marx’s labor theory of value “wrong” and hailed Whitman as a

If he had a better sense of his readership, Rorty might challenge a broader public for whom his own Cream of Wheat ideas—secular humanism, the insignificance of Truth, the importance of labor unions—would be a difficult bolus to get down.

utopian figure of “revolutionary socialism.” Menand repeated the hackneyed claim that the “contemporary left” exists only in the university. Rorty, for his part, intimated that policy—rather than theory—is what really matters, quoted
from the *Spoon River Anthology*, and urged a return to Herbert Croly’s patriotic progressivism. Edmundson cited religion as the key preoccupation for Americans today and suggested that intellectuals seeking a broader audience might modify their strategy accordingly. Gitlin did his part to make Adorno and Horkheimer safe for liberalism by noting how American commodity culture, for all its deadening impact, has become a global advertisement for democracy. Lilla waxed triumphant about waning left prospects (“There’s not a chance in hell of the Nation’s hopes coming true”). Fareed Zakaria, second in command at *Foreign Affairs*, counseled against waves of “revolution” abroad (i.e., citizen-activated social change) in favor of constitutional democracy instituted from above or from outside—precisely the “economic development” enforced by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. And George Bush’s eleventh-hour secretary of state Lawrence Eagleburger (why not?), was sure that nit-picking with China over human rights was much less effective than simply exposing the Chinese to “Western ideas.” Michael Lind and Sean Wilentz alone offered probing readings of American party politics in the last two centuries, only so that Lind could reify and eternalize caste division, and Wilentz could too easily proclaim it
fixable. Spivak performed well as house crank, but she was too isolated to offer more than local, wildcat interventions from the floor on the writings of Marx (a helpful thing, when Paul Berman is around).

It was a sad and complacent spectacle, and I blame Richard Rorty for this conventionalizing and defanging of sometimes powerful cultural and social critics. To be sure, Rorty cannot alone be held accountable for Paul Berman’s habit of writing the Black Panthers off as vicious thugs, or indeed for the incredible arrogance of Berman’s title, A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968 (this generation apparently did not include blacks or women). Nor is Rorty to blame for Michael Lind’s objections to affirmative action or Sean Wilentz’s refusal to grant multicultural initiatives any space in the American cultural scene. But in short pieces for Harper’s, op-eds in major newspapers, essays and reviews in Dissent, and public lectures all over the world, Rorty has created a genealogically rich environment for the emergence of the above sorts of ideas. Achieving Our Country only piles patriotism onto this new formation, defending it against dimly perceived threats from the left.

At least Michael Lind exposes the right: Pat Robertson’s lunatic anti-Semi-
tism, William F. Buckley Jr.’s mercenary ideological compromises. Rorty, on the other hand, follows family tradition, standing fast for freedom against a terrible left-wing specter. In the CIA-funded McCarthy and the Communists (1954), James Rorty and Moshe Decter took note of McCarthy’s obvious demagoguery, but still sought, as they put it, a way “to combat Communism responsibly.” “Current membership in the

Between you and me, I never had any doubt that Nabokov was a better read than Fichte, but I was (kind of) willing to let Richard Rorty tell me so in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.

Communist Party should be regarded as prima facie evidence of . . . unfitness to teach,” they wrote. As for teachers who “adhere to the Party line but cannot be shown to be Party members,” they continued, routine academic processes of evaluation and administration would take care of them.

Rorty fits peddles a much softer version of this sort of thing in his constant attacks on the “cultural left.” Like so many others unsure of what to do after the demise of communism and the abatement of the culture wars, Rorty espies an imminent derailing of left hopes by a self-involved and myopic academic set:

Leftists in the academy have permitted cultural politics to supplant real politics, and have collaborated with the Right in making cultural issues central to public debate. They are spending energy which should be directed at proposing new laws on discussing topics as remote from the country’s needs as were [Henry] Adams’s musings on the Virgin and the Dynamo. The academic Left has no project to propose to America, no vision of a country to be achieved by building a consensus on the need for specific reforms. Its members no longer feel the force of [William] James’s and [Herbert] Cooley’s rhetoric. The American civic religion seems to them narrow-minded and obsolete nationalism.

Fighting words, of course; yet the main charges seem banal next to the rhetoric that labels the bad left permissive, traitorous, misguided, and remote in the space of two sentences. Pardon me for hearing the keening antilfe tones of, respectively, the sixties, fifties, seventies, and eighties, played on Rorty’s remarkable polemical instrument. No member of this left is actually named (save Fredric Jameson in an appendix). This does nothing for Rorty’s argument intellectually, but, as with the anti-PC diatribes it lamely echoes, Achieving Our Country will do wonders raising the hackles of readers who know no better. The problem with the cultural left is apparently that it reads the wrong philosophers and does scholarly work, rather than public-policy advocacy. Politically, it knows not whereof it speaks, and talks little sense within its own academic ranks, let alone to any “public.” It complains about too many injustices at once when it should stick to economic inequality. There’s a lot of urgent-seeming moralizing about all this. In the end you begin to wonder why the writer spends a whole book attacking such a pathetic thing, but you also sense his disconnection from his own polemical purpose. He harangues so