

The Unquashed Masses

By Donald N. McCloskey

The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939, by John Carey, New York: St. Martin's Press, 246 pages, \$19.95

JOHN CAREY'S READABLE BOOK, WHICH was successful in Britain and is now issued over here, assaults what is known in English departments as "modernism." Modernism was best summarized by the poet Philip Larkin, who was also a jazz critic, as the "Three Ps": [Ezra] Pound, Picasso, and [Charlie "Bird"] Parker, the three artists who in Larkin's view destroyed modern art. Modernism's main *shtick* was and is obscurity. When T. S. Eliot versified in *The Waste Land* about the vulgar suburbanites coming to work—"Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many"—he required two footnote references, one to Baudelaire and the other to the *Inferno*, III, 55-57.

In 1924 Virginia Woolf, who along with Eliot was one of the chief modernist baddies, declared: "On or about December 1910 human character changed." You bet. What did change on or about December 1910, give or take a decade, all over Europe, was the artistic theory of the avant garde. It was a burst of artistic -isms, from Italian futurism, French cubism, and German architecture to American imagism in poetry and Russian formalism in literary theory.

Carey's wider point, which brings the book out of the Department of English, is that the avant garde was in this way fleeing its bourgeois origins and keeping clear of the proletariat masses. It was making itself, at any rate in its imaginings, into a new aristocracy. "The intellectuals could not, of course, actually prevent the masses from attaining literacy. But they could prevent them from reading literature by making it too difficult for them to under-

stand." The obscurity of modernism kept literature (and music and painting) in the hands of cultured chaps. It kept it out of the hands of clerks, suburbanites, Eastern European immigrants, and the other nasty creatures growing in such numbers.

NUMBERS. THE SPECTER THAT HAUNTED Europe and America circa 1910 was Malthusian numbers of vulgar clerks and dirty proles and foreigners, as in Eliot: "And the jew squats on the window sill, the owner, / Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp." Says Carey: "Rewriting or reinventing the mass was an enterprise in which early twentieth-century intellectuals invested immense imaginative effort." The masses were Them; we were the New Aristocracy, who could read Ezra Pound and listen to 12-tone music.

It was a European obsession, tied up in European fears of a Malthusian crisis, which was adopted after a lag by American writers such as H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis. Baudelaire and Nietzsche were the pioneers, leading their followers to an aristocratic contempt for democracy, capitalism, bourgeois values, and the United States of America. Baudelaire had spoken for example of "a knave in Benjamin Franklin's style, the rising bourgeoisie come to replace the faltering aristocracy." A nostalgia for aristocracy bubbled up in the century after 1848, a treason against the liberal polity. Modernism, says Carey, is a literary theory of fascism. One finds it still among certain literary intellectuals, many of whom think of themselves as politically progressive.

Carey's hero is Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), who wrote novels that clerks could read. Bennett was aware he stood apart: "Bennett's whole quarrel with intellectual



T. S. Eliot: The modernists' obscurity kept literature, music, and painting out of the hands of the uncivilized masses.

contempt for the masses is that it is a kind of deadness, ... a dull, unsharpened imperviousness shut off from the intricacy and fecundity of each human life." Bennett, like Dickens or the Brontë sisters, "did not see why what the masses liked should automatically be accounted trash." He wrote in 1901 that "everyone is an artist, more or less," in their lives and perceptions.

The modernist baddies are Nietzsche (Great Satan to all baddies) and his English-writing progeny Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Russell, Lawrence, Joyce, Woolf, Wyndham Lewis, Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene. The tiny band of bourgeois goodies down to the present includes Bennett, G. K. Chesterton, Conan Doyle, George Orwell, Stevie Smith, Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes.

The clerks around 1910 read Shaw and H. G. Wells, too, though Shaw and Wells, lucid in their writings and nothing like modernists in literary theory, preached an apocalypse in which supermen would run the show. Wells in particular, who figures as both a goodie and a baddie in Carey's book, grew pessimistic in a Malthusian way. The sheer bulk of the masses would overrun the earth, he lamented, spoiling the trout streams. (The contribution of Malthus to the social experiments of our century—eugenics, *Lebensraum*, extermination camps, urban renewal, and zero

population growth—needs to be looked into.)

“All those damn little clerks,” says a character in a Wells novel of 1901, with “no proud dreams and no proud lusts.” The “swarms of black, brown, and dirty-white, and yellow people...have to go.” George Bernard Shaw wrote the same way in 1910: “Extermination must be put on scientific basis.” And D. H. Lawrence, who in *Aaron's Rod* (1922) advocated “a proper and healthy and energetic slavery,” in 1908 had written presciently, “If I had my way, I would build a lethal chamber as big as the Crystal Palace, with a military band playing softly. Then I'd go into the back streets and bring them all in, all the sick, the halt, and the maimed.”

IT WAS NOT JUST LITERARY MEN WHO talked this way, of course. They got their talk from scientists—and not, as is sometimes claimed by philosophers of science, from mere “pseudo-scientists,” either. Malthus was a great scientist, if gravely mistaken. The social Darwinists were nobody's fools. In 1900 the great Karl Pearson, who invented modern statistics, wrote in his neopositivist bible *The Grammar of Science*: “What we need is a check to the fecundity of inferior stocks. It is a false view of human solidarity, which regrets that a capable and stalwart race of white men should advocate replacing a dark-skinned tribe.” In 1925 he advocated in a scientific paper stopping Jewish immigration to Britain.

Carey piles up the evidence for his proposition that literary modernism and fascism are more than merely chronologically linked. George Moore, a leading figure in the Irish renaissance, wrote in 1888, “Injustice we worship....What care I that some millions of wretched Israelites died under Pharaoh's lash or Egypt's sun? It was well that they died that I might have the pyramids to look upon. I would give many lives to save one sonnet by Baudelaire.”

The “proud dreams and proud lusts” of an aristocratic character, said to be so foreign to the masses of clerks, had their chief political expression in World War I.

(The clerks in fact volunteered in great numbers, in the “Pals” battalions, and fought with aristocratic elan.) Thus the writer H. H. Munro (“Saki”) wrote in 1914, “I have always looked forward to the romance of a European war,” and two years later got his wish fulfilled personally by a German shell. Clive Bell, an art critic and friend to Woolf and to John Maynard Keynes, had this to say in 1928 about political theory: “To discredit a civilization it is not enough to show that it is based on slavery and injustice; you must show that liberty and justice would produce something better.” Carey has compiled hundreds of such remarks.

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His argument works. The modernist writers he attacks are The Canon in the study of literature. He is arguing, to use a form of words he would dislike, for widening the canon, bringing back to the center the writers who supported bourgeois life and democratic institutions. Casey even uncovers an anti-feminist line in modernism, the claim that women are more earthy than men and are therefore ethical idiots—this in sharp contrast to the Victorian notion that women embody ethical standards. Children come off badly, too: “Literary intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century tended to opt for childlessness or child neglect.” One puts down the book wondering how one could have admired for so long the wannabe aristocrats like Eliot or Lawrence, capable of such evil words.

Unhappily, Carey ruins his argument

with a “Postscript,” a mere seven pages that lead one to rethink whether he knows what he is talking about. Astonishingly, after all his exposure of “intellectual phobias about the masses” arising from a Malthusian aversion to population growth, the Postscript declares Carey himself to be a thoroughgoing Malthusian. It is hard, I suppose, to escape *all* the prejudices of the Sunday supplements, and we should be thankful that Carey has escaped so many of them.

AMAZINGLY, HE QUOTES WITH APPROVAL from *Mein Kampf*: “The day will certainly come when the whole of mankind will be forced to check the augmentation of the human species. Nobody can doubt that this world will one day be the scene of dreadful struggles for existence.” In a sentence that could have come equally from *Mein Kampf* or the newsletter of the Sierra Club, Carey writes: “The remedies of the twenty-first century...will entail the recognition that, given the state of the planet, humans, or some humans, must now be categorized as vermin.” My Lord. As Carey himself says of the crypto-fascist director of the Third Programme of the BBC, Rayner Heppenstall, this detestation of humanity “is perhaps best regarded as insane.”

One should adjust for the sanity of the source, therefore, when hearing a page later in the Postscript that Carey also detests literary theory, which he collapses, as do the deep literary thinkers at *The New York Times*, into that most terrifying of words, “deconstruction.” (What do you suppose the conservative judge and writer Richard Posner titled the section of *Law and Literature: A Misunderstood Relationship* [1988] when he wanted to frighten his lawyer readers into rejecting all interpretation of law or literature? “Deconstruction and Other Schools of Criticism.” It's enough these days to call someone a “deconstructionist” to arouse a McCarthyite fury.)

True, some literary theorists are anti-bourgeois, anti-meaning, anti-capitalist, like their heroes and heroines the literary modernists. Shame on them. We should

ask them all to take a course in economics and in modern economic history. The literary critics should learn that modern economic growth can easily handle much greater human numbers, that natural resources have become a trivial constraint on production, and that the real welfare of the workers has increased since the 18th century by a factor of 12. But the hysteria against deconstruction has, as hysterias tend to do, blotted out distinctions. It is surprising that Carey, who is Merton Professor of English at Oxford, should descend to such crudities—although not perhaps in view of the Canon Wars that have so embittered English departments in Britain. Wars do that.

I wish Carey had not written the "Postscript." I would prefer to think of him as a

literary man who knows enough about economics to know that Malthus was wrong and enough about literary theory to know that critics do much good work with its aid. But on his own theory of literary interpretation I cannot. If D. H. Lawrence's epistolary insanities about the will to power are to color our readings, so must Carey's postscriptive insanities about the future of the race and the wickedness of Jacques Derrida. It's a pity, because otherwise he has written a most illuminating book. ✻

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price below the market price, it will cause a shortage because at that lower price consumers will want to buy more and producers will want to supply less.

In the early 1970s, Nixon's price controls on gasoline were causing shortages, long lines, and violence. Coase tells of his colleague at the University of Chicago Law School, Edmund Kitch, giving a speech in Washington explaining how price controls were causing a shortage of natural gas. The audience was a typical Washington audience: Washington journalists, staff members of congressional committees, and so on. They showed little interest in Kitch's findings, says Coase, but much interest in who financed the study. Many assumed that it had been financed by the natural gas industry, which was not the case.

Coase writes, "A large part of the audience seemed to live in a simple world in which anyone who thought prices should rise was pro-industry and anyone who wanted prices to be reduced was pro-consumer. I could have explained that the essentials of Kitch's argument had been put forward earlier by Adam Smith—but most of the audience would have assumed that he was someone else in the pay of the American Gas Association."

WHO IS THIS GUY? FEW PEOPLE OUTSIDE the economics profession had heard of Coase before he won the Nobel Prize in economics in 1991. But he had a major impact on economics with just two articles, one published in 1937, the other in 1960. In the book's first essay, a reprint of the lecture he gave in accepting the Nobel Prize, Coase explains the significance of the two articles. The 1937 piece, "The Nature of the Firm," was probably the first attempt by an economist to explain why there are firms rather than just autonomous individuals exchanging things. Within firms, he pointed out, the price system—free markets—is rarely used. Coase asserted that firms arise as a way of economizing on the inevitable transaction costs of the price system. Competition ensures that we get the optimal combination of firms and arm's-

Coase Encounters

By David R. Henderson

Essays on Economics and Economists, by Ronald H. Coase, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 230 pages, \$27.95

ARE YOU LOOKING FOR A BOOK BY an economist who can really write and who has insight after insight on free markets versus government regulation? Would you like it even better if you could get some good laughs from his clever way of putting things? Then Ronald H. Coase's *Essays on Economics and Economists* is the book for you.

One of the book's best articles is "The Market for Goods and the Market for Ideas." Presented originally in December 1973 at the American Economics Association meetings, it made many intellectuals squirm. In it, Coase notes that intellectuals tend to think government regulation of economic markets improves matters. When it comes to regulating the market for ideas, however, most intellectuals are positive that the government is utterly incompetent. Coase sticks the knife into this inconsistency, and, page by page, cleverly turns it. He points out that, while the press is often quite willing to accept

and capitalize on stolen documents (as was the case with the *New York Times* publication of the "Pentagon papers" in 1971), it castigates others for stealing them. At the time of his speech, the Watergate burglary—an attempt to steal documents—was bringing down Richard Nixon. Quips Coase: "It is hard for me to believe that the main thing wrong with the Watergate affair was that it was not organized by *The New York Times*."

One of my other favorites is "Economics and Public Policy," based on a speech Coase gave in 1974 at UCLA. I remember the speech; I saw him give it. And it reads as well as I remember it. Coase's main message is that what economists have to say that "is important and true is quite simple—so simple indeed that little or no economics is required to understand it." But what is discouraging is that these simple truths are commonly ignored in economic policy discussions. One such insight is that if the government fixes a