ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Cultural Politics in Contemporary America

Edited by
Ian Angus and Sut Jhally

Routledge Revivals

Cultural Politics in Contemporary America

First published in 1989, *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America* is a radical attempt to lay out the complex ways in which the American media and American culture is powerfully interlocked. At the end of the 20th century, the media exerted an overwhelming influence on the formation of social identity through the production and consumption of images. The Hollywood Presidency of Ronald Reagan was founded on the skills of the 'Great Communicator'; Bruce Springsteen's 'Born in the USA' was used by Chrysler Corporation to assure that 'the pride is back'; feminists and right-wing militants converged to oppose pornography. The media, American culture, and political power were bound together in a gamble, the stakes of which increased daily.

'Cultural Politics' incorporates the struggles of race, gender and class; the economy of the commercial media system; the myths of hegemony and imperialism; the crises of privacy and of the intellectual; and such diverse issues as postmodernism, the American automobile, advertising as communication, and television. While political actors have changed and media technology has advanced rapidly, the outcome of this research still holds true for the 21st century and is of importance to students of media studies, cultural studies, postmodernism, postcolonial studies and political science.

Cultural Politics in Contemporary America

Edited by Ian Angus and Sut Jhally

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

First published in 1989
by Routledge

This edition first published in 2022 by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN
and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

A Library of Congress record exists under ISBN: 0415900093

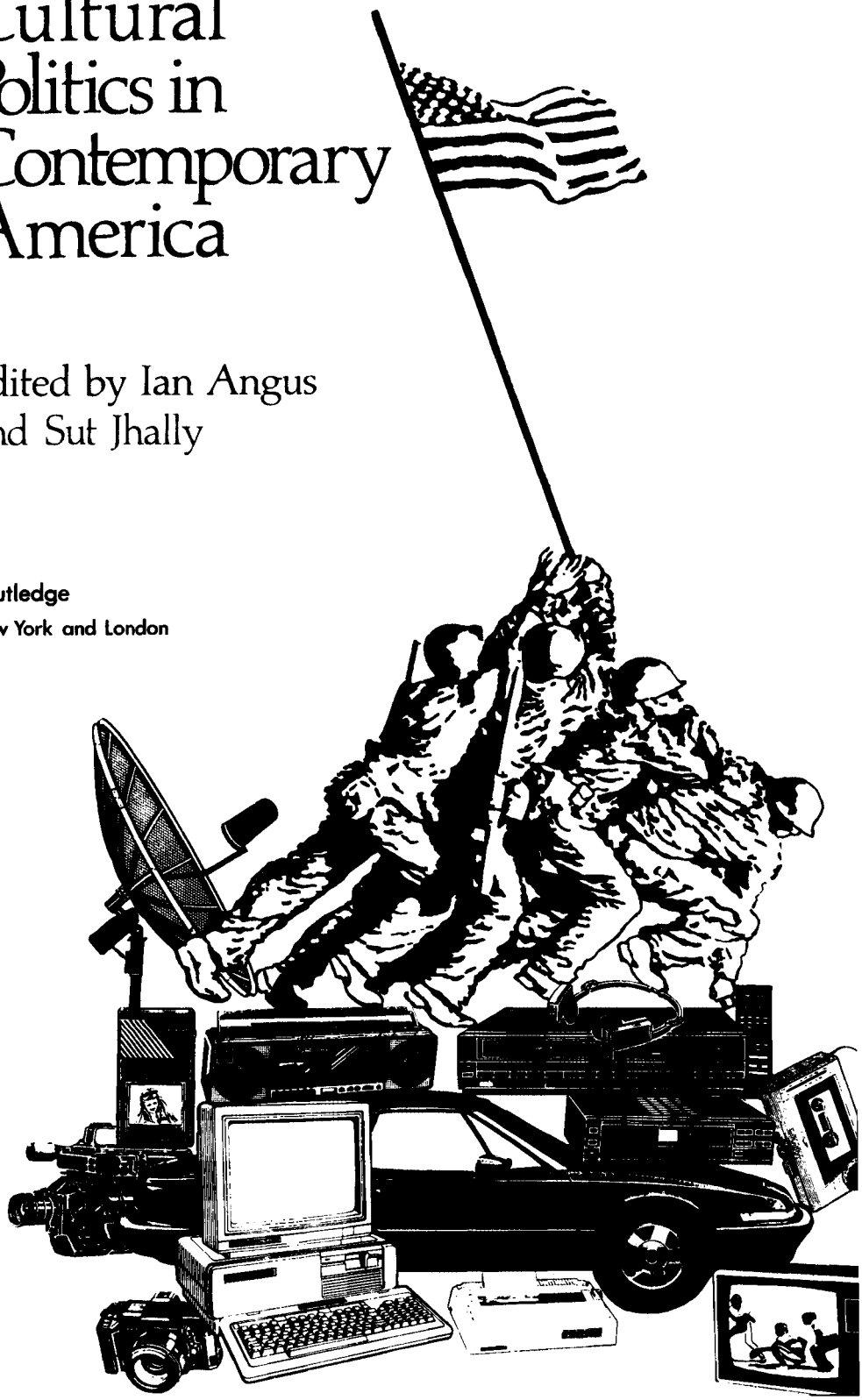
ISBN: 978-1-032-35329-6 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-32642-7 (ebk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-35332-6 (pbk)

Book DOI 10.4324/9781003326427

Cultural Politics in Contemporary America

Edited by Ian Angus and Sut Jhally

Routledge
New York and London



First published in 1989 by

Routledge
an imprint of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.
29 West 35 Street
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by

Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cultural politics in contemporary America / [edited by] Ian H. Angus & Sut Jhally.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0–415–90009–3. ISBN 0–415–90010–7 (pbk.)
1. Mass media—United States. 2. United States—Popular culture—History—20th century. I. Angus, Ian H II. Jhally, Sut
P92.U5C85 1988 302.2'34—dc19 88–20934

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Cultural politics in contemporary America.
I. United States. Society. Influence of mass media.
I. Angus, Ian H. II. Jhally, Sut 302.2'34'0973

ISBN 0–415–90009–3
ISBN 0–415–90010–7 Pbk

Dedicated to the memory of
Joe Hill
Wobbly, labor militant,
and genius of cultural politics
Murdered by the Authorities
of the State of Utah
November 19, 1915

Contents

Acknowledgments

This project has benefited enormously from the support provided by the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, especially W. Barnett Pearce, Chair of the Department, and Vernon Cronen. The hospitable environment of the Department, and continuing discussions with faculty and graduate students, has encouraged the establishment of a "critical cultural studies" approach to communication. This book is one result of this continuing dialogue. We thank Glen Gordon, Dean of Social and Behavioral Sciences, for his support of the project at a crucial stage. We are also thankful to our colleagues in the University community for engaged interdisciplinary inquiry, some of which is reflected in the contributions to the collection.

We would like to thank David Maxcy for his valuable help in the preparation of the manuscript. Sut Jhally extends special thanks to Eileen McNutt.

For both editors, this collaboration has been a very enjoyable and fruitful experience of cooperative work, which is at the very heart of socialist practice.

Introduction

Ian H. Angus and Sut Jhally

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.

Guy Debord

Image and Identity

We live in a world continually transformed by a proliferation of images. Media representations substitute for the social action needed to address "real life" concerns. Violence against women intensifies and the response by right-wing fundamentalists and left-wing feminists is to unite to remove the images of pornography from the iconography of our culture. Polls indicate that most Americans want to maintain the Welfare State and reduce military spending while a right-wing Hollywood actor wins the Presidency in a landslide victory on the basis of his "communication skills." The homeless huddle outside the gates of the White House and the poverty level rises while the media assure us that the American Dream is alive and well. Racial tensions increase and blacks and minorities are subjected to violent physical attacks as Bill Cosby tops the television ratings. Social commentators bemoan the general knowledge and literacy skills of the young, as children dutifully chant advertising jingles and hypnotically watch the space adventures of characters created by toy manufacturers. The nuclear arsenal builds, children's nightmares of holocaust intensify, and comic-book fantasies of protection from space dominate disarmament negotiations. Vietnam veterans protest intervention in Central America while Hollywood attempts to convince teenage America that a lost war was in fact a victory. As Bruce Springsteen sings of alienation and frustration in the heartland of America and devotes funds to food banks and trade unions, Chrysler offers him $12 million to use "Born in the USA" as

an advertising slogan in a nationalistic campaign to assure us that the "pride is back."

In contemporary culture the media have become central to the constitution of social identity. It is not just that media messages have become important forms of influence on *individuals*. We also identify and construct ourselves as *social beings* through the mediation of images. This is not simply a case of people being dominated by images, but of people seeking and obtaining pleasure through the experience of the consumption of these images. An understanding of contemporary culture involves a focus on both the phenomenology of watching and the cultural form of images.

The essays in this book probe the dimensions of what we call "cultural politics." By this phrase we do not intend a narrow definition of either the realm of culture as referring to artistic production or of politics as referring to the formal electoral process. Instead, we focus on a wider definition of both terms that refers to the complex process by which the whole domain in which people search and create meaning about their everyday lives is subject to politicization and struggle.

The central issue of such a cultural politics is the exercise of power in both institutional and ideological forms and the manner in which "cultural practices" relate to this context. People create their own meaning, but as Marx noted, "not in conditions of their own choosing." Understanding the manner in which institutional and ideological structures act as limits to the possibilities of cultural practices is indispensable to social action directed to our real problems.

The power of representations in the formation of social identity occurs within the broader political economy of culture and society as a whole. The 1980s have been characterized by three related movements regarding the culture industries. First, there has been an increasing integration of the media within the broader control of transnational corporations, such that there is a severe restriction on the autonomy of the media from the influence of business and commerce. Second, there has been an increasing concentration of ownership of the media, such that there are far fewer independent voices available in the United States to contribute to a democratic dialogue. Fewer and fewer companies own more and more media outlets.

Third, power is not only exercised through direct control of the cultural realm by economic force or the state but by blurring the boundaries between the economic and cultural spheres. The media have increasingly become just another sphere of business such that their uniqueness and centrality as cultural forms are submerged beneath their treatment as commodities like any other. As Mark Fowler, Commissioner of the FCC under the Reagan administration

remarked, "television is just like any other business . . . it is a toaster with pictures." Commodification is the form that cultural life assumes under these conditions and the goal of critical cultural analysis should be to ask what possibilities this opens up and what forms of expression, activity, and understanding it mitigates against.

On the basis of the first two developments, it is possible to understand the combination of national identity spectacles and secrecy in contemporary American politics. Alexander Cockburn has referred to the increasing presentation of events as a kind of "electronic Nuremberg rally" where only one kind of interpretation is allowed and endlessly repeated.[1] Alternative readings are not presented or allowed to intrude. The media coverage of the invasion of Grenada, the bombing of Libya, and the explosion of the Space Shuttle are examples of this "rally" principle, where rituals of patriotism and national identity whip up popular sentiment against the "enemy other." Simultaneously, whereas once the media were used by the government to report imperial activities, the bulk of these activities have now become covert and secret. For example, the widespread anger and revolt that followed President Nixon's announcement in 1970 of the bombing of Cambodia led to a political opposition around these events that brought to a head several years of development of public opposition to the undeclared war in Vietnam. The murders at Kent State and Jackson State were the culmination of state repression of this opposition. In retrospect, it is important to note that this response was called forth by Nixon himself in the TV broadcast speech that disclosed the military's bombing inside the Cambodian border. What if that announcement had not been made? Government officials and those engaged in putting into practice an imperial foreign policy have learned this lesson. Now the problem is secrecy; the facts are withheld, covered up, and — even if finally exposed — they are distanced from the event and diffused in their effect. At most, the public resents the secrecy; they are at arm's length from any viable response to the events themselves. While nations, especially nations with foreign policies that may be criticized by the population, have always had some tendency to secrecy, this has become much more pervasive since the political right has learned the lessons of protest against the Vietnam war. Oliver North is only the tip of a much deeper program of government and military secrecy, a situation in which the media no longer play the role of assisting informed public discussion. It is this combination of celebration and secrecy that constitutes the main political effect of corporate concentration and control of media production.

However, there are further consequences for cultural politics stemming from the contemporary commodification of culture. In order

to understand properly these consequences, we need to clarify the present stage of industrial culture through an account of its historic development.

The Three Stages of Cultural Development

With the onset of industrial capitalist society in the 17th century, the traditional basis of cultural life in feudal political relations and an agrarian economy was gradually eroded. The formation of social identities revolved to an increasing extent around relationships stemming from industrial production. The *first* stage of industrial culture was *class culture* in which the class relations between workers and owners in the factory defined their sense of identity and place in the social world generally. Cultural expressions fit into this divided society through the separation between high culture and popular culture. The former centered on such institutions as concert halls, classical music, novels, and theater, while the latter revolved around taverns, folk music, pamphlets, and union meetings.

At the beginning of the twentieth century a dramatic increase in the concentration of capitalist ownership occurred. From being a system with a large number of separate owners competing for success in a predominantly competitive market, ownership was centralized in fewer and fewer hands and the market was increasingly dominated by large-scale producers. On this basis there was a "rationalization" of production through the meticulous analysis of the production process by time-and-motion studies and so forth. The old trades and their control over the manner of production were broken down and workers were confined to minutely specialized tasks. It was just another step to the assembly line, in which these tasks were performed by machines rather than workers, and the further development of automation.

Alongside this control of the production process, there was also increasing control of the market. In the first place, it was necessary to make sure that the great number of consumer goods produced by automated methods were bought by consumers. Second, it was necessary to ensure that the market became the major arena in which needs and desires aimed at satisfaction. Thus, ethnic, regional, and class allegiances — which aimed at particular and non-market means of satisfaction — were broken down in favor of homogeneous, market-oriented needs. Advertising was a key element in this transition. In the consumer society the main focus is on the realization of investment rather than its production.

From these changes, in the first two decades of this century,

emerges the *second* stage of industrial culture — *mass culture*. Culture becomes industrially produced for mass consumption. While there remain differential degrees of access to the goods of mass culture, this is not the same as the totally different spheres of cultural goods present in class culture. Mass culture is in principle available to all; the same type of goods are produced. The only differential is the relative amount of access groups and individuals have to the same sphere of goods. Thus mass culture levels the differences of class culture and projects a totally enclosing sphere in which homogeneous cultural expressions are produced and consumed as commodities. While class differences in production remain, social identity is formed primarily in consumption. Mass culture depends upon, but hides, its production process.

Since the 1960s there has been a further change in industrial culture. This is associated with the shift to a so-called "information society" and is part of a larger transition including the explosion of electronic media, the shift from print literacy to images, and the penetration of the commodity form throughout all cultural production. As in the previous two stages, a transition in production is also underway. Science and technology have become central productive forces so that goods are increasingly distanced from the human work that produces them. Industry has come upon ecological limits not only to capitalism but to industrial production itself. The concentration of ownership has now proceeded to such a vast extent that many transnational corporations are larger than national governments. This third stage of industrialism will require careful political-economic evaluation to assess the exact nature of the change underway. Our book, however, is focused on the cultural dimensions of this *third* stage.

Recent changes in the production and consumption of images have led many commentators to label contemporary society as *postmodern* culture — a society where social identity is formed through mass-mediated images and where culture and economy have merged to form a single sphere. It is a society and culture fundamentally different from the two earlier stages of industrial society and emerges on the basis of the two prior developments.

We suggest that the culture of the information age consists in the production of *staged difference*. Images are consumed as simulations of social identities. They no longer proceed through the homogenization of culture but rather through the simulation of differences overlaid on previous social homogenization. Thus, sex, race, ethnicity, as well as other differences, are no longer suppressed. They are simulated and floated as images in the social imagination. Social identities are constructed through the images on which the desire of audiences temporarily alights. Industrial culture now centers on a politics of images.

Violence, pornography, Reagan's TV politics, are just so many examples of the third stage of industrial culture. Thus the distinction between "images" and "real life," with which we began this introduction, can no longer be regarded as tenable. Social representations constitute social identities. The real is always mediated through images. It is this culture, and this politics, that is discussed under the heading of "postmodernism."

The postmodern stage of industrial culture has also given rise to the argument that we are entering an "information society." Many apologists for industrial capitalism (such as Daniel Bell, Alvin Toffler, and Marshall McLuhan) claim that the information society will remove the toils of industrial work, inequality on both national and international scales, and the separation between work and leisure. However, we may see in these claims merely a continuation of the ideological claims of mass culture: The supposed elimination of differentials stemming from the production process is really just a hiding of these inequalities behind the screen of consumed goods. Moreover, differentials in access to consumption remain. Both of these are issues of the distribution and exercise of social power. They will not disappear in the information age and need to be addressed by critical analysis.

We argue that the postmodern culture of staged difference is *overlaid* on the earlier phases of class culture and mass culture. Class relations in production and mass homogenization have not disappeared; they have simply ceased to be the central phenomenon through which the conjuncture of social relationships in contemporary society is articulated. This leads to a further point about the centrality of cultural dynamics in contemporary society. The dominant cultural articulation can proceed from any of a number of locations in the social body. The stages of industrial society involve just such shifts in the origin of cultural articulations. Culture, in this analysis, should not be thought of as totally dominated by and dependent upon the economic realm. It has to a large degree attained a measure of autonomy and also importance to the survival of the whole social realm. While we cannot say that power has shifted from Wall Street to Madison Avenue, we can say that the power of Wall Street is dependent upon the power of Madison Avenue for its realization and, therefore, the cultural dynamics of contemporary capitalism are not only significant in their own right, but also central to economic dynamics. Thus, cultural politics must address new sources of inequality in postmodern society. The question that poses itself is the extent to which these new conditions allow the possibility of an oppositional or progressive cultural politics.

Mainstream and Alternative Culture

Within the left, it has normally been assumed that mainstream culture offers no openings for a genuine alternative vision and that the creation of an *alternate* sphere is the best way for cultural politics to proceed. This is cultural politics based upon the "sixties" tradition of Joe Hill, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Joan Baez, Phil Ochs, the Weavers, Pete Seeger, and many more. These cultural productions draw on the folk traditions of black, ethnic, and regional music and crafts to articulate an independent version of events, but also and more importantly, of the framework within which events become meaningful and have significance. This is the politics of folk concerts, first-person documentaries, marches, demonstrations, teach-ins, etc. in which culture is created and maintained as an alternative political force. It is the cultural politics of Manhattan Cable's "Paper Tiger" television, for example, where the ordinariness of handheld signs is celebrated as a triumph of authenticity over the technical wizardry that hides the inauthenticity of mainstream culture.[2]

Recently, a critique of this traditional notion of cultural politics has emerged. Jesse Lemisch argues that left culture has failed to engage the mainstream of American life and the vast bulk of the American people.

> Why, at a time when so much avant-garde culture is crossing over toward a mainstream audience, does the left, with more important messages to convey, intentionally remain so isolated? What we have is a culture descended from a noble tradition of popular struggles — one whose public rehearsal is an important ritual of affirmation for those of us who grew up in it — that leaves us speaking a language that more and more Americans don't understand.[3]

Lemisch claims that the left's suspicious attitude toward slick, striking images and pure technique has doomed it to talk in old forms of communication that much of the audience simply finds dated and boring. It is a culture of isolationism where the "converted" reaffirm their conversation — a cultural practice that has abdicated the very cultural domain in which the vast majority of the audience participate in some form or another (even if it is a participation of passivity). Left culture, at its own peril, has refused to play the "numbers game."

Such suspicion of the cultural forces of capitalism raises some interesting issues of what a future "socialist" culture might look like. Marx was clear that he regarded the development of material forces (separate from the relations of production under capitalism) as

progressive. Indeed, the socialist economy would be dependent upon the productive capacity unleashed by capitalist forms of production. The deeper question for us here is the extent to which the cultural forces of capitalism can be used to promote a more democratic and egalitarian society. Surely the perceived drabness of the Soviet Union or the Eastern European countries cannot attract anyone's imagination. Lemisch urges the left to adopt the most advanced *forms* of communication of the contemporary marketplace to advance *left* content.

> There are new ways of looking at the world, some from inside the left, some from outside. Say what we will about the values of television advertising and MTV, we recognize their form as distinctly contemporary, and so does much of America. They offer us rapid movement, mobile cameras, quick cutting, excitement, condensed expression, wit, comedy and attractive color. While I hold plenty of reservations about content, anyone who wants to talk to Americans — as the left presumably does — must understand this language.[4]

This critique of traditional left cultural strategies certainly hits at the core of the issues and raises some important questions. However, before we enthusiastically embrace the central tendencies of postmodern culture we need to consider some important reservations. First, what is the relationship of the world of images through which we hope to "speak" to Americans to an alternative political culture? The critique implies that left culture can be created through these images and is not dependent for its success upon the surrounding conditions of reception and experience. Lemisch mentions the "Sun City" video as an example of the success of this type of strategy. This video was produced by Artists United Against Apartheid in order to oppose the racist South African government. However, if the "Sun City" video was successful the real factor is its relationship to an existing and strong anti-apartheid movement in the United States such that the alternative images are both understood and appreciated by the audience. Could the MTV strategy work with an issue that does not already have a developed political base? As a counterexample, Neil Kinnock and the Labour Party of Britain in the election of 1987 put forward a superb media campaign that used the techniques of postmodern imagery but met with giant failure. The whole question of how the reception of this new proposed cultural object is affected by forces from *outside* the object itself remains to be answered.

Secondly, this approach does not investigate the affect of power on the form of culture. What is the effect of the production of culture as a commodity on the image-form? The separation of form and content that Lemisch's approach assumes may not be as simple as it appears.

What if the form affects the experience of the cultural product to such an extent that it alters the content? This, in short, is the "postmodern question." In such a situation, the external context of reception takes on an even greater significance. The tendency of the contemporary commercial form of communication is toward a sequence of juxtaposed images without an explicit internal form of connection. This tendency has been led by ads, but is spreading throughout the media system. The production of cultural artifacts as commodities squeezes the maximum number of images into the shortest space of time — speedup in the entertainment industry — and, in so doing, pushes increasingly more of the context necessary for interpretation to the side of the audience (and away from its provision within the cultural object itself). This has been recognized by advertisers, who direct their messages at specific segments of the market, rather than at the audience as a whole. The representation of people in the ads as similar to the "type" advertisers want to buy the product indicates a recognition of the importance of a context of reception — though, of course, because of the speedup, this context is merely triggered and not developed.

In short, the argument that the left must abandon its traditional preference for small-scale, alternative, "folk" events makes far too many assumptions concerning the benign character of the packaging effect of mass media. First, it ignores the importance of a context of reception within which a message has meaning; and, second, it fails to investigate the connection between the commodity-form and the image-form.

The Possibilities of Intervention: Lennon and Springsteen

The issues that we have raised in the previous section can be concretized with specific reference to the two most important figures in mainstream culture, from a left perspective, in the last twenty years: John Lennon and Bruce Springsteen.

One reading of Springsteen is that he is a traditional lefty (with ties to the poor, unions, the unemployed, etc.) who despite his best intentions is misunderstood by his fans who do not recognize his political message. But Springsteen is much more ambiguous than this simple reading. The attempt by Ronald Reagan to appropriate "Born in the USA" as a campaign theme in 1984 was met by Springsteen with a kind of bemused bafflement rather than a clear refutation. In part, Springsteen could get away with not reacting because there was no pressure on him to clarify his position. Unlike the 1960s and the early 1970s, the political context did not force him to take sides. There was, in effect, "no pull from the

streets" in the vacuum that was left political culture. But as Marshall Berman notes, this situation may change and thus force Springsteen's hand. If the United States invades Central America,

> what will Springsteen do? In the rap that precedes "War," he's pretty well said "Hell no, don't go" already. If he reiterates this, he knows — and the government knows — that it will influence many people to resist. What then? Is he prepared to see his songs pulled off the radio, his records disappear from the stores? The FBI's vendetta against John Lennon could have been just a run-through. Is he ready to head into the storm, and how many of us are ready to go with him?[5]

The "misunderstanding" of Springsteen is then partly of his own creation, which in turn is a reaction to an absent alternative political culture. It is this same absence that contributes to the non-political reading of Springsteen. This issue can be highlighted with reference to the way many people understand "Born in the USA." While for many of us, it rings as a fierce indictment of the Vietnam war, for the majority of those familiar with the song (especially the younger listeners) it is a celebration of American roots and patriotism. Above all it is a celebration of "America." One aspect of Springsteen's huge popularity is indeed this very *populism* that is expressed through the celebration of being American. People tell stories of being in foreign countries where the song brings (young) Americans together. Springsteen's populism however is not the only kind that vies for identity in the 1980s. It combats and finally succumbs to the other great recent populist ideology — Reaganism. Daniel Hallin has perceptively noted that while the network news divisions have not succumbed to Reagan and the causes he has championed, they have succumbed to *Reaganism*, especially the "America is Back," "We're Number One" nationalism.[6] In the battle for the definition of what populism will be defined as, Springsteen's vision has become blurred with the Reaganite one. It is the relationship between populism and authority that is important to understand here. In such a context it is difficult for people to read "Born in the USA," (or at least the slogan) in a critical vein.

In addition to this, there is also the issue of whether there is something *within* the message itself that encourages a non-critical populist reading. For one thing, unless one reads them from the jacket cover, the words are very difficult to understand. All that comes across is the slogan (jingle). (Even if the words could be heard it is possible that they could be given a rightist slant given the celebration of militarism that pervades the culture.) The video for the song, directed by John Sayles (a filmmaker of impeccable political credentials), is highly ambiguous. A stream of images of working-class life, the Vietnam war, and disabled

veterans intermingle together, without a clear intended message. The advertising industry has known for a long time that fast moving images work through emotion rather than logic or narrative. Why should these images, using the same techniques be any different? Our young students tell us that they don't pay very much attention to the images that rush before their eyes. This of course is mistaken, but the perception has its basis in the fact that they cannot *distinguish within* the image system. Springsteen merges with Michael Jackson, Madonna, Coke, Miller Beer, and Guess jeans. The image system overwhelms isolated images. Speed and fragmentation are not very good to *think* with. They are good to *feel* with. People can then feel the song while not "understanding" it. In one series of ads for MTV, a teenage boy or girl engages in a continuous monologue of events, characters, feelings, and emotions without any central thread. As the video images mirror the fragmentation of the thoughts, the ad ends with the plug: "Finally a channel for the way you think." In his frustration at the misunderstanding of his art Springsteen responded with the song "War" — as blunt a statement as is possible. There is endless repetition of the same phrase: "War — what is it good for? Absolutely nothing!" It is ironic that Springsteen has drawn upon the *alternate populism* of Woody Guthrie in playing "This land is your land" when his own performances are squarely within the commercial mainstream.

John Lennon suffered from no such ambiguity. In addition to there being no possible misunderstanding of his art, he explicitly articulated his political views. In the situation of the 1960s and the early 1970s, he had to. He could not sit on the fence. He could not passively let a reappropriation of his messages take place. For this he paid, as Marshall Berman noted, a price — political persecution. At the same time, his music had an active political culture to draw upon and which could shape its understanding. He knew "a working class hero is something to be" and he strived, despite his enormous financial success, to become one. Again, unlike the situation that Springsteen confronts, Lennon's music could be separated from the commercial image system. In part, this was because in the early 1970s there still remained some separation between television and rock music. To some degree, the music could stand on its own without having to work against the surrounding image world. Of course this had nothing to do with the music itself but the context. In the postmodern context, "Revolution" turns into an advertising jingle for Nike sneakers (but this may be an anachronism, in a sense, since it is hard to image such a song deliberately being written for an ad — Jackson Browne's "For America" is not being used to sell anything). In the contemporary situation, for a generation that grew up in the absence of an alternative political culture, John

Lennon is simply a Beatle, rather than a figure who was part of an oppositional political culture. In short, the image involves a stripping of its context and a re-immersion in a commercial nexus which is today virtually all-pervasive.

The tendency of the commodity form to decontextualize cultural productions and reinscribe them within a process of exchange cannot be avoided by any cultural producers today. Lennon cannot be insulated from Nike, and his future meaning will become tied up with Nike in the minds of audiences. In the absence of a "pull from the streets," and an alternative political culture, the external conditions of reception will be monopolized by the mainstream. Moreover, the artist will not be pushed to clarify her or his meaning. Consequently, the reception of the most critical content will be ceded to the commercial norm. This situation is even more crucial with the postmodern emphasis on the image, which places an even greater burden on the process of reception.

A Critical Approach to Media and Culture

Mainstream analyses of media have ignored the dimension of power that we have argued is vital to understanding contemporary culture. A critical theory of postmodern culture requires: First, an analysis of the political economy of media and cultural institutions; second, a focus on the form of the cultural commodity; third, a politics of images centering on the experience of viewing.

The starting point for understanding the relationship between economy and culture is the work of Karl Marx. Marx wrote that there is a very close connection between the control of material wealth and the control of ideas and culture, for the ruling class is able to dictate (because of their control of the "means of mental production" such as media) the context within which people think about their daily lives. Consequently, what people accept as "natural" and "self-evident" is exactly what should become problematic and in need of explanation from a critical standpoint. It is characteristic of Marxist thought to place the conscious expressions of social actors within the whole social complex in which those expressions occur. This theoretical framework has generally been described under what is called the "base/superstructure" model. Briefly, this means that the economic base conditions the contents of the superstructure of ideas and beliefs prevalent in everyday life. While in many subsequent strains of "orthodox" Marxism this model has been applied in a very rigid and deterministic manner, the tradition of "Western Marxism" has offered the most sophisticated, elaborate, and thoughtful exploration

of this relationship. Seeking to avoid a crude determinism of culture by the economic base alone, this strain of Marxism has approached the analysis of consciousness from the broader and more complex concept of "totality," in which consciousness is seen as interacting with a whole host of important social forces, not simply as the reflection of economic interests. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1946, translated into English in 1972) pioneered the way for this type of analysis. From this point of view, it is not so much the question of determination by the economy that it is important, but rather the imposition of the "commodity form" on cultural productions. The commodity form is imposed whenever production is for the purpose of exchange, rather than use; consequently, political economic forces come to condition the very form of culture.

We place ourselves squarely within the tradition of Western Marxism, in that our central concern is how to theorize about culture without falling into a reductionist mode. We seek to develop an approach which acknowledges the importance of the economics and production, but at the same time places cultural productions within a much broader *totality* of factors. Certainly economic factors are vitally important in understanding the constraints on contemporary cultural production, but we follow Horkheimer and Adorno in attributing general significance to the commodity *form* as analytically distinct from questions of ownership. Furthermore, we argue that a phenomenology of the viewing experience is essential to clarifying the politics of postmodern culture. We must understand the desire for images and the "pleasure" in their consumption, and not see this as merely the imposition of ideology on a passive audience. The attraction of images, combined with the loss of previous cultural forms, puts media productions at the very basis of identity formation.

Cultural Politics

A contemporary cultural politics must recognize not only the power of ownership, but power in the image, power *of* the image; it must refuse celebration, and turn the analysis of new forms toward the external conditions of reception.

The commercial system requires a continuous influx of new cultural commodities. Assimilation of cultural productions into this system strips them of their original context and presses them into an image-form. Without a context for interpretation of images, they all blend into an undifferentiated continuous flow, in which each individual image or set of images, has no particular significance. Thus, they succumb,

whatever their intent or content, to the mainstream assumptions of the society at large which dominate the conditions of reception.

A critical democratic and egalitarian strategy must, of course, find itself in conflict with this system. It is certainly true that a hermetic strategy that relies purely on alternative "folk" forms will be irrelevant to the majority of the population, which is thoroughly saturated with mass media productions. As Lemisch argues, some engagement with these forms is definitely called for. Jackson Browne, especially his album "Lives in the Balance" and the video "For America" is an excellent example of such an attempt. But the critical content, as again the case of Jackson Browne indicates, will succumb to these forms if there is no engagement with audience reception as well. The conditions for an alternative reception cannot be separated from the traditional left attempt at an alternative culture, most simply through providing a *context of recognition* of images that are written out of mainstream accounts. An alternative culture provides a *context of interpretation* which is a public pedagogy, and can provide the external conditions for the reception of alternative content when it surfaces in the mass media. Furthermore, it can ground a critical response to the apologetic content that is far more pervasive. In this context, the work of avant-garde artists, such as David Byrne and Laurie Anderson, is important insofar as it disrupts audiences' conventional expectations and motivates self-reflection that may lead to critical readings. One of the most interesting and encouraging features of postmodern media is that such avant-garde works have become widely popular.

We must engage with the media system, but the image-culture cannot provide the basis for its own interpretation. Alternative culture is not a hermetic strategy of self-congratulation, but is the necessary basis for any expansion of critical consciousness into the media system. It is too early, or too late, to throw out Pete Seeger.

Part I

Empire and Consumption

The essays in this section deal with the two most important external conditions influencing the context within which contemporary cultural experience takes place.

The theme of empire is taken up in the first three essays. Gore Vidal offers a history lesson on the foundations of the American empire and how it has guided political life. Vidal ends with the suggestion that the era of uncontested American power is over and that there is renewed international economic competition. Bill Livant examines how the constraining effect of imperial assumptions has limited our understanding of this situation and proposes an alternative way of thinking. Eileen Mahoney shows how American power has been extended globally through control of communication technology and international regulation especially since the Second World War.

The analysis of empire and consumption is bridged by the discussion of hegemony and political economy. Leslie Good introduces several ways of conceptualizing the relationship between power and communication. The notion of hegemony shows how power has been maintained in its established forms by control of the cultural realm. Sut Jhally sketches the specific ways that

political-economic power has shaped the development of culture.

The theme of consumption is addressed in the final two essays of this section. The most overt form of commercial influence on culture is advertising, of which an historical sketch is provided by Stuart Ewen. Ian H. Angus pulls together the two themes of empire and consumption and a discussion of the contemporary postmodern situation.

This account of the external conditions influencing culture provides the general framework within which specific cultural analyses take place. However, the notion of hegemony also suggests that culture is a contested terrain in which a struggle over meanings takes place in everyday life. In subsequent sections, the essays take this into account while nevertheless focusing their attention on the establishment of dominant practices.

1.

Requiem for the American Empire

Gore Vidal

On September 16, 1985, when the Commerce Department announced that the United States had become a debtor nation, the American Empire died. The empire was seventy-one years old and had been in ill health since 1968. Like most modern empires, ours rested not so much on military prowess as on economic primacy.

After the French Revolution, the world money power shifted from Paris to London. For three generations, the British maintained an old fashioned colonial empire, as well as a modern empire based on London's primacy in the money markets. Then, in 1914, New York replaced London as the world's financial capital. Before 1914, the United States had been a developing country, dependent on outside investment. But with the shift of the money power from Old World to New, what had been a debtor nation became a creditor nation and central motor to the world's economy. All in all, the English were well pleased to have us take their place. They were too few in number for so big a task. As early as the turn of the century, they were eager for us not only to help them out financially but to continue, in their behalf, the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race: to bear with courage the white man's burden, as Rudyard Kipling not so tactfully put it. Were we not — English and Americans — all Anglo-Saxons, united by common blood, laws, language? Well, no, we were not. But our differences were not so apparent then. In any

This article first appeared in *The Nation* (January 11, 1986). Reprinted by permission.

case, we took on the job. We would supervise and civilize the lesser breeds. We would make money.

By the end of World War II, we were the most powerful and least damaged of the great nations. We also had most of the money. America's hegemony lasted exactly five years. Then the cold and hot wars began. Our masters would have us believe that all our problems are the fault of the Evil Empire of the East, with its Satanic and atheistic religion, ever ready to destroy us in the night. This nonsense began at a time when we had atomic weapons and the Russians did not. They had lost 20 million of their people in the war, and 8 million of them before the war, thanks to their neoconservative Mongolian political system. Most important, there was never any chance, then or now, of the money power (all that matters) shifting from New York to Moscow. What was — and is — the reason for the big scare? Well, World War II made prosperous the United States, which had been undergoing a depression for a dozen years; and made very rich those magnates and their managers who govern the republic, with many a wink, in the people's name. In order to maintain a general prosperity (and enormous wealth for the few) they decided that we would become the world's policeman, perennial shield against the Mongol hordes. We shall have an arms race, said one of the high priests, John Foster Dulles, and we shall win it because the Russians will go broke first. We were then put on a permanent wartime economy, which is why a third or so of the government's revenues is constantly being siphoned off to pay for what is euphemistically called defense.

As early as 1950, Albert Einstein understood the nature of the rip-off. He said, "The men who possess real power in this country have no intention of ending the cold war." Thirty-five years later, they are still at it, making money while the nation itself declines to eleventh place in world per capita income, to forty-sixth in literacy and so on, until last summer (not suddenly, I fear) we found ourselves close to $2 trillion in debt. Then, in the fall, the money power shifted from New York to Tokyo, and that was the end of our empire. Now the long-feared Asiatic colossus takes its turn as world leader, and we — the white race — have become the yellow man's burden. Let us hope that he will treat us more kindly than we treated him. In any case, if the foreseable future is not nuclear, it will be Asiatic, some combination of Japan's advanced technology with China's resourceful landmass. Europe and the United States will then be, simply, irrelevant to the world that matters, and so we come full circle. Europe began as the relatively empty uncivilized Wild West of Asia; then the Western Hemisphere became the Wild West of Europe. Now the sun has set in our West and risen once more in the East.

The British used to say that their empire was obtained in a fit of absent-mindedness. They exaggerate, of course. On the other hand, our modern empire was carefully thought out by four men. In 1890 a U.S. Navy captain, Alfred Thayer Mahan, wrote the blueprint for the American imperium, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*. Then Mahan's friend, the historian-geopolitician Brooks Adams, younger brother of Henry, came up with the following formula: "All civilization is centralization. All centralization is economy." He applied the formula in the following syllogism: "Under economical centralization, Asia is cheaper than Europe. The world tends to economic centralization. Therefore, Asia tends to survive and Europe to perish." Ultimately, *that* is why we were in Vietnam. The amateur historian and professional politician Theodore Roosevelt was much under the influence of Adams and Mahan, he was also their political instrument, most active not so much during his Presidency as during the crucial war with Spain, where he can take a good deal of credit for our seizure of the Philippines, which made us a world empire. Finally, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Roosevelt's closest friend, kept in line a Congress that had a tendency to forget our holy mission — our manifest destiny — and ask, rather wistfully, for internal improvements.

From the beginnings of our republic, we have had imperial tendencies. We took care — as we continue to take care — of the indigenous population. We maintained slavery a bit too long even by a cynical world's tolerant standards. Then, in 1847, we produced our first conquistador, President James K. Polk. After acquiring Texas, Polk deliberately started a war with Mexico because, as he later told the historian George Bancroft, we had to acquire California. Thanks to Polk, we did, And that is why to this day the Mexicans refer to our Southwestern states as "the occupied lands," which Hispanics are now, quite sensibly, filling up.

The case against empire began as early as 1847. Representative Abraham Lincoln did not think much of Polk's war, while Lieut. Ulysses S. Grant, who fought at Vera Cruz, said in his memoirs, "The war was an instance of a republic following the bad example of European monarchies, in not considering justice in their desire to acquire additional territory." He went on to make a causal link, something not usual in our politics then and completely unknown now: "The Southern rebellion was largely the outgrowth of the Mexican War. Nations, like individuals, are punished for their transgressions. We got our punishment in the most sanguinary and expensive war of modern times."

But the empire has always had more supporters than opponents. By 1895 we had filled up our section of North America. We had tried twice

— and failed — to conquer Canada. We had taken everything that we wanted from Mexico. Where next? Well, there was the Caribbean at our front door and the vast Pacific at our back. Enter the Four Horsemen — Mahan, Adams, Roosevelt and Lodge.

The original republic was thought out carefully, and openly, in *The Federalist Papers*: we were not going to have a monarchy and we were not going to have a democracy. And to this day we have had neither. For 200 years we have had an oligarchical system in which men of property can do well and the others are on their own. Or, as Brooks Adams put it, the sole problem of our ruling class is whether to coerce or to bribe the powerless majority. The so-called Great Society bribed; today coercion is very much in the air. Happily, our neoconservative Mongoloids favour only authoritarian and never totalitarian means of coercion.

Unlike the republic, the empire was worked out largely in secret. Captain Mahan, in a series of lectures delivered at the Naval War College, compared the United States with England. Each was essentially an island state that could prevail in the world only through sea power. England had already proved his thesis. Now the United States must do the same. We must build a great navy in order to acquire overseas possessions. Since great navies are expensive, the wealth of new colonies must be used to pay for our fleets. In fact, the more colonies acquired, the more ships; the more ships; the more empire. Mahan's thesis is agreeably circular. He showed how little England had ended up with most of Africa and all of southern Asia, thanks to sea power. He thought that we should do the same. The Caribbean was our first and easiest target. Then on to the Pacific Ocean, with all its islands. And, finally, to China, which was breaking up as a political entity.

Theodore Roosevelt and Brooks Adams were tremendously excited by this prospect. At the time Roosevelt was a mere police commissioner in New York City, but he had dreams of imperial glory. "He wants to be," snarled Henry Adams, "our Dutch-American Napoleon." Roosevelt began to maneuver his way toward the heart of power, sea power. With Lodge's help, he got himself appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy, under a weak Secretary and a mild President. Now he was in place to modernize the fleet and to acquire colonies. Hawaii was annexed. Then a part of Samoa. Finally, colonial Cuba, somehow, had to be liberated from Spain's tyranny. At the naval War College, Roosevelt declared, "To prepare for war is the most effectual means to promote peace." How familiar that sounds! But since the United States had no enemies as of June 1897, a contemporary might have remarked that since we were already at peace with everyone, why prepare for war? Today, of course, we are what he dreamed we would be, a nation armed to the teeth and hostile to everyone. But what with Roosevelt was a design to

acquire an empire is for us a means to transfer money from the Treasury to the various defense industries, which in turn pay for the elections of Congress and President.

Our turn-of-the-century imperialists may have been wrong, and I think they were. But they were intelligent men with a plan, and the plan worked. Aided by Lodge in the Senate, Brooks Adams in the press, Admiral Mahan at the Naval War College, the young Assistant Secretary of the Navy began to build up the fleet and look for enemies. After all, as Brooks Adams proclaimed, "war is the solvent." But war with whom? And for what? And where? At one point England seemed a likely enemy. We had a boundary dispute with it over Venezuela, which meant that we could invoke the all-purpose Monroe Doctrine (the invention of John Quincy Adams, Brooks's grandfather). But as we might have lost such a war, nothing happened. Nevertheless, Roosevelt kept on beating his drum: "No triumph of peace," he shouted, "can equal the armed triumph of war." Also: "We must take Hawaii in the interests of the white race." Even Henry Adams, who found T. R. tiresome and Brooks, his own brother, brilliant but mad, suddenly declared, "In another fifty years . . . the white race will have to reconquer the tropics by war and nomadic invasion, or be shut up north of the 50th parallel." And so at century's end, our most distinguished ancestral voices were not prophesying but praying for war.

An American warship, the Maine, blew up in Havana harbor. We held Spain responsible; thus, we got what John Hay called "a splendid little war." We would liberate Cuba, drive Spain from the Caribbean. As for the Pacific, even before the Maine was sunk, Roosevelt had ordered Commodore Dewey, and his fleet to the Spanish Philippines — just in case. Spain promptly collapsed, and we inherited its Pacific and Caribbean colonies. Admiral Mahan's plan was working triumphantly.

In time we allowed Cuba the appearance of freedom while holding on to Puerto Rico. Then President William McKinley, after an in-depth talk with God, decided that we should also keep the Philippines. In order, he said, to Christianize them. When reminded that the Filipinos were Roman Catholics, the President said, Exactly. We must Christianize them. Although Philippine nationalists had been our allies against Spain, we promptly betrayed them and their leader, Aguinaldo. As a result it took us several years to conquer the Phillipines, and tens of thousands of Filipinos died that our empire might grow.

The war was the making of Theodor Roosevelt. Surrounded by the flower of the American press, he led a group of so-called Rough Riders up a very small hill in Cuba. For this proto-photo opportunity be became a national hero, Governor of New York, McKinley's running mate and when McKinley was killed in 1901, President.

Not everyone liked the new empire. After Manila, Mark Twain thought that the stars and bars of the American flag should be replaced by a skull and crossbones. He also said, "We cannot maintain an empire in the Orient and maintain a republic in America." He was right, of course. But as he was only a writer who said funny things, he was ignored. The compulsively vigorous Roosevelt defended our war against the Philippine population, and he attacked the likes of Twain. "Every argument that can be made for the Filipinos could be made for the Apaches," he explained, with his lovely gift for analogy. "And every word that can be said for Aguinaldo could be said for Sitting Bull. As peace, order and prosperity followed our expansion over the land of the Indians, so they will follow us in the Philippines."

Despite the criticism of the few, the Four Horsemen had pulled it off. The United States was a world empire. And one of the horsemen not only got to be president but for his pious meddling in the Russo-Japanese conflict, our greatest apostle of war was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. One must never underestimate the Scandinavian wit.

Empires are restless organisms. They must constantly renew themselves; should an empire start leaking energy, it will die. Not for nothing were the Adams brothers fascinated by entropy. By energy. By force. Brooks Adams, as usual, said the unsayable. "Laws are a necessity," he declared. "Laws are made by the strongest, and they must and shall be obeyed." Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. thought this a wonderful observation, while the philosopher William James came to a similar conclusion, which can also be detected, like an invisible dynamo, at the heart of the novels of his brother Henry.

According to Brooks Adams, "The most difficult problem of modern times is unquestionably how to protect property under popular governments." The Four Horsemen fretted a lot about this. They need not have. We have never had a popular government in the sense that they feared, nor are we in any danger now. Our only political party has two right wings, one called Republican, the other Democratic. But Henry Adams figured all that out back in the 1890s. "We have a single system" he wrote, and "in that system the only question is the price at which the proletariat is to be bought and sold, the bread and circuses." But none of this was for public consumption. Publicly, the Four Horsemen and their outriders spoke of the American mission to bring to all the world freedom and peace, through slavery and war if necessary. Privately, their constant fear was that the weak masses might combine one day against the strong few, their natural leaders, and take away their money. As early as the election of 1876 socialism had been targeted as a vast evil that must never be allowed to corrupt simple American persons. When Christianity was invoked as the natural enemy of those who might limit

the rich and their games, the combination of cross and dollar sign proved — and proves — irresistible.

During the first decade of our disagreeable century, the great world fact was the internal collapse of China. Who could pick up the pieces? Britain grabbed Kowloon; Russia was busy in the north; the Kaiser's fleet prowled the China coast; Japan was modernizing itself, and biding its time. Although Theodore Roosevelt lived and died a dedicated racist, the Japanese puzzled him. After they sank the Russian fleet, Roosevelt decided that they were to be respected and feared even though they were our racial inferiors. For those Americans who served in World War II, it was an article of faith — as of 1941, anyway — that the Japanese could never win a modern war. Because of their slant eyes, they would not be able to master aircraft. Then they sank our fleet at Pearl Harbor.

Jingoism aside, Brooks Adams was a good analyst. In the 1890s he wrote: "Russia, to survive, must undergo a social revolution internally and/or expand externally. She will try to move into Shansi Province, richest prize in the world. Should Russia and Germany combine . . ." That was the nightmare of the Four Horsemen. At a time when simpler folk feared the rise of Germany alone, Brooks Adams saw the world ultimately polarized between Russia and the United States, with China as the common prize. American maritime power versus Russia's landmass. That is why, quite seriously, he wanted to extend the Monroe Doctrine to the Pacific Ocean. For him, "war [was] the ultimate form of economic competition."

We are now at the end of the twentieth century. England, France and Germany have all disappeared from the imperial stage. China is now reassembling itself, and Confucius, greatest of political thinkers, is again at the center of the Middle Kingdom. Japan has the world money power and wants a landmass; China now seems ready to go into business with its ancient enemy. Wars of the sort that the Four Horsemen enjoyed are, if no longer possible, no longer practical. Today's conquests are shifts of currency by computer, and the manufacture of those things that people everywhere are willing to buy.

I have said very little about writers because writers have figured very little in our imperial story. The founders of both republic and empire wrote well: Jefferson and Hamilton, Lincoln and Grant, T. R. and the Adamses. Today public figures can no longer write their own speeches or books; and there is some evidence that they can't read them either.

Yet at the dawn of the empire, for a brief instant, our *professional* writers tried to make a difference. Upton Sinclair and company attacked the excesses of the ruling class. Theodore Roosevelt coined the word "muckraking" to describe what they were doing. He did not

mean the word as praise. Since then a few of our writers have written on public themes, but as they were not taken seriously, they have ended by not taking themselves seriously, at least as citizens of a republic. After all, most writers are paid by universities, and it is not wise to be thought critical of a garrison state which spends so much money on so many campuses.

When Confucius was asked what would be the first thing that he would do if he were to lead the state — his ever-to-be-fulfilled dream — he said *rectify the language*. This is wise. This is subtle. As societies grow decadent, the language grows decadent, too. Words are used to disguise, not to illuminate, action: you liberate a city by destroying it. Words are used to confuse, so that at election time people will solemnly vote against their own interests. Finally, words must be so twisted as to justify an empire that has now ceased to exist, much less make sense. Is rectification of our system possible for us? Henry Adams thought not. In 1910 he wrote: "The whole fabric of society will go to wrack if we really lay hands of reform on our rotten institutions." Then he added, "From top to bottom the whole system is a fraud, all of us know it, laborers and capitalist alike, and all of us are consenting parties to it." Since then, consent has grown frayed; and we have become poor, and our people sullen.

To maintain a thirty-five-year arms race it is necessary to have a fearsome enemy. Not since the invention of the Wizard of Oz have American publicists created anything quite so demented as the idea that the Soviet Union is a monolithic, omnipotent empire with tentacles everywhere on earth, intent on our destruction, which will surely take place unless we constantly imitate it with our war machine and its secret services.

In actual fact, the Soviet Union is a Second World country with a First World military capacity. Frighten the Russians sufficiently and they might blow us up. By the same token, as our republic now begins to crack under the vast expense of maintaining a mindless imperial force, we might try to blow them up. Particularly if we had a President who really was a twice-born Christian, and believed that the good folks would all go to heaven (where they were headed anyway) and the bad folks would go where *they* belong. Fortunately, to date, we have had only hypocrites in the White House. But you never can tell.

Even worse than the not-very-likely prospect of a nuclear war — deliberate or by accident — is the economic collapse of our society because too many of our resources have been wasted on the military. The Pentagon is like a black hole; what goes in is forever lost to us, and no new wealth is created. Hence, our cities, whose centers are unlivable; our crime rate, the highest in the Western world; a public

education system that has given up . . . you know the litany.

There is now only one way out. The time has come for the United States to make common cause with the Soviet Union. The bringing together of the Soviet landmass (with all its natural resources) and our island empire (with all its technological resources) would be of great benefit to each society, not to mention the world. Also, to recall the wisdom of the Four Horsemen who gave us our empire, the Soviet Union and our section of North America combined would be a match, industrially and technologically, for the Sino-Japanese axis that will dominate the future just as Japan dominates world trade today. But where the horsemen thought of war as the supreme solvent, we now know that war is worse than useless. Therefore, the alliance of the two great powers of the Northern Hemisphere will double the strength of each and give us, working together, an opportunity to survive, economically, in a highly centralized Asiatic world.