

# H-Net Reviews

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Edith Kurzweil, ed. *A Partisan Century: Political Writings From Partisan Review*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. xxiv + 409 pp. \$32.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-10331-2; \$75.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-10330-5.

Reviewed by Gil Troy (Department of History, McGill University)  
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## A Partisan Travelogue of the Left

The publisher of this book proclaims that “The writings in *A Partisan Century* are a barometer of shifting currents of culture and politics in this century.” True, this collection edited by Edith Kurzweil covers only seven decades, from the 1937 “Editorial Statement” of the founders, William Phillips and Philip Rahv, to a 1994 essay on “Romania’s Mystical Revolutionaries.” And the particular perspective of *The Partisan Review* makes this collection more a prism than a barometer. Still, its 53 essays and symposia offer an illuminating and important overview of central currents in American intellectual history from the heyday of the American left in the 1930s to the fall of Communism.

While it is dangerous to use one small, iconoclastic magazine to mirror the history of the left or the country, reading selections from *The Partisan Review* does spotlight certain sobering trends. As a travelogue of the left, it highlights many of the follies that have consumed radicals during the past sixty years, from Stalinism to Political Correctness. Most strikingly, this collection serves as a useful reminder in the post-Cold War world of how powerful a hold Communism had over intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s. Nearly half the book focuses on the internecine debates about Stalinism, Bolshevism, and socialism that often overshadowed many other pressing political and cultural issues in America. We learn more about Stalin and Trotsky in these pages than we learn about Franklin D. Roosevelt.

These eloquent yet distasteful debates were often

narrow and self-referential, more often focused on intellectuals’ prerogatives and personalities than on the country’s needs. *Partisan Review* founder Philip Rahv’s “approach to history is that of the homeowners’ commuter,” critics Clement Greenberg and Dwight MacDonal sneered in 1942. He “wants his revolution covered by 5 percent gold bonds and insured at Lloyd’s against failure. But *any* policy that looks to the future—Lenin’s in 1910, Hitler’s in 1925—instead of merely paraphrasing, as Rahv’s does, the status quo, must ‘speculate’ on ‘contingencies’... Social change is always a gamble” (p. 68).

At the same time, these debates have a certain appeal to the modern reader. Their intensity reflects the writers’ passionate beliefs that ideas mattered, that intellectuals are not mere observers or verbal gymnasts but soldiers fighting for truth and justice. “[Y]ou cannot drive a pick axe into ideas,” the author James T. Farrell thundered after Joseph Stalin had Leon Trotsky murdered in Mexico in 1940. Trotsky’s “fertile, suggestive, illuminating” writings, Farrell sniped, make “the productions of our American political scientists and journalists seem morally flabby, spineless, full of facile improvisations.”

World War II, of course, shifted the intellectual center of gravity from Europe to America, and made the United States the “protector of Western civilization” (p. 117). Always ready to pounce on liberal cant, the editors noted in 1946 that “the ‘liberal’ distrust of the United States was as unbounded as their confidence in Russia: in American hands the atomic bomb constituted a threat to the peace

of the world, but of course, if Russia had possession of it, the world could rest secure. The millions of Stalin's political victims, if they could speak from the grave, might have a wry comment to make upon this" (p. 71).

As the collection progresses through the decades, more of the 48 different contributors target the growing conservative movement in America and the cultural revolution the country has experienced since World War II. By focusing on political and cultural enemies rather than intramural civil wars, the writers of *Partisan Review* ended up drawing sharper and more insightful portraits of their country. A 1952 symposium "Our Country and Our Culture," has Norman Mailer, David Riesman, Lionel Trilling, C. Wright Mills, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., sharing insightful observations about the allure and power of "mass culture" (p. 117) that are remarkably relevant nearly half a century later. "Society has been rationalized, and the expert encroaches on the artist," Mailer wrote. "Belief in the efficacy of attacking his society has been lost, but nothing has replaced the need for attack" (p. 119). James Baldwin's heartbreaking "Letter from the South: Nobody Knows My Name" from 1959 eloquently condemns the "criminally frivolous dispute, absolutely unworthy of this nation" (p. 192) about desegregation, and shrewdly warns White America that "this evasion of the Negro's humanity" (p. 199) takes and will continue to take a great toll on the nation. And Susan Sontag's 1964 "Notes on Camp," dissecting an emerging "Camp sensibility" which is "disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical," (p. 233) brilliantly anticipates so much of modern culture, while upstaging much of the drivel that passes for cultural commentary today.

Oddly enough, it is the doubting, dispirited, defeatist essays from the late 1960s and 1970s that often seem most outdated. In 1962, and again in 1975, the foreign policy expert Hans Morgenthau warned that "the United States, by dint of its pluralistic political philosophy and social system, cannot bring to the backward nations of the world a simple message of salvation supported first by dedicated and disciplined revolutionary minorities and then by totalitarian control. In the nature of things, the advantage lies here with the Communist powers" (p. 212). The collapse of Communism beginning in 1989 made a mockery of the bold claims that American decline, Soviet strength, and the rise of the Third World reflected immutable laws of history rather than momentary trends.

The collection ends with a series of eulogies for socialism and the entire century-long endeavor to devise a perfectly equitable social system without sacrificing human liberty. Revisiting the Polish Spring of 1990, Jeffrey Herf admitted that "Capitalism is not lovely. It does not generate a heroic ethos, at least not one that appeals to intellectuals. It can bring out the worst in human beings. It can be heartless. Its impact on culture has been a mixture of support and corruption. It does generate inequality ... But for all these unlovely qualities, it is the only economic system compatible with the existence of pluralistic democracy in which political parties can peacefully win political power and no less peacefully agree to give up political power" (p. 332). Ralf Dahrendorf was more direct: "Socialism is dead," he wrote in 1990, and "none of its variants can be revived for a world awakening from the double nightmare of Stalinism and Brezhnevism" (p. 341).

Clearly, most readers will sample essays here and there, even though much can be gained by reading this collection from cover to cover. This lively, vigorous, at times exasperating, at times inspiring, collection underlines how pale, how constipated, how abstract, contemporary intellectual life is today. Outside the academy, the only intellectuals who gain attention are either blow-dried telegenic wonders who can package their thoughts into snappy soundbites or political hacks who sell their souls and sacrifice any intellectual independence to serve a particular partisan stance. Within the academy, what passes for bold thinking is often little more than a high-faluting attempt either to build one group's self-esteem or to advance one obscurantist's career. Too many of the academies' modernist stars are more John Bradshaw and Deeprak Chokra than Irving Howe or Lionel Trilling. In response, the rest of us super-specialized careerists, what Gore Vidal once called the "scholar-squirrels," clutch onto our footnotes tighter and tighter worshipping ever more intensely on the increasingly narrow altar of empiricism. If this collection inspires even one of us to be a bit bolder while remaining relevant, to take ideas more seriously, it will have done a major service.

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