

BOOK REVIEWS

The Fateful Question of Culture. By Geoffrey H. Hartman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

The starting point for Geoffrey Hartman in his book, *The Fateful Question of Culture*, is a feeling:

The feeling is that of being an outsider to life. Not just to social life or a particular group that I aspire to join, although this wish may play a part, but to participation (perhaps always mystical) in life itself. I want to be a part of all I perceive; I want to know myself, not only my processes of knowing. I want to share, be part of, the feelings of others and not simply feel for them, sympathize in an abstract way. The sense, moreover, that someone else (even more uncannily, something else) may be living my life can become psychologically unsettling. The search for identity, which never seems to cease, plays its role in this strong and potentially pathological fantasy that others live my life, a life I want to live – fully-myself. (21)

This feeling, an unpleasant one, has been the starting point for many who have gone before Hartman. It, or something like it, is recognized by Hobbes as one of the causal and/or prudential (as opposed to epistemic) reasons for religious belief. Nietzsche references such feeling in his accounts of religious belief also – though the feeling becomes, for Nietzsche, a part of the explanans of most (if not all) of what he counts as despicable human behavior. Freud, of course, must be mentioned here as well, along with Sartre and a host of existentialist thinkers concerned with that existential “angst” characterized vividly by Sartre as a sort of “nausea.” In a time when universalizing has become commonly accepted as

either out of fashion, incoherent (or at least unjustifiable), or down-right morally obnoxious, there remains for me at least a few enormously tempting universals. This unpleasant feeling is one of them. It is difficult not to consider this an essential element of humanity. As such, it must surely figure into our self-understandings and our explanations of human behavior in its many forms.

Hartman's book is in part a careful and informed discussion of how "culture" has been variously understood from the modern era through the holocaust to the present. It is a discussion in which Hartman adeptly ties together the variety of "culture" usages through the relation they each have to the basic human anxiety coming out of the desire for identity. This sometimes overly esoteric book also raises and attempts to answer an important and not overly esoteric question:

...are not images of embodiment that haunt us and feelings of abstractness or nonembodiment that tell us we are not real enough, or that we inhabit the wrong body, the post-religious source of ideologies whose explanatory and remedial strictures increase rather than lessen abstraction and too often incite a cannibalistic violence far greater than that of Hegel's animals?
(28)

The anxiety needs a cure. Fortunately, there are many cures. Unfortunately, most of the cures for the anxiety involve one form or another of eradicating the very foundation for the anxiety: humanity itself. One cure for the anxiety has been religious belief. This particular cure has in many cases been one that is worse than the disease. John Stuart Mill had a particularly disdainful attitude towards living life in accordance with what he labeled the "Calvinistic Theory" precisely because he saw the theory as subverting all that is essential to, and thus valuable in, human nature. According to the Calvinistic Theory:

...the one great offence of man is self-will. All the good of which humanity is capable is comprised in obedience. You have no choice; thus you must do, and no otherwise: 'whatever is not a duty, is a sin'. Human nature being radically corrupt, there is no redemption for any one until human nature is killed within him. To one holding this theory of life, crushing out any of the human faculties, capacities and susceptibilities, is no evil: man needs no capacity, but that of surrendering himself to the will of God: and if he uses any of his faculties for any other purpose but to do that supposed will more effectually, he is better without them.
(Mill 129-130)

Other cures have been found in the ideologies of modernity, humanism, nationalism, and cultural identity. Many of these have, as Hartman points out, been associated with much moral failing during the post-enlightenment years.

There is a relationship between these cures and imperialism, as well as between these cures and the holocaust. The confidence of the modern era, in light of the several and profound moral failings located in its compass, appears to have been unwarranted.

For many, especially those who fit into the category of "post-moderns," these failings warrant an all-out abandoning of most (if not all) of the commitments of modernity. Too often this response is merely reactionary and offers one of two unsatisfactory solutions. Either some nostalgic return to a premodern-like period is defended, or we are to simply stop attempting to make sense altogether. Hartman puts this a little differently; however, the upshot is the same. How we speak, as much as what we say when we speak, is constrained in the aftermath of the holocaust. As Hartman puts it, "the choice between styles seems more absolute now: nonsublimity or silence" (118). Neither choice is satisfactory because neither is compatible (in any but a logical sense) with progress and it is unconvincing to many (I include myself among these ranks) to suggest that the idea of progress is chimerical at best and dangerous at worst.

Hartman's discriminating scholarship makes this book the great success that it is. He is able to glean a great deal of important and worthwhile insight from leading post-modernists such as Derrida while keeping his wits about him and avoiding the temptation to abandon the equally important and worthwhile insights of modernity. He avoids the glaring mistake that many have succumbed to: that of understanding the relationship between the "cures" for human anxiety that are found in modernity (i.e., humanism and various ideas of culture and identity) and the moral failings of modernity as one of entailment. The relationship is not one of entailment and it is a laughable and gross suggestion that these moral failings are an unavoidable consequence of the ideas of the likes of Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and others.

The "cures" of the basic human anxiety go bad whenever they become either compulsory or numbing. Living one's life in accordance with the Calvinistic Theory discussed by Mill involves abandoning one's autonomy and giving oneself entirely to obedience. The anxiety might well be assuaged, but the price is too high. Culture can offer a cure as well and it too can carry too high a price. Whenever "culture" amounts to a source of identity and meaning that people accept passively, the price of the cure is too great. Agreeing with Adorno, Hartman tells us that "Culture should resist rather than promote self-deception, should reveal rather than occult human and social misery" (118). Culture should be freeing. It should be compatible with autonomy and thus must be always kept alive, active, and questioned. Culture should never be accepted passively and should not become dogmatic. As Hartman puts it:

...the aim of both contemporary and older appeals to "culture" is not that of turning everything into an item of knowledge that can be manipulated in order to bring about domination, whether by a benevolent or malevolent order. It is to redeem imagination from abstraction, to achieve, with or without the state, a more embodied and less alienated way of life. (179-180)

and:

...as long as it (the newer concept of culture) discourages groupthink or the tyrannical enforcing of a particular embodiment, that is, as long as it does not create self-segregating, ethnic, or lifestyle sects, it opens toward a plenitude of social forms and the possibility of their coexistence. (180)

In these passages we find Hartman's recognition of the importance of freedom and a culture that allows for and fosters freedom.

The culture of freedom, argues Hartman, must put a premium on art and aesthetic education. Although its only explicit statement is made with little fanfare, the great message of Hartman's book is as follows:

...do not give up the concept of aesthetic education. Art is not a luxury, a snobbish indulgence, but basic to a measure of freedom from inner and outer compulsions. The aesthetic sense is essential for this growing freedom and establishes links even with physics, that is, with a world not of our making, which is attractively sensuous yet open to intellectual scrutiny. (157-158)

Art is creation and it is expression. By expressing ourselves through art and creativity, we develop an identity, one that we are in charge of and responsible for rather than an identity that takes charge of us and constrains us. Both sorts of identity – that of which individuals are the author and that which can be foisted onto passive masses – will serve as a cure for the anxiety Hartman has described at the outset of the book. However, when the cure is constraining and one to which we only uncritically submit, it is worse than the illness. In light of this prescription and its cultural implications, Hartman makes a case for the important role the university has to play. He is right in his assessment of the University as an institution that can uniquely support a free and vital, expressive and critical culture. This culture is one that can effectively relieve us of our natural human anxieties without destroying our humanity through subtle and not so subtle compulsion.

The Fateful Question of Culture is an impressive piece of academic writing. Its message is important and the author's own sympathies suggest that a more popular presentation (not to be understood as "dumbing-down") of the message could be of great value. However, this book, like so many others, is relatively unbalanced in terms of the presentation of its critical and prescriptive components. A more sustained discussion of the university as an institution with a vital role to play in the culture of freedom and inclusion would greatly improve the book. I am sympathetic with the suggestion that the academy can enhance society in the way Hartman suggests it can. Although there are points in the course of this book that give the impression that Hartman is about to move from the disengaged and esoteric stance of the professional academic

towards the more engaging stance of a public intellectual with a message and a direction, in the end it doesn't happen. Perhaps there is resistance on his part, fearing that the jargon of the public intellectual will constitute an illicit influence (the way alcohol, drugs, and cults are an influence) and thus potentially be incompatible with the freedom-promoting culture he desires. But surely we can have cultural leaders even in a culture of this sort. If there are to be such cultural leaders, they will have to bear a striking resemblance to Hartman.

Works Cited

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A Carnival For Science: Essays on Science, Technology, and Development..
By Shiv Visvanathan. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

A Carnival For Science is an insightful and elegantly written collection of essays from one of India's finest post-modern critics of science. Trained in the sociology and philosophy of science, Visvanathan has devoted his attention in this book to the "development agenda" of modern science, explicitly identifying modernism, development, and science as interlinked and potentially genocidal forces in the world. In making this argument, Visvanathan argues that science and politics are inseparable, and to localize science would also have the effect of decentralizing government. In spite of the polemical tone of his thesis, Visvanathan's writing is often entertaining and even delightful as his essays move from a fictional account of a crisis of simultaneously blooming bamboo clumps over thousand of acres of forest (and the attendant rats which come to feed on it) to rewriting Gandhi to Oppenheimer and atomic physics.

Cultural historians in the U.S. often speak of modernism encountering a crisis of confidence, usually placed between 1965-75, after which the validity of expertise (scientific and governmental) was never quite the same. This is thought to have ushered in the period of post-modernism, characterized by a multiplicity of competing narratives (none pre-eminent), experimentation, and a general skepticism on the part of academics, and the U.S. public, towards totalizing narratives of any sort. Visvanathan follows a similar trajectory in his analysis of Indian science and society in the last fifty years (the length of its independence). From the early happy days of the Indian Republic had come the various crises of the 1960s and 70s, including defeat by China in a war and a