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# *The Tribalization of the Western Mind*

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**The Defeat of the Mind**, by Alain Finkielkraut. Translated by Judith Friedlander. *New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. 165 pp. \$22.95.*

The conclusion of this thoughtful, if problematic, book is summed up in one of its chapter titles: "The Zombie and the Fanatic." The two types are the citizens of the new Babylon; the first is the one who has given up thinking, the second turns everything into feeling. Together they constitute what Alain Finkielkraut calls "youth," the narcissistic preoccupation with temporality that turns everything away from the mind and towards the body as the new measuring rod for human living-together. The body, which has no significance beyond temporality, has become the locus of modern, now postmodern, obsessions. Temporality abolishes succession as a meaningful principle in human organization and makes culture impossible. This means that "barbarism replaces culture." Culture has been degraded to somatic gratification, from which all meaning is now derived. Politically, this requires "using threats of high treason to silence doubt," doubt

about the status of the body as a justification for reshaping politics.

This is evident in the inversion of the meaning of culture, which had heretofore pointed man away from nature (Christianity), or attempted to perfect it (Greek philosophy). Under postmodernism, culture is debased on behalf of the body and now employs technology—what Freud called a prosthetic god—to advance the body over the mind in the search for identity, or "authenticity."

The dualism generated by Descartes has been answered in favor of the body; it not only rules the mind but has abolished the mind as a human necessity. Thus, Finkielkraut concludes, "The life of the mind has quietly moved out of the way, making room for the terrible and pathetic encounter of the fanatic and the zombie."

To many observers of the cultural crisis, Finkielkraut may seem to be stating the self-evident, and to be repeat-

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ing the dismal warnings of more comprehensive thinkers. But this understates his contribution. A Frenchman railing against the nihilism offered up by his countrymen, especially Derrida and Foucault, he appears to offer some relief to the civilized world. Curiously, Finkielkraut writes as a defender of the Enlightenment and points the accusatorial finger at his countrymen, who, he believes, have abandoned Enlightenment principles for the sake of atavistic identities. As he sees it, these atavisms are not a residue of the Enlightenment but an attempt to defeat the universalism of the original Enlightenment project. Thus, he moves lightly past the philosophes to those he believes are the saboteurs of culture and their contemporary successors today.

Finkielkraut takes his analytical lead from his countryman Julien Benda, author of *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, who first called attention to the perversion of Enlightenment principles by nationalist romantics. Benda saw the "translation of culture into *my* culture" as the "true mark of the modern age." This set the stage for the intellectualization of culture, which is the mark of modern hubris. As Benda wrote in his own prophetic book: "Our age is indeed the age of the *intellectual organization of political hatreds*."

Finkielkraut tries, not entirely successfully, to rescue the Enlightenment by turning away from its mundane rationalism and towards its universalist aspiration; that is, from its "parochially conceived nationalism" and toward its (attenuated) spirituality of humanism. Particularist nationalism, he believes, gave rise to the racialism found in Hit-

ler, then in post-colonial Africa, finally to reach American shores in the form of multiculturalism.

Johann Herder (1744-1803) and the German political romantics rejected reason's quest for the Good, the True and the Beautiful, and made life contingent on history and circumstances. This change culminated in ethnic egoism: "All that was Divine was human; even the Word belonged to history." Taking Hegel one step further, Herder marched every particular culture, every geno-type, one by one, through history. Indeed, it was history, not reason, that rode into Jena on horseback and carried with it the multiculturalist creed: "Let men speak well or ill of our nation, our literature, our language: they are ours, they are ourselves, and let that be enough."

Like others before him, including Eric Voegelin and Hannah Arendt, Finkielkraut understands that the end of the state and rise of the nation signaled the end of the *ancien régime* and gave all power to ethnicity. But worse, it paved the way for the modern, temporal, egoistic rejection of ancestry, class, faith, and transcendent norms. The absolutization of the body led to the relativization of truth and of the moral aspirations of the philosophes. The nation became a magnified solipsism, "associates . . . represented by the same legislature." And to his credit, Finkielkraut is aware of the true meaning of this transformation turning man into god. Thus, he observes, it was not the "revolutionaries," not the philosophes, who denied the uniqueness of ancestral development and sought to reshape it around an "imaginary entity:

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man." Instead, it was a different intelligentsia, what Benda calls the "clerics," who thought their imagination was the collective soul of the people. Through their will they could "transfer to man powers that the age old alliance of throne and altar had reserved for God."

It would be wrong to see Finkielkraut as a "traditionalist" pushing for a *status quo ante* and guided by a form of universalism. Critical of both de Maistre and Bonald, he holds that a "simple return to tradition" is inadequate to confront the "counter-revolution [which] abolished all transcendental values, divine as well as human." Instead, he hopes for a kind of rationalist renaissance, defending the philosophes who tried to uphold "abstract and timeless principles." He holds that the traditionalists, especially their Christian acolytes, failed by abandoning their catechism to meet the new rationalism on its own ground. The traditionalists then renounced all dualisms (eternity/time, etc.), and their thought degenerated into a quasi-materialism that would become a target for Nietzsche. Finkielkraut points to the Church's absorption by the Critical Spirit of the Enlightenment. The current politicization of faith, manifested in its soliciting support for abortion and homosexuality, resulted not from the victory of rationalism over faith but from the willingness of the latter to do battle in terms of the former.

The outcome of this battle, some of whose worst consequences are visible to us now, is that secular rationalism has asserted itself in its most pernicious form: ideologues and theocrats have been discarded in favor of the

"scholar," the "expert," for whom society is an object of mental fascination. Members of the intellectual class—those trained in the rules of rationalism (attuned to the laws of nature), the manipulative powers of economics (centering on self-interest), and the arcana of social forces (governed by class interest)—have become the real transmitters of culture. Away with our ancestors, traditions, the social contract, community, and the idea of individual redemption! The "clerics" have become a clerisy.

The universalism towards which Finkielkraut aims, or what he, following Renan, calls "human culture," is not the globalist sentimentality that emerged after the Second World War. The icon of this smarmy romanticism is UNESCO, which Finkielkraut sees as the enemy of "human culture." Through UNESCO and its cultural revivalism "progressivist" illusions came to seek expression: swords were to be beaten into plowshares and the last were to be made first, or at least equal. Hitler signaled the end of the old era. The progressivist UN symbolized a confluence of presumed human moral progress and rationalist self-consciousness.

Under the banner of the UN, the cognoscenti could finally reshape man according to their own conceptions of humanity. But this could only be done under egalitarian conditions. A truly human humanism had to respect persons, but in the concrete form of their collective existence. The new theorizing led to the democratization of cultures under the banner of equal historical opportunity.

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The equalization of cultures validates the normative assumptions of each and thereby obliterates the common humanity proclaimed by the Enlightenment. Contradicting its own rationalist, universalist principles that were intended to embrace all mankind, UNESCO incorporated the intellectual notion of cultural relativism into its guiding principles. Guided by the new social sciences, Western intellectuals cleansed the UN Declaration of the Rights of Man of its formalism and universalist aspirations. The Declaration was redrafted under the assumptions of Claude Levi-Strauss to force the individual into a new tribal consciousness. Its new first principle became: "The individual releases his personality through his culture. Hence respect for individual differences entails a respect for cultural differences." This formed the first step in the new racial thinking: origins are understood to govern destiny. Culture, formerly understood as an historical phenomenon, and containing the potential for natural development, was transformed into a composite mentality, banishing individualism and the identity it seeks to convey. This new notion of culture formed the axiom of the new social sciences, which denies the very possibility of limited, representative democracy: no individual matters apart from his group.

With the denial of the opportunity of consent, culture becomes an ethnic parochialism that destroys individuality, and with it the prospect of politics as voluntary association. As Finkielkraut points out, assuring the hegemony of the new "cultures" had the effect in Af-

rica of precluding democracy. What he calls "the ideology of cultural identity," expressing the vanity of the particular body, does not promote diversity but insulation. Insular and xenophobic in its more benign form, irredentist and imperialistic in its worst form, this new identity requires the rejection of the cosmopolitanism requisite to constitutional democracy and civilization. Such insularity spawns the belief that there is a genetic code for cultural identity, which is the very antithesis of a general humanity and the belief that what is natural can move towards the universal. Finkielkraut: "We create an impossible contradiction in seeking to establish rules for welcoming diverse ethnic groups based on principles affirming the primacy of cultural roots."

The former inequality of persons is eventually transformed, Finkielkraut argues, into an inequality of races. The old view is hierarchical, placing value on a particular race and judging others inferior by its standard of achievement. It is not universalist, but narcissistic. The new view denies commonality, hence humanity, making differences the ineluctable basis of confrontation, which leads finally to what Renan called "zoological wars." The first view imposes a standard; the second obliterates it. The first view puts a certain group at the top; the second denies there is a bottom. As Finkielkraut concludes, "The former holds that civilization is unitary; the latter maintains that there are multiple ethnicities which cannot be compared." "The first outlook leads to colonialism; but the second culminates in Hitler."

Unhappily, the very philosophes

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Finkielkraut tries to rescue are those who sought to base culture on unaided reason, ignoring Plato's warnings on the inability of the cave dwellers to be fascinated by anything other than the peripherals of culture (such as MTV today). These same philosophes fostered the despiritualization of culture, abetting the emergence of autonomous "cultures." But without a transcendent order, which requires at least a partial surrendering of autonomy, how can a sense of universality survive? Thanks to the reductionism of our age, universalism has been inverted and now emerges out of the individual, reflecting his own "culture," however arbitrary or degraded. Finkielkraut calls

this the "infantilizing of culture."

Perhaps the main value of Finkielkraut's little book is that it connects, albeit grudgingly, the cult of racialism with the rise of rationalism and with the failure of liberalism to live up to its former promise. Thus, he observes scornfully that "there are increasing numbers of people who, when they hear the word 'thought,' . . . reach for their culture." While he tries to rescue a moribund liberalism by dissociating the philosophes from their progeny, especially social scientists, he illustrates how current race theorizing promotes a new era of racialism, rather than ending the old one.

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