

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

Mark L. Melcher
President
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

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WE HAS MET THE ENEMY, AND IT IS US

Mark L. Melcher

It is apparent to even the most casual observer that the United States is in the midst of a period of extraordinary cultural change. Like it or not, the nation is awash with trends and fashions that would have been out of the question just a few short years ago: gay rights, women's rights, militant multiculturalism, condom programs and metal detectors in schools, staggering increases in teenage pregnancy, soaring rates of murder and mayhem, and attacks on free speech by campus "thought police" who in the same breath condone popular "music" containing blatant racists, sexist and incendiary lyrics.

Conservatives charge that the United States is in the midst of a "cultural war." They argue that the nation's moral capital has been depleted by, among other things, the effects of years of expanding federal social programs, a frontal assault on the role of religion in public life, and soft-headed polices toward crime.

The villains, according to the right, are politically correct, multiculturalist utopians, who have a strong predilection toward socialist totalitarianism.

The leadership of this leftist crowd, the right believes, resides in the humanities departments and in the administrative offices of some of the most prestigious universities; in the executive suites of the principle media and entertainment conglomerates, from Hollywood to Madison Avenue; in career positions within federal agencies that deal with such issues as education, health, welfare and housing; in the seemingly endless string of "civil rights organizations;" in the management of the principle public employees unions; and now, of course, in the White House.

In short, the right believes that the left has successfully followed the advise of the 1960s German radical Rudi Dutschke, who told his colleagues to quit the barricades and begin "the long march through the institutions." Today, according to the right, these 60's radicals are finally in a position to launch an all out assault on America's most sacred social, moral and intellectual conventions and traditions.

Subscriptions to The Political Forum are available by contacting:
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8563 Senedo Rd., Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
Tel 540-477-9762, Fax 540-477-3359, Email melcher@thepoliticalforum.com,
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For their part, liberals applaud many aspects of the on-going cultural change. The "rights" campaigns, the growth in federal programs, and a more "humanitarian" approach to criminals are not the cause of society's problems, they feel, but a necessary first step toward creating a more fair and equal society. They generally blame those aspects of societal change that they don't like on tightfisted, mean spirited conservatives, whom they charge have collectively blocked the government from spending the kind of money and doing the kinds of things that would be necessary to effectively address society's problems.

Both sides tend to view politics as the principle battleground in this clash of ideas. Washington must "do something" is a common theme in virtually every argument or discussion. Liberals want more federal programs and better management of existing ones. Conservatives want a rollback in the "welfare state" and a tougher approach to crime.

I am increasingly of the opinion that politics is incidental to it all; that investors and others who are interested in the future direction of U.S. society need to look beyond the histrionics of Pat Buchanan and ministrations of Hillary Rodham Clinton for clues to the direction and the outcome of the battle.

Other, much more powerful factors are at work. In fact, I think the politicians of today can be compared to the monks, Popes, emperors, kings and potentates of the early 16th century; those men who debated endlessly the rights and wrongs of the renaissance and reformation, some struggling against the remarkable forces at work and others using them for political advantage, but all basically powerless to significantly effect the direction or the speed of change because it was being driven by an explosion in scientific knowledge and technical innovation that was beyond their control.

In the introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the eminent scholar and historian A.H.T. Levi, argues that the Western world today "may be thought to be in the grip of a value-shift no less bewildering and of changes in systems of transport and communication no less disturbing," than that experienced by Northern Europe during the reformation and the late renaissance period.

As is the case today, the world at that time, Levi notes, was experiencing a "new and intoxicating vision of man's potentialities." Predictably, he says, "the results ranged from a theological backlash of unprecedented severity to . . . wild millenarian expectations." In addition, Levi notes, the times were marked by a wave of economic prosperity prompted in large part by the influx of precious metals from the new world.

Economic prosperity? What does that mean? It means business! It means commerce! And, like it or not, it means cultural change! As Levi notes, a primary cause of the social upheaval during the 16th century was not simply an explosion of technical innovation and science, but the practical application of these developments, namely a growing economic base and the emergence of a merchant class that profited by and therefore aggressively promoted cultural variety.

The merchant class today is, as then, a driving factor behind cultural change. The liberal bugbears of the right are important, of course. But to understand the nature of today's cultural

upheaval it is necessary to recognize that, like the revolutionaries against the church during the reformation, proponents of cultural change today have a powerful partner, and that partner is business, commerce, and, dare we say it, capitalism.

This theme was beautifully developed by David Rieff in a article in the August, 1993 *Harpers*, entitled "Multiculturalism's Silent Partner, It's The New Globalized Consumer Economy Stupid." Rieff, who has been described as a modern day Tocqueville, is author of several books on change in America. His latest is *The Exile, Cuba In The Heart of Miami* (Simon & Schuster, August 1993).

Rieff uses the term "multiculturalism" as a kind of catch-all phrase for the cultural war, or as he describes it, the "ongoing arguments about race and gender, the cannon and deconstruction, values, victims and sensitivities." Rieff notes that academia is alive today with this war, that "campus life would be emptied of excitement, if not of subject matter, without these debates."

But, he says, those who believe that academia is where the real action is on multiculturalism miss the point, because, "despite the denials and mystifications of the intelligentsia, multiculturalism is a phenomenon with a silent partner: the broad and radical change now taking place within world capitalism."

"Those offering seminars in, say, queer studies together with those lambasting such programs . . . both overstate and misstate their cases," Rieff maintains. "All insist that the advent of multiculturalism is a critical watershed in American history. And all agree that the debate is a zero-sum game in which either the status quo (call it Western civilization or white male hegemony, according to your tastes) will be maintained or some radical new understanding (describe is as justice or barbarism, as you will) will be established."

But, Rieff says, "Reality is elsewhere. For better or worse (probably both), ours is a culture of consumerism and spectacle, of things not ideas . . . In a country of Kmart and 'material girls,' what is all this anguish about the canon?"

". . . multiculturalism *is* enormously important, just not in the way either its champions or its detractors suppose. Indeed the curiousness of the situation is that both sides have misconstrued the power of multiculturalism in precisely the same way: as a threat to the capitalist system. In reality, it is nothing of the sort . . ." It is, Rieff says, instead "the most salient cultural epiphenomenon of an increasingly globalized capitalist system."

Rieff offers a variety of excellent supportive arguments for his thesis. I don't have room to present them all. But his primary point can be found in his contention that "culture was always a problem for the marketplace. For one thing, despite the fact that one art form, painting, became extremely valuable as a commodity over the course of the twentieth century, there was always a latent antagonism between an economic system ever more dependent on maximizing growth through increased consumption and a high culture in which the old, the long-cherished, and the irreplaceable were held in higher esteem than the new."

Contrary to the beliefs of leftist advocates of multiculturalism, Rieff maintains that multiculturalism is "what any smart businessman would prefer. For if all art is deemed as good

as all other art, and, for that matter, if the point of art is not greatness but the production of works of art that reflect the culture and aspirations of various ethnic, sexual, or racial sub-groups within a society, then one is in a position to increase supply almost at will in order to meet increases in demand.”

"Instead of being a rare and costly thing, culture becomes simultaneously a product, like a car--something that can be made new every few years--and an abundant resource, like, well, people. The result is that consumption of culture can increasingly come to resemble the consumption of goods. After all, just as one cannot say that a preference for Pepsi is superior to a preference for Dr. Pepper, what is euphemistically known as 'cultural pluralism' permits a similar abdication of judgment in matters of artistic taste. The rules of the market are soon in full control. If students want to read Alice Walker in a literature class instead of the *Iliad*, fine. The publishing industry certainly has no qualms. . . ."

"The multiculturalists," Rieff says, "may pride themselves on posing a fundamental threat to what Professor Henry Giroux has called 'the hegemonic notion that Eurocentric culture is superior to other cultures and traditions by virtue of its canonical status as a universal measure of Western civilization.' But the reality is that no serious player in the business world has anything but the most vestigial or sentimental interest in Western civilization, as it is roughly understood by campus radicals and conservatives alike . . . If any group has embraced the rallying cry 'Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western culture's got to go,' it is the world business elite."

So there you have it. As Pogo said, "We has met the enemy. And he is us." The bottom line is that if you're interested in the direction in which American culture and society is proceeding, watch the business community as well as the intellectual and political proponents of change. They're in cahoots.

T.S. Eliot saw it too, you know. Like Rieff, he linked the growth of materialism and the business community's role in this phenomenon directly to what he mourned as the passage of the "permanent things," or as Russell Kirk calls them "those enduring truths and ways of life and standards of order." In his always elegant and eloquent style, Eliot said it this way: "We are destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their merchandised caravans."

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