

# Salmagundi



fortieth anniversary issue



fall 2005 • winter 2006

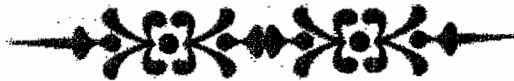
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The Deluge of Porn Goodbye America? Movie Tunes  
Whining Freud's New Love Five Fassbinder Scenes

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# Salmagundi



**SALMAGUNDI** is a quarterly of the Humanities and Social Sciences which is addressed to the "general" reader rather than to the academic specialist. Founded in 1965 and published since 1969 at Skidmore College, the magazine routinely publishes essays, reviews, interviews, fiction, poetry, regular columns, polemics, debates and symposia. It is widely regarded as one of the most influential intellectual quarterlies in the United States, and though it is often discussed as a "little magazine," it is by no means predominantly belletristic or narrow in its purview or its audience.

Among the writers long associated with **Salmagundi** are Nadine Gordimer, J.M Coetzee, Tzvetan Todorov, George Steiner, Orlando Patterson, Norman Manea, Christopher Hitchens, Seamus Heaney, Mary Gordon, Susan Sontag, Benjamin Barber, Joyce Carol Oates, Richard Howard, Carolyn Forché, Martin Jay and David Rieff.

For many years **Salmagundi** featured the work of the late American historian Christopher Lasch, who wrote the introduction to the tenth anniversary issue of the magazine in the fall of 1975. Lasch noted that, in **Salmagundi**, "the criticism of art and literature is informed at every point by analysis of the social, psychological, and political conditions that shape them." He also noted that the magazine's politics were difficult to define, that it often "criticized leftist clichés...from a point of view sympathetic to the underlying objectives of the left," and that, though obviously attracted to the work of "iconoclastic" thinkers, it was often critical of "the counterculture."

Obviously, the magazine has changed over the course of the past quarter century, but in many respects Lasch's enthusiastic description remains accurate. The "mix" of material in the magazine is much what it has always been, the political perspectives various, the regular political and cultural columnists unpredictable in their sense of what matters, the presence in the "mix" of European voices (and sometimes Latin American and African voices) notable.

As in the past, **Salmagundi** often devotes large parts of entire issues to "special subjects." In the past ten years, two issues have been devoted to lengthy symposia on Afro-America, with contributors ranging all the way from Anthony Appiah and Darryl Pinckney to Jim Sleeper and Gerald Early. Other issues have been largely devoted to "The Culture of the Museum," "Homosexuality," "Art and Ethics," "The Culture Industry," "Kitsch" and "FemIcons." From time to time, the magazine gives over its pages to debates, as between a leading thinker and his or her sometimes virulent critics.

In short, **Salmagundi** is not a tame or genteel quarterly. It invites argument, and it makes a place for literature that is demanding, including novella-length fiction—by Gordimer, Oates, Andrea Barrett, Steven Millhauser, Cynthia Ozick, and William Gass—and essays that—in terms of length and range of interest—go well beyond the fare served up by the better weeklies and monthlies.

Forthcoming in **Salmagundi** are interviews with writers like Mario Vargas Llosa, Seamus Heaney and Adam Zagajewski; fiction by Nadine Gordimer, Joyce Carol Oates and Nancy Huston; regular columns by Tzvetan Todorov, Benjamin Barber, Carolyn Forché, Martin Jay, Marlo Vargas Llosa and Marilynne Robinson; and a full-issue symposium (Spring 2005) on "Jihad, McWorld, Modernity: Public Intellectuals Debate the 'Clash of Civilizations'" featuring Martha Nussbaum, Benjamin Barber, Akeel Bilgrami, Gity Nashat, Orlando Patterson, Breyten Breytenbach, Carolyn Forché, Vladimir Tismaneanu and James Miller with responses from Christopher Hitchens, Jean Bethke Elshtain and others.

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# Salmagundi



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## Behind the Deluge of Porn, a Conservative Sea-Change

BY JIM SLEEPER

“Channel surfing with Jessica, who’s 9, we stopped at an early evening rerun of Jon Stewart’s Daily Show — irreverent, we figured, but not wrong for her,” my friend Dave wrote me recently. “Came the bit about the gay male escort/model who’d mysteriously gotten White House press clearance to represent a Republican-funded online ‘news’ service and lob the president softball questions. The show flashed a photo from the escort service’s website showing the man naked, spread-eagled, his genitals blurred. Jessie gasped. Her face clouded over and she looked our way but didn’t ask anything, and sometimes you just let things roll. We clutched hands silently, knowing damage had been done. I don’t want to beat up on Stewart; I’m a liberal. Maybe I should have used better judgment, but, man, my parents never had to think about jumping up and shielding my eyes when we watched Walter Cronkite.”

Why was the photo flashed? Was it news? Social commentary? Ratings lust? All of that, surely — even news of conservative sexual hypocrisy, of which there is no end. But “sex” itself is what sells: “People want it, so we are trying to provide it; the more X’s, the more popular,” an Adelphia Communications spokeswoman told the *Boston Globe* recently after the company, among its other dubious distinctions, became the

first U.S. cable provider to offer triple-X rated pornography. What Dave's family got wasn't porn, exactly, but it forced him to think about how he'd explain to his 9-year-old that people sell their bodies – and that TV “sells” their doing it. That Dave faults his own judgment doesn't quite make him fair game.

It certainly doesn't explain what's coming to us unbidden in roadside “Erotic Empire” billboards, bus-shelter underwear posters, fashion-cum-kiddie porn ads, commercials for erectile dysfunction cures, and the fetid currents wafting suddenly through our homes at prime-time. The Thing that's exposing itself to us increasingly is more degrading than porn because it's so unchosen, so public, and so purely commercial: The pornification of public spaces and narratives, an eros-burning equivalent of second-hand smoke, isn't malevolent as much as it's a mindless groping of our persons to goose profits and market share. Don't call it free speech; these sensors are beyond censors. They aren't bringing us artists' art, activists' politics, or fellow-citizens' opinions, and the only social message in their leering come-ons is this: “Our company can bypass your brain and heart and go for your erogenous and other viscera on its way to your wallet. Nothing personal, by the way.”

Nothing liberating, either – and my authority is the author of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, who thought porn “a sign of a diseased condition of the body politic.” D.H. Lawrence wasn't ducking indictment or an inquest when he wrote in 1929, in “Pornography and Obscenity,” that “even I would censor genuine pornography, rigorously,” rebuffing “the insult it offers, invariably, to sex, and to the human spirit.... There is no reciprocity... only deadening.” Lawrence hated porn because he exalted sexual love. He was happy that “the intelligent young... are rescuing their young nudity from the stuffy, pornographical hole-and-corner underworld of their elders, and they refuse to sneak about the sexual relation.” He came as close as any well-known writer of his time to seconding Oscar Wilde's defense of homosexuality. But unquestionably he'd have detested the commercialized, bare-it-all, flip side of porn's sneaking secrecy that's inundating us now, not least because, while he abhorred sneaking secrecy, he cherished modesty (and monogamy!).

And let's not call our problem "liberal permissiveness." American liberals such as Tipper Gore and Bill Bradley protested years ago that by feeding kids like Jessica "a menu of violence without context and sex without attachment," as Bradley put it, Americans who are letting corporate investment drive our public culture are abusing "the all-important role of storytelling which is essential to the formation of moral education that sustains a civil society." That protest was right, even if Gore's call for warning labels was wrong. You don't have to want to re-run "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" or Cecil B. DeMille's "The Ten Commandments" — with Charlton Heston as Moses, heaven help us — to have worries about such big public narratives as "Titanic," "Gladiator," "Revenge of the Sith," or "Matrix II" — or to wonder why more worthy replacements, such as "Harry Potter" and "Lord of the Rings," that affirm virtues like loyalty among friends and courage against darkness have to be imported from a British public culture that is expiring, but a little less rapidly than our own. No wonder Lawrence distinguished "personal, superficial, temporary desires" from "impersonal great desires" that are nourished in noble public narratives. Even when the latter are contested, the ardor in the contention nourishes a social faith that's not for sale: "It is the business of our Chief Thinkers to tell us of our own deeper desires, not to keep shrilling our little desires in our ears," he wrote.

To take proper account of this, we need to change the debate about pornography and freedom of expression in this republic. We need to examine often-unconscious assumptions about where the problem I've sketched is coming from and what kind of damage it is doing. Only when our premises have changed enough to permit a new consensus about the problem might we imagine new policies or other solutions. We have no consensus or wisdom about the role of eros in social narratives that shape young people's social depths and horizons, as Bradley and Gore rightly insisted they do. Nor have we noticed that American conservatives generate not only repressions of eros but also, and perhaps inevitably, its destructive, reactive explosions. Liberals and leftists and honorable conservatives themselves can't end this see-saw if they're too busy fighting repression to imagine how a distinctive American, republican culture might renegotiate civilization and its discontents.



Lawrence's novels moved F. Scott Fitzgerald and others to weave sexual and social love into tales of a young republic's coming of age and of eros' meanderings through mannered precincts of money and class: In *This Side of Paradise* 18-year-old Isabelle "strung the names [of her white-shoe suitors] into a fabrication of gaiety that would have dazzled a Viennese nobleman. Such is the power of young contralto voices on sink-down sofas." However fraught or sad, such story lines didn't foist on readers the instant, for-sale sex that's dancing up to Jessica, so close and yet so cold. Our sad public descent from controversy over *Lady Chatterly* eighty years ago to the shrugs greeting Toni Bentley's *The Surrender* (an in-depth appreciation, as it were, of anal intercourse) shows mainly that print has lost its capacity to shock to electronic images that are more intrusive and, increasingly, interactive. Even the worst book remains something you must choose to buy and read, and it retains print's capacity to deepen reflection, unequalled by torrents of disjointed sensations.

Saddening though it is to see publishing conglomerates squander that capacity in order to catch up with sensationalist media, it's the latter's half-stories and non-stories, flashed relentlessly, that spur a nameless, not always quiet heartbreak and decay. Like the porn-inflected culture of the Weimar Republic, ours now degrades "great desires," skewing the nervous systems, hormones, and muscles of children like Jessica and of adolescents trying to negotiate erotic life. Parents struggle to lift up children's hearts and inspire social graces not by railing against nudity or unconventional sexuality per se but by acknowledging a deepening undertow of "violence without context and sex without attachment." Yes, post-Nazi, social-democratic Europe has wrestled with pornification longer than we have, without collapse, but its public cultures are older and deeper. Even so, darkly sexy demagogues like Austria's George Haider show that these cultures are fraying.

How far is it, really, from Jessica's confusion to darker burdens like those dramatized on "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and successor shows, burdens borne by young people at the edge of a social abyss largely unnoticed by their oblivious elders? After all, prime fare at present features TV confessional and reality shows whose participants (and audiences) shed civility for prurience and brutality. Has this no relation to the coercive, "deadening" sex reported at the Groton and Milton acad-

emies or to the torture and voyeurism at Abu Ghraib? Or to Larry Clark's renderings of teen male prostitutes at the International Center of Photography, which prompted the *New York Times*' Ken Johnson to worry that "despite a reluctance to contribute to the censoriousness of our times, it is difficult not to feel there is something wrong with the adult Clark's making pornographic-looking pictures of visibly underage young people under the cover of high art. . . . The rather too obvious point is that mainstream media culture is hypocritically complicit in eroticizing children." (The come-on headline of Johnson's review reads, "Drawing You Into the Moral Void of Gorgeously Sensuous Squalor.")

How far is it, finally, from the beclouding of Jessica's horizons to the rage sketched by New York University professor of English Josephine Hendin in *Heartbreakers: Women and Violence in Contemporary Culture and Literature*? "Insofar as women are traditionally icons of the civilizing virtues," Hendin told me, "their current idealization as cold, ruthless killers says a lot about the rise of nihilism. From the lighthearted *Charlie's Angels* remake aimed at teenage girls to *Basic Instinct* and its clones, the proliferation of good-looking women killing and kickboxing connects sex, nihilism and violence. . . . That skews private and well as public forms of discourse."

But who is doing this to us, really? One familiar answer these days comes from the former Lutheran activist-pastor Richard John Neuhaus, now a Roman Catholic priest and conservative public intellectual. His *The Naked Public Square* laments not mainly affronts like the photo Jessica saw but the role he thinks liberal public leaders, especially, have played in stripping public discourse of the stories and arguments that used to affirm its decency: "When Bill Clinton took the office of the presidency on MTV and answered questions about his underwear," Neuhaus wrote in 1999, "that is something that Bill Clinton did. It was not done by the American people; it was done to them. Many Americans loved it. There have always been a lot of slobs. Clinton's innovation is in pandering to them."

But is Neuhaus being fully honest here? He knows very well that, not long ago, no American in a presidential audience would have asked such a question. Clinton's questioner had to assume that audience standards permitted his query, and to assume *that*, he need only have been watching midday television, not the president. Clinton pandered, but for

the question to be asked at all, something had to have changed in the general culture. Neuhaus admits this by condemning Bob Dole, Clinton's Republican challenger of 1996 and a public scold of Hollywood, for later making TV "commercials for Pfizer about how Viagra helps him cope with his erectile dysfunction. The poor fellow looks like he's restraining the impulse to unzip and show us the happy change." We're back to Lawrence's admonition to "Chief Thinkers" not to shrill our little desires into our ears.

In fact, though, conservative moralists won't begin to seriously address what is happening in our society until they take on the very market capitalism and consumerist culture they uphold and promote. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* 30 years ago, Daniel Bell argued that free markets no longer make free men because "economic liberalism has become... corporate oligopoly, and, in the pursuit of private wants, a hedonism that is destructive of social needs." Older societies filtered needs through nature's rhythms and kinship traditions; bourgeois capitalism displaces such needs with ginned-up "wants" that "by their nature, are unlimited and insatiable.... [T]he rational calculation of efficiency and return" displace "the principle of the public household," strip-mining and selling off fragments of cultural narratives. All that is solid melts into air, an earlier commentator wrote; "money appears as a disruptive power for the individual and social bonds. It changes vice into virtue, stupidity into intelligence. He who can purchase bravery is brave, though a coward.... But let us assume man to be man, and his relationship to the world a human one; then.... if you are not able, by the manifestation of yourself as a loving person, to make yourself a beloved person, your love is impotent, and a misfortune."

Marx's diagnoses were sometimes better than his prescriptions, but the horrors attending the latter have driven many to believe that capitalism is not the problem but the solution. Some of its most determined celebrants now were drawn romantically to revolutionary Marxism in youth only to learn painfully that the human heart is more deeply divided and often depraved in any regime than any indictment of capitalism can explain: "If a man is not a socialist at 20, he has no heart; if he is a socialist at 50, he has no head." From that bleak premise some concluded that capitalism must be defended as the most liberating of possible dispensations here on earth. Even John Maynard Keynes, who'd designed govern-

ment-driven economic growth to increase material abundance, equality and social felicity, wrote later in life that he'd been wrong to "believe in a continuing moral progress by virtue of which the human race already consists of reliable, rational, decent people, ... who can be safely released from the outward restraints of convention and traditional standards and inflexible rules of conduct." Hoping to lift humanity by removing "outward restraints" of poverty and its attendant repressions, Keynes and colleagues had "completely misunderstood human nature, including our own.... It did not occur to us to respect the extraordinary accomplishment of our predecessors in the ordering of life... or the elaborate framework which they had devised to protect this order."

What an apparent vindication of high-conservative wisdom! Even Herbert Marcuse, who accepted Freud's understanding of civilization's discontents, recognized that removing capitalism's most perverse "surplus repressions" couldn't cancel the disciplining and sublimation of desire and creative work that are inherent in "the reality principle" of mortal life in nature. A wise politics wouldn't promise utopias of perfect justice or even elysian liberation through struggle against "outward restraints" but would carry on "the extraordinary accomplishment of our predecessors in ordering life" and in protecting that order.

Unfortunately, that conclusion is almost always especially convenient for those most assiduous in proclaiming it, and that tends to impair their clarity in drawing critical distinctions between surplus and necessary repressions when they propose reforms. Keynes' recognition that social life is too complicated to be redeemed through material progress alone is a rebuke not only to dialectical materialism but also, and perhaps especially, to capitalist materialism that rationalizes the most disruptive and degrading effects of mass marketing and production. While conservatives ignore criticism of corporate mass marketing and its ever-receding but insanity producing *promesse de bonheur* – or, indeed, while they rationalize pumping its offerings into the national bloodstream – young people's love and libido are indeed "melting into air" as markets deliver us from censors to sensors. Every counterculture is absorbed into the over-the-counter culture; avant-garde creations mimic the planned obsolescence of durable goods; bohemians become bourgeois.

Even journalists become carnival barkers as political reporting, so critical to civic-republican deliberation, is skewed by pornification. Talking to Yale students a few months after the 2004 election, Howard Dean blamed a precipitous decline in investigative reporting of public issues on the quarterly bottom lining of news conglomerates. Instead of investing in stories that might not be “sexy,” they favor cheaper, quicker gossip, sex and other sensationalism. A Newsweek editor responded that, far from stinting on investigations, his magazine “had a reporter working on Bill Clinton’s sex life a full year before anyone had heard of Monica Lewinsky.” Of course, he only proved Dean’s point – and Rochelle Gurstein’s, in *The Repeal of Reticence*, that “Many modern liberals and radicals... can no longer discriminate between the essential circulation of ideas, which is the cornerstone of liberal democracy, and the commercial exploitation of news, entertainment, and sex as commodities.”

When the circulation of commodities engulfs the circulation of ideas it traps libertarian and corporatist conservatives, too, as the government they now dominate dodges its civic and moral obligations to regulate marketing rampages against civil society. The Federal Communications Commission may fuss selectively about Janet Jackson’s brief Super Bowl exposure, but the more that conservatives ride the currents ravaging the public household, the more desperately they try to shift the blame to liberals; the personal hypocrisies of Bill O’Reilly and Rush Limbaugh are but emblems of a whole movement’s deceptions.

A typically tawdry variant of the finessing of sexual blame came this winter in a speech to the Commonwealth Club of California by Sally Pipes, executive director of the conservative Pacific Research Institute and a scourge of public health care. Pipes had barely thanked her host before she sniped at the “Hillarycare” health-care proposal of 1994, signaling that she’d be “on message” as a polemicist. But who would have expected her, in a decorous civic forum being broadcast on National Public Radio, to digress as follows to criticize Massachusetts regulations requiring insurance for *in vitro* fertilization: “Not surprisingly Massachusetts has the most *in vitro* births in the nation. When I mentioned this in a talk recently, a questioner asked if that means people in Massachusetts have sex less often than anyone else. I told him I don’t know, but that perhaps he should

ask the senior senator from Massachusetts, Ted Kennedy.” Some of Pipes’ listeners guffawed but then caught themselves, and she moved on, soon mentioning varied insurance options for medications her husband takes for his migraines. Here is but one of a sadly surprising number of smart, obscurely wounded people who’ve turned themselves into manic, “on-message” conservative talking machines, tone-deaf to their listeners and their own dignity.

Some conservatives sluice their resentments and political agendas more deftly into a faux-folksy populism. A virtuoso at this is *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, poet laureate of The Home Depot and Wal-Mart and a sacralizer of American shoppers’ consuming passions. About ten years ago he stopped writing *Weekly Standard* essays glowering with hatred of liberals and began sidling up to them, instead, purring: “C’mon; you *know* you love your unearned income and real estate and that you’d rather circulate commodities than ideas, and [wink, tickle] it’s *okay!*!” He means to reconcile conservative moralizing and free-marketeering by deflecting the darker implications of consumption with a deftly feigned bemusement that might have impressed Marcuse. Until reading Brooks I’d never seen a grown man approach delirium just watching other people shop, but maybe that’s because my father’s small business was only wholesale.

Brooks is drawn to liberal boomers who’ve done well by a system of inequities they excoriated in youth but don’t seriously oppose now. Some make compensatory gestures against racism, sexism or homophobia and seem almost eager to shed sexual taboos, at least in principle, even as they erect new barriers around their class privileges. Brooks is forgiving. He offers us absolution for our class transgressions, making us laugh aloud at our fading resistance to what we once called “selling out” and being “co-opted.” He tells us that consumer marketing has absorbed and gently transformed the old countercultural hope that eros unbound would dispel alienation. Capitalism, ever protean and absorptive, is reshuffling a new generation’s libidinal decks: “Sex, especially adventurous sex, used to be the great transgressive act... Bohemians would throw off the fetters of respectability and explore the joys of Free Love. But today that is obsolete.... There is now a thriving industry that caters to people who want to practice moral sex.” With benign curiosity Brooks visits websites of

bondage-and-discipline “communities” such as the Arizona Power Exchange, where “...paddling and punishing are made to sound more akin to bird watching or wine tasting. You imagine a group of off-duty high school guidance counselors ... standing around in nothing but a leather girdle and their orthotics, discussing the merits and demerits of foreign versus domestic penile clamps. It’s so temperate and responsible. It’s so bourgeois.....”

“You imagine....” And we do laugh. This is eerily reminiscent of Allan Bloom, who taught at the University of Chicago when Brooks was an undergraduate there and who contended famously in *The Closing of the American Mind* that as repressed sexuality is unleashed it’s turning out to be not a demonic Marcusean “lion roaring behind the door of the closet” but “a little, domesticated cat.” Brooks echoes that claim (as he does so many of Bloom’s insights that I wonder if he keeps the book in his desk at the *Times*) in a column entitled “Public Hedonism and Private Restraint.” He tells us that “As the entertainment media have become more sex-saturated, American teenagers have become more sexually abstemious,” supplying statistics about lower teen pregnancy and abortion; “American pop culture may look trashy, but America’s social fabric is in the middle of an amazing moment of improvement and repair.” What the media hypes isn’t reality, he insists, but his larger claim is only half true. Many young people shrink from the glare of predatory sex not because they’re nourishing “amazing” improvement but because they’re frightened, even hurt. Another truth Brooks finesses is that too many Americans simply haven’t enough bourgeois resources or habits to restrain sinister eroticizations of civic loss and internalized social pain.

Through commentary like Brooks’ standard columns in our newspaper of record, American conservatism is groping its way toward an Old World strategy of minimizing and massaging that pain rather than moralizing about it – a strategy that has characterized the apologetics of well-modulated oppression everywhere, from the gentle tauntings of Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor to the lurid come-ons of Rupert Murdoch’s tabloid *New York Post*. Brooks is administering political euthanasia to Tocqueville’s America by indulging depredations which he secretly despises and which conservative media moguls make a show of condemn-

ing but trade upon day and night, certain that a stupefied or distracted public is what's wanted.

Occasionally even Brooks will sigh about the decline of fidelity and the rise of sex-for-sale, but soon he's back to love-bombing disoriented college students and indulging off-duty high school counselors in leather girdles. You feel as if you're supposed to join him in being tolerant, large-minded, or at least in shrugging. Anyway, who can turn the tide? But recalling Brooks' exhortations to "national greatness" in other columns and watching him strain to cast every consuming passion as an emblem of high national purpose, I suspect he's torn, like American conservatism itself. He'd love dearly to be one of Lawrence's "Chief Thinkers" who "tell us of our own deeper desires;" but to hold up the conservative side at least tactically he has to ingratiate himself by "shrilling our little desires in our ears." I think I hear pulleys creaking every time he shifts his stage sets from lush gardens of consumption to forbidding heights of national grandeur.

I heard pulleys creaking recently, too, as the conservative columnist George Will, author a decade ago of *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, touted a hedonism destructive of social needs. "America's hope," Will wrote in a *Newsweek* column last March, "is that a China whose muscle and will are devoted to consumerism will be too busy – too hedonistic – for militarism." Hedonism as conservative grand strategy! And not just abroad: Two pages before Will's column in *Newsweek*, a feature, "Jude Awakening," asks, "[S]o how will you decide which version of Jude [Law, the actor] to spend the night with?" It tells where in his movies Law takes off his shirt and has "Romeo moments." "Why is [sic] marriage and kids so important? There's an overpopulation problem," he says in "I ♥ Huckabees" – and to Jessica in her bedroom as she flips, bright eyed, through the magazine.

Never mind that in a speech to 3000 American broadcasters in a Washington ballroom years ago, Don Imus imagined that "George Will goes home every night, stands in front of the mirror, and puts on clothes that make him feel really pretty." More likely, Will, Brooks, and others have simply decided, perhaps not even consciously, to patronize even as they disparage our sad, tawdry squirmings against old and new constraints. This is something unprecedented in American conservative thinking, driven by a growing awareness that conservatism cannot long continue to



trumpet both “family values” and corporate consumer marketing. Around 1998, conservative activists such as Paul Weyrich, William Bennett and the Rev. Neuhaus became appalled as the public made amply clear it didn’t care to see Bill Clinton impeached for his indiscretions and fibs. Realizing that there is no conservative “moral majority” or “silent majority,” the professional moralists concluded that Americans are too far gone to govern themselves and must somehow be ruled. A republic, conservatives used to insist, needs not just armies, markets, and laws but also richly stylized flows of trust and love that can’t be coerced but should be conveyed in narratives that ennoble the public and inspire the young. If the flows have been dammed or diverted, if the levee has run dry, if republican civic-cultural narratives have been used up and sold off, most conservatives try to deny their responsibility for what Bell rightly called the “oligopolistic” cause of the despoliation by peddling one of two false substitutes for civic-republican health.

The first is the ersatz salvation Brooks finds in shopping and exurban or gated culs de sac. His stroking and sometimes kicking of the civically wounded won’t repair the living tissue of civic commitment or the cartilage of the constitutional republican skeleton. Brooks knows that republican freedom depends on self-restraint and modest daily sacrifices made freely, not stamped or coerced. He knows, too – at any rate, most conservatives used to know – that civic trust depends on a personal integrity that goes mostly unremunerated and on collective seedings and waterings (as well as weedings) of that integrity’s rich civic soil. Individuals have to be willing to extend themselves to strangers who embody the republic, not in order to meet contractual obligations or avoid punishment but in self-forgetful affirmations of the whole.

Even necessary coercion and proscription work best when they’re introduced on the cusp of a public consensus shaped by politics of cultivation, deliberation and persuasion, a politics made compelling to the young in social narratives and rites of passage that fuse love and civic trust. A strong civic culture should have fights and even factions, but it can’t sustain them humanely if it’s see-sawing between moral relativism in the marketplace and intimidation in governance, between free marketeering and statism. The almost-defenseless trust at the heart of a republic *is* its

strength, evident not in armies or censors but in little daily actions that seem to spring up like perennials in May, not because public scolds are shouting but because they were long ago planted and are being cultivated by "chief thinkers" who appreciate the "all-important role of storytelling which is essential to the formation of moral education that sustains a civil society."

If economic and other riptides tear up or corrupt the plantings and rites of passage that enable a confident coming of age, some will eroticize the personal and social loss in an "individualism" that spirals off into whorls of fraud and force, such as we have in "The Fear Factor" and "Survivors" and "The Apprentice." One needn't have been a Weimar refugee like Marlowe to have seen this coming. In 1942, the sociologist David Riesman warned that "Like a flood, [the collapse of a republic into corporatist authoritarianism] begins in general erosions of traditional beliefs, in the ideological dust storms of long ago, in little rivulets of lies, not caught by the authorized channels." In *Privilege*, a memoir of his recent Harvard undergraduate life, Ross Gregory Douthat, an honorable young conservative, cites Christopher Lasch's apothegm, "Meritocracy is a parody of democracy" and shows us a student body weaned on rational-choice gamesmanship and self-marketing, jumping to quarterly bottom-lining in a kind of global Nintendo game. The snarky college culture rewards one-upmanship, opportunistic back-scratching, resumé padding, outright thievery, and anomic entertainment.

Douthat considers that his privileged classmates' breezy divorce of sex from love and commitment is pulling the moral rug out from under even decent, struggling poor people, who find it much harder now to sustain the kind of proprieties Brooks finds among bourgeois bohemians. "We practice safe sex," Douthat writes, "because [it] requires only motivation, self-control, and a healthy self-regard, which we have in abundance. These motivations don't exist everywhere, but it's not our fault if other people don't have our bright futures to remind them. . . . We live in a meritocracy, don't we? We deserve to be where we are, don't we? . . . We don't get pregnant young or married too early . . . we don't have to have abortions" or bear "the fatherless children . . . we're generous enough to tutor . . . in Harvard's admirable after-school programs."

As if anticipating Douthat, the Harvard sociologist Christopher Jencks wrote fifteen years ago that “in poor communities as in rich ones, clergymen, teachers, mothers, and other moral leaders must continually struggle both to limit and to redefine self-interest... The unwritten moral contract between the poor and the rest of society is fragile at best... But the solution cannot be to tear up the moral contract.... The only viable solution is to ask more of both the poor and the larger society.” Yet now, in the example set by Ivy undergrads and in the pornification of commerce and news itself, self-styled libertarians of every cultural political persuasion – civil, sensual, other – teach the poor that blame itself is taboo. With such guidance, Jencks noted, society can “hardly expect the respectable poor to carry on the struggle against illegitimacy and desertion with their old fervor. They still deplore such behavior, but they cannot make it morally taboo. Once the two-parent norm loses its moral sanctity, the selfish considerations that always pulled the poor parents apart often become overwhelming.”

From Brooks to Murdoch to Karl Rove (who got White House press room clearance for that prostitute-cum-journalist whom Jon Stewart flashed at Jessica), today’s conservatives are tearing up the social contract which Neuhaus, Weyrich, Bennett, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Charles Murray, and others claim to defend. Gone are Lawrence’s exaltation of sex and Fitzgerald’s elegant sublimations. The casualty is not just adolescence up and down the social ladder, but also the civic faith of ordinary adults across the political spectrum — and, with it, the republican experiment Alexander Hamilton sketched when he speculated that history had destined Americans, “by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.” Commentators such as Brooks and Will may juggle statecraft and soulcraft till the cows come home, but they are facilitating the dissolution of the American republic; conservatives like Murdoch and Rove are banking on it. Sure, we’re all complicit, as Brooks likes to tease. What he cannot and never will say is that the corporate minions and shareholders who are busy hollowing out our children’s sense of themselves as rational citizens and even as sexual beings are among the real traitors to the civic-republican society our parents and grandparents struggled with, loved and served.

Some conservatives promote a second substitute for civic-republican health — the kind of salvation that neither loves consumer marketing nor needs the republic at what it considers The End of Days. Religious enthusiasts in whom the cord of republican trust has been snapped under one kind of pressure or another are dreaming more of Augustine's City of God than of a Social Gospel in the City of Man, which they conflate with the Rome of the Caesars, unto whom they render only what they must. That drains the generous cultivation of republican civic virtue, as it did Roman republican virtue in the second and third centuries AD: Montesquieu thought that the virtues of republicanism are not Christian virtues but pagan ones, in the classical sense. Even salvationists who want to take over the City of Man seek not stronger republican checks and narratives but an Emperor Constantine, a faith-filled commander-in-chief.

Edward Gibbon's account of Rome's slide from republic to empire describes "the exquisite sensibility" of old Roman republicans forced to contrast their degraded condition with their memory of ancient liberties sustained by a "public courage which is nourished by the love of independence, the sense of national honor, the presence of danger, and the habit of command." Bereft of the public courage and freedoms they'd bartered away almost unknowingly to artful princes over the years, many forgot their heartbreak by heeding the Brookses of their time: "The rich and polite Italians, who had almost universally embraced the philosophy of Epicurus, enjoyed the present blessings of ease and tranquility, and suffered not the pleasing dream to be interrupted by the memory of their old tumultuous freedom. With its power, the senate had lost its dignity...."

It would take a special perversity for a self-styled defender of the American republic now to call our slow abdication of public courage a liberation as so many people writhe in a chronic anxiety and despair over the decay of the republican ethos and as others cast about for ways to dull or eroticize the pain. To acknowledge that this is what's happening to us, we'd have to know, with Lawrence and Fitzgerald, that a society's sexual narratives and imagery foretell its life and death; that, under the relentless, intimate blandishments of corporate marketing, we are losing what Hannah Arendt called a "politics of natality" that welcomes the young into a society whose members care for and stimulate one another; and that, like

Douthat's Harvard undergraduates, we are accustoming ourselves to what she called a politics of mortality whose self-fulfilling expectation is that your former fellow-citizens, now a mob, will more often try to exploit and abuse you than encourage you.

The writer Mark Lilla reports a "dumbing down of American religions," a tidal shift away from a liberal, historically engaged faith that moved within the City of Man, toward a religion that is preoccupied instead with the City of God and dubious preparations for it here on earth. But this trend isn't always "dumb." Not all fundamentalists and evangelicals are anti-republican (or pro-Republican), and not all religious people are fundamentalists and evangelicals. Liberal Protestantism can be wooden-headed and thin, evangelicals more intellectually alive than their media-hyped spokesmen. Politically troubling effects will spread only for as long as the brutalization of American civic culture spreads. Lilla assumes that religion's irrepressibly illiberal currents are resurfacing in defiance of the founders' deist, Enlightenment hope that they'd wane. But the drift of formerly lapsed or apostate Americans into evangelical and fundamentalist mega-churches is less a change in "religion" as such than it is a stampede of individual reactions of millions of individual Americans to the loss of republican freedom at the hands of big-government liberals and free-market conservatives alike.

The republic's founders knew that the emerging liberalism of their time would have to rely on virtues and beliefs which the liberal state couldn't nourish or even defend, let alone enforce. Jefferson hoped to nurture these virtues by creating the University of Virginia to identify and raise up what John Adams called "an aristocracy of virtue and talent" – an open elite that, with time and republican inspiration, would draw from all colors and classes. We draw relatively well that way now, but we nourish what we draw poorly, if at all. There will be more religious stampedes until a classical liberalism that includes honorable conservatives can strengthen the public household in a liberal education less responsive to "oligopolist" markets than our elite colleges are now. If republican liberals and conservatives can't grasp and act on this truth, religious people will continue what Lilla calls their "demonization of popular culture," for the simple reason that popular culture will continue to *be* more demonic.

Twentieth-Century prophets of doom such as Lawrence and Orwell doubted that republican virtue would survive anything like the deluge of mindless, degraded come-ons I've described. Lawrence warned that "With imaginative words and individual meanings [business tricks the public] into giving the great goose-cackle of mob-acquiescence..." Among the republic's founders, John Adams was Lawrentian *avant la lettre*: "When the people give way, their deceivers, betrayers, and destroyers press upon them so fast, that there is no resisting afterwards. The people grow less steady, spirited, and virtuous, the seekers more numerous and more corrupt, until virtue, integrity, public spirit... become the objects of ridicule and scorn, and vanity, luxury, .... meanness, and downright venality swallow up the whole society." Founder Richard Henry Lee noted that "History does not more clearly point out any fact than this, that nations which have lapsed from liberty, to a state of slavish subjection, have been brought to this unhappy condition, by gradual paces."

The founders were pessimistic partly because some of them were reading Gibbon, then hot off the press. Are today's conservative moralists going to say of us what Seneca said of imperial Rome, that "We are too ill to bear our sicknesses or their cures."? Before they carry us off into salvationism and empire, let's see if we can begin a liberal-republican response to the corruption of the public household by shifting the debate away from imposing censorship to restricting the impersonal marketing *sensorship* that shrills our little desires so relentlessly that it drowns deliberation and then shoves mirrors at us that magnify our degradation. Bell urges that we strengthen the public household against excessive corporate huckstering of "bourgeois wants, as lacking a moral foundation for society, and insist on the necessity of public goods." He acknowledges that "we need political liberalism to assure the individual of protection from coercive powers" but insists that "the arbiter of both cannot be the market — which has to be seen as a mechanism, not a principle of justice...." A republic can block "public display of ... prurient elements which degrade the human personality; but behind the wall, what consenting adults do is their own business."

We could also stop protecting, as "free speech," degrading intrusions driven only by mindless bottom lining. C. Edwin Baker's *Human Liberty and Freedom of Speech* and the legal scholar Milton Regan

argue that the First Amendment protects speech only by autonomous moral agents who may persuade one another in debate to transcend narrow self-interest – the essence of republican self-government and ordered liberty. “Freedom of speech” shouldn’t protect impersonal entities that are charter-bound to pursue only the pecuniary interest of shifting constellations of shareholders. Corporations aren’t voluntary associations of autonomous individuals who’ve come together in any deliberative sense: Barred by law and charter from doing or saying *anything* that cannot be quickly and strictly reconciled with boosting profits and the stock price, corporations are mindless in any republican sense. That is why it is always an out-of-body experience to broach civic-republican concerns with corporate employees who during office hours are minions of profit and market share.

Think of companies like Adelphia and its triple-x or the General Motors subsidiary that pumps hard-core porn into millions of American hotel rooms. The Calvin Klein-cum-kiddie-porn ads that appeared briefly on the sides of public buses in New York City a few years ago became “statements” degrading of the public culture thanks not to their hip young designers, much less to transgressive leftists, but to impersonal whorls of private investment in free markets. It took non-market, civic forces to yank the ads off the buses. Investigative reporting might expose right-wing moralists who are heavily invested in such enterprises, but even that gratification of “the public’s right to know” couldn’t trump the public’s readiness to buy.

There may be a broader precedent for reform in our slow, national withdrawal from the smoking addiction. There, public perceptions shifted long before anti-smoking laws that, by the time they were passed, had become almost unnecessary in some parts of the society. Millions of Americans who had once thought smoking no more addictive than porn — and more sexy, sophisticated, and liberating, especially for women — began to shed such illusions, thanks to fellow citizens’ information campaigns, legal witness, and, sometimes, anguished courage in breaking their own addictions — thanks, in other words, to democratic deliberation in a responsive republican framework. Unlike earlier (mainly conservative) anti-smoking moralists, we’ve preserved the right to smoke, but not to do it or market it in strangers’ faces. (Abroad, the Marlboro Man is still

galloping after George Will: In April *The Wall Street Journal*'s Nicholas Zamiska reported that Phillip Morris was negotiating to have Marlboros manufactured in China, among whose 370 million smokers the brand's cadaverous cowboy remains "a sign of status.")

Creative anti-smoking commercials also suggest that the new fragmentation and flexibility of media – including blogs, independent videos and even the efforts of Jon Stewart and Michael Moore – enable some table-turning against minions of mindless predation. Let's have sharper satire of them. No censorship there; just the free speech they all claim to defend, but with a defensible social purpose. Why not boycotts and civil disobedience, too? News of organized responses to corporate abuse can spread fast and catch on. Who, exactly, would make such news, and what if they act at cross-purposes on behalf of irreconcilable agendas? The best answers confound left-vs.-right thinking. Sexual politics made strange bedfellows when feminists and conservatives battled porn tactically in the early 1990s, until new technology outmaneuvered and overwhelmed them. Today's technological landscape may permit new coalitions and strategies. Recently the leaders of 30 million evangelicals surprised liberals by opposing Bush Administration environmental policies they claim violate their biblical injunction to take stewardship of God's earth. Secular liberals could surprise them and conservative "media watch" groups like the Parents' Television Council by opposing gratuitous violence and smut. One needn't be a biblical fundamentalist to grasp Ecclesiastes' recognition that there is "a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ... a time to break down, and a time to build up... a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing..." Transgression has its place, but isn't this a season in the republic's life to plant more than to despoil, to build up narratives more than to tear them down? Isn't it time to change the debate by crossing some old lines?

So thought Jonathan Levin, son of former Time-Warner CEO Gerald Levin and a dedicated young inner-city teacher in the Bronx, who was murdered in 1997 by one Corey Arthur, a 19-year-old recent student of his and an aficionado of the worst gangsta rap the elder Levin's company was pumping into that borough. In a spectacle that should have been televised, two worlds commingled in grief at the funeral as dozens of poor



black and Latino youths whom the younger Levin had touched so affectingly at Taft High School crowded into the Park Avenue Synagogue on Manhattan's posh Upper East Side to weep alongside his father and colleagues such as Viacom's chairman, Sumner Redstone, and Sony's Howard Stringer — the same Stringer who at CBS had presided over the broadcasting of gratuitously bloody made-for-TV movies. As the entertainment moguls dabbed their eyes with silk handkerchiefs, frightened, hapless kids in the balcony wailed at mentions of the young teacher whom some called "the father we never had." They may have been crying as much for themselves as for him — crying out, it almost seemed, to that other world which had exploited and abandoned them in more ways than one.

Gerald Levin may have understood this. Barely two years before, in March, 1994, he had sat in a room with Jimmy Iovine, one of the bodyguarded thugs who ran Interscope, distributor of the notorious Death Row Records, and pledged \$100 million to raise Time Warner's equity stake in Interscope 50 percent. As Levin and Iovine were meeting, Jonathan's former student Corey Arthur was awaiting trial on charges of drug possession that would send him to New York's Lakeview Shock Incarceration Facility. Back on the street months later, Arthur became an aspiring rapper who, his friends say, bragged about befriending rap impresario Sean "Puffy" Combs, the promoter of a 1991 gangsta rap event at the City College of New York where nine young people had been trampled to death and, later, the patron of the late Biggie Smalls, rival of Death Row and the late Tupac Shakur. Corey Arthur is credited on the liner notes of one of Small's releases. This cannot have been lost on Gerald Levin, who had majored in religious studies at Haverford before becoming a corporate lawyer. He was not just another of those self-important social predators and purveyors of violence and degradation. He was not like Ted Field, the Marshall Field department-store heir and Interscope partner of Iovine, who once told a reporter, "You can tell the people who want to stop us from releasing controversial rap music one thing: Kiss my ass."

Quarterly bottom lining seems to have blinded Levin less fully than Field to the perils of making maximum returns on whatever titillates the buying public and mangles the cultural dreams of vulnerable kids. The ones in the balcony should have come down and confronted the merchants of death. Of course, a liberal capitalist ethos makes no legal or even

investigative-journalistic connection between Jonathan's murder and Time-Warner's mayhem. But a civic-republican ethos knows that there is a deep commercial and cultural connection which liberals and conservatives alike must make, in a public vocabulary that must somehow be revived.

But here we confront a wide fault line in American conservatism. Two years before the murder, Bob Dole, of all people, had given pre-campaign speeches assailing Time-Warner, and conservative cultural moralists such as William Bennett had confronted Levin personally with the lyrics his conglomerate was pumping into the Bronx. Writhing in the cultural crossfire as his company divested itself of Interscope, Levin had invoked his own son's work with inner-city kids. But Jonathan's good works fit a sad pattern which conservatives dread to remember, a long-running story in which young heirs of malefactors of great wealth defy their elders by trying to undo their depredations. The narrative is rendered unforgettably in Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*: Young Arthur Jarvis, scion of a wealthy white South African planter, dedicates his life to social reform but is slain by a native intruder who turns out to be the wayward son of a humble black priest in the impoverished village near the wealthy planter's farm. After young Jarvis' murder and a funeral attended by blacks who had respected him, his father begins to comprehend the extent to which his own prosperity was implicated in the abuses his child was trying to undo.

Some dismiss narratives like Paton's as dated and summonses like Bradley's as little more than quaint turns on the old anti-Vietnam War movement's call to "Bring the War home" — mixtures of moralism and sentimentalism. But by now it should be clear that if you deride such appeals you incur some moral responsibility for how the war did come home to Gerald Levin and is coming home to countless families like my friend Dave's. At Jonathan Levin's funeral, the circle of death that is beginning to encompass Jessica should have been broken. More likely, it has become a spiral that will not end until we find the courage to stop it, first by changing the debate.

Even if religious zealots in alliance with public moralists like Weyrich and Bennett won their crusade politically, they'd only reinstate Lawrence's dread stasis of phony public purity and sleazy private porn. But they won't win, because they're being undermined by conservative,

liberal-baiting apologists for unrestrained corporate marketing. Liberalism has been fighting back defensively because, again, it requires virtues and beliefs the liberal state itself can't nourish or defend, committed as that state is to protecting individual autonomy more than to nourishing participation in republican self-governance. Even so, if more of us liberals could shed our defensiveness and inhibitions before everything that parades itself as free speech — and if the civic-republican ethos is still deeper than the materialist, statist patriotism of George Bush, Fox News, David Brooks, and demagogic divines — we *could* make tough judgments and strike a better balance.

Perhaps you find the very idea of a resilient civic-republican faith even more quixotic than fundamentalism. "Israel used to have a wonderfully attractive civil religion and civic culture — egalitarian, patriotic, participatory," a wise mentor wrote me. "This worked for a generation or two, but now it can't hold its own against global pop culture or religious fervor. It is only the ultra-orthodox who guard against pornification, and in their community rates of wife-beating and child abuse are much higher, so there is something to be said for liberalism. The cultural reproduction of the civic-republican ethos is a major problem." Agreed. But see where we are heading now without deepening our training-grounds and our laws: "Fundamentalists rush in where liberals fear to tread," warns the political philosopher Michael Sandel. Civil-libertarian liberals must change the debate and their strategies, and to do that they need some impassioned, classical liberal wisdom like Lawrence's and Bell's. So does Jessica. So do those kids in the Bronx.