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ROBERT HUGHES: CULTURE OF COMPLAINT

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The United States has always occupied a special realm within the imagination of the world. From the moment of its inception it has been considered one of mankind's noble experiments, a country of second chances, where the sins of the Old World could be redeemed by the struggle for the foundation of the New. While the much celebrated fall of the Berlin Wall, the subsequent political regeneration of Central and Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Empire left the U.S.' historic superpower status untouched, America in the late 1980's and early 1990's began to show signs of inner decay. The collapse of the Soviet Union had a dual effect on American polity eliminating its chief adversary and tossing the nation into a paradoxical turmoil.

Whereas the worldwide defeat of communism signaled capitalism's greatest victory, the United States seemed to have lost its direction. A nation guided by the idea of the protracted conflict—a historic clash between two antagonistic political and economic systems—was suddenly searching for a new sense of mission in a unipolar world.

Robert Hughes, the art critic of TIME magazine is a keen observer of post Cold War America. In his latest effort he takes a concerned look at the current crisis of his adopted country.

The book's eloquent and succinct subtitle, "The Fraying of America", underscores Hughes' message; the United States after centuries of

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inner stability and global domination is on the decline. The nation's crisis is caused by two culprits; political fragmentation and cultural separatism. Political fragmentation is brought about by the very nature of democracy and a redefinition of the nation's value system. Cultural balkanization is a harmful side effect of multiculturalism, a manifestation of America's demographic transition.

"Culture of Complaint" is a series of lectures compressed into 3 subsections where the author presents a detailed examination of several aspects of current American civilization.

The first chapter analyzes the relationship of culture to a politically and morally disintegrated state. Hughes discerns external and internal causes behind the decline of America. In the last 20 years national consensus fell victim to divisive political maneuvering and a failure of communication between liberals and conservatives.

The notion that the United States was a country where diverging interests and antagonistic aspirations could be placated by appeals for the welfare of the country became a casualty of a general obsession with victimhood, cultural separatism and the idea of political correctness.

America's current preoccupation with victimhood is a projection of Puritan thought processes onto the present. The Puritans escaped the evils of "religious and political persecution to create a new world in order to redeem the fall of European man". This "experiment in applied theology" developed into a nation devoted to the sanctity of political equality and individual rights.

It is one of the ironies of history that the ideas of erstwhile colonial victims came to be seen as the ideology of the oppressor. The Puritan value system based on the duality of victimhood and redemption became the accepted norm in the first 160 years of American democracy chiefly affording the privilege of the latter for inhabitants of European stock. The country underwent a demographic revolution in the post World War II years as the principal origin of immigration shifted from Eastern and Southern Europe to Southeast Asia and Latin America. Furthermore the Civil Rights Movement culminated in the acquisition of political equality for the nation's largest ethnic minority, African-Americans, the descendants of

former slaves. Thus the notion of a heretofore white protestant mainstream American ideal faced a serious challenge as new groups began to demand their share of the "American Dream".

Whereas the civil rights revolution and subsequent ethnic awareness movements of the 1960's achieved political equality for minority groups, economic parity seemed to be out of reach. American society was divided between two opposing viewpoints; conservatives arguing the sufficiency of present gains and liberals voicing displeasure over the limits of political equality.

Frustrated by their inability to partake in the "American Dream" minorities found solace in ethnic pride movements where differences from the mainstream American norm were idolized in such slogans as "Black is Beautiful" and "Brown Power".

Ethnic achievements and racial equality suffered significant setbacks in the 1980's during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. As a former Democrat turned fiscal conservative Republican, Reagan capitalized on the division of American society and attempted to annihilate several privileges gained by minorities. The American Left's failure to mount an effective challenge against Reaganism found an expression in the political correctness movement.

Following the Puritan value system the politically correct school of thought views the American past in the framework of victims and villains. Similarly to the settlers of New England who condemned European intolerance, in the politically correct worldview of late 20th century America the role of the villain is assigned to a special category, the white European male. Consequently the history of the U.S. is viewed as a neverending laundry list of atrocities and violations perpetrated against a wide array of minority groups. Thus the newest object of a historic American obsession—the search for public enemy No. 1.—the white European, or any person with a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant background must lower his head in shame and is held responsible for every injustice befallen on mankind, from slavery to the destruction of the ozone layer.

Political correctness is a multidisciplinary phenomenon encompassing three main objectives; the restructuring of the English language,

revision of American history and reforming public education. The movement's guiding principle is the notion of equality and it is aimed to recompensate heretofore neglected or oppressed components of American society at the expense of "mainstream American culture".

On the linguistic front a bizarre campaign is waged against gender-specific words reflecting oppressive male-female relationships or any sign of racial or physical difference.

In PC speak "chairman" becomes "chairperson" "woman" is replaced by the androgynous term "womyn" and a "cripple" turns out to be "physically challenged." Hughes mercilessly dissects this "linguistic Lourdes" as he writes. "Does the cripple rise from his wheelchair, or feel better about being stuck in it, because someone back in the days of the Carter administration decided that for official purposes he was physically challenged? Does the homosexual suppose others love him more or hate him less, because he is called a gay? The net gain is that thugs who used to go faggot-bashing now go gay bashing".

America's obsession with victimhood as an access to social and political acceptance made the white male a victim himself, seeking solace in esoteric male liberation movements and habitual shirking of public responsibility.

The nucleus of the political correctness movement is the academic world where the college campus is in danger of becoming, a modern day equivalent of Puritan Massachusetts. Speech codes governing student conduct in such venerable educational institutions as Stanford or the University of California Santa Cruz prohibit pejorative references to ethnic minorities, women and the disabled. The Santa Cruz campus' campaign against terms like "nip in the air" and "chink in one's armor" are just the few of the ever growing examples of this bizarre trend. In politically correct history books Columbus is depicted as a procurer of genocide, a "Hitler on caravel" and the Native American is assigned the role of an innocent historical bystander.

Hughes however, is not content with simple description, recognizing that the PC movement is no more than a band-aid solution, a surface treatment for the underlying problems of present day America. The economic gap between whites and minorities, the "glass ceiling" and the

"mommy track" keeping women from realizing their American Dream and the historic ethnocentrism of American public education will not be obliterated by the magic wand of euphemism and the onslaught of sensitivity courses.

The author also refrains from unilaterally blaming liberals for the present paralysis of public discourse, for ill-guided attempts of social engineering through language is a favored method of obfuscation employed by the "patriotically correct" American Right as well.

In the second section Hughes analyzes the multiculturalism phenomenon and its unwelcome companion, cultural separatism. Multiculturalism, initially a government sponsored promotional program for public acceptance of minority cultures turned into a complex assault on the myth of an ethnically homogeneous American civilization. As a result of the demographic transition of the U.S. multiculturalism finds its origins in cultural relativism, a school of anthropology assigning equal value to all civilizations.

Hughes emphatically attacks the conservative perception of a uniform mainstream culture, arguing that American society had always been multiculturalist and continues to be so. He believes in intelligent multiculturalism and its mutual acceptance of all cultures. He laments the latest example of distorted multiculturalism, the emergence of Afro-centrism and its efforts to rewrite history.

Afro-centrists assert that prehistoric Egypt and its achievements are part of a lost black civilization and all human culture originates from the black continent. The author poignantly refutes the fallacies of Afro-entrism, but warns of the increasing influence of its tenets, manifested by the popularity of the Portland Baseline Essays and the curricula of the New York School District.

Multiculturalists aim to restructure the Canon, the nationally accepted reading list for public and higher education by eliminating works of Dead European Writers. Consequently Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky are claimed to be elitist and representative of an oppressive system irrelevant to the lives of ethnic minorities.

Hughes not only disputes the need for a Canon, but by quoting

Derek Walcott, a recent Nobel laureate, he proves that the masterpieces of European literature have universal appeal.

Hughes rejects the zero-sum game perception of education where the inclusion of European elements would automatically lead to the exclusion of the achievements of the Third World. He provides an eloquent defense of Eurocentric schooling, arguing that his Jesuit upbringing gave him the basic skills necessary to appreciate other cultures.

The author is concerned about an alarmingly anti-European oriented rewriting of history, where the white man and the Old Continent is habitually blamed for all ills that visited the peoples of the Third World.

Hughes acknowledges historians' indebtedness to Third World nations for "a systematic neglect of their history, but rejects any attempt to rewrite the past in the name of affirmative action".

In the last chapter Hughes raises his voice against the politicization of the art world, asserting that the current controversy around the National Endowment for the Arts, a non-profit organization devoted to the support of struggling artists, is another symptom of the crisis of American culture.

Hughes thoughtfully dispels the endearing myth of the therapeutic function of the arts and laments the fact that political correctness crept into the art world. Consequently museums have to navigate between pressures from the American Right and Left and quality and demands for artistic standards are viewed as the sexist and racist white society's attempts to suppress minority artists.

Eversince Crèvecoeur's inquisitive cry; "What then is the American, this new man?" several attempts have been made to unravel the mystery of American culture. Hughes inquires about the direction America is taking and is concerned about the onset of cultural and political disintegration.

The author's greatest asset is his objectivity amidst the emotionally charged atmosphere. He dares discuss issues deemed touchy and too controversial by others and seeks the possibility of intelligent public discourse.

Few can argue with Hughes' conclusion that political correctness and multiculturalism signal the crisis of post Cold War America. These trends however, are only the latest manifestations of an American tradition,

a constant redefinition of the nation's values, as a lack of a tangible and potent outside adversary forced Americans to search for the enemy within.

Hughes and other observers of the American scene can find solace in the genius of American civilization, its built-in rejection of extremism. PC censoriousness will undoubtedly follow the path of the Salem witchhunts and the hysteria of McCarthyism, but until then it is reassuring to hear Robert Hughes, a sound of reason and tranquility over the jumbled noise of heated rhetoric and the deadlock of political paralysis.