

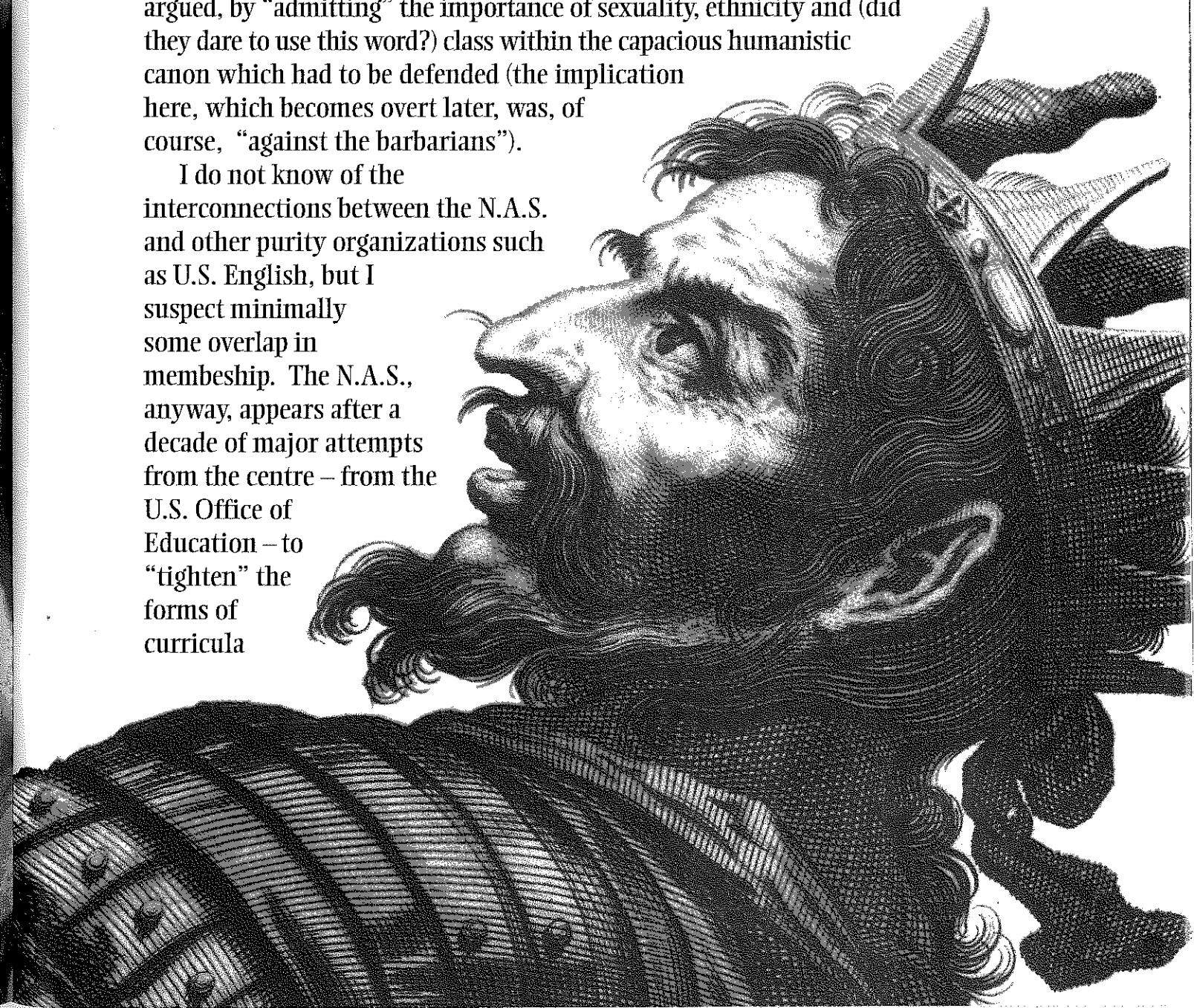
What the "Right" Fears Most!

Philip Corrigan examines the way the "Right" tries to turn loss of privilege and loss of institutional control into a universal social malaise.

I Fear(s) of Loss

In the Fall of 1990, I came across the first (as far as I know) advertisement for the National Association of Scholars (from a recent *New York Review of Books*). The language of that advertisement – although somewhat contradicted by the subsequent activities of the N.A.S. (including their newsletter *Accuracy in Education*) – could not have been gentler: All these debates about inclusive/exclusive canons, curricula and courses could be dealt with, they argued, by “admitting” the importance of sexuality, ethnicity and (did they dare to use this word?) class within the capacious humanistic canon which had to be defended (the implication here, which becomes overt later, was, of course, “against the barbarians”).

I do not know of the interconnections between the N.A.S. and other purity organizations such as U.S. English, but I suspect minimally some overlap in membership. The N.A.S., anyway, appears after a decade of major attempts from the centre – from the U.S. Office of Education – to “tighten” the forms of curricula



and pedagogy operative within U.S. schools. Not dissimilar movements have also appeared, of course, in Canada. All such movements are criss-crossed by different (often violently contradictory) value-objectives. Many, for example, took for their contrasting Other what they regarded as the "most successful" social formation – often this was Japan – and compared themselves negatively. Other organizations, with a directly economic character, surrounded and contradicted the moral-authority values of organizations like the N.A.S. by valorising skills and training (rather than values and education).

All that being alluded to, I do not propose to signal the seething (and thus violent) psychodynamic contradictions within ruling classes and their middle class allies, except to argue that this is, along with so much else, a source of their *social fear*. These

white male heterosexual middle-classes within the Occident are not, of course, alone in their historical experience of social fear. What is new is that They had not expected to feel afraid. They had thought their version of what the historical experience of the post eighteenth-century world meant (for Them), that is to say their *History*, their *Culture*, their *Literature*, their *Art*, and – to be sure –

their *Education*, represented all that was The Best of the West, and it was theirs, and it was good to Behold. "We" (a term which I find increasingly unusable!) have all been *taught* to embody quite different forms of social fear. For some (a distinct minority) it is a mannered fear: easily recognizable as a mania, white, clean, mannered and utterly distinct from the labours of the millions that make that life possible! We have to stop thinking of manners and morality as features which are supplied or applied from without, added to/worked upon already somehow distinct (social) bodies and their articulation within powered relations and structures of authority and command.

Are our social fears quite different from Their social fears? Indeed not! They are dialectically interlaced: the more we (differently) question, interrogate, demand, the more fearful They become; the more They police and survey and regulate and structure, the more we are (differently) made to be afraid. We all (differently) bear multiple marks of being denied, and every such mark (learned often long after we have been so branded) is a scar, a wound. We carry within and around us multiple bodies. The frail skin,



II On the Historical Experience of the Occidental Upper and Middle Classes

As various statistical data show (across all OECD countries), the upper 10-15% of the earning/wealthy population have done very well indeed in the last twenty years. Nonetheless, Edward Luttwak realized, in his sharp analysis "Why Fascism is the Wave of the Future," (*London Review of Books*) that the upper/middle classes are uneasy, feeling their citadels have been invaded and transformed.

All sorts of expectations have been interrupted, all sorts of "givens" are no longer given, a range of institutions no longer appear to be "their" institutions. The English *Sunday Times*, for instance, very stupidly described the National Union of Teachers Annual Conference, in an editorial, "The Barbarians Are No Longer At the Gate; They Are Inside Our Classrooms." The writers re/present in their social fears the wild thrashing around to find a cause—which cannot, of course, be the very specific de-socialization created by the allegedly new forms of capitalism ("making money") they so favoured. Not being able to name the economic (or the more complex range of political-economic institutions without which their God "The Free Market" could not last for an hour, let alone a day), They have to turn to a personalized enemy, a nameable enemy, an enemy with a face (*and a body*): The Enemy Within, the Other who has (somehow) Infiltrated us. "Us," note that these displaced (or feeling displaced) middle classes always claim to operate through the personhood of Nation/People. "Us-ness" for their historical experience is that it was all Theirs, it was Their country, it was Their culture.

Terrified of a future that is no longer Theirs (forget that the present and past was not really Theirs either, we are not talking rationality here!) and re/presenting the truth of a past (claimed as theirs) that never actually existed, they are caught in that trap so well analyzed by Wilhelm Reich with regard to

bones and physiology that enable us to keep drawing breath; the markers within and on that skin that enable differences "socially cultured" to work; and the markers of dress, realization, behaviour, manners (again) and varieties connected to the notion of appearance and (re)presentation – these are all governed by rules that we often learn (differently) by the historical experiences of those occasions when we (differently) demonstrate infractions of this (Their) social grammar.

I have never believed that what is at issue is the capture (read: regulation) of hearts and minds; what matters is how persons behave. Organizations of the Cultural Right (which is now so impenetrably involved in forms of governance that (1) we should not locate it *beyond* state forms; (2) we should thus recognize that what is taking place is a "Revolution in Governance") do not necessarily desire restriction (of access, of numbers, etc.) to their citadels. They want, however, to ensure that the "social grammar" of their commanding/ruling institutions works to continue to make Their rule(s) regular, reliable, respectable, rational – that is, normalised.

Fascism. They promulgate a restorationist myth: old values, old ways, Victorian values, Back to Basics, more "English" period dramas/old films from the U.S.A. with hardly a non-white face in them. They prefer Australian soaps on TV to two major English-produced soaps, *Eastenders* and *Brookside*, which, they complain, are too realistic; the latter engage black people/families, gay and lesbian issues, debt, violence, suicide, and so on!!!).

Get A Head! Forget the Pain



III

Get A Head! Forget the Pain

Place all of this in two other spirals: first, that education is continuously argued as the way to "get ahead," yet the competition from myriad others (lower depths, outsiders, Others in general) is squeezing out "us"; second, no government can "deliver the goods" (or The Goodies). Governments complain that they are caught in the boom/slump cycle of capitalism. They are also caught in what historians of the early Soviet period called the scissors crisis: the more you make productivity, uh, efficient (lowering the necessary reproduction costs of labour as we old-fashioneds call it), the higher you raise the socially necessary support costs for such a working class. Thus, there is the required direct and indirect taxation to pay for such supports for life. Above all there is the reproduction of class society, whose work falls most heavily upon the non-males in any given society. So, the female-headed household becomes nameable, across the OECD countries, as the *cassus belli*, the cause of the social war that the middle classes feel themselves to be losing.

Unable, as I said earlier, to name any of this, They have to turn to culture (and more generally, morality) to name their fears, sotto voce, and *their* target populations: these barbarian others in "our" midst. This transfer of a possible social, economical, political or cosmological analysis to "the cultural" is hardly a new phenomenon, is it? Not only since Raymond Williams' mid-1950s analysis of *Culture and Society* but in any halfway-adequate analysis of any *struggle* the linked nature of cultural/political/

Fearful Dangers/ Dangerous Fears

IV Fearful Dangers/Dangerous Fears

economic/social relations and structures is obvious. When, for example, English women and men wished not only to read, but also to discuss, the Bible *in their own language* – in that premature Reformation we call Lollardy – their “criminality” was at first seen as that of heresy—a religious matter—but quite rapidly, and in an entirely paradigmatic manner, was seen as a threat to “the social order.” It took many, many years, until, as one Welsh Methodist explained to me, any person could stand before his or her God without intermediary.

So the social fear has always been there, long before a properly historically sociological middle class existed, the fear of radical desubordination, the fear of infiltration; hence dilution.

What is at work, in many forms, is a project of restoration. This entails both a claiming (clawing) back of what has been lost (for Them) *and* – inseparably so – the re-establishment of modes of social discipline and deferential obedience which they imagine to have been true in the “Golden Age(s)” They wish to restore. More bluntly, there is a sustained attempt to frighten the majority of people alive today. What they see as fearful dangers eventuate for the majority as their attempt to work out their dangerous fears upon the bodies of working women and men.

One pattern of this which has gone unremarked for far too long involves their utilisation of seemingly “Good Things” – against which nobody could argue: everyone should be “literate” and “numerate”; “more people” should have “better” education and training. As always (and again there are extensive historical struggles from which much must be learned) these seemingly technical/quantitative indicators are in fact “filled with a certain content,” they embody certain values. Most importantly is the use of “the numbers game” regarding “access” where the simple employment of general statistical indicators (as indeed with fiscal indicators of spending on X, Y or Z) can disguise radically changed social, structural and relational patterns. As the OECD found for the 1960s/early ‘70s “boom” in post-secondary education, it benefitted wider ranges within the middle classes. Analysis has also shown a stalling and regression in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s of the proportions of the excluded *majorities* in gaining access to a socially and occupationally significant post-secondary education. Where there have been changes within the social forum (and social grammar) of cultural production and educational provision they have occurred against massive resistance on the margins. This is crucial. For it is such changes at the margins (within what they claim to be their culture and their educational institutions), which are taken to be so devastating, so threatening, so indicative of the “new barbarians” and the “coming anarchy” that a new Crusade or twenty must be launched to “save Civilization”!! We are, thus, dealing with an Imaginary, a fantasy, *and that is why their fears are so very very dangerous.*

There is a second set of dangers for the majority of the world’s people. Late capitalism’s frenetic, modernizing,

monetarist impulses cannot, in their own terms of morality, preserve or protect *any social relation, institution or structure from an economic (cost-benefit) judgement.* Thus the very institutions that symbolize and embody the heart of the civilization They are so fearful of losing are also subject to a social critique. Hence, there occurs the contempt for politicians and bureaucrats and what I want to call the “making brittle” of official politics. Since they have been the first to seek increased productivity (by extending the working day and increasing the intensity of labour) *and* to deny that anyone has the right to “a job for life” *and* to argue that citizenship is really a form of consumerism, it is no surprise that questions of value for money, productivity and so on are raised about *their* institutions and *those* who occupy positions within them. This, too, is dangerous.

V Finale: What (Once Again) Is to Be Done

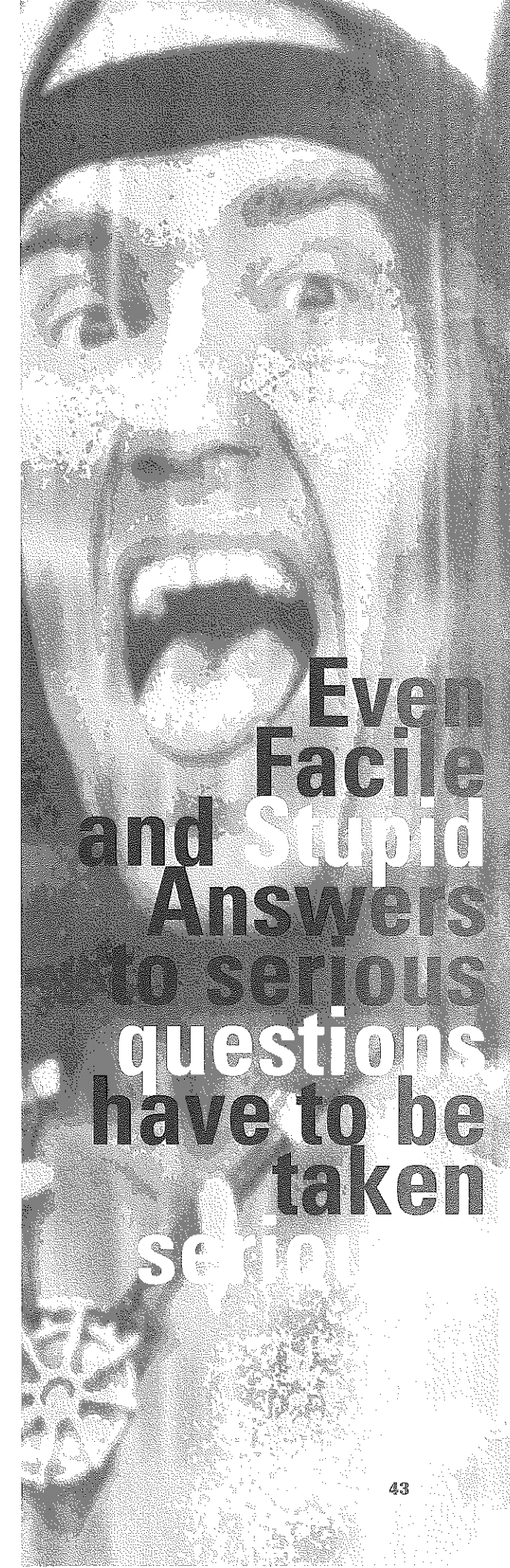
While They talk of the fact that Their radicalised monetarist capitalism would produce, through a trickle-down effect, a rise in well-being for all, there has been a bloody deluge of laws, rules, regulations, administrative inspections and constant re-constructions of our lives, both in varieties of work-situations and in the range of social assets/providing institutions. In England, to take the example I know best, there have been 144 Acts of Parliament since 1979 reforming/changing Local Government and, over the same period, there have been 800 new pages of Statute Law on Education. A third area of massive legislative activity has been the “reform” of trades-unions and work-place relations. The consequences of these changes in terms of the constant re-working of social relations and structures is what we have all been living through.

What began as a Cultural Revolution, then required (after 1983) massive Institutionalization, has now (after 1990 or so) entered a phase of Permanent Revolutionising. Within this roaring hurricane the plaintive calls for Victorian values, Back to Basics, Civic Values, and other *standards* of moral regulation appear somewhat ineffective. Also different devils are conjured up. Worried about “crime”? Why, it’s the fault of the parents, or the teachers, or the schools, or the religious bodies, or the television, computer games, films, videos, pop music, youth – ah yes, that’s it, it’s the fault of youth that they are, um, youthful, well, sort of . . . Well, dammit, it is somebody’s fault! Nothing to do with poverty, insecurity, fear, loss, unemployment, flexibility of labour regimes, withdrawal of social provision – no, *not at all:* on that They are very clear!

As Lenin once put it, even facile and stupid answers to serious questions have to be taken seriously. When both capitalism and their way of life, their civilisation, appear not to be working, they will only cope by naming causes external to the contradictions within capitalism (as a way of life and death) and civilization. Unable to face the evil at the heart of capitalist civilization, their thrashing around becomes wilder. Whole peoples can be condemned, can be erased from the new world dis/order, a world in which, fearfully for them, there seems to be no order and those who wish to give the orders are not infrequently disobeyed.

The only strategy against the cultural right must remain that of “in-and-against”: a defensive strategy that is also quite militantly *offensive* (in all senses). To make the contradictions sing, to make their mythologies dance, to allow the celebration of differences rendered as strength and not as disadvantage.

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