

SAUL'S BITCHES:

A Masculine Philosophy of Capitalism

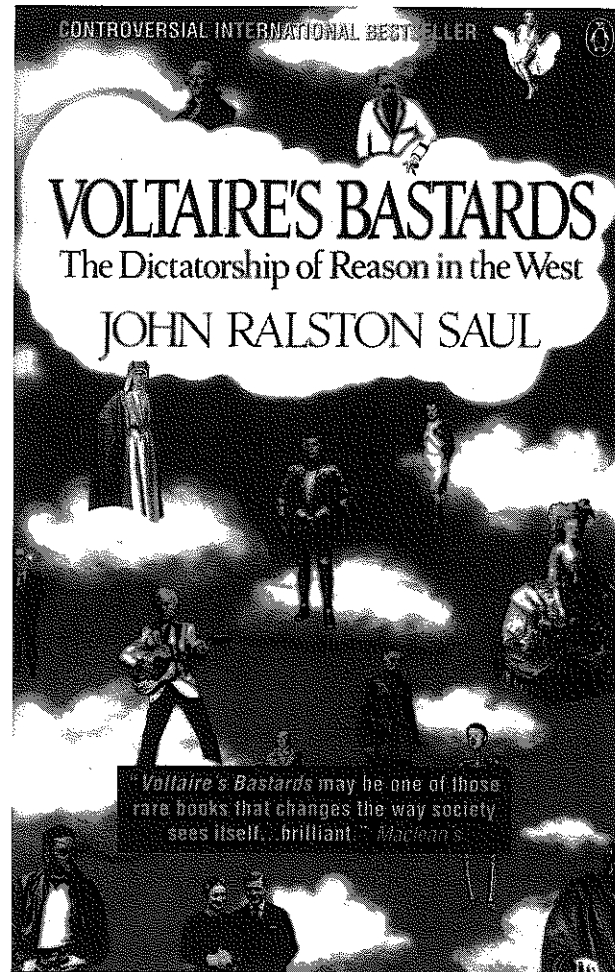
by Clint Burnham

How discriminating among mineral waters is supposed to save Western civilization.

John Ralston Saul had a great deal of positive media coverage last winter, when *The Doubter's Companion*, his executive summary of *Voltaire's Bastards*, was published by Viking. Profiles in leading media: *Books in Canada*; *The Globe and Mail*; and Toronto's yuppie tabloid, *eye*; an excerpt from the book in *The Toronto Star*. Reviews and praise from the international centres of intellectual and political power: London, New York, Washington. The kind of heavy-duty stroking intellectuals ache for: praise by Brian Fawcett, getting onto the *Utne Reader's* 100 smart guys list, lecturing at the University of Toronto and abroad.

I could go on at length here about how sloppy Saul's two philosophical works are — how they are full of sweeping generalizations; how they contain macho boy-scout ideas of the writer as Hemingwayesque man of action; how even the fairly good analyses (of the arms trade, oil industry, and right-wing fixations on debt and cutting social programs) are, in the end, subsumed by a sneering moralism. But I'd rather go at the global and moral issues in Saul's work. I'd rather critique it, also, in terms of such external factors as Saul's media image and his novels: In the greatest of ironies, Saul's work has been celebrated (and sometimes attacked) because of the very things against which he inveighs: the postmodern world of image and media.

So these media events and accolades feed into each other: Val Ross's profile in *The Globe* emphasizes the *Utne* list, for instance, and



shows Saul suavely discussing his Yorkville Red Toryisms in a New York bar. Such "external" benchmarks can reassure the Canadian literary journalist: Saul is respected elsewhere. This colonial cringing is at odds with Saul's own professed nationalism, but most discussion of Saul has little to do with his books themselves, or with their attempts at ideas.

This is just as well for Saul, because if there had been such discussion and scrutiny, critics might have noticed that his recent book is not really a humane criticism of overly rationalistic business and government policy-making. At any rate, when journalists discuss Saul they tend to genuflect, to submit to his taste in clothing, mineral water, or sherry. In *eye* magazine, Jason Anderson writes: "Over a recent lunch interview, I felt a distinct envy for the Toronto writer's past life as a Parisian businessman and for his general air of learned man of the world. I ate my chicken sandwich and felt like a college boy."

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Journalists' masochistic fascination with Saul's lifestyle reinforces hierarchical notions of society — and this fascination is perhaps the only way a postmodern society can talk about ideas. Lifestyle myopia reaches such levels that Ross's article doesn't offer us a detailed discussion of how Saul's ideas were anticipated (in a more radical fashion) by the Frankfurt School or poststructuralists. Ross instead describes confronting Saul on his finicky taste for ice cubes in sherry: "In a *Books in Canada* profile, John Lownsbrough tells how in his PetroCanada days, Saul would refuse a glass of sherry if it came with more than the two ice cubes he'd specified. 'Oh well,' Saul laughs, 'I was 29 then.' But at age 47, he is known to refuse Perrier at dinner parties and to request more arcane mineral waters."

Saul is presented and marketed as a star, in a postmodern feat that promotes him by the very technique he loathes. But Saul's writing tends to be as superficial as a publicist's epistemology — his history of reason's dictatorship is little more than a string of character studies that link rationalistic thinking with personality pathologies. Ignatius Loyola, Richelieu, Robert MacNamara: these are all bad-boy technocrats/courtiers. In some way, Saul's texts critique a media society enthralled with personality; that enthrallment is used as a form of historiography; finally, Saul becomes a media star himself.

The cover of *Voltaire's Bastards*, for instance, shows a number of stars: J. F. Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Marshall McLuhan, Andy Warhol, posed on clouds, with their heads and bodies interchanged. Resembling nothing so much as a superannuated version of a *Sgt. Pepper* album cover, the design accurately demonstrates Saul's gossip-rag level of commentary. Similarly, the *Globe* profile features a cartoon by Anthony Jenkins: Saul, grinning and looking like Prince Charles, surrounded by pals of one kind or another such as Conrad Black and Voltaire. In Canada, where foreign-dominated media find it difficult to manufacture stars with the ease they do in the U.S., these visual signifiers play a disproportionate role. In *Reading Canadian Reading*, Frank Davey pointed out that the cover of a Macmillan anthology, which presented caricatures of Robertson Davies, Margaret Atwood, and others, reinforced a perception of Canadian writing as a game of personalities. The cartoons suture an unstable concept — the postmodern intellectual — to a fixed social semiotic, the celebrity world of lifestyles and global travel.

It's important, then, when discussing Saul's ideas, not to ignore this media-spectacle positioning of the man and his books. Saul portrays himself (and

is aided in this by journalists) as being a man of the world, at home both in a Parisian restaurant and in the company of Burmese guerrillas. Saul as Yorkville big forehead is also, curiously, anti-intellectual, given to dismissals of Nietzsche as lunatic and Warhol as pimp: "There really isn't much difference between Marie Antoinette's bon mot over bread and brioche and Warhol's soup cans. They are both expressions of clever artificiality, not of intelligent relevance" (*Voltaire's Bastards*, 464). Here Saul's cosmopolitan gourmet image seamlessly supports a dismissal of pop art with an ill-thought binary: it never occurs to Saul that Warhol's art could be artificial *and* relevant. Saul's relentlessly macho image is part of how he analyzes Western political philosophy and culture. Novelists are supposed to be "deep-penetration patrols, striking out where least expected" (*Voltaire's Bastards*, 38-9); the manager isn't a real man, a real capitalist, but "an employee in drag" (*Voltaire's Bastards*, 363), a eunuch, like a courtier — in a word: feminized.

In novels such as *The Paradise Eater* and *The Next Best Thing* Saul presents the Far East as a drug-corrupted, soft, vicious, feminine, Oriental cave. Here Westerners ramble like sodden descendants of characters from Greene or Conrad, viciously exploiting Asian men and women for the reader's titillation or uttering feudal moral codes for literary pretension. This venerable tradition in Western letters has been analyzed by Edward Said in terms of "Orientalism," or the freezing of the complexities of the East into a feminized and vaguely mercenary Other. Saul's novels can be read as even more grotesque than that, as they exact a symbolic punishment of



"Oriental" women; in them we learn of the "importance" of child prostitution for the sexual development of bar girls and of "the miraculous ejection of razor blades from private parts" (*The Paradise Eater*, 121-22). Saul's characters coldly analyze "Oriental" women in terms of their genitals, or rescue them in an even more heroic mode; thus, readers are afforded both vicarious thrills and a feeling of moral superiority. This is not merely local racism, but rather the pathological effect of global capitalism.

Saul, of course, doesn't see his work this way; he therefore misses how post-modern late capitalism determines cultural forms like the genre novel he is attempting. Saul is a former broker and the poet laureate of that class, the bard of Nick Leeson, if you will.

I'm not saying that Saul himself is some racist monster. But this is the attitude fostered by his novels at a thematic level and by his philosophical texts at a structural level. Saul, because of his activism (president of PEN Canada, critic of NAFTA, etc.), is seen by liberals as a political revolutionary. But — and this



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is why he is being praised by the capitalist class (with the exception of Conrad Black) as well — Saul is in favour of capitalism: he just envisages a kinder, more regulated capitalism, not one as mercenary as the present system (which he blames on employees, not capitalism). Saul's critique is a form of capitalist brush-clearing: the managers who have run business and government have screwed up, so we need real capitalists to take charge. In a chapter of *Voltaire's Bastards*, "The Hijacking of Capitalism," the environmental and other excesses of international capital are blamed on the managerial class, who aren't true capitalists but abject substitutes. Also, discussing food contamination by agribusiness chemicals, Saul writes, "Nothing is neater than to blame human greed. However, most of the corporations involved are run by managers, not owners" (*Voltaire's Bastards*, 313). If owners ran things, Saul argues, capitalism would be great.

Saul extends his critique of technocrats and managers to modern (or postmodern) trends like pop art, mass media, and sexual freedom. Here he almost sounds like a conservative critic in the 1960s, say Daniel Bell, with a Zen fetish thrown in: "There can be no doubt that the road which Zen Buddhism offers out of the prison of reason is far superior to alternatives such as self-actualization, bioenergetics, colour therapy, getting in touch with your anima, massage to release emotional trauma" (*Voltaire's Bastards*, 495). All contemporary attempts to rethink subjectivity are then given the same label of "silly," and associated with fads such as colour therapy. Saul hates both governmental-business stupidity and postmodern culture — for postmodernism is usually a code word for leftist theory and critique. By claiming to have no ideology, to be neither left nor right — the classic stance of the liberal — Saul marginalizes Marxist and postmodern theories because they entail a critique of his capitalist individualism. Indeed, he lumps Marxists in with other postmodern courtiers like Harvard business geeks and military officers.

Read in this way, Saul's rants and desperate gestures seem less macho and more like a textual form of self-protection. Saul has it in for critics, especially those who might be critical of his position. Critics, he says, "worst of all, review for money. Reviewing is paid less than Third World factory labour and any reliance on it for income may unbalance the mind" (*The Doubter's Companion*, 82). Saul equates rhetoric with whoredom; he castigates "sophists" and other such sellers of rhetoric as intellectual prostitutes. But his thinking is so abstract and generalist that he overlooks and continually discounts any form of opposition — particularly left opposition — to the general rule of reason he detects.



Saul's philosophical rants are little more than a liberal form of capitalism thinking out loud. His philosophy is liberal in that it rejects the absolute standard of the market in determining human interaction and supports some form of government regulation — although he is exactly backwards when he sees the market as a reflection of reason, instead of the other way around. That is, Saul's history is as linear and idealist as it gets: its sharp edge comes merely from the confused dishonour of a class realizing how it has screwed up the system. For Saul is eminently of the class — the technocrats — he criticizes. Born into the officer corps, Saul studied as an academic in London, worked as a stockbroker in Paris, was a senior official with PetroCanada in Calgary, and now advises the Canadian government on cultural policy. These are all paradigmatic occupations for the technocrat today, and while Saul repeatedly throws in his own experiences as justification for his philosophy, nowhere does he outline precisely how he's not part of the problem.

Saul's insistence on a clear and instrumental writing style is linked to his overall rationalistic mindset. For clear and direct expression as an aesthetic replicates the capitalist desire for efficiency. (He really is naive — he hasn't even caught up to the MTV-style language now favoured by corporate philosophy.) Saul repeatedly attacks what he sees as the obfuscation of postmodernism, deconstruction, and theory. Rhetoric is their ultimate tool, the sneaky cunning of speechwriters working for evil politicians: "Either we wish discussion and doubt or rhetoric and reassurance" (*The Doubter's Companion*, 271). Saul traces rhetoric's history in a potted survey in *Voltaire's Bastard* (115–18), where it is seen as the evil weapon of Jesuits and bureaucrats; his own rhetoric — sarcasm, hyperbole, truncated sentence fragments — remains unexamined.

Much of what Saul put forward in *Voltaire's Bastards* is neither original nor radical: it is the anti-modern ranting of an irascible humanist, dismayed to find that his concept of truth was a chimera. The executive summary style of *The Doubter's Companion* results in a rearrangement of Saul's slicker bits of liberal philosophy and economics. His philosophizing may be superficial and his novels may be offensive, but Saul is hot property for his service to the class he pretends to criticize.

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