

First of the Year: 2008

Benj DeMott (Ed.), Transaction Publishers, 2008, 320 pp.

Thomas Hale

'Call me a crank, but I've had enough of reverential nostalgia for The New York Intellectuals,' declared feminist writer Ellen Willis in 1999. She objected to her fellow liberals' tendency to pay 'disinterested tribute' to Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Irving Howe, and other progenitors of the midcentury anti-Stalinist liberalism found in the pages of *Partisan Review*. Such nostalgia is 'pernicious,' Willis wrote, in its 'conservative' and 'uncritical endorsement of a certain kind of cultural authority.'

It is also deeply appealing. Unlucky enough to live at a time when, in her words, 'cultural authority is not only radically de-centered,' but a 'vacuum,' Willis' contemporaries naturally gravitate toward the golden myth of the 1950s New York Intellectual, the Mitteleuropa milieu of the City College cafeteria, the post-war, pre-Hippie Village.

But if imitation is the highest form of flattery, then Willis's blunts her critique by writing in *First of the Month*, a 'newspaper of the radical imagination' whose first ten years are now gathered in *First of the Year: 2008*. The very first page of this collection quotes the poet Philip Levine explaining his initial doubts about *First of the Month's* prospects:

Never thought *First* had a prayer. But it looks like there's an audience for it. I wonder how many people read the *Partisan* when it first appeared. Probably ten more than read it now.

Thus the analogy is set and embraced. Willis is not unaware of what she calls the 'Oedipal' nature of her irritation. If New York intellectuals have to kill The New York Intellectuals in order to become the new New York Intellectuals, then that is probably the natural order of things.

To be a new *Partisan Review*, a magazine would of course have to be equivalent in function and thus, in a different world, different in form. First differs dramatically. 'Conceived in opposition to flagship papers of smart sets' (the *New York Review of*

Books and *The Nation* are singled out, as is, perplexingly, the *Village Voice*, which now runs more porn ads than political commentary) *First* would 'love to blow your minds.' The title comes from a song by the rap group Bones-Thugs-n-Harmony and refers to the monthly pay-day of people living on welfare. *First* commits itself to 'trying to walk with ... 'dis' people – "disenfranchised and disadvantaged, disaffiliated and disinherited, discomfited and discredited, displaced and discarded, discussed and discounted, dispossessed and dismissed.'" In place of the New York Intellectuals' white bread democratic socialism, *First* offers solidarity with the po-mo proletariat of the socially dissed.

Language, too, has changed, as should already be apparent. While *First* 'has never had a problem with argufying that asks a certain height of readers,' it aspires to be equally accessible to two signature uptown institutions: Columbia University and Riker's Island, the prison. Brushing off charges of stylistic 'slumming,' *First* rejects the 'genteel culture of literate pabulum.' Instead, the editor, Benj DeMott, and at least some of the contributors, want to showcase everyday language as an idiom of political and cultural discourse. This is a worthy goal, but one that some of the pieces collected in *First of the Year* meet better than others. DeMott's own poetic prose – 'argufying that asks a certain height of readers' – is often pithy but never popular.

First's difference in style runs beyond language. The magazine feels rooted in the northwest patch of Manhattan, sprouting up from Harlem and Morningside Heights, reaching down into the Upper West Side, and up to Inwood. We are told of gatherings at uptown bars, and of the 125th St. post office. This is a hundred blocks away from the 'flagship papers of smart sets' that thrive in the cosmopolitan soils of the Village, where Wall Street is closer than the ghetto and it seems quite plausible to imagine Manhattan as a small island off the coast of France. But *First* is not parochial, at least not in the pejorative sense of the word. It simply has a sense of place, something unexpected and challenging in a serious journal of political and cultural thought.

The price of this authenticity is, inevitably, a dose of amateurism, though again not in the pejorative sense. There are indeed a few 'cranks' in these pages, as Willis alerts us. But *First* is not some indy 'zine of late night undergraduate profundities. And while some passages would never pass muster in those smart set flagships, *First* gives us more cause than most to think that a badge of honor.

HALE | In Praise of First of the Year

II

Of course, substance, not style, must be the test of any publication aiming at authenticity. Here again Willis' critique of the New York Intellectuals is premature. Writing in 1999, she could not foresee that the magazine that carried her words would, after September 11, 2001, embrace a reincarnated form of Partisan's anti-Stalinist liberalism. DeMott, borrowing from one of his contributors, puts the principle starkly at the outset of *First of the Year: 2008*: '*The underdog is owed sympathy; the mad dog is owed a bullet*' (italics in original). We could imagine Irving Kristol believing this, if perhaps not putting it quite that way.

The contributions of Charles O'Brien – author of the above formulation – set the tone. In a 2001 piece called, aptly, 'The War,' O'Brien insists that the United States recognise the September 11th attacks as an act of war and set out to defeat their perpetrators. 'A war of genocide has been proposed,' he argues, 'It ends when one side dies.' The weight of O'Brien's ire, however, is directed not at terrorists but at those he considers to be their apologists, the 'Vichy Left.' Rejecting the self-recriminations, contextualisations, and the we-need-to-understand-this sentiments of liberals like Chomsky and Sontag as so much 'snot,' O'Brien calls for the Left 'not only to be a party of war, but to be the maximalist party of war.' 'We can do no better,' he claims, 'than to emulate Revolutionary France...which, with audacity, without indulgence, summoning up the people, carried the war, across whosever borders, to the enemies of the republic.' We may think this an overly enthusiastic interpretation of the events of 1789 and all that, but, as a description of what would follow September 11, 2001, it is almost prophetic. Except, of course, it was the neoconservatives, those disaffected Partisan alumni, who led the charge.

That is not to say that some on the Left were not swarming over the barricades as well, and their arguments appear in *First*. Most notable is an excerpt from the Iraqi democrat and exile Kanan Makiya's remarks at an NYU lecture in 2002. DeMott notes that it was Makiya whom *New Republic* editor Peter Beinart credited with convincing him to support the 2003 Iraq war, and it is easy to see the appeal of Makiya's optimistic humanism, a level-headed parallel to O'Brien's zeal.

Opposing viewpoints also appear in *First of the Year: 2008*, but they are not dominant. Charles Keil's 'Waging Peace,' written shortly after O'Brien's war cry, argues that war is an irrational, impossible response to terrorism, and that eliminating poverty, disease, violence, environmental damage, and other social

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ills is the only way to address the problem. But these pacifist sentiments are less poignant than Keil's other contribution to the volume, an explanation of his choice to disassociate himself from the magazine.

The fact that *First of the Month's* editors still want warmongers and peacelovers to have a dialogue in their pages seems like a serious waste or misdirection of precious time, energy, thought and feeling. Arguing with people who want to spin rationalizations for the insanity of war makes no sense to me.

DeMott notes this departure with regret, and deserves credit for including it. He also deserves credit admitting his own error in supporting the war, though again he takes guidance (and numerous citations) from Makiya's own *mea culpa*. But DeMott will not apologise for what he call the 'uniqueness of *First's* politics of culture,' writing,

I can't think of another American publication on the left that would have printed in the same issue...Makiya's pro-war NYU talk and Tim Shorrock's detailed critique of Paul Wolfowitz's reactionary diplomatic record in Asia [an account of how Wolfowitz's support of Suharto and other autocrats during his time as U.S. ambassador to Indonesia]...Makiya's and Shorrock's voices and the others in this mix implicitly call each other out. As I hear them in my head now, I'm struck (again) by how *First* has tried to be a 'device' that would let argument breathe.

This is a rather self-aggrandising claim – plenty of detailed debate preceded the Iraq war in publications across the ideological spectrum – but let us suppose it true for a moment. We may have been wrong, DeMott admits, but at least we were open to debate. It is one thing to console oneself with this idea; quite another to make it an editorial philosophy. The purpose of open debate is not to embrace all views at all times, but rather to allow the more intelligent position to win out. This did not happen in *First of the Month*, nor in the American media as a whole in the run-up to the 2003 war. In fact, outside the blogosphere, it was only those maligned smart-set flagships that can now claim to have stood on the right side of the most important question of the Bush administration. Score one for the Vichy Left.

III

There is much to be found in *First of the Year: 2008* beyond the politics around September 11th and the war in Iraq (for example, Armond White's revealing commentaries on film and music). But more than anything, *First of the Year: 2008* chronicles one group of reflective New Yorkers' reactions to those attacks and the subsequent 'war on terror.' This does not amount to a new Partisan Review, but then the myths of nostalgia are by definition unattainable, even as things to react against.

The context for 'newspapers of the radical imagination' has also changed. The Internet allows a disorienting array of outlets for political and cultural commentary to flourish. Among them must be dozens of contenders for the title of new *Partisan* – ranging from ad hoc blogs to venues more in the line of 'traditional' publications like the one currently occupying your screen – and for this reason none can ever become the place for intelligent liberal commentary. If Willis thought cultural authority was 'radically de-centered' ten years ago, imagine how much more it is now.

In this environment it seems publications aspiring to reach beyond their own contributors and communities must do one of two things. First, they can become authorities, essential reference points for high-quality information that no one else can provide. This is how *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *The New Yorker*, to cite just three examples from *First's* world, will survive the Internet (though perhaps in different form). Second, publications can become hubs, centers that aggregate and synthesize information for delivery to readers. This is what Google News, which has recently announced that it will sell advertising space, does so effectively.

I hope there is space within these strategies for publications like *First*, which show us that intelligent thought with general relevance can still be rooted in a specific place and identity. At the time of writing, however, the magazine is not currently publishing, nor does it seem to plan to in the future. There are, however, updates on the website, firstofthemonth.org. [1]

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Notes

[1] I mistakenly reported that First had stopped publishing. Instead, it has shifted focus from the occasional newspaper First of the Month to the annual volume First of the Year. The next edition will be published by Transaction in November. There are also regular postings on the website firstofthemonth.org, and First's editors have not ruled out future issues of the newspaper. [Note added March 15, 2009.]

Update: An exchange between Benj Demott and Thomas Hale

Editors: I like compliments as much as anyone so I enjoyed lines in Tom Hale's review, 'In Praise of First of the Year' without accepting his line of argument. While I won't contest his reading of First's relation to the tradition of New York Intellectuals, I wish he'd engaged the criticisms of NYI's made by First authors. I'm not writing, though, about what's omitted from his review. I'm concerned here with errors of commission. Mr. Hale has misrepresented my own position on the Iraq war. If you go back and check, you'll see that I busted myself for a very specific error – my claim, before the war and the Abu Ghraib scandal, that the choice for the American left came down to 'war or torture.' I didn't and don't believe I was wrong to support the overthrow of Ba'athism in Iraq.

Clarity counts here chiefly because Mr. Hale aligned Kanan Makiya's position with mine. No illusions the world must know my take on my back pages, but Makiya matters. He certainly has his regrets (as do I) about what happened in Iraq, but he's explicitly rejected what he describes as 'Maoist' calls for recantation. Mr. Hale notes that I repeatedly invoke a piece of Makiya's in my introduction to a section of First articles on the Iraq war ('First Draft of History'). I did that in the course of criticizing (what seemed to me to be) a duplicitous 'good-bye to all that' by New Yorker writer, George Packer, who traduced Makiya's movements of mind. Hale seems not to have grasped that the Makiya piece I quoted, which he takes to be a retrospective mea culpa, was written before the invasion of Iraq (though I underscored the timing in my text).

HALE | In Praise of First of the Year

Mr. Hale jumps from his mistaken version of my position on Iraq to a riff dismissing my ‘self-aggrandizing’ case for *First’s* openness to pro- and anti-war arguments during the run-up to the Iraq war. Since Mr. Hale’s snark – ‘We may have been wrong, DeMott admits, but at least we were open to debate.’ – is out of time now, maybe he’ll concede I had a point when I suggested *First’s* readiness to let argument breathe made it different from other publications on the American left. *First’s* history here indicates that our openness undermines easy certainties of ideologues. At the risk of getting ahead of myself, let me quote a line from my introduction to the next *First of the Year* as it seems on point: ‘In the wake of the recent election in Iraq, which indicates the idea of establishing a federal, democratic state there might not be a pipe-dream, it still seems wise to tune out certain trumpets on the left – “SOFA [Status of Forces Agreement] means total defeat for the U.S. in Iraq!” – as well as blowhards on the right – “2008 was the year we won in Iraq!”’

Let me note one other tiny mistake in Mr. Hale’s piece that no-one would (or should) notice but me. After he cites the opposition between Charles Keil’s pacifist response to 9/11, ‘Waging Peace,’ and Charles O’Brien’s bellicose call for ‘The War,’ he refers to Keil’s ‘other contribution’ to *First of the Year: 2008*. (A letter in which Keil explains why he was stepping off from *First’s* community of contrarians.) But Keil actually made three contributions to the book. If Mr. Hale reads the first one – a conflicted defense of NATO’s campaign to reverse ethnic cleansing in Kosovo (informed by Keil’s own experiences in Ibo-land in the ‘60s), I’m guessing he could make some unobvious connections. It turns out that Keil’s world-view isn’t that far from, say, Makiya’s, even if O’Brien’s seems a bridge too far. (FY.I. though, back in the day Keil allowed the critique of ‘the Vichy Left’ in ‘The War’ was brilliant and necessary before rejecting O’Brien’s call to arms.) Those on whom nothing is lost will recognize certain unities within the variousness of *First of the Year* even when it comes to its starkest antitheses.

Benj Demott

Editors: I thank Benj DeMott for clarifying his position on the Iraq War, which he is far better positioned to explain than me. I think, however, two differences remain between us.

First, it is not clear to me that *First* was exceptional in the ideological scope of its debate over the war. While O’Brien and Keil represent quite different viewpoints, both pro- and anti-war positions were articulated on the Right (realists v. neo-conservatives), center (on the op-ed pages of the *Times*), and Left (the *New Republic*

v. The Nation). In the blogosphere, the debate was even more varied. Rejecting ideological blinders no doubt fosters the deliberation essential to democracy. Thankfully, such broadminded dialogue is not so rare as DeMott seems to think.

That said, there was, of course, a major failure of both democratic deliberation and decision-making in the run-up to the war. The Bush Administration was able to sell invasion to the American public on a combination of insinuations and half-truths. The mainstream media did a poor job of exposing these weaknesses. What was needed was not a broad, ideologically-varied debate of the merits of the war, but rather a more probing challenge of the Administration's arguments.

This failure highlights what I see as the second outstanding difference between DeMott and me. Should we judge debates and the fora in which they occur merely by the process they employ, or the substantive outcomes to which they lead? DeMott seems to think process – specifically, broad debate – is the only coherent standard. I'm sympathetic with this position, because to judge on substance requires a) the benefit of hindsight and b) agreement on what a 'good' or 'bad' outcome is. These are more exacting requirements but, I think, essential ones. The self-assessment they require, missing from *First of the Year: 2008*, is hardly – to use Makiya's word – Maoist.

Thomas Hale