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MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH AMERICA:
THE CAUTIONARY TALE
OF A CHEERFUL CONSERVATIVE
by Norman Podhoretz
Free Press, 2000 248pp \$25

IN A RECENT issue of *Commentary*, Norman Podhoretz pronounces *American Pastoral* Philip Roth's best novel, while confessing his uncertainty that this is a disinterested aesthetic judgment, because the novel's political implications resonate so well with his own views. At first this scruple struck me as misplaced. Though I agree with Podhoretz on little else, I was blown away by *American Pastoral*, which taps into the potency of the American dream—and the poignancy of American naiveté—on a level that transcends ideology. Contemporary fiction has offered few characters as compelling as Roth's protagonists, the New Jersey-Jewish star athlete and successful businessman, whose blond good looks inspired the nickname "Swede," and his Irish, ex-beauty-queen wife, who raises cattle. (Their daughter, who destroys their lives by becoming a Weathermanesque radical and bombing the local post office, is less well realized; by the end she is something of a caricature, leaving the impression that Roth understands her no better than her devastated parents do.) Yet after reading *My Love Affair With America*, I can more easily believe that Podhoretz would reduce Roth's complex and unsentimental vision to a political message, for this memoir-cum-polemic is shockingly one-dimensional and smug.

On being asked to review Podhoretz's book, my first reaction was that I had already reviewed it, twenty years ago. And indeed, much of it is a rehash of earlier works: once again we meet the poor Jewish boy from Brownsville, taken

in hand and "civilized" by an aristocratic WASP high school teacher, Columbia, and Cambridge; once again, the magazine editor who is seduced by the utopian chimeras of the left, then does battle against them. Though the introduction promises something new—a discussion of anti-Americanism on the right—the delivery turns out to be brief and perfunctory.

What is new about this book is signaled in the subtitle: "cheerful" aptly describes Podhoretz's demeanor, where in previous writings words like "contentious," "embattled," and, at times, "resentful" sprang to mind. Despite enlisting the likes of Henry Adams, Henry James, and Alexis de Tocqueville as interlocutors, his narrative is less a meditation on patriotism than an inspirational tract. Though Podhoretz's first and best memoir-cum-polemic, *Making It*, was also about his love affair with America, it was an affair with ambiguities and tensions. Now such complications are recalled fondly, as the early struggles of a long and prosperous marriage might be; the journey toward assimilation is invoked mainly as proof that Podhoretz has earned the right to be as earnest, not to say corny, in his patriotism as any character out of *Our Town*. Similarly, he likens his short-lived veer to the left in the sixties to an episode of infidelity whose resolution has left the marriage stronger than ever (as often happens in such circumstances, he displays a suspicious need to constantly reaffirm his passion). Self-consciously seventy, he embraces the persona of mellow elder statesman, even making some conciliatory remarks about the culture war, which he sees as having reached an armistice, or what others less cheerful than he might call a stalemate.

Along with Podhoretz's new mood comes a marked disinclination to focus his argument; he rambles and free associates on subjects ranging from his immigrant relatives to anti-Semitism to Saul Bellow, punctuating his

text with long, footnoted asides. He seems to want to entertain his readers into agreeing with his point, which is that we live in the best of all possible worlds. His love affair with America and his more recent love affair with capitalism ultimately converge in a love affair with his own good fortune, which he apotheosizes in a chapter called "Dayyenu American Style." The reference is to the Passover song that recites the many blessings God has bestowed upon the Jews, ending each verse with "dayyenu" (it would have been enough). "America is not God," Podhoretz graciously stipulates; yet America, as he sees it, has bestowed analogous blessings on its citizens. After calling on us all to give thanks for the Constitution and its fruits, he gets to what, for him, is the heart of the matter: "If America had only granted me the inheritance of the English language, that would have been enough. But America then sent me to a great university," and so on. He ends the chapter, and the book, by thanking America for his apartment in Manhattan and his house in East Hampton.

Although this stuff verges on unintended satire, Podhoretz does not ignore the existence of Americans less well off than he. Rather, he repeats the standard conservative response to attacks on increasing inequality: no problem, because capitalism generates so much wealth that virtually everyone has enough; even the poorest American is rich by the standards of Bangladesh. In this vein Podhoretz invokes a study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, according to which 40 percent of families below the official poverty line own their own homes, 92 percent have color television, and sizable majorities have microwave ovens, air conditioners, and cars. "What most Americans care about," he declares, "is what they have, not what Bill Gates and George Soros have." The left, in contrast, is mired in the complementary sins of ingratitude and envy.

I'm not in a position to assess the statistics, but the argument misses the point. What's wrong with economic inequality is not simply that one person owns more than another—it's that some people have the power to subordinate others by doling out or withholding the means of subsistence. The poor are those who have the least control over their fate and are

effectively excluded from participation in a social world defined by access to material goods and cultural opportunities they don't have. From this perspective, the relevant frame of reference for discussing Americans' standard of living is not the third world but other advanced postindustrial nations, or better yet, our own recent past—the genuine mass prosperity of the fifties and sixties. And the impact on most Americans of the last two decades' dramatic upward redistribution of wealth is best measured by people's declining control over the conditions of their work and their lives. I don't care about Bill Gates's personal possessions. I care about the power of the rich to dominate politics and policymaking, to defund public goods, to resist regulation, to deny workers job security and benefits, to enforce long hours of work for low wages, to bid up the price of land and housing, to reshape all social institutions on the model of the hierarchical corporation. I care, in short, about democracy.

PODHORETZ recognizes that dedication to as-yet unrealized ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution might, as he puts it, "present itself as a higher form of patriotism." Though he can't quite bring himself to acknowledge that this brand of patriotism always competed with Amerika-hating third-worldism for the soul of the new left, he attributes his own left turn to "a limitless faith in the perfectibility of this country." But since this very faith implied dissatisfaction with America as it was, Podhoretz sees it as bearing the seeds of anti-Americanism. He makes the familiar argument that utopianism is bound to turn into hatred of a world and a people resistant to utopian aims, which is why utopians who gain power end up committing mass murder. It follows that America's best defense against this fate is democracy "as it presently exist[s] in the real world." This theme also informs Podhoretz's critique of various elements on the right. Paleoconservative nativism, the symposium in the "theocon" journal *First Things* that suggested revolution might be justified in view of the Supreme Court's refusal to overturn legal abortion, and Paul Weyrich's call for the Christian right to abandon politics because the Ameri-

can people refused to support Clinton's impeachment are all cited as unacceptably hostile to real-world American democracy. Here Podhoretz sounds almost like a liberal. After all, the left today has thoroughly marginalized its utopians, arguing that democracy as it exists is the best we can do (give or take a little tweaking to curb the worst excesses of the market). Yet it has clearly never occurred to Podhoretz that the ideology of laissez-faire capitalism is itself utopian—in that the free market is an abstraction that has never actually existed—or that its triumphal pursuit on a global scale poses a more formidable challenge to American patriotism than the delusions of nativists, theocrats, and third worldists combined.

The present status of the United States as “the world's only superpower” and headquarters of the world economy tends to obscure the fact that the American government must operate within bounds strictly circumscribed by the agenda of the world's economic elite. The new economic order entails a massive transfer of power from nation states to transnational corporations, from elected officials to unelected managers, and from national business classes with a stake in their countries' well-being to global conglomerates concerned only with securing the cheapest possible markets and ruthless about moving around their capital to discipline governments or buy them off. As a result, America is governed less democratically than it was thirty years ago, is further from fulfilling what to most people is its promise—which is not that the poor will own their trailers but that everyone, or almost everyone, will be middle class—and is no more a genuinely independent entity than the New York Stock Exchange.

WHAT DOES it mean to be a patriot under these circumstances? I use the word “patriot” loosely, to cover those of us who believe that our formation as Americans and our attachment to America's abstract ideals, its concrete culture, or both are relevant to our political aspirations. But in truth I find patriotism a problematic concept. Although it is not exactly the same thing as nationalism, it does imply an *a priori* loyalty to the nation (as in “I pledge allegiance to the flag”): one can

count oneself a patriot, in the strict sense, and oppose American policies, even call for revolution—but only if one's assumed framework remains the sovereign state. And though I accept that framework for many practical purposes—I see myself as a citizen in an American polity, I vote, I would defend the United States if it were attacked by a foreign power—I resist it philosophically. In a larger political and cultural sense, I am for globalization, which is to say cosmopolitanism. It's globalization without representation, globalization on corporate terms that I abhor. In any case it is no longer a serious option to concentrate on preserving or extending democracy in one country, and the economic nationalism espoused by some on both the right and the left would be a futile as well as reactionary move. Politically it really is one world, ready or not.

This in no way means that an American left can ignore the country that remains our immediate context and, for most of us, a crucial aspect of identity. How then can our “Americanness” contribute to a democratic politics that transcends the American nation-state as such (assuming, as I do, that desires for freedom and equality are not intrinsically American, or Western, but human)? The possibilities cannot even be imagined, in my view, without recourse to that ecumenically maligned and dutifully repressed requirement of political creativity: a utopian vision. There's no denying the devastation that utopian thinking gave rise to—or became an excuse for—in this century; yet to pronounce it, in Podhoretz's words, “logically and psychologically inherent in utopianism” is a narrow reading of history. For if democracy as a utopian ideal can be said to have produced its negation in communist totalitarianism, it has also inspired our own long and continually unfinished struggle to put its principles into practice, as well as similar struggles throughout the world.

The ideal of democracy as something more than just “what is” is not purely abstract for Americans. It is a dynamic, if often submerged, element in our culture, reflected in the irreverence toward authority and toward one's “betters,” the expansive optimism, the urge to transcend limits, the penchant for self-invention, the belief in material pleasure as a human right

for which Americans are justly known. That these very impulses, especially the last mentioned, have often been enlisted in the service of corporate power and profits is also true. The point, though, is this: perhaps America's distinctive contribution to a global democratic politics is the idea of an immanent utopia—a vision of freedom and equality constructed from those democratic tropisms already embedded in our bones, a movement propelled not only by dissatisfaction with what is, but by appreciation of what is incipient. For me it's the wife in *American Pastoral*, with her fierce battle against being forever defined as "the former Miss New Jersey," who best embodies America's utopian strain—not the "revolutionary" daughter.

Right now, of course, the momentum is with the Podhoretzian view of America as a magnificent flagship that will capsize if too many people demand access to the first-class deck: can't they shut up and be happy they're along for the ride? For Podhoretz, though, even this is not enough; he wants everyone to be as happy for the first-class folks as the latter are for themselves. He deplores, for instance, the "ugly" response of liberal book reviewers to a memoir in which William F. Buckley Jr. describes "in almost lubricious detail" his luxurious life, from his "big house on the water" to his "outsized limousine driven by the perfect chauffeur (one of a host of equally perfect servants)," and concludes that "we are obliged to be grateful" for America's bounty.

Why Podhoretz is so insistent that people like Buckley—or himself—deserve to be applauded for kvelling over their assets is a question better addressed by psychoanalysis than by social commentary. But the poverty of his origins may explain his incomprehension that hostility to such recitations has less to do with envy, or even with p.c. moralism about consumption and greed, than with a more primitive bourgeois reflex: what middle-class mother has not warned her children that it isn't nice to brag about what they have? It's a nicety designed to preserve the myth that we have no classes in this country.

Podhoretz may imagine that he is speaking

for all who have caught some corner of the wave of twentieth-century American prosperity, but what he's actually doing is spilling the beans. Does a patrician with a retinue of servants really fit the image of what America is supposed to be about—even if he's grateful?

There's an item in Podhoretz's "Dayyenu" litany that younger members of his own urban upper-middle, knowledge-producing class—surely a sizable portion of his readership—are likely to find particularly tactless: of course it's that Manhattan apartment, "much like the one in which the affluent parents of some of my classmates at Columbia had lived." After all, he must know that these days—as the price of housing in Manhattan has gone the way of tulips in sixteenth-century Holland, abetted by the gutting of rent regulation—no one but the truly rich can acquire such a place. Unlike the myriad poor displaced by rent inflation, the artists, writers, teachers, students and other assorted middle-class Americans now being pushed out of the heart of the city will not thereby lose a decent roof over their heads—"merely" the convenience and cultural amenities of a downtown way of life.

The irony is that with the escalating transformation of Manhattan into a plutocratic monoculture (and similar developments taking place in other "desirable" cities, from Boston to San Francisco), this very way of life, whose essence is social and economic variety, is on its way to being destroyed. How, amid the statistics debunking the importance of equality, are we to assess the loss of a version of America in which people of all classes and many cultural sensibilities must share the same space, non-drivers and other misfits can survive, bohemians and intellectuals and dissidents can find each other, and those of us with no taste for suburbia can feel at home? This land may be your land, it may be my land, but it is indubitably their real estate. Would that Podhoretz and his fellow cheerleaders knew the difference. ●

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