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# NOTES ON *THE END OF AMERICA*

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## **NOTES ON *THE END OF AMERICA*:**

### **A CONFERENCE REVIEW**

Nicholas Royle

A recent conference titled "The Ends of America: New Perspectives, New Priorities" was held at the university of Tampere in Finland (April 18-20 1991) and permitted a provocative and challenging focus on some of the most urgent and important questions of our time. To have staged such a conference in Finland is perhaps less perverse than it may sound: a liberal capitalist democracy very much governed by Western political and social values, Finland also shares a long border with what at the time of writing remains the Soviet Union. It occupies a unique place, in fact, encouraging the possibility of valuable different perspectives on the topic in question. The following notes and remarks concentrate only on a selection of the papers presented --primarily those on literary theoretical topics-- but attempt to situate their interest and significance in more general terms.

The Conference was centered on the question of the concept of "America" and of what might be the defining limits or boundaries (the "ends") of America. From the outset this emphasis proved productive precisely because it allowed a reversal of what otherwise might seem to be the order of the day, namely the limits and end or ends of the Soviet Union. Western and especially American triumphalism over the supposed "end" of the Gulf War provided a further dramatic and critical context for the terms of the debate. From the start of the Conference attention was given to the ways in which "America" works silently but for that reason all the more powerfully as an abbreviated synonym for "the United States" or (less often) for "the United States and Canada". How, where and when is the word "America" designated in this manner? How should we analyse it in these contexts? Needless to say this was not felt to be merely a matter of semantic nicety: rather, it was suggested, the ends of America are to be located precisely here, in a critical circumscription of the term "America" itself. "America" in this Conference was to be understood as a term in quotation marks.

To focus on the question of "The Ends of America" was also to see the word "ends" working in at least four ways: ends as aims, ends as goals, ends as limits or boundaries, and ends as temporal /pp 4-5/

closures or conclusions. To address the concept of the ends of America, in other words to address the ends of the concept of America, was thus to pose a wide range of questions, such as: What are the ends of America in terms of history and ethnology, in terms of literature and literary theory, in terms of cultural studies or psychoanalysis? What are the ends of America in geographical, political and military terms? What are the boundaries of America, its limits, figurative as well as allegedly literal, internal as well as external? What are the ends of "America" within America itself, in particular in relation to questions of ethnic, sexual and social identity or rather ethnic, sexual and social difference? What, for example, are the ends of pluralism --especially insofar as pluralism is conceived on the basis of groups or communities of individuals whose identity and status as individuals is already assumed?

Living in a period of largely indeterminable but massive transformations, it may be prudent to concur with the view of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, that "the future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger"[\[1\]](#) . Together with Jean-François Lyotard, Derrida has been perhaps the most influential of so-called poststructuralist thinkers in signaling attention to the question of the ends of the "political" as such. This has meant a concern both with the "political" as a determined philosophical concept and with the "political" as a space of opening onto otherness, onto a future (not) to be determined. The work of Derrida and Lyotard is characteristic of what is known as poststructuralism and postmodernism precisely to the extent that these two contemporary "movements" both exhibit and promote powerful suspicions about ends. We should always beware of ends and all the more so in light of the recognition that there is no possibility that we should or could do without ends. We cannot do without ends but more than ever we should say there is a need to be vigilant and critical, to question ends, to put ends into question.

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One of the most celebrated, and most transparently totalizing, "academic" proclamations of the past few years has been the Francis Fukuyama's argument for "the end of history"[\[2\]](#) . Fukuyama's view is that we have come to the end of history and can now get on with the rather dull and predictable work of consolidating a sort of global democratism --of consolidating what he calls "the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (p.4). It did not require the catastrophe of the Gulf War to expose the complacent and facile nature of this thesis. Nor does it require much imagination to sense the extent to which Fukuyama's

argument is by definition to be viewed through U.S. tinted spectacles: it is an argument clearly stamped "Made in U.S.A." [3].

Nevertheless we might wish to regard the "end of history" claim in relation to the more rigorous terms established by Robert Young's recent and important book *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, which argues that "History" is itself a fundamentally Western (and essentially Eurocentric) concept and that what we may now be witnessing is precisely "the dissolution of the west" [4]. Marxism falls under the aegis of the concept

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of "History" in Young's account: in this respect, Marxism is situated as only one more Eurocentric totalizing discourse. Young follows Hélène Cixous in proposing that "Marxism, insofar as it inherits the system of the Hegelian dialectic, is also implicated in the link between the structures of knowledge and the forms of oppression of the last two hundred years: a phenomenon that has become known as Eurocentrism" (p.2). *White mythologies* is concerned to criticize, along with that of other twentieth-century Marxist theorists, the legacy of the work of Georg Lukacs --"in which history, the dialectic and the totality are interdependent to the extent that each is essential to the operation of the other in the production of a Marxist science" (p.24).

The Tampere Conference on "The Ends of America" contained a number of extremely stimulating presentations. Among these, a talk on "The Future of Europe and the Ends of America" by Anatoliy Utkin, from the Institute of USA and Canada Studies in Moscow, had the special and salutary merit of stressing the extent to which any question about the "ends of America" is ineluctably also about the "ends of Europe". Utkin's passing characterization of North America as a relatively small island between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans had the value not only of entertainment but also of focusing attention on North America as facing both west and east, and north and south. This circumscription of "America" stimulated a good deal of discussion afterwards. It led the present writer to consider seemingly quite different questions: namely, to wonder about the "ends" of North American and Western European styles of "democracy" -and to sense more than ever a need for the West to be able to hear Soviet voices, voices that would be calling not necessarily for an importation of such "democracy" from West to East, but rather voices seeking, in a critical and scrupulous way, to question the ends of North American and Western European concepts of "democracy" in the first place.

Leo Bersani, Professor of French at the University of California at Berkeley, gave a paper on "America's Boundaries" --part of it based on a reading of Melville's Moby Dick from his latest

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and arguably most brilliant book to date, *The Culture of Redemption*[\[5\]](#) . Bersani wishes to show how, "in the terms of an unrelenting logic enacted by Moby Dick, democracy ultimately promises the unintended and politically tragic consequence of its own extinction. Melville persuasively expresses the thrill of the democratic promise, both for the individual and for literature, but that thrill is perhaps inseparable from the prospect of unlimited power. The excitement about Ahab in Moby Dick is provoked by the spectacle of what might be called an earned despotism. The Pequod is the social realization of a fantasy of intrinsic kingship. The opportunity for self-expression and self-assertion in a democratic society is, Melville's novel suggests, existentially translated as a will to power despotism is the social logic within an argument for the rights of personality" (pp. 143-144).

The boundaries of America, for Bersani, are above all boundaries of the self. In other words he is concerned to question and undermine the ideology of the self, specifically insofar as it is linked to power. Bersani thus wishes to criticize the ideology of what he calls "identity as authority" (p.3) and to show (especially by way of recent poststructuralist and post-Freudian psychoanalytical thinking) how this equation of identity-as-authority cannot be sustained. Leo Bersani is interested in a kind of radical absence or "shattering" of self and with a thinking (or rethinking) of the political on this basis. In *The Culture of Redemption*, for example, his aim is to challenge conventional Western assumptions that take art or literature to have redemptive qualities, to have a capacity to provide comfort or solace or a sort of experiential nourishment. Instead Bersani wishes to argue for the affirmative power of art and literature to shatter us, to fragment or dissolve the self. Bersani's writing is aligned with the work of Derrida or Lyotard in the sense that it too tends to draw attention towards what is radically other,

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toward forms of non-totalization, fragmentation and irreducible, irrecoverable difference. Literature (and art generally) is for Bersani where such forms of otherness are most dramatically to be traced.

An acknowledgement of the otherness of art and literature also marks the work of J. Hillis Miller, who gave the final paper at the Tampere Conference, on "The Work of Cultural Studies in the Age of Digital Reproduction" --this title inevitably recalling Walter Benjamin's famous essay on "The Work of Art

in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Miller's argument focuses on the extremely important recent and continuing changes in the study of literature in the U.S. (as well as in other Western countries), in particular the effects of the massive growth of Cultural Studies. He emphasizes the extent to which, in North American universities today, literature is studied within multidisciplinary and "non-literary" contexts, for example as an integrated aspect of social and political history or racism or feminism. "Literature" in the United States is no longer a guaranteed or immutable pantheon of "canonical texts" (whether "English", "American" or even "European")[\[6\]](#) . The ends or boundaries of America are displaced and re-marked by the attention to seemingly "marginal" texts --for instance by blacks, by women, by working class writers, and so on: the marginal both illuminates and operates at the center. All of this necessarily suggests a transformation of the very grounds on which questions about the ends of America can be asked.

Miller is very much in favor of the generally liberating and affirmative dimensions of Cultural Studies, both up to and beyond "the Ends of America"; but he is not, for all that, without certain doubts and qualifications. In particular he holds to the position established in his influential book on *The Ethics of Reading* (1987),

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a work which seeks to justify its seemingly hyperbolic claim that "reading itself is extraordinarily hard work. It does not occur all that often."[\[7\]](#) . The language of literature, for Miller, has its own "specificity and strangeness" which means that "literature continually exceeds any formulas or any theory with which the critic is prepared to encompass it"[\[8\]](#) . It is this excess, this resistance to formalization or to meaning-making theories, which makes "reading" itself so difficult or rare and which Cultural Studies can all too easily skip or otherwise deny.

In his paper on "The Work of Cultural Studies" Miller also seeks to highlight the always present danger of Cultural Studies developing its lurking potential as an instrument in the service of a national aestheticism. Further, he expresses skepticism and reserve with regard to the tendency for Cultural Studies to slot into pre-planned programs, to follow predetermined ideas or frameworks (a situation which digital reproduction, i.e. computers, can ironically, he suggests, in many ways help rather than hinder). Miller sounds his warning note in this context by quoting a dictum which may sound to have a Derridean or Lyotardian resonance but is in fact from Karl Marx: "Whoever has a program for the future is a reactionary."

The ends of America are after all, then, intimated by Marx; for Marx's claim underscores precisely the suspiciousness of "ends" that is characteristic of

poststructuralism and postmodernism. What these two "movements" further lead us to acknowledge is that all forms of totalization --whether Marxism itself or the "universalization of Western liberal democracy" envisaged by Fukuyama-- are always already fissured, worked over by a radical

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otherness, by the radical impossibility of "program". Such an acknowledgement would concern the unthinkable or unrepresentable of "democracy" itself --not only on the level of a national or even global politics, but also, and perhaps most critically, at the level of the human subjects as such, the identity and authority of the self.

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), p.5.

[2] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", in *The National Interest* (Summer 1989), 3-18.

[3] The "Americanist" stance of Fukuyama's essay scarcely requires documentation. However implicitly, it makes itself felt at every turn -whether in the definition of the "end of history" as involving "liberal democracy in the political sphere combined with easy access to VCRs and stereos in the economic" (p.8); or in the anti-European sentiments whereby "postwar Western Europe" is described as comprising "those flabby, prosperous, self-satisfied, inward-looking, weak-willed states whose grandest project was nothing more heroic than the creation of the Common Market" (p.5); or in the brazen (though avowedly unoriginal) claim that "the egalitarianism of modern America represents the essential achievement of the classless society envisioned by Marx" (p.9).

[4] Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 120.

[5] Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[6] Indeed the very concept of canon can and must be subjected to deconstruction. For an excellent account of the necessity and impossibility of canon, see Bill Readings's "Canon and On: from Concept to Figure", in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 57:1 (1989).

[7] J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p.3.

[8] J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), p.5.