

Book Reviews

John Carlos Rowe. *Afterlives of Modernism: Liberalism, Transnationalism, and Political Critique*. Dartmouth College Press, 2011.

John Carlos Rowe's *Afterlives of Modernism* is part of the Dartmouth Series in American Studies "Remapping the Transnational" coordinated by Donald Pease, a collection which aims to reconfigure American Studies in the wake of the Cold War, more particularly to develop from a comparativist perspective the notion of Transnational American Studies in light of the global changes. In this context, world-renown American Studies scholar John Carlos Rowe provides a reassessment of liberal thinking from the perspective of an intellectual who started his critical and academic career in the liberal tradition and who subsequently embarked on the self-conscious leftist critique of the liberal imagination and cultural production, contributing also to the expansion of the American canon to include versions of radical otherness.

Rowe's book is based on a series of articles published between 1983 and 2010, all focusing on modernist literary texts and addressing the liberal heritage, most notably as defined in Lionel Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*, when Trilling was at the center of the New York intellectuals, a group which promised a viable alternative to both left-wing and right-wing extremism in the Cold War era. At the time, as Rowe reminds, Trilling in fact presented liberalism as the only rational option available.

In an ample discussion of the shortcomings of the liberal tradition but also of the contemporary relevance of Trilling's mode of thinking, and emphasizing also Trilling's contribution to the development of liberalism as an aesthetic ideology rather than a progressive political position, Rowe explores the contemporary ring of liberalism, noting that it is now less the middle course prescribed by Trilling, but rather tends to designate "a "left-leaning" person incapable of bipartisan cooperation in practical politics" (3), having become a label that is to be avoided. Rowe's discussion also ventures onto the meandering path of liberal thinking, showing how liberalism was "hijacked by neoconservatism," which turned liberalism into a neoliberalism marked by a rhetoric unmatched by political action. There are affinities, argues Rowe, between Trilling's work and Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), especially in the "advocacy of high culture as a defense against extremist political ideologies, their contempt for popular culture, and their neglect of race, class, and gender/sexuality as central social and political issues" (8), but also between the liberal imagination and contemporary "liberal cosmopolitanism" such as that evinced by philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah. Despite criticism based on what is perceived to be Appiah's own privileged trajectory, this liberal cosmopolitanism is, as Rowe states, "more appropriate to the global and multiethnic contexts in which most of us live today" (21).

Fully aware of the contradictions inherent in the liberal tradition and its present-day reinterpretations, Rowe proposes a rediscovery of the vexed tradition of liberal

thinking by returning to the core texts that lay out its aesthetic and socio-political premises. Situating his own work “with the political left” (8), Rowe sets out to “offer an oppositional interpretation of liberalism that respects its immense popularity, even defining function, in U.S. history.” Rowe insists on the manner in which liberalism in fact embraces a broad spectrum of American life and society, as “[w]ithout liberal culture, Barack Obama would never have been elected president.” Thus, it is neither fair to dismiss liberalism or reductively treat it as socialism or communism, nor is it adequate to ignore how its “genealogy can lead to genuinely conservative values, as it has in the neoliberal phase” (9).

In line with Rowe’s positioning on the cusp of literary criticism and political/social text, and as suggested by the multiple meanings of the “afterlife” mentioned in the title (liberal heritage and “other lives” exemplifying problems of race, class, gender), Rowe’s book both tells the story of how the liberal substratum of modernist works was transformed into a “resource of neoliberals” but also how high modernists, unfairly assumed to marginalize (in liberal fashion) issues like race, class and gender in fact address these questions in “progressive ways” (9). Written over an almost 30-year span (and, in one case, extensively rewritten), the chapters address the liberal strains of 20th century fiction, from the great modernist mythmakers in part 1, such as Gertrude Stein or Ralph Ellison, read in particular for the transnational dimension of their narrative, to the postwar liberal tradition of Harper Lee, Philip Roth but also Louise Erdrich, where transnationalism merges with a new cosmopolitanism.

A particularly salient example of the fascinating transitions Rowe’s discussion makes so seamlessly between the literary and the socio-political is the discussion of “wandering” in Stein’s *Three Lives*, which draws together modernist racial passing, William James’s mind-wandering as a case of arrested development and wandering as a symptom of “different epistemological methods” (37) in “Melantha.” In a remarkable tour de force, Rowe shows how Stein’s double meanings “divide the reader’s understanding between the matter-of-fact, highly racialized experiences of the characters and the sophisticated meaning built into the narrative by the literate, upper-middle class author” (40).

Many of the readings offered in this fine work are in fact marked by a critical “wandering” between the local interest of close text analysis and a more global discussion of the liberal tradition and its often conflicting afterlives. What is more, the book is an invitation to reanalyze a tradition of thinking and writing that is often unfairly, and superficially, dismissed as a whole. In fact, while Rowe remains critical of the liberal shortsightedness (and the hesitations of the authors discussed) when it comes to issues such as race, gender and class, he salvages out of the liberal tradition those elements that also made it a driver of innovation, of social and political engagement. In fact, as Rowe puts it, the liberal tradition is to such an extent a core part of American (and contemporary) consciousness that its voices need to be heard and understood in their full complexity and richness. Perhaps one of the great merits of the book is that, beyond the subtle literary interpretations and wide-ranging socio-philosophical and political discussions, it provides readers with an act of active and engaged scholarship, as happens in the frequent moments when Rowe analyses his own positioning vis-à-vis the liberal

tradition as object of study: “whether we understand it as a utopian ideal or as a practical political position, liberalism is a concept we ignore or trivialize at our peril. It continues to shape our values” (23).

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