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Opiates for the last man

by [Costin Alamaru](#)

Paul Hollander's latest book is an understated, wry, and often hilarious collection of reflections on the profound link between anti-Americanism and the delusions and desires stirred up by modernity. Consumerism and the worship of celebrity, vain status-seeking and the artificial cult of youth—all symptoms of a society in irreversible decline—share a common root with the professed discontent of what could be called the educated ape. Hollander's book is rich in fact and vivid, direct observation; a sociologist by profession, he practices something close to the nineteenth-century Tocquevillean variety of the discipline and eschews the abstruse theory, do-gooding mawkishness, and quantitative pedantry that plague his field and academe at large.

The Only Superpower contains many delights of the cringe-inducing variety; Hollander is a master at unveiling lame vanity, the psychologically dirty and suspect. One of his funniest chapters is an analysis of the *New York Review of Books* personals ads. The legacy of the 1960s, with its false promise of individuality, originality, and self-fulfillment on the cheap, of community and freedom simultaneously achieved, is shown here in its tormenting, homogenous banality. The aspirations of the elite, socially atomized but interchangeable “individuals” reveal “an unexpected impression of uniformity, a standardization of cultural values, tastes, and ego ideals.” It's all pasta for lunch and Mahler for dinner: a reduction of culture and life to the tedious mix-and-match randomness of *lifestyle*. The gap between the original, vain promise and tawdry reality becomes ever wider.

The frantic effort of the old and middle-aged to deny nature and mimic the young—to keep “busier than ever”—is Hollander's target in a short, brilliant chapter more tragic than amusing. In the misuse of freedom and prosperity, Hollander intuits a sorry insight into the human condition:

an abundance of leisure uninformed by a philosophy of life, substantial intellectual resources, or religious belief of some kind may give rise to escapism, meaningless routines, or rushing around. It seems that human beings are not programmed to enjoy unlimited amounts of leisure without unease and difficulty.

To forget the abyss that opens up in modern life between the ideal and the real—this is a serious task: ever more powerful distractions and stimulants are required. Hollander's lively, witty chapters on the cartoonish Puff Daddy, celebrity-watching in St. Moritz, the entertainment obsession of newspapers, vulgar hankering after the Toyota Land Cruiser, the cheap moral satisfaction of “white guilt,” and other, similar inanities (including the “working class” circus-act of Michael Moore) paint a demented mosaic: a carnival society ever more desperate to satisfy exaggerated expectations and compensate for the anonymity, loss of community, and detachment from cosmic meaning that come with life in a modern mass democracy.

But of all such symptoms and delusional palliatives, the most potent and dangerous is the intellectual's fabricated "alienation" and false anti-Americanism. This is a clue to a deeper way in which Hollander has preserved a now-vanished European voice of criticism: no booster for the glories of capitalism and liberal democracy, he speaks in the wake of the Platonic, and perhaps tragic, insight—that a regime's particular virtue is also the source of its vice and decline. Indeed, he shows in a variety of ways how the intellectual's typical pose of disaffection and the core of emotional anti-Americanism are themselves only perverse consequences of the "high and questionably realistic hopes and expectations" stirred up by modernity in general and by America's attempt to be the embodiment of "contradictory and mutually exclusive human attributes and efforts" in particular. Like Allan Bloom, another recent observer of modern shallowness and its even shallower critics, Hollander is acutely aware that "the critical theory of late capitalism is at once late capitalism's subtlest and crudest expression." Hollander paints the bleak, true image of the spoiled, middle-class pretender to intellect, dissatisfied with the pace of progress in the modern world. It is the impatient foot-stomping of the irrational child who can't get his way fast enough, and who engages in impotent, subtle forms of moral tartufférie: "Anti-bourgeois ire is the opiate for the Last Man."

The last chapter of the book is in a way the most intriguing. Hollander's early life in Hungary and escape in the aftermath of the failed 1956 revolution to a new and unsure existence in the West reveal a fascinating story of danger and hardship unimaginable to most readers. Appreciative of the very real and fragile freedoms that America can provide, Hollander depicts here, from personal experience, the real and terrible wages of the modern delusion that politics and reason can fundamentally alter the human condition.

The persistent attraction to a mostly insincere Marxism in intellectual circles, even after the failure of the Marxist project, is explained by the same unacknowledged disaffection and petty frustration that boils beneath most other forms of irrational or unreflective anti-Americanism. But the low and mendacious source of this pose does not mitigate its very real danger and consequences. To mention, among others, Burke, Dostoyevksy, or Schopenhauer is to remember that those serious thinkers who were most skillful in ridiculing the pettiness and vanity of the modern intelligentsia were also the most prophetic about the catastrophe that lay concealed under the more ruthless and harebrained ideas of progress. Hollander's book is an important reminder in a time when not just the intellectual but the ordinary American seems to cleave ever more dangerously to a presumptuous desire for change and progress, which (so it is hoped) will obscure the fundamental limitations and shortcomings of life itself.

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