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The BBC & other losses

by [Hilton Kramer](#)

On the reality of the culture war in Britain and America.

... in the presence of the Englishman, when by chance he turns up or is thought of, there is an invincible impatience and irritation that his point of view should be so fixed, his mind so literal, and the freight he carries so excessive (when you are sailing in ballast yourself), and that he should seem to take so little notice of changes in the wind to which you are nervously sensitive.

— George Santayana, in *Character and Opinion in the United States*

A few weeks before I revisited London in late April, there appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* one of those periodic assaults on American cultural life that are written by visiting English dons for the sole purpose, it sometimes seems, of making a sort of atonement for the large lecture fees they are embarrassed to be seen collecting on this side of the Atlantic. Perhaps it is a way of demonstrating that they haven't been bought—or is it only a last dying ember of that blazing, unapologetic snobbery that was once so standard a feature of English visitors to our shores? This particular assault was the work of John Gray, and took the form of a fatuous review of James Q. Wilson's *The Moral Sense*, which was judged to be a failure not only as “a contribution to moral theory” but even as “an exercise in cultural criticism.” In the U.S., Mr. Gray is— or once was, anyway—thought in certain circles to be some sort of conservative political thinker. Yet on this occasion his primary purpose was clearly to register his disdain for the entire literature of “neo-conservative cultural criticism in the United States,” not only Mr. Wilson's, and for its allegedly “Americentric limitation” as well as what was said to be its deplorable addiction to “the ephemera of current American controversy.”

It is notably uncommon [wrote Mr. Gray] to find neo-conservative writers asking why the cultural disorders they diagnose are so peculiarly prominent in the United States, and do not affect in anything like the same degree other modern societies.

That “we are engaged in a cultural war, a war about values,” as Mr. Wilson accurately wrote, is a notion that Mr. Gray treated with derision, and he dismissed the principal “argument” in *The Moral Sense*, which he never condescended to elucidate, on the grounds that it was “dominated by the local and transitory context of recent debates in America.” The obvious implication of the piece was that at home English cultural life has remained blissfully uncontaminated by the “debates” engendered by the kind of “cultural war” that is tearing American society apart and that it was Mr. Wilson's purpose to illuminate in his book.

You don't have to have been as regular a visitor to England as I have been in recent years to know that Mr. Gray's claims in this regard are either woefully uninformed or deliberately misleading. You need only have followed the recent shifts in the ideological perspective of the *TLS* itself to have had a

frontline view of the intellectual combat that has now established the cultural war as a conspicuous feature of English intellectual life. (See, in this connection, “Peter Brooks’s Complaint,” on page 1 of this issue.) And indeed, Mr. Gray’s review of *The Moral Sense* was nothing if not a minor skirmish in that cultural war. It is difficult to believe, moreover, that Mr. Gray is not aware of the fact that the entire phenomenon of “cultural studies,” which has played a large role in the cultural war by reducing all critical analysis of the arts and the humanities to a species of left-wing political anthropology, had its origins in the English provincial universities, from which it has been exported to America with disastrous results. If he is really oblivious to the contributions made to what he describes as “the cultural disorders” on both sides of the Atlantic by Terry Eagleton, Perry Anderson, Martin Bernal, and certain other of his intellectual compatriots, then Mr. Gray should disqualify himself from entertaining opinions on these matters.

When one looks at these “cultural disorders” from a London perspective, certainly, it is quickly apparent that it is Mr. Gray, rather than the American neoconservatives he castigates, who is hopelessly “Americocentric” in his assessment of the current cultural situation. For the culture wars, as we have come to call this melancholy phenomenon in this country, are being fought on many fronts in Britain today, and declarations of denial like Mr. Gray’s readily identify themselves as acts of appeasement to the cultural left. If there is a significant difference between what is happening in the United States and the way the culture wars are currently conducted on Mr. Gray’s home ground, it may be found in the conspicuous absence there of any organized conservative resistance to the devastation that is already in progress. Individual voices have been eloquent in their dissent, to be sure—Roger Scruton’s, for example, or Paul Johnson’s, which usefully identified the cultural left’s contribution to “cultural disorders” in Britain as a species of “liberal fascism.” For the most part, however, the British response to the culture wars has been characterized by an abject pusillanimity. Its political model has been Sir Isaiah Berlin, the consummate establishment fence-sitter, who has made a career of remaining “above” every important battle by passing as a conservative liberal to the liberals and a liberal conservative to the conservatives. It is hardly a surprise, then, that John Gray’s latest book is a fawning study of—who else?—Sir Isaiah Berlin: a study, as it were, by an understudy-in-waiting.

Meanwhile, back in the real world, where the cultural left continues its “long march through the institutions,” the losses to British cultural life mount up. A good deal of the talk I heard in London in April was devoted to the further “dumbing down” process that is now in progress at the BBC. At BBC radio, for example, the last of the literary programs are under threat of extinction—to be supplanted, I am told, by a still greater emphasis on popular culture. There was a time—and not so long ago, either—when BBC radio could be counted upon to make an important contribution to British intellectual, literary, and artistic life. Its weekly magazine, *The Listener*, was one of the best periodicals of its kind in the English language, and there was hardly a serious writer in Britain who could not earn a few thousand pounds a year from contributing to the broadcasts that were reprinted in that journal. It had its critics, to be sure—most notably, the late F. R. Leavis—and they weren’t entirely wrong in their charges of cliquishness and middlebrowism. Yet compared to what is happening now, there is every reason to regard the heyday of BBC radio as a golden age.

Similar changes are overtaking BBC television as well. One of the few intelligent television programs ever to deal with the arts was the BBC’s “Late Show,” to which—just for the record—I have myself sometimes contributed. The “Late Show,” too, had its faults—it was too trendy, too closely tethered to glossy reputations and sensational, short-lived events—but at its best it was capable of giving its viewers a cogent and remarkably unsimplified account of an artist’s work and the mix of critical opinion it met with. There has certainly never been anything like it on American television.

The last of the “Late Show” productions in which I participated was a documentary film devoted to the late Donald Judd, the American abstract sculptor who in his last years established himself in the

small town of Marfa, Texas, where he acquired a large number of properties and became the town's principal employer, though a highly reclusive one. It was Judd's ambition to make Marfa a kind of Bayreuth of Minimalist art, a place to which the international faithful would be expected to make pilgrimages, and he would very likely have succeeded in this bizarre ambition if not for his untimely death last year.

The film which Matthew Collings made of this subject—it is called *Big Art in a One-Horse Town* and was broadcast in February—is one of the most engaging, illuminating, and amusing documentaries ever devoted to an American artist. Its participants include Richard Serra and Dan Flavin and the artist's son, Flavin Judd, but it is the townspeople of Marfa who steal the show with their amazingly shrewd, respectful, and sometimes hilarious assessments of Judd and his work and the ambitions he harbored for it. The result, in my opinion, is a classic. Yet almost the first thing I learned when I arrived in London in April was that the "Late Show," too, had been suspended by the BBC in favor of a new program, designed to be (as I was told) "light, frothy, and campy," devoted to gay life in Britain.

The culture wars in Britain, like those in the U.S., take many forms, of course, and this "dumbing down" of cultural discourse, in which pop culture and sexual politics are given priority over high culture and intellectual distinctions, is only one of them. Another consists of the trashing of history in the name of public education. You might think that a figure such as Winston Churchill would be exempted for this process, but you would be wrong. My visit to London happened to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of V-E Day, and in the midst of the many observances that had been organized to mark that solemn occasion the British public awakened to a remarkable outrage. In an official film designed to inform British school children about the conduct of the war that had saved their country's civilization—there were actually two versions of it: a thirty-minute one for younger children and a full-hour version for older ones—Churchill's role in winning the war was confined to something like seventeen seconds. This caused a bit of an uproar, of course, but mainly among those old enough to have experienced the war. What was really remarkable—and depressing—was that it didn't seem to cause much of a stir with the general public. For the generation that grew up on the Beatles, neither the Second World War nor Churchill's role in it carries any resonance or stirs any emotions—except, perhaps, a feeling of indifference.

In the U.S., of course, we are woefully familiar with the fact that kids can pass through twelve years of schooling without acquiring even a rudimentary knowledge of the history or the geography of the world in which they live—a development that is now so widespread that even teachers of undergraduate students in our universities are no longer able to take it for granted that allusions to the most pivotal events in our history will be understood by adults of voting age deemed sufficiently advanced to qualify for "higher" education. The progress of this kind of cultural illiteracy among the so-called educated classes may still be slower in England than in America, but it is nonetheless well-established on its headlong course.

So is the coarsening of artistic expression and the debasement of the critical—or rather, uncritical—response that accompanies it. An art scene in which a figure like Damien Hirst is elevated to stardom does not differ in any significant respects from the one here in America that has made Jeff Koons an emblem of success. It may, if anything, be even further advanced in the direction of an unconscionable nihilism.

When I participated in a debate about contemporary art at the Tate Gallery in 1993, I suggested that despite many claims to the contrary there were no longer any styles or materials that could legitimately be regarded as "transgressive"—the word that has now replaced "avant-garde," which has lost its luster—since everything, no matter how debased, is instantly embraced by the institutions that preside over the fate of contemporary art. The only exception I could think of, I said, was the use of feces as an art material—and in minutes I was contradicted by an earnest young man

in the audience who cited a number of contemporary works he admired that had indeed made ample use of such material. Such claims effectively place art—if it can still be called that—beyond the reach of criticism and put it firmly in the realm of social pathology, where in fact a good deal of contemporary art is now to be found on both sides of the Atlantic.

As far as the arts are concerned, the situations in Britain and America are very much alike in another negative respect. In both countries the election of a popular conservative government—Ronald Reagan’s in America, Margaret Thatcher’s in Britain—not only failed to have a favorable impact on cultural life but, insofar as it played any role in cultural matters, served as an unintended spur to the escalation of precisely those “transgressive” impulses in the arts that have proved to be most destructive to our values. Mrs. Thatcher’s reign as prime minister was as impotent in reshaping the agencies of government that lend support to the arts in Britain as Mr. Reagan’s presidency was in this country—which is why, among other reasons, the level of outrage at the National Endowment for the Arts was actually accelerated in the 1980s.

Conservatives in government in the 1980s did not really have an arts policy, or any acquaintance with them; until they read about one or another outrage that had been perpetrated by agencies of their own government, they scarcely even knew what was going on in contemporary cultural life. This gave their adversaries on the cultural left an immense advantage, which they exploited with great success. Both the Bush and Major governments proved to be even more inept in this respect, and it remains to be seen whether their conservative successors in the 1990s will be any wiser in dealing with the problems of our adversarial culture. Railing against cultural “elites” is not the solution to this problem. It may, in fact, be a guarantee of failure, for it ought to be a priority for real cultural conservatives to bolster rather than undermine the kind of elite standards that serve to preserve and revitalize the traditions that are now being dismantled by the cultural left in the arts, the universities, and the media. Alas, it may already be too late to reverse the ruinous course that our culture has embarked upon, but that, too, remains to be seen. The only thing we can be absolutely certain of is that conservatives have so far failed to address the issue with the cogency and the vision that it requires, and, as a result of that failure, it is the radical left that remains in charge of our cultural fortunes.

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