REVIEWS

Creating Equal: My Fight Against Race Preferences, by Ward Connerly. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000, 286 pp., $24.95 hardbound.

Christopher Flannery

This is the story of a citizen propelled by circumstances reluctantly to take a leading role in the politics of race in America. The story offers useful instruction for those who may be drawn into battle in this arena. The instruction takes the form, not of scholarly analysis or statistical data, but of the common-sense observations of a practical man undergoing a political education in a school of hard knocks. Behind these observations is a decency, firmness of purpose, and generosity of spirit that amount to lessons in themselves—Lincolnian lessons in the kind of character and understanding that might turn a good fight into a victory for good.

Following his appointment by California Governor Pete Wilson to the University of California Board of Regents in 1993, businessman Ward Connerly was presented with clear evidence of pervasive racial discrimination in UC admissions and hiring—a long-term system-wide policy then still being publicly and privately denied by UC officials. Connerly concluded that it was his duty as a regent to investigate this policy for the simple reason that "This is wrong" (124). It was a decision that changed his life and may yet help to change his country.

When further evidence revealed an even deeper and more radical policy of racial discrimination in the UC system than Connerly had first realized, he determined to propose two resolutions to the Board of Regents prohibiting racial preferences in admissions (SP-1) and in employment and contracting (SP-2) throughout the UC system. In a highly publicized vote, amid widespread protest and threats of violence, these resolutions passed on 20 July 1995, and racial preferences in admissions, hiring, and contracts have since been officially prohibited in the UC system.

While Connerly was busy battling racial preferences in the University of California, N.A.S. members Glynn Custred and Tom Wood were organizing to put an end to racial discrimination in all California public employment, contracting, and education. Their effort was known as the California Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI). It proposed to amend the California Constitution with language adapted from the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964: "The state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group, on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public contracting, or public education" (161). Because Connerly had become recognized as an effective opponent of racial preferences in California, the struggling CCRI movement asked him to assume the chairmanship of their organization. Though not inclined to enter yet another, and even more painful, political battle, Connerly became convinced that the fate of his victory on the Board of Regents may be linked to the fate of CCRI. UC Regent Roy Brophy, hoping for a failure of the Civil Rights Initiative, had written in the *Sacramento Bee* of his plans to take the occasion to introduce a resolution rescinding the Regents' vote against racial preferences.

In November 1995, despite Pete Wilson's warning that "you'll get attacked in a way that will make the regents thing seem like kid's stuff," Connerly accepted the chairmanship of a still very uncertain CCRI (167). By February 1996, he was able

to submit to the California Secretary of State the number of signatures required to qualify the initiative for the November ballot, as Proposition 209. "At some point during the 209 campaign," Connerly writes, "I stopped being a private citizen and became a public figure" (203), a transformation to which he had not aspired and in which there was little to relish. He also learned in the course of this campaign that in today's America racial politics is unavoidably national politics, that any good done within the Board of Regents could be undone by broader forces in California, and that no progress in California was secure if it stopped at the Oregon and Nevada borders. He concluded that "Once you embark on a cause like the one [he had] undertaken, you have to keep advancing, if only to protect the ground you've already won" (205). Proposition 209 passed and became, and remains, part of the California Constitution. Soon after the passage of Prop. 209, Connerly joined with Thomas "Dusty" Rhodes to form the American Civil Rights Coalition and the American Civil Rights Institute, "non-profit organizations that would take the fight against preferences national" (205).

Connerly began a national speaking tour both to galvanize those who agreed with him and to try to win over "people who reflexively hated me and what I believed," that is, primarily university audiences (206-7). The Republican Congress had shown no "stomach for the fight," so Connerly was left to wage the fight state by state (211). This led him to Washington, Texas, and Florida where equal rights movements were already active or in prospect. In Washington, he helped achieve passage of I-200, an initiative similar to Prop. 209. In Texas and Florida, after initial setbacks, his efforts continue at the time of writing.

Connerly's account of his experiences on the Board of Regents, in the Prop. 209 campaign, and in Washington, Texas, and Florida takes up the last two-thirds of his book and covers the years 1993-1999. (See *Academic Questions*, Summer 2000, 85-88 for a review of two books offering more detail on the legal and administrative background of affirmative action in California higher education and on the campaigns for and against Prop. 209.) From this account emerge many prudential judgments or perspectives about the political lay of the land for those with the hardihood to join the public opposition to race preferences in America. I will mention just a few of these songs of experience which called to mind as I read them the unsurpassed wisdom of Abraham Lincoln on this most vexed political question.

- The leading proponents of affirmative action racial preferences will fight to the last ditch. They are race professionals, and their careers and their standing in government, politics, education, business, and society are staked on the entrenched system of racial preferences. Though they will not always say so, their operative principle is, and must be, "Preferences forever!" They will shrink from hardly any measure, legal or illegal, to prevent or evade laws and policies prohibiting racial preferences. As Roger Clegg and Glynn Custred recently pointed out (*Weekly Standard*, 24 July 2000), Prop. 209 continues to be flagrantly violated four full years after becoming constitutional law in California. Race professionals like Jesse Jackson and Willie Brown urge citizens and officials to defy the law. Nowhere does the Lincolnian insight more fully apply than to this question of how racial preferences can ever be ended in America: "In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it

nothing can succeed. Consequently he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed." Affirmative action racial preferences will not end until an established national consensus gathers moral courage to enforce equal justice under the law. The deepest and most significant object of efforts like Connerly's must in the long run be public opinion.

- Opponents of racial preferences must be prepared to be taunted and vilified in the most outrageous way and to be threatened with personal violence and professional ruin by ministers, academics, elected officials, and employers, not to mention the self-proclaimed and self-righteous "civil rights activists" and the gangs of thugs they deploy. (Connerly's story—like so many stories of the men and women who have dared to stand up against the racism of affirmative action—offers unforgettable examples of the shamelessness and ruthlessness of professional affirmative actionists, who have refined their unseemly methods to a science in our universities.) To such assaults, opponents of racial preferences should, like Ward Connerly, adopt the Lincolnian civic disposition that suits the benignity of their cause: the generous disposition of malice toward none and charity for all, which is the ground of civic friendship and the true hope of healing America's racial wounds. This is not easy when one is being viciously attacked, or one's family is being threatened, or one's career is being destroyed—all too common consequences these days of speaking up for equal justice under the law. Though one should not hesitate to heap shame upon the truly shameful words and deeds that have become the stock in trade of proponents of racial preferences, the end should never be forgotten: This is the reestablishment, on the American Proposition, of civic friendship among our divided citizens. This end should be pursued confidently with Lincolnian "firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right."

- Professional supporters of affirmative action racial preferences must insist, and can never relent in insisting, that America is a racist society. They must, in fact, engender and fabricate racism to justify their race-driven "remedies." All that is most dear to them depends on creating and perpetuating an America that is a House Divided against itself. Conversely, opponents of racial preferences—like Ward Connerly—maintain that, at its core, America is good. Every diminishment of racism in America adds strength to their cause. This simple difference is profound. It is a source of great vitality and hope for those fighting racial preferences. Their appeal is to the "better angels of our nature" and has the intrinsic advantage that right has over wrong. Connerly, nonetheless, would be as quick as Lincoln to point out that the justice of a cause is no guarantee of its success; his book is, in part, a homily on the theme that this good cause will depend for its success on great political sagacity, not to mention good luck.

- Academic work has a critical role to play in this issue. Connerly, of course, is not a scholar. He is an intelligent, practical, hard-working citizen, who has become a public leader by circumstance. He is guided—and generally guided well—in his public advocacy by simple and firm moral principle mingled with what may be a statesmanlike understanding of political realities. But successful opposition to racial preferences—like Lincoln's op-

position to slavery—requires not only moral decency and prudence, but philosophical rigor. Connerly and his cause are aided in decisive ways by the writings of such scholars as Shelby Steele, Thomas Sowell, and Abigail and Stephen Thernstrom, and he credits them gratefully. As he says of Sowell and Steele, "their writings were my philosophical compass on the issue of affirmative action long before I entered the battle in 1994" (279).

Ask not "from whom the advice comes," advises James Madison (giving Abe a well-deserved breather), but "whether the advice be good." Sound counsel, philosophically speaking. But as Madison also reminds us, there has never been a nation of philosophers, and in our unphilosophical state it can matter a great deal from whom the advice comes. The advice that Ward Connerly brings to black Americans—that they ought to despise racial preferences and demand of their good country the greatest, in a sense the only, benefit and justice it has to offer: the freedom to stand on our own two feet—is advice unquestionably more potent coming from the man whose picture is on the cover of his book. The race professionals know this and fear it to their bones. This is why they reserve their most poisonous venom to spew upon any black American who dares to break the color line and speak such truths to other black Americans. Americans of every color are in Connerly's debt, and in the debt of the many like him, who subject themselves to such outrages and to very real dangers for the sake of their country and for the sake of what is right.

Christopher Flannery is professor of political science at Azusa Pacific University and senior fellow at The Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy.

Gender and the Politics of History, by Joan Wallach Scott. New York: Columbia University Press, Revised Edition, 1999, 283 pp., $17.50 paperback.

Fred Baumann

In the Spring 2000 issue of *Academic Questions*, David Kaiser concludes that the well-known feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott has "issued a declaration of disinterest in the past as such." He means by this that she, among other things, straightforwardly admits that she adopted the Foucaultian "theory" she recommends to the historical profession for "avowedly political" purposes. Since a historian who is not interested in the past would seem by definition not to be a historian at all, Kaiser would appear, with considerable cause, to be reading her out of the profession. Yet Scott's insouciance about the admission should give us pause. After all, we have been here before. We triumphantly make what we think is our clinching argument, and our target refuses to surrender, condescendingly noting our epistemological naïveté as she walks off. After all, if truth is socially constructed, it is far more truthful to admit one is doing it than to pretend that no one should. The standoff is frustrating to us, since the belief in truth is connected with the belief at least in the possibility of coming to a common understanding. The postmodernists, by contrast, are not frustrated at all; they consider themselves too hip to believe either in truth or in common understanding.

Maybe there's a better way. The way to be interested in the past as such that made the most sense to me when I was training to be a historian was R.G. Collingwood's notion of "reliving," i.e., of trying to understand the historical subject from

within, from its own point of view and its own questions. I think Collingwood is right in saying that that effort is required before any judgment of the subject can be made. It also might be the only basis for any plausible effort at persuasion and discussion. So I will try it on Scott. Fortunately, her book of essays, mostly from the 1980s, provides a fair degree of intellectual autobiography. Scott seems typical of a great many progressive scholars of her generation, so her case may be instructive.

For a reissue of "a classic text," *Gender and the Politics of History* starts oddly with a preface in which Scott tells us that "gender" no longer interests her much. While it had seemed a "useful category of analysis" in the 1980s, because it "seemed the best way to realize the goal" of bringing "women from the margins to the center of historical focus," in these days gender "is a term that has lost its critical edge" because everyone has gone back to thinking that it just means sex. Scott is currently more interested in psychoanalytic theory, she reports. Still, this is less frivolous than it may seem. She understands both "gender," and the underlying complex of Foucaultian ideas that govern her use of it, as instruments to accomplish a moral purpose, namely promoting feminism. Thus, in the beginning of the introduction she clearly states that she "was forced to take post-structuralist theory seriously," because "[i]t addressed many of the most pressing philosophical questions I had confronted as a feminist trying to write women's history."

Those questions are made acute by Scott's radicalism, her refusal to accept compromises. Thus, "the point of feminist inquiry—and for me its continuing appeal—has always been its refusal to accommodate the status quo." It should cause "consternation by pointing out the contradictions and inconsistencies in societies claiming to provide equality and justice for all." That means that nothing short of perfection is good enough; any compromise means some inconsistency.

Yet how is perfection possible if the goals of feminism are contradictory? Since equality asserts that differences don't matter and consequently abstracts from them, how can one get complete equality without abstracting from those differences that become highly relevant to the particular situation of women? If one does that, as the Enlightenment at least promised to do, Scott is aware that you end up with a "universal man" who is always disconcertingly male. The postmodern critique of the Enlightenment, and particularly Foucault's dissolution of its intellectual categories, will, she thinks, do the requisite job by particularizing, historicizing, and relativizing the abstract categories and identities that are imposed on human beings (among them and especially "human being") so that the false antitheses that stand in the way of a consistent and thoroughgoing feminism can be overcome.

Before seeing what Scott makes of Foucaultian theory, it seems worth saying that, purely as history, some of what Foucault recommends in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and elsewhere is useful and even refreshing. To the extent that he encourages us to question conventional categories and arrangements of phenomena, Foucault can spur new questions and new thinking about old ones. In this, of course, he is no more "postmodern" than were Collingwood and Carl Becker when they warned, over half a century ago, about trusting too much in the historical fact. Thus, when Scott repeatedly invokes "theory" against the rigidities of traditional polarities, she is not being particularly postmodern but she is, potentially at least, doing her job as a historian. What

is genuinely postmodern, i.e., Nietzschean, in Foucault emerges at the very end of *The Archaeology* when he allows an interlocutor to ask him what legitimates and grounds his own critique. Foucault's answer is that he won't say; his discourse "is trying to operate a decentring that leaves no privilege to any centre."[1] Later, he insists that the issue is one of courage and politics. He charges the interlocutor with wanting to defend (out of fear) "the great historico-transcendental destiny of the Occident."[2] Thus in the end Foucault tells us that his method is not a scientific or scholarly one at all, but rather a way of shattering all certainties out of a love of equality. Foucault's answer, it seems to me, does not really answer the interlocutor very well. (If "decentering" has no compelling rules of its own, no legitimacy other than its political purpose, it would seem to become essentially a rhetorical device; and, recognized as such, it would lose precisely its power as rhetoric.) Still, at least it would seem to encourage lots of different "decenterings" and the assumption of as many perspectives as possible, in the belief that doing this will somehow bring about the hoped-for fall of the West. But even (or especially) if it did not, we might still learn something from it.

It is not exactly as if Scott's promises about Foucault are entirely empty, but there is much more talk about the excellences of postmodern historiography than any evidence even of its practice. The first third of the book is devoted to making the case for "theory" to the well-disposed. Repeatedly she holds up for inspection and critique the alternatives to her own view from mere, naïve "women's history" to Marxist feminism and Lacanian psychology. Invariably, these turn out to leave untouched the dominant male paradigms either by making the case of women exceptional or subsuming it to some universal (male) conception of human being. (Lacan gets it for universalizing sexual conflict.) Repeatedly Foucault rides to the rescue by questioning and thus deconstructing the categories that create the apparent problem. Throughout, the test is practical—what will "lead to change." Fortunately, the most theoretically sophisticated approaches are also those that promise the most politically. Above all Scott has learned from the postmodern heirs of Nietzsche that "[w]e need a refusal of the fixed and permanent quality of the binary opposition, a genuine historicization and deconstruction of the terms of sexual difference." One might of course ask Scott (and, at a different level, Foucault himself) about the "binary opposition" between equality and inequality, which she understands as identical with justice and injustice. But biased historians can still do good work; consider Gibbon.

Even at this point, we have to wait for the real test of Scott's methodological promises. Two historical works are reviewed from the perspective of "theory." First, a historian of Chartism, Gareth Stedman-Jones, is faulted for using concepts like "class" abstractly and thus concluding that the Chartists understood themselves politically and not as an economic class. Had he paid attention to the way meaning was constructed by the Chartists, he would have seen how "their visions of power intertwined economics and politics." Further, he might have seen how their self-definition depended on fundamental assumptions about gender that excluded women. The first charge against Stedman-Jones seems strong though far from innovative; it is the familiar (and welcome) Collingwoodian plea for understanding historical subjects from their own viewpoint. Scott's second point (one she makes frequently) has some force. Yes in-

deed, assumptions that seemed rock-solid until recently about the natures and tendencies of men and women did indeed affect how they thought about work, property, or rights. The pay-off for this observation, though, is what you do with it, how you articulate the relationship between gender assumptions and other parts of life. Here we have to be satisfied with the general observation itself.

Scott's second target is the famous radical historian and activist, E. P. Thompson, whom she greatly admires. Still, she finds him wanting for insufficient sophistication in the treatment of women in labor history. In particular, she does not appreciate his lack of appreciation for utopian, mystical political movements, which she thinks he associates with the feminine. Scott says she does not want to denounce Thompson, just to show the reliance of his political vision "on gendered representations to convey its meaning." There is an oddly repressed quality here, of a grudge that does not quite dare to come out openly. The stated point, that Thompson uses sexual metaphors to convey his meaning, is no doubt true. But the real complaint seems to be Thompson's cavalier attitude toward feminine utopian mysticism.

The real test of the worth of the gender approach for historical scholarship comes in the next three essays, where Scott is on her own scholarly turf with "Work Identities for Men and Women," a critique of "A Statistical Representation of Work" from 1847-1848, and "*L'Ouvrière*," a study of "Women Workers in the Discourse of French Political Economy, 1840-1860." The first compares the arguments of revolutionary tailors with those of revolutionary seamstresses. The men operated on a distinction that privileged skilled work understood essentially as male and extra-mural; the women did not. The second essay shows very persuasively how a famous statistical analysis of the industry of Paris, upon which historians have relied, really represented an establishment position and cannot be relied upon for the objectivity its numbers seem to promise. The third discusses the phenomenon of the "femmes isolées," women working on their own, as seen contrastingly by a liberal political economist, Jules Simon, and a radical woman intellectual, Julie-Victorie Daubié,

Scott's historical essays reveal common features. The first is how little Foucaultian theory contributes to them. For example, her demolition of the statistical report convinces me. Still, it did not take postmodernism to discover that compilations of fact are often expressions of partisan interest and informed by theoretical conclusions. Second, the tone of the essays reveals a moral indignation (however competently and professionally it is muted) against all forms of liberalism, stemming from the utopian insistence on all or nothing. Thus the utopian socialists are credited with a view of the family that "encapsulated a total transformation of human relations" and praised for "a ringing positive endorsement of characteristics associated with the feminine," but they are criticized for leaving things at "a dream, something to aspire to." By contrast, when describing the liberal *Statistique*, Scott's tone becomes one of straightforward mockery. In the small shop "[w]orkers were inevitably well paid and well behaved, replicating in their private lives the orderly relationships of the shop."

Third, and most importantly, Scott's indignation turns out to make the essays considerably less interesting than they could easily have been. It seems sufficient to unmask the false claims to objectivity of the liberal position; the merits of the

contrasting views are never seriously discussed. Nor do we find a penetrating and sympathetic explication of just how her subjects' understanding of gender (or, as they might have said, "human nature") led them to define and solve their own dilemmas. Of course for a utopian these things do not matter; at best, the compromises the liberals (and even Scott's radicals) sought to make between the market and the traditional family are contemptible. Thus a concern for "the family as the natural regulator of morals" is merely mocked and Daubié, an otherwise sympathetically treated feminist, is taken to task for having "remained within the conceptual boundaries earlier set by political economy, accepting the notion that work and family . . . were separate spheres when in fact it was precisely the relationship between them that lay at the heart of wage calculation." Of course, from anyone else's view those compromises are precisely what is interesting and need to be viewed in a sympathetic as well as a critical light. It is not just that the most recent social science seems again to attest that there really is a tension between the goods of individual liberty (hence equality of right) and those provided, especially for children, in most families (where there is at least some differentiation of roles), that is, that there may really be something to the tension between equality and difference. At a minimum, the historian, who wants to do more than score points for her side, ought to recognize that, for example, both Simon and Daubié were operating within the rich tradition of Rousseauian humanism that was seeking, with considerable sophistication, to answer many of the same questions the contemporary American Left, Scott included, is vexed by. While it may be asking too much to want Scott to take the tradition seriously on its merits (though she could do worse), at least it would have made genuinely informative history to see both the strengths and weaknesses of the compromises her subjects made as they had to face particular cases. For a utopian, though, tensions are *a priori* resolvable; it just takes willpower. Hence, not much sympathy is there for those given to agonizing.

Of course, whether one should be a utopian or not is a political and philosophical question. But, on this showing, utopianism can be criticized for producing flat and boring history. While Scott should not necessarily be disqualified as a historian because she has an ideological axe to grind, she can be reasonably criticized for letting the sound of her grinding drown out the voices of her subjects.

At the end, Scott comes to grips with the problem her utopianism faces, what she calls equality versus difference. In an essay on the Sears affirmative action case, she attempts to argue that there is no problem. After all, equality means "a social agreement to consider obviously different people as equivalent (not identical to) for a stated purpose," which here is the allocation of rights. So, we can have all the differences we want, as long as we ignore them for political purposes. But of course in ignoring them we say that they do not matter. We can then only have full equality plus full difference if those differences matter when we want them to and not when we do not. This might work if it were divinely revealed when they do and when they do not, or, possibly, if, as in classical liberalism, we limited sharply the areas in which they are said not to matter. But try it for physical standards in military training for example; do they, don't they, and *how*?

Even Scott seems to realize that this argument will not do. So postmodern thought is called on once more. "[W]e must open to scrutiny the terms 'men' and

'women' as they are used to define one another in particular contexts—workplaces for example." A serious scrutiny of what "men" and "women" are is an invitation to philosophy, postmodern or not, and as such it might very well lead to aporia and ambiguity (or even worse, inegalitarian conclusions). Scott realizes this and hastens to let us know she does not quite want to risk that. "If in our histories we relativize the categories man and woman, of course, it means that we must also recognize the contingent and specific nature of our political claims." Thus, "there are moments when it makes sense for mothers to demand consideration for their social role, and contexts within which motherhood is irrelevant to women's behavior; but to maintain that womanhood is motherhood is to obscure the differences that make choice possible." It makes sense all right if you wish to preserve some undeconstructed categories to trot out when it is convenient. That is, "postmodern" thought is to be employed to bring intellectual confusion upon the bad guys, while allowing the good guys to say anything they want.

Nice work if you can get it, of course, but it still leaves the big question begged. Who cares what "culture" has done to the relations of "men" and "women," unless one has some basis for saying that it is wrong and should be changed? And here the real dirty truth about Scott's "postmodernism" emerges. The undeconstructed categories she has up her sleeve are in fact plain old eighteenth-century liberalism as transmitted by equally plain old nineteenth-century radicalism. Scott, like many others, can so easily invoke the specter of relativism against the Enlightenment because in her heart she is pure . . . Enlightenment.

Still, this conclusion should be modified on the basis of the last essay. In this postscript to the revised edition she explains her turn from gender to contemporary feminist psychoanalysis, whose emphasis on the role of fantasy in sexual identity attracts her. Thus rights can become the products of fantasy, morphing into "aspiration rather than possession," hence licensing boundless utopianism. It appears that those nineteenth-century utopian dreamers were on to more than Scott once realized. If what appears like irreducible nature is just fantasy, then no problem, including equality versus difference, is insoluble. And that the solution is itself a dream would not be a problem either, would it? It is at this point, one perhaps always implied by her utopianism, that Scott shows herself for the first time on the verge of the genuinely postmodern. That it is also on the verge of looniness and some of the most hateful politics of the past century (hateful surely to Scott as well) is true, too.

In the end, utopian feminism's need for fantasy and a theory of fantasy points to the origins in liberal thought of the real problem of equality and difference. Liberalism, from Locke on, did indeed abstract from large parts of experienced reality in order to establish fundamental human equality. It knew full well it was doing it, which is why it tended to drag its feet in applying its principles, particularly to the family.[3] That is, "universal man" was meant to be both a fundamental truth and an admitted construction. It was something both to fight for (liberal revolutions and war) and to engineer cautiously (liberal domestic policy). The two aspects were in necessary tension. The hitherto excluded would necessarily weigh in on the heroic side and the most simple and powerful arguments would weigh in with them. Yet even the total triumph of "universal man" would not be enough since, as feminists were quick to realize,

the terms of "universal man" were in their very abstraction somehow particularly male. Hence liberalism would have to sacrifice itself and its inadequate universality to an even more universal post-liberal universality, one that had room for everyone and everything on its own terms, without crowding or compromise. That this is self-contradictory is true, but self-contradiction rarely makes things less desirable. The political problem for liberals is how to recognize liberalism's tendency toward self-contradiction and, not just to live with it, but to make a persuasive case for trying to live with it, at least to some degree. The problem for utopians is to avoid knowing how absurd they are forcing themselves to become. Unfortunately, the latter problem is far more readily soluble than the former; pixie dust, often with designer labels, is always on the market. But as a historian, the utopian pays a heavy price: a tin ear and a tinny tune. Which is why David Kaiser was right; historians should care about the past as such.

Fred Baumann is professor of political science at Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio 43022.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, Pantheon Books, 1972), 205.
2. Ibid., 210.
3. Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988), 115-116. Pangle cites a remarkable letter of John Adams arguing for the property qualification for the franchise. It begins "[i]t is certain, in theory, that the only moral foundation of government is the consent of the people. But to what an extent shall we carry this principle?" Pangle's citation ends, "Depend upon it, Sir, it is dangerous to open so fruitful a source of controversy and altercation. . . . New claims will arise; women will demand a vote; lads from twelve to twenty-one will think their rights not enough attended to."

The Human Stain, by Philip Roth. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000, 361 pp., $26.00 hardbound.

Paul Hollander

Understandably enough *Academic Questions* does not, as a rule, review works of fiction. *The Human Stain* however is the kind of novel that has much to say to the readers of this journal. It exemplifies art imitating life, illustrating as it does the blight of political correctness (PC)—the key dramatic ingredient of the story. Philip Roth has an excellent grasp of what has been going on in our colleges over the past three decades, a knowledge acquired presumably in part during the years when he taught comparative literature at the University of Pennsylvania and literature at Hunter College in New York. He knows intimately the terminology, the clichés, the styles of solicitude, the verbiage of the prevailing politically correct conventional wisdom. The fictional "Athena College" can be readily substituted for many others personally known to the readers of this journal.

This novel is a powerful work of fiction, both in its imaginative and realistic aspects, that grasps certain defining characteristics of our times. In any work of fiction the artistic-imaginary as distinct from the sociological-social historical dimension requires separate consideration. The latter, in these pages, will be given more attention. But it should be made clear at the outset that this is a fine novel, quite apart from its focus on matters that weigh heavily on the minds of the readers of *Academic Questions.*

It is in itself significant that Philip Roth, veteran chronicler of the afflictions of

contemporary American (and personal) life turned his attention to the two major components of PC—the preoccupation with racism and sexism—and found them a dramatic enough point of departure for a story that is by no means limited to these current concerns. (Another recent novel of his, *American Pastoral,* too dealt with political issues associated with the 1960s and could be read as a cautionary tale of the fruits of idealistic, if mindless, political violence.)

Future readers of another era may wonder how much of this novel is pure fiction, a product of the fertile imagination of its author or one that was inspired by actual events, rooted in social realities? Could it really happen in the 1990s that a professor of classics (Coleman Silk) in a small New England college would be harassed, hounded, and denigrated as a racist for referring to two students who never showed up in his class as "spooks," and who were, unbeknownst to him, black? Could this have led to the automatic, reflexive attribution of racism and the attendant demands for apologies, penalties and humiliations? This is how it began:

> He was astonished to be called by his successor, the new dean of faculty, to address the charge of racism brought against him by the two missing students, who turned out to be black, and who, though absent, quickly learned of the locution in which he'd publicly raised the question of their absence. Coleman told the dean: "These two students had not attended a single class. That's all I knew about them. I was using the word in its customary and primary meaning: 'spook' as a specter or ghost. I had no idea what color these students might be. I had known perhaps fifty years ago but had totally forgotten that 'spooks' is an invidious term sometimes applied to blacks . . . The issue, the only issue, is the non-attendance of these students and their flagrant and inexcusable neglect of work. What's galling is that the charge is not just false—it is spectacularly false (6-7).

The dean and the rest of the college community were not convinced. (As we all know the non-attendance of students is hardly a matter to exercise administrators.)

One of the two aggrieved students also claimed, with faculty support, that she flunked most of her courses "because she was too intimidated by the racism emanating from her white professors to work up her courage to go to class"!(17).

Those of us who have been teaching between the late 1960s and the end of the century know all too well that such a story—no matter how absurd—is by no means far fetched, that Roth did not have to strain his imagination or risk ridicule in conjuring up an incident like this; people have been accused on the campuses (and outside of them too) of racism (or sexism) innumerable times on similarly flimsy or grotesque grounds. (An incident that comes to mind is the famous "water buffalo" story at the University of Pennsylvania.)

In the months to follow Coleman was

> engulfed . . . (in) punishing immersion in meetings, hearings, interviews, the documents and letters submitted to college officials, faculty committees, to a pro bono black lawyer representing the two students . . . the charges, denials and countercharges, the obtuseness, ignorance and cynicism, the gross and deliberate misrepresentations, the laborious, repetitious explanations, the prosecutorial questions—and always . . . the pervasive sense of unreality (11-12).

Giving the story an unusual twist, Coleman Silk is actually a light-skinned black who decided early in life that passing (as a Jew, to boot) was both feasible

and desirable. He came from a conventional, hard working black family that believed in and lived up to American middle class values and did not feel alienated from Western culture and its great figures, including "the language of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Dickens" (92). His mother, who became a head nurse in a hospital before the days of affirmative action, speaks for those who are dismayed by recent trends in higher education: "Sounds . . . that anything is possible in a college today. Sounds like the people there forgot what it is to teach. Sounds like what they do is something closer to buffoonery . . . . One has to be so terribly frightened of every word one uses? . . . All these colleges starting these remedial programs to teach kids what they should have learned in the ninth grade" (328-329).

This is a book that should also prompt future social historians to ponder how and why the whole notion of PC emerged and became a major preoccupation and part of the language in the last decades of the twentieth century. How did it come about that in this period allegations of racism and sexism, and ways of dealing with their alleged manifestations, became an obsession in American life and especially institutions of higher education? Why the apparent credence given to all such claims and accusations? How did it come about that, as Roth puts it, "No motive for the perpetrator is necessary, no logic or rationale is required. Only a label (of being a racist) is required. The label is the motive. The label is the evidence" (290). Of all the politically incorrect attitudes, racism (its alleged presence) has come closest to the idea of original sin as a supposedly ineradicable affliction of white people.

Why have so many educated Americans, and especially teachers in colleges and universities, so readily succumbed to the often hysterical allegations and demands associated with PC and the substantial restrictions of free expression associated with ferreting out its supposed violations? The book itself does not propose to explain the phenomenon, dwelling only on its absurdity and consequences in the instance chronicled. It does however make the reader stop and think.

Four broad explanations may be suggested as to why PC has come to prevail in academia without meeting serious resistance. One is the durable and pervasive white guilt (at least among the educated) as far as the racial underpinnings of PC are concerned; the second is the massive presence of former sixties activists on the faculties and in the administration of colleges and universities sympathetic to the ideas and attitudes PC encompasses; third, the major political and legal institutions of the country have also thrown their weight behind many of the ideas and impulses associated with PC (for example legitimating and institutionalizing reverse discrimination of many kinds); fourth, and more speculatively, the legendary conformity of Americans detected by such early observers as Toqueville may also have played a part in the apparently widespread and reflexive support for PC. As the hero, victim of the outburst of this "ecstasy of sanctimony" or "virtuemongering" reflects, there were those

> who, out of indifference or cowardice or ambition, had failed to mount the slightest protest in his behalf. Educated people with Ph.D.s, people he had himself hired [in his earlier capacity as dean—P.H.] because he believed that they were capable of thinking reasonably and independently, had turned out to have no inclination to weigh the preposterous evidence against him . . . . Racist: at Athena College, suddenly the most emotionally charged epi-

> thet you could be stuck with, and to that emotionalism (and to fear for their personal files and future promotions) his entire faculty had succumbed. "Racist" spoken with the official sounding resonance, and every last potential ally had scurried for cover (83-84).

Sounds familiar.

The matter of conformity invites further probing. Why have so many academics who do not truly believe in many aspects of PC gone along with it? What would they have risked had they expressed their misgivings, at any rate those among them already tenured?

It is the potent combination of white guilt (as far as the racial issues are concerned) and the quest for popularity (that begins in high school and continues at the places of work and residence) which most readily explain these attitudes; people who wish to be well liked prefer to avoid controversy and confrontation, especially in connection with sensitive moral-political issues such as race relations.

But Coleman's predicament had broader and more timeless implications as well: "It was strange to think . . . that people so well eduated and professionally civil should have fallen so willingly for the venerable human dream of a situation in which one man can embody evil" (306-307).

There is another major violation of the prevailing proprieties and pieties central to the story. The 71 year old Coleman, following his resignation from the college after the "spooks" scandal, has a passionate love affair with a 34 year old cleaning woman of the college. Although seemingly a private matter between consenting adults, it attracts the attention of the guardians of politically correct morality, including the feminist vigilantes of the college and especially a young French woman, Delphine Roux (Yale Ph.D.), chairperson of the literature department and pursuant of gender studies. Even prior to this development, she conveyed to Coleman with utmost seriousness that students complained to her about the Euripides plays in his Greek tragedy course deemed to be "degrading to women"(184). She warns him against his "fossilized pedagogy . . . . If you persist in teaching literature in the tedious way you are used to, if you insist on the so-called humanist approach to Greek tragedy . . . conflicts like this are going to arise continually" (193).

Roux, upon learning of Coleman's affair, comes to the conclusion that in Faunia Farley (his mistress, the cleaning woman) "he had found someone more defenseless even than Elena or Tracy (the complaining students), the perfect woman to crush" (194)—a conclusion totally and almost comically wrongheaded that could only have been reached by substituting abstract ideological presuppositions for the realities of human relationships.

Roth seems to believe that old style American puritanism (or "the coercions of a (morally) censorious community" [310]) also feed the kind of present day feminist outrage sparked by Coleman's affair which, in turn, resembles the public outcry about President Clinton's doings with Monica Lewinsky. This however is a strained parallel. Many well known feminists actually found excuses for the President's misconduct given their view of him as a supporter of their cause; at the same time opinion polls indicated that public indignation was modest; most people just did not care. Still, Roth's reflections on these matters capture something important about American life, its preoccupations and discontents, and are suggestive of the relationship between a sense of security and certain types of public concern with personal virtue:

> A century of destruction unlike any other in its extremity befalls and blights the human race—scores of millions of ordinary people condemned to suffer deprivation upon deprivation, atrocity upon atrocity . . . half the world or more subjected to pathological sadism as social policy, whole societies organized and fettered by violent persecution, the degradation of individual life engineered on a scale unknown throughout history, nations broken and enslaved by ideological criminals . . . all the terrible touchstones presented by this century, and here they are up in arms about Faurina Farley. Here in America either it's Faunia Farley or it's Monica Lewinsky! The luxury of these lives disquieted so by the inappropriate comportment of Clinton and Silk! (153-154)

Here Roth seems to overlook the proverbial American unfamiliarity with and lack of interest in major historical events outside the United States, the entrenched disposition to focus on the here and now.

Nonetheless it may well be, as the quotation suggests, that preoccupation with the minutiae of PC and its violations is indeed a luxury that can flourish only in a society, or social setting, where people are free of any truly pressing care, threat or deprivation, settings which allow and encourage full expression of all sorts of dubious idealistic impulses and grievances.

This preoccupation with the intimate personal realm and its proprieties may have other roots as well, in the contradictory beliefs and attitudes left over from the 1960s. While on the one hand it was a period of self-inflating narcissism and unbridled quest for "self expression," or "self realization," or "radical individualism," it was also a politicized era that sought to obliterate or obfuscate the lines between the private and the public, the personal and the political. It was not only the radical feminists who averred that "the personal is political." There was an inclination to politicize and overpoliticize everything, from housework to sexual preferences, the classics of art and literature and the best ways of garbage disposal. There was a "politics of . . ." or a "political economy of . . ." everything. Those who still think along these lines find it irresistible to poke around the intimate relations of people, looking for victims and victimizers, feeling entitled to do so by their perceived pursuit of social (sexual or racial) justice.

Two reservations to note: As in so many of his writings, Roth cannot resist dragging into the story the setting he is most familiar with, Newark, New Jersey and its environs, where he has Coleman Silk grow up. A more serious flaw is that, quite implausibly, most of his characters use the same overly articulate language and locution.

Although Roth regards American society and culture as deeply flawed—as most of his writings, including this book testify—he does not endorse every effort to purify them. In this novel he has taken a good measure of the recent efforts of purification associated with the imperatives of political correctness and exposes their shallowness and destructiveness.

The Human Stain, while a very contemporary story, also reflects the writer's longstanding and justifiably gloomy notions of the human condition and human nature.

Paul Hollander is professor of sociology emeritus at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. His next book, a collection of shorter writings, will be published in 2001 by Transaction under the title Discontents: Postmodern and Postcommunist. *Please address correspondence to Academic Questions / NAS, 221 Witherspoon Street, Second Floor, Princeton, NJ 08542–3215; editor@aq.nas.org*