

CounterPunch

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“Does Sontag sense no irony in getting a prize premised on the recipient’s sensitivity to issues of human freedom, in a society where the freedom of Palestinians is unrelentingly repressed? Imagine her bitter words for any writer voyaging to the Serb portion of Bosnia to receive money and a fulsome scroll from Milosevic, praising her commitment to freedom of the individual.”

BUSH’S POLITICAL GAS

- Big Coal Battles
Natural Gas

COUNTERPUNCH JOURNEY TO DIXIE

- With Volnay at
Monticello
- With the Strikers
in Gastonia

Stones and Glass Houses Said and Sontag

Here’s a story about what is intellectually respectable and politically safe in this country, and what is not. It concerns two of this country’s best known public intellectuals, Edward Said and Susan Sontag.

Though the range of Said’s intellectual interests is wide and his writings on history and culture – most notably Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism - immensely influential in the academies, his role as spokesman for the Palestinian national cause is pre-eminent, never more so than in recent years since the Oslo accords and subsequent rites. Time and again Said has issued acrid critiques of the evolution of the so-called “peace process” and the relentless degrading of Palestinian national aspirations.

First by the mere fact that he is an articulate Palestinian, then by reason of his intellectual distinction and influential roost at the University of Columbia Said has, down the years, elicited truly amazing onslaughts from the irreconcilables who tolerate no questioning of the moral and political propriety of the Zionist cause as applied against the Palestinians on the practical plane by Israeli governments down the years, and as unconditionally endorsed by the United States.

It’s a backhanded tribute to his effectiveness as spokesman for the Palestinian cause that the attacks on Said have, across the last couple of years, reached new levels of envenomed absurdity. A couple of years ago the journal Commentary, a shoddy publication sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, published an attack on Said by an Israeli-American called Justus Wiener, with a desk at an Institute in Jerusalem financed by the Michael Milken Foundation.

Wiener’s appointed task was to seek to demonstrate that Said had been mostly raised outside Palestine, therefore wasn’t really a

Palestinian and thus had no standing as a tribune for his people! In fact we noted here of Wiener’s interminable diatribe at the time, it was plain that Wiener was in effect trying to portray just the sort of rootless intellectual with shadowy kinships spread across the Levant that was beloved of anti-Semitic pamphleteers in the nineteenth century.

Wiener’s mad attack was given wide publicity. There’s always space in the US press for charges that Palestinians do not in some mysterious manner “exist”, and that therefore by the same token the Palestinian nation cause has no merit. The acme of this mode of abuse was a book accorded immense deference a number of years ago, called From Time Immemorial. Its author, Joan Peters, was wildly acclaimed in publications such as the New York Times for her supposedly learned discovery that by reason of hitherto unknown migratory eccentricities, Palestinians had no secure claim upon the soil of Palestine. Then suddenly the row died away as Peters’s “scholarship” crumbled under scrutiny.

The latest storm over Said concerns a trip to Lebanon he took last summer, in the course of which he and his family took the opportunity to visit the recently evacuated “security zone” occupied by Israeli forces. As did many Arabs, the Saids shuddered at the horrors of Khiam prison, built by Israel and used for the incarceration and (subsequently admitted) torture of their thousands of Palestinian and Lebanese captives.

Then the Saids drove to a deserted border post, abandoned by Israeli troops, and now crowded with festive Lebanese throwing exuberant stones at the heavily fortified border. In competitive paternal emulation of his son, Said pitched a stone and was photographed in the act of so doing. You can scarcely blame him for being stunned at the (Sontag and Said continued on page 6)

A CounterPunch Journey From Monticello to Gastonia and Beyond

BY ALEXANDER COCKBURN

Bidding adieu to the nation's capital, I head west on 66 past Manassas battlefield, then down Route 29, formerly the old Seminole trail that runs south through Charlottesville. I was hoping to make it in time to visit Jefferson's house, Monticello, which I last saw a decade ago. Among those making their way down this same road two hundred years ago to visit the great man was one of my favorite characters from the revolutionary era, Constantin Francois Volney, whose career is freshly evoked in a wonderful book (of which more here in a future issue) by CounterPuncher and friend Peter Linebaugh and his co-author, Marcus Rediker. It's titled "The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic", recently published by Beacon.

A member of the French assembly who voted to abolish slavery, Volney published

"Ruins; Or, Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires" in 1791, republished in English two hundred years later by Black Classic Press in Baltimore. A sample from the famous dialogue between the "People" and the "Privileged Class":

PEOPLE: And what labor do you perform in our society?

PRIVILEGED CLASS: None; we are not made to work.

PEOPLE: How, then, have you acquired these riches?

PRIVILEGED CLASS: By taking the pains to govern you.

PEOPLE: What! This is what you call governing? We toil and you enjoy! We produce and you dissipate! Wealth proceeds from us, and you absorb it. Privileged men! Class who are not the people; form a nation apart and govern yourselves...

PRIVILEGED CLASS: It is all over for us. The swinish multitude are enlightened."

Worldwide, Volney was as big a hit as Tom Paine and more radical. In a year his "Ruins" had been translated into German, English and Welsh. William Blake pored over it. The United Irishmen distributed a chapter from it and by 1797 in Bahia, Brazil, it was in the hands of a mulatto amidst the 1797 conspiracy of whites, browns and blacks.

Volney opposed nationalism, the division of classes and the oppression of women ("the King sleeps or smokes his pipe while his wife and daughters perform all the drudgery of the house"). Like Paine he saw a new age dawning across the Atlantic.

In 1794, amid the rampages of Robespierre's Committee of Public Safety, the guillotine wasn't far from Volney's neck. He landed in prison but was released on 9 Thermidor, same day as Paine, and soon sailed to America, spending the winter of 1795-6 in Philadelphia, across from the African Church which was crowded with refugees from the revolution in Haiti. Then he headed down to Monticello for a visit with Jefferson, later recording his impressions:

"After dinner the master [Jefferson] and I went to see the slaves plant peas. Their bodies dirty brown rather than black, their

dirty rags, their miserable, hideous half-nakedness, these haggard figures, this secretive anxious air, the hateful timorous looks, altogether seized me with an initial sentiment of terror and sadness that I ought to hide my face from. Their indolence in turning up the ground with the hoe was extreme. The master took a whip to frighten them, and soon ensued a comic scene. Placed in the middle of the gang, he menaced, and turned far and wide (on all sides) turning around. Now, as he turned his face, one by one, the blacks changed attitude: those whom he looked at directly worked the best, those whom he half saw worked least, and those he didn't see at all, ceased working altogether; and if he made an about-face, the hoe was raised to view, but otherwise slept behind his back."

Volney's was too strong a dram of universalist revolutionary sentiment for the politer element at the time. As Linebaugh and Rediker relate, William Cobbett denounced him as an infidel and a cannibal; Priestley accused him of Hottentotism and John Adams probably had Volney in mind when he complained that the United States was becoming a "receptacle of malevolence and turbulence, for the outcasts of the universe". Jefferson expressed it as his opinion in 1798 that Volney was the main target of the Act Concerning Aliens of 1798, designed to promote "purity of national character", forcing the Frenchman to return to Europe.

But why did Cobbett and Priestley abuse Volney as a cannibal and Hottentot? The Frenchman believed in the grand family of the human race and, well ahead of William Wells Brown and Martin Bernal, held that civilization had begun in Africa: "It was there that a people, since forgotten, discovered the elements of science and art, at a time when all other men were barbarous, and that a race, now regarded as the refuse of society, because their hair is woolly and their skin is dark, explored among the phenomena of nature, those civil and religious systems which have since held mankind in awe."

THE CAROLINAS

Thunderstorms and terrible traffic in the exploding exurbs around Manassas held me up. It was nearing twilight when I passed Monticello. I drove on; 29 became interstate 85 and somewhere around midnight I was in a motel near Gastonia, an old textile town, battleground of famous strikes in the early 1930s, which my father Claud covered for the London Times, just before the Great Crash of October, 1929. Another friend of

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