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Feature Articles

Book Reviews

The Triumph of the Traumatic

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Review: David Rieff, *Desire and Fate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2025). 260 pp. Hardcover, $100.00; Paperback, $24.00; Kindle, $15.00.

Thinkers who are themselves sympathetic to the left have in the past proven helpful in diagnosing what has happened when leftist movements corkscrew into purity spirals—e.g., George Orwell's blasts against Soviet totalitarianism. In our spring issue, and again in the fall edition, *Pietas* will offer a two-part consideration of critiques of wokeness written by such intellectuals. In our Spring issue we consider David Rieff's *Desire and Fate* (2025); in the Fall issue, we will review Musa al Gharbi's *We Were Never Woke* (Princeton, 2024).

We begin with David Rieff's outstanding *Desire and Fate*. Rieff is a public intellectual, policy analyst, and journalist who has, for decades, written about wars and humanitarian crises throughout the world. He has written a challenging work on the use of historical memory, *In Praise of Forgetting*.[1] He is also a memoirist who has written a powerful account of how Susan Sontag (his mother) faced her third and final bout with cancer.[2]

He is the son of Philip Rieff, a thinker the Ciceronian Society has come to venerate and whose theory many of us have explored in a recent volume.[3] Between father and son there are resemblances in form, if not in style. Like Philip Rieff's *Fellow Teachers*, David Rieff's *Desire and Fate* is not organized conventionally into sections or chapters and does not unpack one central thesis from beginning to end. Unlike *Fellow Teachers*, whose expanded argument was delivered in deliberately inaccessible prose and with key arguments hidden in the footnotes, *Desire and Fate*'s short, untitled essays are highly readable.

David Rieff is not sympathetic to what has come to be called "wokeness." He anatomizes it as a toxic brew of "authoritarian subjectivity most radically expressed by the conviction that

[1] David Rieff, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).
[2] Rieff, *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).
[3] *The Philosophy of Philip Rieff: Cultural Conflict, Religion and the Self*, eds. William Batchelder and Michael Harding (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025).

human beings are whatever they feel themselves to be" and a "lumpen Rousseauism" in which "'indigenous ways of seeing' are taken to be at least reason's equal" (11, Kindle). Genealogically, he argues "wokeness" owes a debt to the Communist desire to remake human beings; the Maoist hatred of the past, which must be publicly ratified by every private conscience; European fantasies about "primitive" societies; and what Philip Rieff called "the triumph of the therapeutic" (11).

Despite the book's loose organization as a long series of short essays, two overarching arguments emerge. The first is wokeness's "absolute intolerance of everything—White Supremacy, Patriarchy, heteronormativity, and so on—except for capitalism" (11). Rieff argues that conservatives fundamentally misunderstand what they have come to call "woke capitalism." In large measure, Rieff believes this is not because conservatives don't understand wokeness, but because they don't understand capitalism. Conservatives spent the twentieth century defending capitalism because they imagined an antagonistic binary between the free-market West and the communist East. In fact, Rieff argues, since the nineteenth century, high culture has been cooperating with capitalism to destroy everything traditional in the life of the west. Capitalism's very adaptability, which Schumpeter praised as creative destruction, should have made it as obvious to conservatives as it was to Marx that capitalism was the foe of tradition.[4]

If conservatives are pro-capitalist when they should not be, Rieff argues, the contemporary "woke" left conceives of itself as being anticapitalist when it isn't. While Rieff does not question the sincerity of the anticapitalist rhetoric of the woke left, their focus on identitarianism means woke leftists do not actually understand their relationship to capitalism any better than conservatives do (23). At times, this opens wokeness to very cynical uses by large corporations. Rieff writes that the corporate appropriation of wokeness makes perfect strategic sense: "the risk of not presenting everything as a social justice campaign is that there will be a real social justice campaign, meaning one that might actually threaten the economic status quo in which corporate America has everything its own way in every essential sense"

[4] In 1966, Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, 2nd ed. (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), 54, brushed off any real cultural difference between Communism and Capitalism, writing, "Both American and Soviet cultures are essentially variants of the same belief in wealth as the functional equivalent of a high civilization. In both cultures that controlling symbolism has been stripped down to a belief in the efficacy of wealth. Quantity has become quality. The answer to all questions of 'what for?' is 'more.'"

(32). Indeed, he shrewdly points out that if the proportional representation of all identities in powerful academic, philanthropic and corporate institutions which so obsesses the woke variant of leftism were to be fully realized tomorrow, "it would leave the economic structures of society utterly untouched" (52).

Less obvious to both left and right is how very easy it has been to graft wokeness onto capitalism: "identity politics and contemporary capitalism are an uncommonly close fit" (21). The "proliferating" forms of identity promote a mentality of customization with which market providers are not at all uncomfortable: "infinite variety of new identities means a potentially infinite number of new products" (141). The success of large-scale capitalism at absorbing antinomianism, commoditizing it, and expressing its thrilling sensations through advertising has rendered *Brave New World* outdated:

> Huxley imagined that, in the future, human beings would need to be discouraged from pursuing their own unique desires and interests in order to maintain social order. But in our world, maintaining it requires persuading them to believe that these desires make them unique rather than emblems of the new conformity of the simulacrum. This does not mean that contemporary capitalism is any less dependent on securing consent by conditioning people not only to accept, but to enjoy their fate. It is just that our conditioning rests on a different drug than Huxley's Soma, and it involves the cultivation of instability rather than stability. That instability may not seem pacifying (or enslaving) but that is, in reality, exactly what it is, for it's mistaking one's sense that one has the freedom to determine one's own fate for the reality that one is actually doing so. (141–42)

If the thesis of the book is the complicity of wokeness and capital, the heart of *Desire and Fate* is the author's alarm at the florid subjectivity untethered to any external reality which gives wokeness its emotional and social power. At times, he invokes an "authoritarian subjectivity," in which any individual *is* whatever or whoever he feels himself to be, and under which condition social sanction may be incurred for disagreeing with the subjective assertions of the individual. In the case of the trans movement, Rieff invokes "subjective essentialism," the idea that "by understanding the real nature of one's own feelings about oneself that one will be able to identify whom one is. And the idea that one could be mistaken about any of this is rejected out of hand" (183). Once subjectivity becomes "the new objectivity," public discourse descends into what he calls the "unfalsifiable fevers of the subjective," a horrifying impasse in American public life where what is really real is what is most deeply felt by any

individual subject (126, 177). This subjectivity itself remains comprehensively left-coded: "people have convinced themselves ... that, to sincerely believe something is proof of that belief's truth—assuming, of course, that the belief in question is in sync with the current identitarian wisdom" (38–39). Rieff writes:

> Now that it has become plausible to speak of 'my truth,' even when it is at odds with 'the' truth, there can be no more objective correlatives, only subjective ones. This is the reason why being offended by something is endowed not just with the ennobling aura of victimhood and martyrdom, but entirely determined by the feelings of those who feel themselves offended. The oppressed are always right, as it were..." (39)

Rieff observes another alarming cultural development intertwined with the extravagant subjectivity of the current moment: the confusion of metaphor for reality. Tongue firmly in cheek, Rieff sums up the (insane) argument made by Australian political journalist Frank Grant that contemporary Chinese imperialism is an artifact of whiteness inflicted upon them, in part, by the white project of Japanese imperialism: "Imperialism is a White Supremacist construct and, therefore, to be an imperialist power is to be a white power, even if you are, well, non-white" (56). In Grant's argument, whiteness serves as both a metaphor and a causative agent—*at the same time*. Rieff remarks, "It is this metaphorization of understanding that is the deepest intellectual, and in some ways, the deepest philosophical ill that afflicts us because it leads the culture toward a refusal to acknowledge any difference between the metaphorical and the real" (56).

If such "metaphorization" is silly when applied to foreign policy, it is alarming when paired with STEM disciplines. Rieff describes the efforts of prestigious publications such as the *Lancet* to convert racism to a public health crisis and the concomitant psychologizing of resistance to anti-racism training, where to be a doubter is to reveal oneself, in his delightful phrase, an "anti-vaxxer of the soul" (135). He cites a physician who wrote, in the *New England Journal of Medicine*: "If we white physicians are to heal others and ultimately the health care system, we must first heal ourselves" (83). This is a near-perfect example of metaphorization. A professional charged with the literal healing of patients not only conflates that healing with both health care reform and private moral exhibitionism, she makes a metaphorical/therapeutic use of "heal" rhetorically prior to the literal healing of her patients. Rieff writes, "Healing herself of her racism is not remotely as important as treating one of

her patients for leukemia. And yet, she seems to think the reverse is the case.... It is the difference between heal and 'heal,' but so complete has the triumph of metaphor been in this society that the distinction literally no longer informs adult judgment" (83–84). The disturbing professional implications of this language bring to mind, for this reviewer, Fan Shen's account of his training to be a barefoot doctor in China during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Fan was told, "We would rather have a doctor with a Red Heart and little skill, than a doctor with a White Heart and better medical skills. A Red Heart will take care of everything else. You must be revolutionaries first, doctors second."[5]

Whence came this intense subjectivity and the public upheaval which has followed? Rieff dismisses the explanation often favored by conservatives (and besieged liberals), that this is the culmination of a Marcusian long march through the institutions. In part, Rieff contends, this is because "Americans never cared much for the life of the mind, anyway" (197). In part, it is because Rieff believes that the liberal consensus which governed the Anglosphere is in its death throes, and however violent the paroxysms of wokeness seem, at root we are watching activists pushing on an open door.

Instead, Rieff identifies one of the chief causes as the "the triumph of the therapeutic culture my father identified a half century ago" (160). Like his father, David Rieff sees the triumph of the therapeutic in part as the product of an exhausted culture: "even without Woke, the post-Protestant world would still never have been capable of resisting the therapeutic tide" (174). The subjectivity at the heart of wokeness had already been described by Philip Rieff in the middle of the last century: "each individual is the "actor-manager," as my father put it in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, "of his own infinitely changeable identities" (206).

But David Rieff is no mere epigone of his father in this matter. In light of the events of the last decade, he offers a refinement of his father's concept—arguing that if the *root* of the "authoritarian subjectivity" at the heart of wokeness is the triumph of the therapeutic, its effective socio-political *deployment* lies with what he has called "The Triumph of the Traumatic." It is this focus on trauma which Rieff believes distinguishes the recent awokening from the mere political correctness of the 1990's. Rieff writes, "Therapeutic language has

[5] Fan Shen, *Gang of One: Memoirs of a Red Guard* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 96.

long been the lingua franca of US society (and increasingly that of the entire Anglosphere). And traumatic language is therapeutic language further weaponized and deployed" (177). Because what passes for the political now operates almost entirely at a subjective level, the prevention of subjective "harms" is reified as policy, from classroom trigger warnings to corporate sensitivity training. This is most visible in the "trans" iteration of wokeness: "Once you come to assume that not deferring to your subjective feelings will cause you physical—as well as mental—harm, anything less than full acceptance by society of the idea that what, subjectively, you feel yourself to be should be the beginning and end of the public debate, becomes a public health crisis, and, as it is becoming in law, also a matter of people's civil rights" (193). Trauma becomes, then, the *ultima ratio* of a therapized/medicalized rhetoric of public debate: "This 'grade inflation' of what constitutes trauma is the new normal for the educational, public health, and psychoanalytic and therapeutic bureaucracies" (203).

For readers of *Pietas*, it is interesting to note that David Rieff's downgrading of the animating importance of the intellectual, even philosophic roots of wokeness contrasts rather strongly with his father's approach to such matters. Philip Rieff's project, in his later work, was to confront the replacement of what he called the "second culture" of Judaism and Christianity with the godless "third culture" of modernity. Like David Rieff, he regarded the second culture as having become, in many ways, exhausted. Unlike his son, however, Philip Rieff was an almost obsessive genealogist of the philosophical origins of the third culture—to the point where, tongue firmly in cheek, he assigned it a "birth year" of 1882.[6] I suspect Philip Rieff, were he still with us, would be much more sympathetic than his son with arguments that wokeness has philosophical origins implemented in a "long march through the institutions."

On the other hand, I think the fate of high culture might be more central to David Rieff's frustration with the twin acids of capitalism and wokeness than high culture itself proved to be in Philip Rieff's developed theory of culture. David Rieff blames the creative destruction of capitalism for initiating high culture's decline, and wokeness only for finishing it off: "Schumpeter plus Fanon. Unimaginable. Yet once imagined, obvious; perhaps, even,

[6] The year Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God and Josef Breuer withdrew from treating Anna O, clearing the way for Freud to interpret her case. Philip Rieff, *My Life Among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 129–30.

inevitable" (16). He doubts the woke culture which seeks to replace western culture will produce anything of lasting artistic value, arguing that "the fantasy that culture can be largely a representation of the historically unrepresented, or that testimony is art, is a consoling fiction" (19). Finally, he sees clear evidence that under the ideological spell of wokeness, representation has become far more important than quality in artistic and academic work.

Philip Rieff's depth of knowledge of high culture was astonishing, of course, but in many ways the function of high culture in his theory was illustrative, not central. He repaired to Mozart, Wallace Stevens, James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp and the like to show how the third culture aimed to subvert and replace the second. That said, for Philip Rieff, such high culture, however important, was not culture *in essence*. In its most important sense, culture was "the origin of order in the mental process," a dialectic between the individual and the group in which self-shaping prohibitions, which Philip Rieff called "the interdicts," were sunk into the individual at the pre-conscious level.[7] The social function of the cultured individual was to reinforce that process by translating sacred orders into social orders which could then be consciously obeyed by the group.[8] Philip Rieff believed that the triumph of the therapeutic marked an unprecedented moment in history, where an "officer class" of cultured individuals ceased to make this translation of sacred order into social order, concluding instead that it is "forbidden to forbid." Such an "anticulture" had never before existed, and his theory suggests that such an anticulture must fail at the fundamental level of the formation of the individual consciousness. It is for this reason that Philip Rieff regarded the passing of the second culture of the West as an unprecedented civilizational catastrophe which would very likely end with an apocalyptic bang and millions of deaths.[9]

Because David Rieff does not seem to subscribe to his father's "meta" view of culture, he can be more phlegmatic about the end of the western high culture, in particular. He suggests the next important high culture will probably emerge from Northeast Asia or India, and that the current dying high culture of the West probably needs to be put out of its misery. Indeed, if Philip Rieff prophesied a bang, David Rieff hears more of a whimper:

[7] See Batchelder and Harding, *The Philosophy of Philip Rieff*, 3–4.
[8] Philip Rieff, *My Life Among the Deathworks*, 2.
[9] Philip Rieff, *The Crisis of the Officer Class* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 167.

> It is simply a fact to say that the greatest days of Western culture are behind it. There is nothing unusual in this. Cultures and civilizations are as mortal as human beings. The great Renaissance historian and politician Francesco Guicciardini said that a citizen must not mourn the decline of their city. All cities decline, he writes. If there is anything to mourn it is that it has been one's unhappy fate to be born when one's city is in decline. (18–19).

This difference probably explains the difference of intensity between Philip and David Rieff on the question of the universities. Particularly in *Fellow Teachers*, Philip Rieff decried both the vulgarization of the academy by money and careerism and, especially, its politicization. He wanted the academy to take the place of the church, in our post-Christian age, and serve as a place where a cultural officer class of professors dedicated entirely to the quest for truth sought to make thick texts live in their re-reading by engaged students. This might preserve both culture in his more expansive theoretical sense, and Western high culture.

David Rieff is nearly as troubled as his father by what has happened to the universities. He writes that he was "unforgivably slow" in recognizing that conservative critics of the university such as Alan Bloom and his father were correct about the disaster (165). On the other hand, David Rieff dismisses his father's vision of the university as a temple of the intellect as "impermissibly romantic, both about the autonomy of the life of the mind, and about the sacerdotal role that should be the professoriate's right" (166). To David Rieff, "the liberal university has collapsed because liberalism as the governing consensus of US and Canadian society has collapsed" (167).

If he takes the view that true misfortune lies not in a civilization's decline, a phenomenon natural and inevitable, but only in living in a time in which one must watch one's own civilization decline, what could have motivated David Rieff to write *Desire and Fate*? Clearly, he is motivated in part by disgust that big capital will harness the destructive energies of the recent awokening while emerging not only unscathed, but stronger than ever. It is equally obvious that he is motivated by his concern with what is happening to the life of the mind, both within the university and without. Clearly Rieff feels genuine disgust at the unhinged subjectivity overtaking public life in which, in his memorable phrase, "the heart's moronic tyranny continues apace" (197). But I think the very title of the work, *Desire and Fate,* points us to a more deeply humane motivation, as well.

It was in *Swimming in a Sea of Death,* his 2008 memoir describing his mother's final battle with cancer, that David Rieff first invoked the binary between desire and fate. He did so in the context of his mother's intense desire to live—a desire so intense she inflicted terrible medical suffering on herself in spite of her almost certain fate at the hands of a virulent cancer. In working through this all too human problem, Rieff wrote: "The great British scientist J.D. Bernal writes somewhere that there is 'the history of desire and the history of fate and man's reason has never learned to distinguish between them.'"[10]

The radical subjectivity of wokeness has clearly provoked again Rieff's longstanding concern with this worrying aspect of our shared human nature. He attributes the mental health crisis in younger Americans in part to the fact that "the young have been sold a bill of goods: the fraudulent promise that their desires should be their fates" (205). Indeed, wokeness may be so dominant in America because of "the old American incapacity to distinguish between wish and reality" (197). He concludes the book invoking a tragic understanding of human nature very much in harmony with his father's:

> Andy Warhol's line that we would all be famous for fifteen minutes seems the height of sober caution. He did not see that people wanted more than to be famous, more than to able to communicate directly with their gods; instead, they wanted to be able to define themselves at will, which, when you think about it, is nothing short of a way of conferring godlike powers to oneself. The move is radical: from 'truth' to 'my truth,' and from the vicissitudes of fate to the supremacy of desire. Fate, though, will have the last word; it always has, and it always will. If on nothing else, on that we can depend. (206–207)

A book which takes on a topic as sensitive as wokeness while making anyone reading it—whether from the right or the left—in equal parts intrigued and uncomfortable, has more than succeeded. That having been said, I would offer two criticisms. First, if Rieff is right about how flexible and damnably adaptable capitalism is, shouldn't that make us more interested in discovering why it is that the last three major social upheavals capitalism has had to be damnably adaptable to—the New Left in the sixties and seventies, the outbreak of political correctness in the 1990's, and the Great Awokening of the last eight years—are all left-coded?

Second, while I admire the convincing argument Rieff makes about the surprisingly comfortable relationship between wokeness and capitalism, the historian in me always winces

[10] David Rieff, *Swimming in a Sea of Death*, 78, Kindle. Rieff invokes a similar concern in *In Praise of Forgetting*, 130.

a little when "capitalism" is said to *do* anything. Here and there in *Desire and Fate*, David Rieff does mention the Professional Managerial Class, but this is never at the center of his argument. In many ways, I think it is this particular stratum of capitalism—the too-numerous, status-anxious, box-checking strivers—who have done more to promote wokeness than any other group. To be sure, they participate in capitalism at a high level, but they are equally to be found in all institutions requiring credentialed managers, from government to foundations, and their relationship to wokeness, in my view, is by far the most intimate and the most self-serving. For this reason, in our Fall issue, we will supplement our consideration of David Rieff's work with a review of a study which places the professional managerial class at the center of the Great Awokening: Musa al-Gharbi's *We Have Never Been Woke*.

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