

Henry George Newsletter

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MEDIA BIAS: The Case of Central America

The New York HGS began its Saturday Seminar Program for the 90-91 school year on October 6th with a discussion on Media Bias: The Case of Central America. The speakers were two experts on Latin America coverage: Dennis Perrin, a syndicated reporter and a correspondent for FAIR, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, a New York-based media watchdog group, and Paul Berman, a reporter for the Village Voice and other periodicals who has covered Central America for many years.

Dennis Perrin noted a persistent double standard in mainstream coverage of events in Latin America. When the Los Angeles Times calls Nicaragua's UNO coalition the "new management team", or notes an "outdated national security strategy in El Salvador", Perrin said, they are clearly viewing those countries through the lens of U.S. foreign policy. El Salvador's guerilla movement, the FMLN, has repeatedly been labeled a bloody and undemocratic instigator of violence -- yet according to the human rights group Americas Watch, 95% of the people killed in El Salvador in the past ten years were killed by government forces. Although the Sandinistas harassed the opposition press by denying them supplies, opposition journalists were shot and left in ditches in Guatemala, but that was not deemed worth much notice in the American press.



Paul Berman

Political debate always acts on a spectrum between left and right extremes, but the mainstream media tends to set the "moderate" line where it pleases, Perrin said -- usually right beside administration positions. For example, the left-of-center position on El Salvador is represented as support for cuts in the amount of U.S. military aid. Thus, the illusion of a valid political debate is maintained, even though there is no true opposition of views.

There is also a tendency for countries to drop out of media coverage once U.S. foreign policy goals have been attained there, Perrin said. The drastic poverty in Grenada, for example, has gone virtually unmentioned since the 1983 invasion. In Panama, the U.S., in order to get Noriega into prison, bombed civilian neighborhoods without warning and killed hundreds. But, a president was installed, and the U.S. media promptly lost interest, presumably because a sympathetic regime was now in power. "According to the mainstream media," Perrin said, "a democratic regime is simply one that is supported by the United States."

There is a reverse side to that popular misconception, according to Paul Berman, which further complicates our interpretation of the media. In the case of Nicaragua, he said, there is clearly another species of bias at work. Those who have been critical of Reagan administration policies, he said, have maintained certain assumptions about Nicaraguan politics: that the Sandinista regime is essentially democratic, and that the Chamorro government, whose campaign was financed by the U.S., represents North American imperialism. Given those assumptions, it is easy to see anti-Sandinista bias in the media.

However, although Paul Berman, like many others, had much hope for a "social democratic revolution" in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas began almost immediately to implement a centralized communist social structure. "The fact is," he said, "that denial of food rations, and government-employed thugs were used to harass opposition." Artisans, who were some of the strongest early supporters of the revolution, could no longer freely sell their wares. Shoemakers, for example, who refused to attend Sandinista rallies were denied a month's supply of leather.

In fact, if there was any bias in U.S. coverage of last year's Nicaraguan elections, Berman asserted, it was -- somewhat inadvertently -- pro-Sandinista. This is seen in the fact that the victory of the UNO coalition surprised the U.S. press. Reporters in the field, who were mainly sympathetic to the Sandinistas, assumed that opinion poll results, and large turnouts at Sandinista rallies, meant what they appeared to mean. "But there were persuasive reasons to conceal one's support for the opposition," said Berman. The UNO party finally issued a statement, before the election, saying that it was all right for its supporters to wear hats and shirts with Sandinista slogans -- because people were in need of hats and shirts, regardless of what was printed on them.

Furthermore, Berman contended that the U.S. press missed the point in Nicaragua because of a tendency to focus on government as the great shaper of events. In Nicaragua, he asserted, the small, untelegraphic decisions of the masses were by far the strongest political force.

Paul Berman suggested that honorable tradition of press criticism, began by the great I.F. Stone, has devolved in some cases to a kind of conspiracy theory, in which the U.S. press corps are seen as following government instructions on what to write. There is no plot to deceive the



Dennis Perrin

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SOUTH AFRICA: A SOLUTION

At present 70% of the land area of South Africa is farmed and owned by whites....numerous laws stop blacks and small farmers from entering the market and competing with white farmers - they should all be repealed....

Another way to encourage the transfer of white farms into black hands would be through the introduction of a land tax.

The advocates of a land tax (of whom Henry George is the most famous) hold the view that land belongs to all the people who live on earth. The fact that land is used communally when it is in great supply is evidence of this. Therefore anyone who owns land should pay a tax as a *quid pro quo* for the privilege granted him by society in the form of a title-deed.

To be effective, the tax should be based on the site value of the land - that is, on the land's potential yield. The land-owner should be allowed to value his own property, and the state should have the right to expropriate the land at 25% above its assessed value. This way, if the owner undervalues his land he will lose it, because it will be in the interest of the state to buy the land and either resell it at a profit or redistribute it to black farmers. If he overvalues it, he will pay high taxes. - *Frances Kendall & Leon Louw, Let the People Govern, 1989 Amagi Publications, South Africa.*

MEDIA BIAS

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people, he said; the reality is much more complex than that, and the overwhelming majority of reporters do their work both ethically and competently.

Dennis Perrin retorted that one does not need to believe in conspiracy theory to notice an incentive for reporters to tailor views to fit the editorial policies of prestigious newspapers. He notes a tendency for writers to publish authoritative books on various controversial topics, only to omit critical analysis when excerpts are published in magazines. This practice does not indicate a conspiracy, he said, but rather that the media is a business, and caters to its markets.

Both speakers agreed on what must be done to address the problem. The foreign policy establishment has a vested interest in influencing media coverage to further its strategic aims; if this tendency is not balanced by a critical reading and viewing public, then the attitude that the truth is irrelevant will prevail. "We are media consumers," said Dennis Perrin, "but we must become media activists. When companies sell us faulty or unsafe products, we make plenty of noise - but we should protest just as loudly when the media lies to us."

AGNES DE MILLE LAUNCHES NEW BOOK

On October 2nd, New Yorkers were treated to a reading by Agnes de Mille from her twelfth book, *Portrait Gallery*, published by Houghton Mifflin. About fifty people were closely packed into the second-floor reading room of the Upper East Side store, Books & Co.

Ms. de Mille, as introduced by her editor Peter Davison, "has distinguished herself in at least three careers - as a dancer, a choreographer, and a writer." Clearly there is much to learn from such a life, yet Agnes de Mille did not instruct. Rather, she conversed, with wit and humor; it might have been across a kitchen table.

Subtitled *Artists, Impresarios, Intimates*, the book is divided into sections under those headings, and there is a section on the de Mille family. From the artists, she read an account of her first sight of the passionate dancing of Carmelita Maracci. The passage is remarkable for its depiction of the workmanlike humility of a committed artist:

It is no ordinary experience to discover one evening that an intimate, a known, well-loved, daily companion, has genius that stands outside the standards we set for ourselves. The person speaks with the usual voice, laughs with the ordinary expression, and then, without transition or warning, becomes a figure of magic.

She then describes, in a sort of prose choreography, the woman's performance. "After the dance I walked to her quietly and put my arms around her. 'Carmie, I didn't know.'"

From the impresarios, we were given a wry account of the dandy, misanthropic self-control that characterized the private side of the legendary Mr. Sol Hurok. And among intimates, Agnes de Mille included the New York City of her youth. She tells of the changes that time and technology have wrought. Although she says her memory is mainly visual, the description is loaded with sounds:

Occasionally came the sound of a piano through an open window, and this was a delight, because many people played well in those days, there being no music except now and then a player piano - but that was too vulgar for consideration. There was always something nostalgic and dulcet about personally made tunes, good or bad, heard at a distance and filtered through the sounds of busy street life.

Finally, though it is a book about a life in show business, *Portrait Gallery* does not ignore political economy. The comparison of the old New York with the new becomes a meditation on the themes of poverty and progress: "The poor ye have always with you." Was Jesus Christ, our savior, a profound economist or a hopeless pessimist? Many diseases have been conquered now; food is safer and more various; transportation is safer and communication works better, and women have cast off their status of serfhood; but there are just as many beggars in the streets. In the end, the glamorous *Portrait Gallery* refuses to let us forget these facts.

SINGLE TAX FOUNDATION ANNOUNCED

(or: Getting the Single Tax in One Country)

A new Georgian undertaking was announced at the Santa Fe Conference in July: The Single Tax Foundation. Starting as a one-man operation, the STF is the brainchild of Adam Monroe, Jr., who launched his project before the conferees. The new Foundation's "Plan of Action" is divided into seven phases: Letter/Poster; Information Package; Public Advertisement; Do Your Own Thing; Coordinate Involvement; Form the Single Tax Party; and Get the Single Tax in at Least One Country...Every Other Country Would Adopt It, Too.

Adam Monroe is latest in a long line of Single Taxers and Georgists on both sides of his family: the Tidemans and well as the Monroes. His grandfather, John Lawrence Monroe, was director of the Chicago Henry George School for many years. Among the talents Adam brings to his project are that of songwriter, singer, and guitarist. Two Single Tax Songs which he performed in Santa Fe are "Valhalla" (see the Autumn 1990 *Georgist Journal*) and a rapsong, "P.S.W. (The Party to Save the World)". For more information, and to find out how you join this effort, contact: Adam Monroe, Jr., The Single Tax Foundation, P.O. Box 479163, Chicago, IL 60647 (Phone: 312-772-2326).

