

# MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



## *The Age of Sentiments*

RUSSELL KIRK

OUR CIVILIZED WORLD is passing out of one age and into another epoch. The age that is passing has been called the Age of Discussion. The age that we are entering I call the Age of Sentiments. Most people are aware of this change only vaguely, if at all. As Disraeli put it, "Prevailing opinions generally are the opinions of the generation that is passing."

This profound alteration of the climate of opinion is not merely related to changes in the mass media; it is *caused*, in considerable part, by such changes in the mass media; and particularly by the triumph of television.

The phrase "the Age of Discussion" I take from Walter Bagehot's chapter by that title, in his book *Physics and Politics*—published in 1869, two years after passage of Britain's Reform Bill. The genial and perceptive Bagehot, the best critic of his own time, understood well that during the nineteenth century the old order of things was being effaced—swept away by the nineteenth-century triumph of what Bagehot called Discussion. In effect, the Age of Discussion was the Age of Liberalism, which nowadays is fallen into the sere and yellow leaf. It was not so much democracy that undid the old social and moral order, Bagehot argued, as it was

Discussion. Democracy itself, for that matter, was a product of Discussion, in ancient times and in modern: democracy arose first in towns of Greece and Italy where Discussion prevailed. Near the close of the eighteenth century, Discussion began to work as a tremendous social force, converting modern nations into states close-knit and sensitive to novelty, as Athens and Florence had been.

Discussion it was that broke the cake of custom in Christendom, that engulfed what Burke called prejudice and prescription, that subverted men's ancient aversion to relinquishing the ways of their ancestors. Modern democracy was the fruit, rather than the seed, of this eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Discussion; so was that view of the civil social order called Liberalism. As Bagehot put it, "Since Luther's time there has been a conviction more or less rooted, that a man may by an intellectual process think out a religion for himself, and that, as the highest of all duties, he ought to do so. The influence of the political discussion, and the influence of the religious discussion, have so long and so firmly combined, and have so effectually enforced one another, that the old notions of loyalty, and fealty, and authority, as they existed in the Middle Ages, have now

over the best minds almost no effect."

This is the Private Judgment against which John Henry Newman inveighed in Bagehot's time. Bulwer-Lytton, in that era, had exclaimed, "Democracy is like the grave—it perpetually cries, 'give, give,' and, like the grave, it never returns what it has once taken." Walter Bagehot, referring to Bulwer-Lytton's analogy, remarks that this simile is equally apt for Discussion. "Once effectually submit a subject to that ordeal," in Bagehot's words, "and you can never withdraw it again; you can never again clothe it with mystery, or fence it by consecration; it remains forever open to free choice, and exposed to profane deliberation."

Just so. Now private judgment and free discussion, the indispensable postulates and chief supports of nineteenth-century democracy and liberalism (not that those two are identical), were made possible in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by a cheap press, speedy communication, popular access to firearms, and urban concentrations of population; thus the chief European nation, and America too, obtained the advantages of the ancient city-states, but also were exposed to the dangers of public opinion as it had been known in ancient Greece and Italy.

Discussion and private judgment, rather than the physical suffering that Karl Marx predicted, have goaded modern people to experiment and alteration during the past two centuries. Marxism has won its zealots not so much because of positive suffering—after all, suffering has been the lot of the majority of mankind ever since Adam and Eve; but because Marxism has been a new mode for protest and private judgment. Is the voracity of Discussion indeed insatiable as the appetite of the grave? If so, then are permanence and continuity impossible for modern society?

In our latter days of the Age of Discussion, most of the world has fallen to crushing tyranny, with almost no discussion permitted, as in Russia or China; or into anarchy and endless civil war, in which all discussion seems fruitless, as in Uganda or Cambodia. Discussion appears

to have swung full cycle: commencing in one authoritarian domination, and ending in an authoritarian domination far more merciless. It has not come to that in these United States—not yet; but though we may be spared tyranny and anarchy, it does not follow that somehow we can prolong greatly in America that Age of Discussion which has vanished, or is now vanishing, from the rest of the world.

## II

LATER I SHALL RETURN to some analysis of the symptoms of dissolution of the Age of Discussion. Permit me to explain, just now, what I mean by my other phrase "the Age of Sentiments."

Words are tools that break in the hand; and this word "sentiments" is employed loosely in a variety of ways. I use it in the signification attached to it by those friends David Hume and Adam Smith, about the commencement of the Age of Discussion. That is, the word "sentiment" implies "higher feeling" or "emotion"; psychologically, an emotional judgment. Think of Pascal's famous phrase, "The heart has reasons which the reason cannot know": there's the gist of it.

In the definition of the old *Century Dictionary*, "*Sentiment* has a peculiar place between *thought* and *feeling*, in which it also approaches the meaning of *principle*. It is more than that *feeling* which is sensation or emotion, by containing more of *thought* and by being more lofty; while it contains too much *feeling* to be merely thought, and it has large influence over the will: for example, the *sentiment* of patriotism; the *sentiment* of honor; the world is ruled by *sentiment*. The *thought* in a *sentiment* is often that of duty, and is penetrated and exalted by *feeling*."

For David Hume and Adam Smith, sentiments exerted greater power, and indeed were better guides, than reason—though Hume remarks in his *Principles of Morals* that sentiment and reason usually coincide. I suppose we may say that for Hume and Smith a sound sentiment is a moving conviction; but a conviction derived from

some other source than pure reason. You will note that I employ *sentiment* not as a term of derision, but as a term of description.

I have digressed at this length in order to define my terms—being of a philosophical habit of mind—so that we may try to understand the large transition of society, conducted by mass media, which we are experiencing in this present decade. When I say that we are passing from the Age of Discussion to the Age of Sentiments, I am not preaching a comminatory sermon: I am doing no more than describing a process, probably ineluctable. A good deal has been written on this subject, but not precisely in the fashion I am about to present to you. Just now I offer you two vignettes that may clarify my meaning.

Three decades ago I first saw the ancient city of Verona, where Catullus was born. Having settled at my hotel, I made my way afoot to the Piazza delle Erbe, which in Catullus' time was the Roman forum, and is still the busiest place in Verona. It was Saturday evening. For some two thousand, five hundred years, I reflected, the people of Verona have gathered in this square, talking endlessly at its cafes while the centuries crept past: one of the world's veritable centers of Discussion. In the Piazza delle Erbe I would be part of the great continuity of talk.

But I was astonished to find the Piazza delle Erbe utterly dark, that Saturday night. I had read somewhere that Verona was rather a melancholy place—so Chateaubriand described the city at the time of the Congress of Verona, I believe—but this total silence and emptiness of the great square was overwhelming. Many cafes lined the piazza; the doors of all were shut: and no Romeo, no Juliet, nor any other native of Verona was to be seen. Could any place in Italy have sunk into such apathy on a Saturday evening?

I walked slowly round the Piazza. As I proceeded, I found that a little light escaped from behind the shutters of the cafes. I peered in: every cafe was crowded with people sitting at little round tables and sipping drinks; but nobody was utter-

ing a word. One and all, they were watching television sets—which miracle, I learned next day, had come to Verona not long before. A week of television had put an end to twenty-five centuries of civilized conversation in Verona.

Demon TV's empire is universal. Some years after my experience in the Piazza delle Erbe, I was exploring the Orkneys, in company with a friend. Not long after docking at Kirkwall, we took dinner in the best hotel of that quaint city, in the midst of which stands the Norman cathedral built in this remote northern fastness about the year 1137. When we had finished our dinner, the headwaiter told us, "Gentlemen, I know ye're not staying in the hotel; but if ye wish, ye'll be welcome to watch television in the writing-room."

Tony and I were no enthusiasts for television; but somewhat puzzled at this civil gesture, we entered the writing-room. Formerly there must have been a score of desks here, and corresponding chairs, intended for the diligent use of commercial travellers—a dying breed. But that old furniture had been thrust out, perhaps into the wild seas; and the desks were supplanted by uncomfortable little metal folding chairs, crowded close together. Every chair in that long darkened room was occupied by an Orkneyman—staring, one and all, at a television set. Television had arrived in Orkney only that week. Of the long, long winter nights at Kirkwall, since the cathedral was consecrated to the murdered Saint Magnus, men had foregathered by Kirkwall firesides for telling of tales and much argumentation—so developing the Scottish intellect. For all those centuries, Kirkwall had talked; hereafter, Kirkwall would view. The Age of Discussion had given way to the Age of Sentiments, even in the Orkneys.

Sentiments are feelings; hereafter the folk of Verona and the folk of Kirkwall will feel more, perhaps; certainly many of them will think less. I confess to being by education, at least, more a man of thought than of feeling. I may be regarded as a survivor—perhaps a captain in the rear guard—of the Age of Discussion. Like the

Celts of the twilight, we survivors from the Age of Discussion go forth to battle often, but to victory never. The rising generation say unto us, "We *feel* that human rights are being violated in Clouduckooland"—not knowing, not thinking, but *feeling*. Policy becomes the art of applying intuitions. Soon the rising generation will murmur, very possibly, "We *feel* that two and two make four"—not knowing it, not thinking it, but *feeling* that mathematical truth. It may be said that this is harmless. Aye; but what if they come to feel that two and two do *not* make four? Are all sentiments infallible?

We veterans of Discussion's rear guard are beaten down, horse, foot, and dragoons. Serious periodicals, weekly, fortnightly, monthly, and quarterly, were the meat and the drink of the Age of Discussion, beginning (in Britain) with *The Edinburgh Review* and *The Quarterly Review*. I began writing for such serious periodicals—*The South Atlantic Quarterly* and *The English Journal*, first of all—when I was a sophomore in college; I have grown gray in their service. On either side of the Atlantic, those magazines have fallen dead even as I have served them. *Requiescat in pace, Dublin Review, Fortnightly Review, World Review, Pacific Spectator, Church Quarterly Review, Measure, New English Review*, and many more that printed my lucubrations; some of you were very old when you were slain, and some quite young; but young or old, there was no room for you in the dawning age that prefers effusions to lucubrations.

Into the Age of Sentiments there will survive some serious periodicals, and some decent books, and here and there obscure corners where a few people earnestly discuss some matters that cannot well be swept into oblivion. Yet this remnant of genuine thinkers and readers and talkers may be very small. The immense majority of human beings will *feel* with the projected images they behold upon the television screen; and in those viewers that screen will rouse *sentiments* rather than reflections. Waves of emotion will sweep back and forth, so long as the Age of Sentiments en-

dures. And whether those emotions are low or high must depend upon the folk who determine the tone and temper of television programming. The most popular program at present being "Dallas," with its offshoots, the prospect for dreaming the high dream does not seem bright. The very same low dream can be dreamed by practically everybody in New York and Los Angeles, Verona and Kirkwall.

Such are my general sentiments about television as evocative of sentiments. In my own household, I pursue a policy of war to the knife—or rather, war to the wire-cutters—against the television set. When some people learn that no television is tolerated in our tall Italianate house, they inquire, wondering, "But what do you do about your daughters?" And we reply, "We give them tools." "What kind of tools?" "Why, tools called books."

Occasionally TV has reared its hideous head at Piety Hill. Clinton Wallace, our hobo butler, was permitted to keep a well-worn portable TV in his bedroom. This I thrust into the cellar the day we buried Clinton.

Some months thereafter, on returning home late at night, I saw lights burning in every room of our house, but encountered no living soul. It was very like the mystery of the derelict *Marie Celeste*. At length I penetrated to a remote quarter of the cellars, and there I found my spouse and all our household huddled round the forbidden TV, watching the late news—or, more particularly, viewing a rather ordinary snowstorm in Manhattan. I dispersed them in wrath. Then, taking a pair of powerful wire-cutters, I did fierce things to the set, and flung portions of it into trash cans.

In the fullness of time, nevertheless, one of the Ethiopians who dwelt with us, young Sahle Selassie Makonnen, secretly repaired the mutilated contraption, installing it in his room—which did not improve his collegiate studies. When I was about to confiscate this shabby article of contraband, it vanished again. Presently a secret agent of the gentler sex informed me that our eldest daughter, Monica, had contrived to

transport the set somehow to the topmost room of the foretower of our archaic house, and there sometimes turned it on.

Monica being out of the house when I learned this, I climbed the ladder to the summit of the foretower, with some difficulty forced open a small octagonal window, and flung the accursed set to its destruction. To my chagrin, the confounded thing caught in a gutter, and there hung like Mahomet's coffin, invisible from most points of view.

Yet wondrous to relate, our housekeeper, Mrs. Cole, descried the suspended television; and the strong-willed Annette, my wife, sent my stalwart assistant scrambling over the roofs to retrieve it. At my stern command, my assistant immured the set in the crawl-space under the front portion of his cottage; and there it may rest until the Last Trump. Monica thinks her parents odd, particularly in their attitude toward television. Once she inquired why I couldn't be like other dads, who "get a six-pack and sit down to watch the game on TV."

Perhaps our daughters will grow up amenable occasionally to Discussion; not wholly subservient to Sentiments. If so, they will be members of a band about so numerous as that which fled from the Cities of the Plain. Yet in the fullness of time they may inherit the earth: for intelligence and imagination will tell in the long run—even in a television studio, even in a university.

### III

I SUPPOSE I HAVE made it clear that I am dragged kicking and screaming into the Age of Sentiments. It is painful enough to be governed by other people's reasoning, without being governed by their sentiments. Yet it should not be thought that I bow down in worship before the late Age of Discussion. For the most part, the Age of Discussion was an age of shams and posturings. I promised to say something about the dissolution of the Age of Discussion; to that I turn now.

That vaunted Age of Discussion has

fallen apart because it never had much vitality in it. For most men and women are little interested in abstractions, and so grow bored speedily with discussions; their talk is of bullocks, or of Toyotas. There have existed, true enough, some periods in some regions when Discussion was fairly general, even to a fault—Scotland late in the eighteenth century (well, Edinburgh, anyway), or the seventeenth-century Massachusetts of my ancestors (among the godly there, at least). But these have been oases in a wasteland of complacency or of violence; and even in Scotland and New England during such periods, the serious talkers may not have been the more pleasant for the insistence that "Life is real; Life is earnest! And the grave is not its goal." It cannot be certified that their relish for Discussion made them into better people; or that it brought to pass a world of fuller freedom and justice and order.

Surely the Arch-Discussant (to borrow a barbarism from the jargon of American learned societies) was John Stuart Mill. Poor Mill, whose name once stood so high but who is so little heeded nowadays, was a man almost totally deprived of sentiments. "By slaying all his animal spirits," Ruth Borchard writes of Mill, "he was utterly cut off from his instincts—instincts for life, instinctive understanding of nature, of human nature in general and of his own in particular."

Being thus cut off from Sentiments, Mill was left with Discussion; and he made of Discussion an idol, and worshipped it, in defiance of the Decalogue. In all sobriety, Mill declared that compulsion in society could be justified only until "the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion." After that happy consummation, no force: merely sweet talkative reason. Mill fancied that force was obsolete in his years, or at least nearly so, Discussion being about to triumph nearly everywhere. How absurd that sounds in the Year of Our Lord 1983! The reply to Mill by James Fitzjames Stephen, published in 1873, now seems overwhelmingly conclusive.

In every principal premise of his argu-

ment about Discussion, Stephen declared, Mill suffered from an inadequate understanding of human nature and history. All the great movements of mankind, Stephen pointed out, have been achieved by force, not by free discussion; and if we leave force out of our calculations, soon we will be subject to the intolerant wills of men who have no scruples about employing force against us. It is consummate folly to tolerate every variety of opinion, on every topic, out of devotion to an abstract "liberty"; for opinion soon finds its expression in action, and the fanatics whom we tolerated will not tolerate us when they have power.

The fierce current of events, during nearly the whole of the twentieth century, has supplied the proof for Stephen's case. Was the world improved by free discussion of the Nazis' thesis that Jews ought to be treated as less than human? Just this subject was presented to the population of one of the more advanced and schooled nations of the modern world; and then that nation, or at least the crew of adventurers who had contrived to win the discussion, acted after the fashion with which we now are dreadfully familiar in many lands.

Mill himself succumbed in argument to that odious bluestocking Harriet Taylor Mill, who made a socialist of sorts out of her husband. Physician, heal thyself! The mid-Victorian illusion that English habits of discussion at that particular moment in the course of human events might somehow become universal and permanent—why, one can understand and forgive the self-deception; but it is difficult to understand and forgive the survival of such naiveté in some quarters so late as the closing decades of the twentieth century.

In fine, there never was an age in which the majority of men and women participated actively in a public process of discussion—though occasionally the majority may have entertained the illusion that they so participated. Actually, in all ages public opinion is formed by those unknowable individuals whom Dicey calls the real molders of public opinion—those strong-willed persons, each with his little circle of friends and acquaintances round him,

whose opinions prevail over the minds of his associates. At the very height of Bagehot's Age of Discussion, relatively few persons formed their own considered judgments. Rather, they were presented with wise or foolish opinions on many subjects, by clergymen, newspaper editors, eminent politicians (in a time when public addresses counted for far more than they do today); and they conformed to those quasi-authoritative opinions, especially if those particular opinions seemed to coincide with the private interest of the conforming. "Discussion," in fine, always has amounted to discussions among a relatively few people; the rest conform to the doctrines of one faction or another.

In the twentieth century, first the cinema and then the radio began to compete with the old agencies for forming public opinion; and their appeal was to the Sentiments, not to Discussion. I can recall listening with a certain juvenile horror, during the early thirties, to the strident voices of such radio commentators as Gabriel Heatter and Boake Carter, frantically defaming and misrepresenting everything and everybody; and I marvelled that the Republic could survive such lunatic or malign shapers of public opinion, until it occurred to my youthful reflective faculty that these radio zealots tended to cancel out one another, setting error against error; besides, the public soon learns not to act upon the admonitions of a person who daily cries "wolf, wolf!"

In departing from the Age of Discussion, then—and the flight from Discussion grew rapid, once radio triumphed in every home—we have left behind much pretense and many Hollow Men. Also, it is sadly true, we have lost some promise and wisdom by our departure into Sentiments. One of the last noble endeavors to redeem the Age of Discussion was that of my old friend T. S. Eliot, in his quarterly magazine *The Criterion*. Aspiring to help to save the world from suicide, Eliot got up, at great expenditure of his own time and energy, this excellent review; and to it there contributed the more important serious men of letters and scholars of the

Twenties and Thirties. The bound volumes of this magazine remain available in the better institutional libraries; and if you will take the trouble to browse through those volumes, you will find that the contents have lost little of their interest and pertinence with the passage of the decades. It was Eliot's fond hope that his journal would be read by public men of importance, whose policies might be affected thereby. But the circulation of *The Criterion* never exceeded a few hundred copies, despite the lip-service given to the magazine in many quarters; and I never have discovered evidence that "the Criterion Crowd" succeeded in influencing a single eminent politician— even though the journal was international in character and circulation. For Eliot made this gallant assault on public apathy at the tag-end of the Age of Discussion. Like Pompeius Magnus, T. S. Eliot stamped his foot—but no legions rose at his summons. Nobody worth mentioning, among public men and the masters of the mass media, remained much interested in Discussion, by the Twenties. The Age of Sentiments already had won the field. In that Age of Sentiments, nevertheless, T. S. Eliot's name remains grand: for Eliot himself understood the Sentiments; and it is the Sentiments, including religious sentiments, that his poetry evokes.

Turn we at last, then, to some defense of the Age of Sentiments. For as Eliot put it, there are no lost causes because there are no gained causes; and perhaps we may do something in the cause of order, private and public, through the instruments of the Sentiments.

#### IV

JUST HOW DESPICABLE the general character of television programming is today, everybody already knows; I shall not labor the point. The sentiments imparted by the typical television station are sentiments of avarice, gluttony, sloth, anger, lust, pride, and envy. Most of the cable networks are worse than the commercial stations. The sentiments imparted by the

educational or "public" television stations are more commendable; but often the introduction of sentiments by such media is dull and erroneous.

Is it conceivable that the medium of television might yet be employed to wake the sentiments associated with the Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, righteousness, fear of the Lord? Does such an endeavor sound perfectly absurd, given the present abhorrent state of television programming and the appetites, natural and unnatural, of the average sensual man in these closing decades of the twentieth century?

Well, lighting myself a candle amidst the darkness, I am making my own feeble endeavor to evoke sound sentiments through television. It appears that my book *The Roots of American Order* will be compressed into a ninety-minute television program. That book is concerned with what Eliot called "the permanent things." Its sweep extends from the Hebrew prophets to our present discontents. Its character on television should be strikingly unlike the tenor and temper of such television productions as "Cosmos," say. Even a ninety-minute production, filmed in Palestine, Greece, Italy, Britain, and America, requires very large expenditures. At the devil's booth all things are sold; and even the gifts of the Holy Ghost nowadays must be bought with a price.

Can such a raid make dead bones speak to the rising generation? Can emotions be evoked that may help to restore order in the soul and order in the commonwealth? Now and again I think of Eliot's lines in "East Coker," referring to his own aspiration as a poet:

And so each venture  
 Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate  
 With shabby equipment always deteriorating  
 In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,  
 Undisciplined squads of emotion. . . .  
 There is only the fight to recover what

has been lost  
And found and lost again and again:  
and now under conditions  
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps  
neither gain nor loss.  
For us, there is only the trying. The rest  
is not our business.

In our Age of Sentiments, how do we try to restore some order amidst "the general mess of imprecision of feeling"? It will not do to use the deteriorated equipment of the Age of Discussion. I mean that the didacticism of the classroom lecturer is altogether unsuited for television. Every program must work upon the emotions, rather than upon the rational private judgment: the method must be that of drama, with the ethical end of Greek drama. The creator of the drama should appear little, if at all: to intrude the image and the personality of the television dramatist is as inappropriate and distracting as it would have been if William Shakespeare had frequently bustled upon the stage to offer a running commentary upon *Hamlet's* significance. What television does is to create *impressions*, not to engage in discussions; and to rouse *sentiments*, not to impart encyclopedic information.

In any age, unless we are to be vanquished utterly, we must take up the tools—the weapons, if you will—effective in that age. In the Age of Sentiments, television has become the great mover and shaker. I re-

mind you that there persist in human nature both bad sentiments and good sentiments. Repairing once more to *The Century Dictionary*, we need to bear in mind that sentiment is more lofty than mere feeling and that there exist such sentiments as patriotism, honor, and duty. Sentiments of that order may yet be raised up in the Wasteland—and through the innovating instrument called television.

An age moved by high sentiments can be more admirable than an age mired in desiccated discussions. Those who fancy that the philosophical and political notions of John Stuart Mill can suffice to govern the pride, the passion, and the prejudice of man, bewilderedly wander in a ghost-realm of yesteryear, and must perish. Is it a fantastic aspiration to endeavor to employ television as a means for our regeneration? If so, we must resign ourselves to a world dominated by the sentiments that "Dallas" rouses. Though in part a product of the Age of Discussion, I do not so resign myself—not yet. To the challenge of television, a courageous response remains possible. I am heartened from time to time by recollecting these lines from a poet of strong sentiments—Roy Campbell, in his poem "To the Survivors":

For none save those are worthy birth  
Who neither life nor death will shun:  
And we plow deepest in the Earth  
Who ride the nearest to the Sun.