The Intelligent Liberalism of Rebecca West

by Peter Baehr (February 2021)

"Rebecca *who*?" you ask.

In 1930, 1940, 1950 and 1960, the question would have been unnecessary. Rebecca West was famous in America and across the anglophone world. She was cultivated by editors,

praised by presidents, and lionized by movie directors. Her books and, even more, her essays—for the *New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly*—were devoured by American readers. In 2020, by contrast, the question of who Rebecca was must be answered and for a reason familiar to all historians of thought.

It is natural to imagine that great writers of the past survive on their merits alone; that their ideas flourish decade after decade because profound thoughts will always find eager readers. The truth is quite different. Scores of once brilliant minds languish in obscurity, waiting, usually in vain, to be rediscovered. To endure, dead writers must constantly reenter the cultural conversation and they cannot do that themselves; others must illumine their ideas, show their pertinence to a new generation of readers. It follows that commentary is the mediator, perhaps the very condition, of a writer's survival. So is commemoration. In the archive of Harold Ross—the co-founder and editor of the *New Yorker* magazine, for which West wrote some of her greatest articles—you'll find an intriguing letter. It states that, in 1950, Wellesley College contemplated awarding Rebecca West an honorary degree. You never did. This evening, I'll pay tribute to her in your place.

I'll tell you, first, what was important to Rebecca West's sense of integrity. Second, I'll say something about her political style of writing. Then, third, I'll describe her liberalism and show how it connects with her feminism. Finally, I'll give a case study of West's liberalism in action, namely, her analysis of judicial investigations into the treasonous conduct of American officials, closet Communists, during the 1930s. West described these investigations as "dervish trials," namely, proceedings in which intense and divisive social emotions invade the judicial space. They roil it still, as we saw in the four days of dervish frenzy that attended the Senate Judiciary Committee

public hearings (in September 2018) on Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court.

Rebecca West: An Early Portrait

From the age of fourteen, when she penned a letter to *The Scotsman* newspaper advocating women's suffrage, to her early eighties, Rebecca West (1892-1983) was a cultural force to be reckoned with. Born in London, the daughter of a Scotswoman and an Anglo-Irish father, West first got widely noticed before the Great War as a feminist writer and militant, contributing to such outlets as *Freewoman* and *The Clarion*. While West's feminism was hard wired, it was anything but monolithic. Versatility was in her nature, complexity her milieu. Liberal, socialist, conservative, and anarchist ideas melded with feminist ones in a literary legacy of astonishing range. It includes several critically acclaimed novels and novellas, two books on treason, volumes of literary criticism and biography, travelogues of journeys to Yugoslavia and Mexico, and a mountain of political commentary.

When Rebecca was 27 years old, an unsigned literary portrait of her appeared in the English periodical *Time and Tide*. The journal is of some interest. First published in 1920, and founded, and largely bankrolled, by suffragist Lady Margaret Rhondda (Margaret Haig Thomas), *Time and Tide* was a British progressive, London-based, non-party weekly review run originally by a board of seven women. West was a frequent contributor to its pages from the nineteen twenties to the early 'fifties.

In the aforementioned portrait, we learn of a young woman who is a poor public speaker but who writes with unusual intensity. She is candid not out of arrogance or even courage, but simply because frankness is as essential to her nature as soaring is to an eagle. Rebecca West, we are informed, is a person who will not trim her ideas to fashion and opinion. And it is this "crude, primitive form of energy" that "refreshes"

Rebecca West's readers.

The *Time and Tide* sketch remarks on something else about West: her uncompromising commitment to personal and public truthfulness. In her first novel, *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), we see West's contention that those who are unwilling to be truthful about reality, and unwilling to face the truth about themselves, are condemned to a life of immaturity. The novel's narrator, Jenny, puts it this way:

> *Now, why did Kitty, who was the falsest thing on earth, who was in tune with every kind of falsity, by merely suffering somehow remind us of reality? Why did her tears reveal to me what I had learned long ago, but had forgotten in my frenzied love, that there is a draught that we must drink or not be fully human? I knew that one must know the truth. I knew quite well that when one is adult one must raise to one's lips the wine of the truth, heedless that it is not sweet like milk but draws the mouth with its strength, and celebrate communion with reality.*

The world is a hard place. Get used to it. Grow a thicker skin. Be truthful to others. Be honest with yourself. It is this attitude that suffuses Rebecca West's character and work, that is essential to her liberalism, and which the *Time and Tide* writer so astutely caught.

Rebecca West's Style

Like many British intellectuals of her day—Virginia Woolf and George Orwell among them—Rebecca West was not university educated. Might that have been a godsend for her intellectual development? Some contemporaries thought so. The *Time and Tide* writer I have already quoted considered it "a particular blessing that [West] escaped a University career, for academic training would almost certainly have turned her into a pedant." And reviewing for *The Spectator* West's most enigmatic book, *The Court and the Castle* (1957), published by Yale

University Press, the literary critic Frank Kermode described it as being as "remote from the cultivated posturing of weekly essayists as from the blinkered investigation of more academic criticism."

Neither posturing essayist nor blinkered academic, Rebecca West was an intellectual phenomenon. Novelist, biographer, literary and theatre critic, travel writer, journalist, and political commentator: all jostle for space within her voluminous *oeuvre*. A tireless autodidact, she learned law to study treason. An inquisitive ethnographer, she trekked across the Balkans, between 1936 and 1938, to record the fate of small nations. Most of all, West was an avid student of the human imagination. That is evident even in her name. Born as Cicily Isabel Fairfield, she became "Rebecca West" in 1912, an allusion to a protagonist in Henrik Ibsen's play *Rosmersholm*. Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristotle, Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, Hobbes, Philip Sidney, Ben Johnson, Dryden, Lessing, Burke, Kant, and Rousseau: all find a place in West's writings. No less a philosopher than Gabriel Marcel admired her acumen. Even so, when West wishes to advance our understanding of a political principle or a moral idea it is not as a philosopher weighing, say, "utilitarian" against "deontological" theories of right conduct. This is an arcane language, and it is not hers. Never a professional theorist, West was instead a political writer intent on reaching the largest possible audience of intelligent readers. The hyper specialized ethos, and ideologically addled atmosphere, of the modern university is foreign to her spirit.

In what register did Rebecca West write about politics? I have already suggested that theoretical systems were not her bag. Instead, West gravitated to actual political events, political controversies, and political battles – in which she sometimes engaged in person. Simultaneously, she cautioned against two stumbling blocks to political thinking: the defect of "idiocy" – from a Greek root signifying the

private person and fixation on the minutiae of the household – and, she punned, the failing of "lunacy," a preoccupation with public affairs that looks at the world as if by moonlight, noting its contours but missing its details. In contrast, West's way is to focus on an episode, an incident, a personality, a scandal, a book, a play, a speech, and elicit their implications for citizenship, authority, and freedom. It was a weakness of Kafka, she thought, "to have lacked the power to perceive and appreciate character;" his "benevolence was impersonal; it flowed out to people in whose idiosyncrasies he was not interested." (She made a similar point about Albert Camus.) West's impulse was different. Find the idiosyncrasy; reveal the person. Equally, she declared, political life attains a heightened reality through its *dramatis personae*. The Third Republic without Dreyfus is as hard to imagine in retrospect as the Bolsheviks without Lenin.

I have been emphasizing Rebecca West's preference for the particular over the abstract, and her focus on human character. Her speciality was misfits: "the biographer of the damned" philosopher Sidney Hook aptly called her. Reviewing the *Meaning of Treason* (1947) for the *New York Times*, Hook added that "no matter how evil or vile an individual may appear to be, despite our revulsion she makes us see him through her wise and compassionate eyes as still a credible, sometimes a pitiable, fellow-human." It takes "rare courage and independence of judgment" to be such a writer for it is always easier and more conventional to resort to political cartoons of those who have done wrong. In contrast "Miss West gives us a complex, nuanced and highly knowledgeable account of a dreadful phenomenon" –in this case, Britons who collaborated with Nazi Germany– "that inspire, in many minds, an aversion so deep as to prevent understanding."

Rebecca West's empathy owes much to her métier as a novelist. After all, the novelist's job is not to scold, to scream, to simplify. It is to depict, imaginatively, the

“random nature of human life, and the queer ways human beings counter it and impose a kind of order” on it (“The Novelist’s Voice,” 1976.) An ideological novel is a contradiction in terms, for the world of the novel is open, not closed, fluid, not formulaic. In this world, contingency and conditioning co-exist. As the literary scholar Gary Saul Morson observes, in *Prosaics and Other Provocations* (2013), the novelist approaches the individual in an entirely different manner from, say, the Kantian philosopher. Philosophers in that tradition, and many others, reduce morality to a set of universal rules; empathy is irrelevant. By contrast, the novelist aims to understand a person from within by grasping, and by reconstructing, that person’s choices; and a choice, by definition, is never inevitable. People surprise us all the time. “In novels, any reliance on abstract rules is seen as best naïve and at worst cruel. Decency is a better guide than rationality,” adds Morson. Note that empathy is entirely compatible with judgment. People sometimes choose badly; they surprise us in the wrong sort of way.

It follows that empathy, once incorporated into political analysis, is not the same as sentimentality. Narrating the lives of two British traitors, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, Rebecca West does not confuse the activity of understanding them with judgment about them. Whatever background formed Burgess and Maclean, whatever made sense to them, whatever choices they made, it bears recalling that a traitor is “also a thief and a liar.”

West’s Liberalism

Read any biography of Rebecca West, or the fine Wikipedia entry on her, and you’ll see that she is quickly identified as a feminist writer. I did the same above when I said that her feminism was hard wired. Yet caution is necessary. Rebecca West is a feminist in the same sense that a chameleon is a lizard. Her feminism consists of several pigments. Among them, liberalism shines brightest.

I'll sketch four dimensions of her liberalism: the commitment to free expression, the political obligation to be intelligent, the inducement to maturity, and the opposition to cruelty. Following that, I'll give an example of her political liberalism in action.

1. Free Expression

In a credo published in 1953, Rebecca West stated: "I believe in liberty," particularly the liberty of a person to "be able to say and do what he wishes and what is within his power." Free expression is important, she says, not just because of what it enables us to achieve as individuals. Free expression is important because of what it enables us to *understand* about others, about their lives, about the world we share with them. Because every person is unique and their circumstances differ, so they "must know some things which are known to nobody else." They are thus "able to tell us something that could not be learned from any other source." Rebecca would have agreed with William James—in his essay "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" (1899) —that "neither the whole truth, nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands. Even prisons and sick-rooms have their special revelations."

Uniqueness, then, is not just a species quality of human beings, never to be reduced to a group identity; it is also a vessel of knowledge. And transmission of knowledge—communication—requires a space in which people can speak their minds. A liberal is a person who defends that space. Such a space is bound to be contested in a pluralist, that is to say, liberal, society. Some minds clash with others. The good things of life are torn by tensions and incompatibilities. Far from being harmonious, our existence entails a complex "balancing of competitive freedom," of endless "very delicate calculations." The competition in this instance to which Rebecca West refers is not between human

beings but between human responsibilities, notably between private loyalties and public duties, between love and citizenship, between friendship and the rule of law. Each has its place and its boundary.

Yet competitive freedom also pits individuals against one another. Reason can only go so far and it cannot bridge our deepest divisions in "the battlefield that is this life." A person who sees abortion as the murder of an innocent is not to be persuaded by a person who says that a woman has total rights over her body, and vice versa. Atheists will not convince evangelicals about the non-existence of God, and evangelicals are unlikely to convert atheists. If diversity means anything beyond a slogan, it means recognizing these stubborn differences of priority and value. A liberal society is one that enables its members, bereft of unanimity, to cooperate and submit to a common constitutional regime.

2. The Political Obligation to be Intelligent

West's affirmation of expressive liberty is accompanied by a view of how that liberty is best exercised in the political realm. This is the second element of her liberalism.

Lionel Trilling, recalling Columbia College in the 1920s, invoked his teacher John Erskine's belief in the "moral obligation to be intelligent." That obligation, Rebecca West believed, was also political and it was the first duty of the liberal writer. Political intelligence avoids nostalgia and historical disinterest, memory holes that even writers of genius trip into. So it was with Henry James who "had a tremendous sense of the thing that is and none at all of the thing that has been, and thus he was always being misled by such lovely shells of the past as Hampton Court into the belief that the past which inhabited them was as lovely." On the contrary, says West, the wine of institutions enjoyed innocently today was originally "trodden out from bruised

grapes by the pitiless feet of men."

Political intelligence, moreover, puts the highest premium not just on detailed knowledge – essential if we are to make informed and discriminating judgements – but on intellectual honesty. "It is never possible," West wrote in a 1951 review article for the *University of Chicago Law Review*, "to serve the interests of liberalism by believing that which is false to be true." Now, political honesty is not the possession of truth; it is a disposition towards truthfulness, an openness to reality in which relevant facts are weighed, and in which arguments and counterarguments that bear on the issue at hand are considered. Predilection and prejudice are inevitable. They apply to us all. But to be complacent of truthfulness is to select facts favorable only to one case or cause – one's own; is to avoid engaging contrary arguments or to caricature such arguments so that no sensible person could take them seriously; is to depict contrary arguments as those held by, and given currency by, people who are insincere, ill-intentioned or deluded; is to let ideological formulae do one's thinking. In political matters, truthfulness is more often ambivalent than dogmatic in its diagnosis, more often disconsolate than jubilant in its mood. And, notoriously, a commitment to truthfulness often collides with solidarity for a group to which we express allegiance or which we believe deserves our compassion.

3. For Maturity

West's emphasis on the "hard task of being adult," as she puts it in *Ending in Earnest* (1931), is the third element of her liberalism and one of her more striking psychological contributions to thinking about politics. We do not expect children to be active in politics; we protect them from it. Nor do we consider adults who act like children to be reflective and responsible human agents. Maturity is the *sine qua non* of liberal citizenship because a flourishing pluralist society, unlike an authoritarian one, requires people of

independent mind and spirit who can make distinctions between civic and private roles, who are sufficiently restrained to care for the world even as they pursue their own pleasures, and who are willing to take on onerous public burdens. Rebecca West's contentions reminds me of Max Weber's belief, expressed in *Politics as a Vocation* (1919), that a politics of responsibility requires "realistic passion." Whether old or young in years, what distinguishes a mature person (*ein reifer Mensch*), says Weber, is an attitude of principled realism able to bear the perversity of the world without succumbing to bitterness and cynicism.

In her youth, West recalls, these kinds of distinction were lost on her. She saw love as effortless and law as a harsh instrument to control the poor. Abolish poverty and law would no longer be required. Goodness would assert itself, in time ubiquitously. It was our social, political and legal institutions that made us savage. When, as an eleven-year old girl, she heard a visitor to her house telling of a Cossack pogrom against Russian Jews, West then and there resolved to commit that story to memory. Surely, the barbarism it recounted would be unbelievable to later generations? The horrors of the war against Germany had proved her wrong. Now, with greater maturity, she grasped that goodness does not just happen but must be nurtured by love and by law if it is to prevail against an inbuilt disposition of human beings to be cruel.

4. Against Social Cruelty

A fourth and, for my purposes, final liberal motif is Rebecca West's stand against cruelty. Like younger liberals such as Judith Shklar and Richard Rorty, West is persuaded that cruelty is the worst thing we can do to our fellow human beings. But, characteristically, she impresses on this idea her own explanatory signature. As West puts it in "I Believe" (1939), cruelty is "a part of our structure." Inflicting pain on others, and believing in its rightness, springs from our

own pain. Being punished painfully for inflicting pain only lends pain a greater majesty. The logic is inescapable: “If it is a good and holy thing to be punished, must it not also be a good and holy thing to punish?” The subjection of women is a classic example of social cruelty as men and men’s society find a party that “is safe to hurt.”

Freedom of speech and the arts—hallmarks of a liberal society—are a bulwark against cruelty because they permit us publicly to inspect all institutions for traces of it; and because they enable us to hear from those whose lives have been blighted by it. Of pressing importance is that “all classes” of men and women, as a purely practical measure, use the resources at their disposal to expose dissimulation, humbug and plain confusion. For “those who love cruelty dress themselves up as its enemies, and those who hate it appear to be, and sometimes are, its servants.”

Nothing requires firmer rebuttal than the most pernicious myth of Western civilization: sacrificial propitiation to God or State or History, the “repulsive pretense that pain is the proper price of any good thing” (as West puts it in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, published in 1941). Fascism and Communism provide secular variants of this myth. Organized Christianity encodes a sacralized version of it, notably, in the notion of atonement for man’s sins. St. Paul is the myth’s father, St. Augustine its seminal theologian. In Augustine’s theology, Jesus’s death is depicted as a moment in a cosmic drama in which God revealed his love for humanity by sacrificing his only Son. By this “theological ruse,” West says, the meaning of Christ’s death is hideously inverted. For Christ, in Rebecca West’s counter-theology, is the prime example of what it means to denounce evil and embrace goodness. His death on the Cross is the preeminent symbol of “what the assault of cruelty on the innocent means.” Instead of drawing this lesson from Christ’s brutalization, the Church transformed an exemplar of goodness into a

vindication of pain. A vice was transmogrified into virtue.

A feminist, Rebecca West was acutely aware of the pain endured by women, yet anyone expecting a simple ideological homily from her on this topic (or any other!) is going to be disappointed. Sadism and masochism are rooted in nature, not gender. Men and women are cruel to each other, West says. They not infrequently love members of the opposite sex who treat them ill. West refers specifically to the situation in which some younger women find themselves in relation to older men and to society in general. It sometimes happens, she notes, that young women cannot find a suitable male mate of their own age who is free of erotic ties. Such women are more likely to fall in love with roaming older men who come to the affair with other attachments and obligations; if these men are sufficiently vital to attract younger women it is likely that they are already married. This means that the younger woman is condemned to an illicit relationship, with all its awkwardness and uncertainty. In fact, she is doubly unfortunate: first by being unable initially to find a mate of her own age who can be durably committed to her; second by society's censorious attitude to her alternative avenue to love. Illicit liaisons are gossiped over and the couple defamed. The lovers' lives, already difficult, are made more so, aggravated by a peculiar spiteful resentfulness of onlookers who behave as if the lovers "had found some way of living that is enormously enjoyable and likely to be followed by all women if they are not discouraged by the spectacle of persecution."

When Rebecca West wrote these lines, she had been married for eight years to the banker, Henry Andrews, a man of similar age. If such a peripatetic woman can be called settled, then settled she was. The lines I have been summarizing allude principally to her life with H.G. Wells, a quarter century her senior, with whom she began in 1913 a decade-long affair, and with whom she bore a son, Anthony, in August 1914. Yet West never played the victim. She knew she

was co-responsible for her plight and that the affair caused pain to another woman, Wells's wife. Moreover, when West expands on the cruelty done to women by society it is the cruelty of both sexes she emphasizes. "The majority of women" find in the deviant woman "a safe object for their aggressive instincts."

More generally, the relations between men and women are marked by what West, in her early period of feminist polemic, called "sex antagonism." I find this term intriguing, not least because of the value it adds to "sexism," a word invented in 1963. Generally, we think of sexism as a male prejudice against women or as the mistreatment of women by men. Men patronizing women – for instance, by "mansplaining" – is another example of sexism. *Sex antagonism* fully registers these usages. Writing about Emmeline Pankhurst, in the fittingly titled "A Reed of Steel" (1933), Rebecca wrote of "the army of women resentful of being handicapped by artificial disadvantages imposed simply on the grounds of their sex."

She goes one stage further, however. Henry Kissinger once quipped that no one will ever win the battle of the sexes because there is too much fraternising with the enemy. West certainly liked to fraternize. Yet she recognized that because men and women are so different from each other it is inevitable that conflicts will exist between them; not all the time, not in all aspects of life, but recurrently and inevitably. "There is no guiltless party in this conflict, which is as much as saying that there is no guilty party." West's collection of novellas, *The Harsh Voice* (1935) is full of these tensions. Some relationships, such as that between Corrie and Josie, are based on hatred. Others display narcissism and the limits of communication more generally: "There is no such thing as conversation," says the narrator of one story before adding bleakly that instead of conversation "there are intersecting monologues." The reason is that, for

all their affinity, men and women have different ways of being, often different interests or priorities, and engage in different kinds of power play. Eros is inevitably an embattled arena. Men seek power over men, men seek power over women, women seek power over men, women seek power over women. Some of the nastiest characters in West's novels are women whose cruelty extends to other women (notably, Alice Pemberton, in "The Salt of the Earth.").

Rebecca West's contention that sex antagonism produces no guiltless or guilty party as such, comes from her essay "Woman as Artist and Thinker" (1931). She added the following wise addendum:

> *Recriminations are useless. But women must learn to go on their way without caring overmuch for the judgment passed on their work by men, just as assuredly as men go on their way without caring overmuch for the judgments passed on their work by women. The non-neurotic man will always judge women fairly, just as the non-neurotic woman will always judge a man fairly. There is a therefore a small charmed circle in which our naïve desire for justice can be satisfied. But it is the neurotics who set the general tone, and it is against them that women must defend themselves.*

In sum, West's agonistic yet fair minded view of the relations between the sexes has none of the rancid quality that one finds in so much feminism today. Her criticisms of men never extend to piety about women.

On HUAC: West's Political Liberalism in Action

In "On Liberty" (1859), John Stuart Mill famously declared that "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others." West took a larger view. Unusually for a thinker who repeatedly describes

herself as liberal, West takes seriously the weighty claims of authority. It is of course true that "demands for liberty must at some point challenge the limitations that the state imposes on the individual;" also true that rebellion "is sometimes necessary if society is not to perish of immobility." But on the other hand, "if a state gives a citizen protection it has a claim on his allegiance." That basic datum is what treason offends. "No society, whether capitalist, socialist, or communist, can survive for ten minutes if it abandons the principle that a contract is sacred."

This view, expressed in the conclusion to West's *New Meaning of Treason* (1964), has a Socratic precedent. You may know the story as Plato tells it. Facing execution for the crime of impiety, Socrates is urged by his friends to flee Athens; they will help him do so; they love him and wish to protect him from an unjust verdict. But Socrates spurns the option of flight with the following argument. "Do you think that a city can still exist without being overturned, if the legal judgments rendered within it possess no force, but are nullified or invalidated by individuals?" (*Crito*, 50b). Equally, while any Athenian is free to leave his city, if dissatisfied with the life it gives him, he is obligated to its laws– "those compacts and agreement you made with us, whereby you agreed to be a citizen on our terms" –if he remains in it (*Crito,* 51d, 52d). And Socrates was living in Athens when an Athenian assembly damned him.

Fast forward to the early Cold War, specifically, House Committee on Un-American Activities' (HUAC) investigations into Communist subversion. HUAC's enquiries concerned accusations, later verified, that senior American officials had spied for the Soviet Union in the 1930s. In that decade of mass purges, show trials, labor camps, deportations, and an orchestrated famine, in short, a decade of terror, American citizens, living freely in a constitutional-pluralistic republic, were willing agents of a totalitarian

regime.

One of these agents was Alger Hiss, a former State Department official and President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Hiss's nemesis was the ex-Communist and, at the time he was subpoenaed by HUAC, senior editor of *Time* magazine, Whittaker Chambers. As a life-long opponent of Communism, Rebecca West was gripped by HUAC's investigations—she claimed to have read all 105 volumes of its official proceedings. More than that, West was herself a seasoned student of treason. Soon after reporting on the Nuremburg trials, she wrote the classic account of British fascists who, during the war, had gone to work for the Nazis. William Joyce, or Lord Haw-Haw as he was derisively known in Britain, was one of these traitors. My point is that Rebecca West came to the HUAC proceedings not just with liberal political instincts, but with honed forensic skills.

Rebecca West's abundant reportage on HUAC, and on the traitors it exposed, consists of several, closely woven threads. Here are just a few of them:

1. West was by no means uncritical of the HUAC investigations. The anomalies of HUAC were plentiful and some of them were serious. One problem, West pointed out, was that the tribunal mixed legal and political roles. While HUAC counted lawyers among its number, it was essentially a body of career politicians whose point-scoring and speechifying deflected its members from objectivity. Persons mentioned in evidence by or before HUAC were unable to avail themselves of counsel to represent them in front of the Committee or cross-examine witnesses. Some of HUAC's phrasing resembled a dragnet to catch as many suspicious people as possible, while, in one case, the committee's subpoena of a witness's attorney to establish the nature of his political beliefs struck at the "roots of legal representation.

2. All the same, and despite these caveats, she insisted that the investigations were necessary and that America had no other established body to pursue them.

3. It was also clear, she lamented, that many American intellectuals, several high-profile liberals among them, repudiated HUAC's investigations as a Red Scare, a hysterical over-reaction to conduct which, even if true, had occurred before the war. It was often said by these same intellectuals – for instance by fellow reporter Alistair Cooke – that the real object on trial was not Alger Hiss and his Communist confederates but the New Deal generation; it was this, above all, that conservatives were recklessly seeking to impugn. Alger Hiss was collateral damage.

As mentioned, West was convinced that the HUAC hearings were needed to get to the bottom of the Communist espionage network that had permeated, and might still permeate, parts of the American state. Britain was also heavily penetrated by Soviet agents, as she later learned: the so-called Cambridge 5 –Guy Burgess, Kim Philby, Donald Maclean Anthony Blunt, and John Cairncross–several of whom had worked in the British embassy in Washington and were active spies into the early 'fifties. Allegations of a "witch hunt" were all too convenient hyperbole that allowed Communists to plead victimization and repeat their self-serving propaganda. "The printed record [of the HUAC judicial proceedings] shows no more inquisitiveness at work then than the situation would have provoked in any society not manifestly insane," she later wrote.

Alas, sanity, or at least sobriety, was in short supply during the HUAC and, a little later, the McCarthy hearings. (HUAC was a body of the House; Joseph McCarthy gained notoriety in the Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations.) Just the opposite: the search for the truth

about treasonous conduct had become one more frightening instance of what Rebecca West called a “dervish trial.” The coinage is odd. What did she mean by it?

Dervish Trials

The Dervishes are members of a Muslim-Sunni order founded in the 12th century. The order commits its members to a regimen of poverty and simplicity. These are the dry facts. But when most of us hear the word “dervish” it is not esoteric doctrine that is uppermost in our minds. It is “whirling dervishes” gyrating at dizzying speed, as they work up to a state of ecstasy. Here is how West applied the image in an article for the *Atlantic Monthly* in June, 1952.

> *There could be nothing more inappropriate to a court of law than the presence of a mob of dancing dervishes. But in they rush, and the examination of witnesses can hardly be carried on because of the commotion caused by the invaders, twirling and turning all over the courtroom, and the lawyers’ speeches are not to be heard because of their holy howlings. Finally they take over the control of the proceedings. All attempts at deciding the accused person’s guilt according to the facts of the case and the principles of law are abandoned. Whether his life is preserved or forfeited depends on which party line triumphs in the tumult. More and more people join the dervishes in their spinning and their screaming, and by the time they have frothed at the mouth and fallen to the ground the courtroom is wrecked. It may well happen that at the end of one of these dervish trials the whole of civilization will be wrecked.*

For Rebecca West, the epitome of a dervish atmosphere was the Dreyfus affair (1894-06) in *fin-de-siècle* France. A Jewish officer in the French army falsely accused by its General Staff, in 1894, of spying for the German Reich, Captain Alfred Dreyfus’s arrest, court martial, public

military degradation, and incarceration on Devil's Island unleashed a hurricane of emotion. Historical prejudices, social and ideological divisions, incendiary claims, conspiracy theories, and what today would be called fake news battered the judicial process– "the facts of the case and the principles of law" (as West put it above). Due process also evaporated during the so-called Reichstag trial, in Germany, during the early Nazi era and the purge trials orchestrated by Stalin. Each of these cases was different but in all of them justice was sacrificed to the interests of the state or to social and ideological conflict or, more precisely, to combinations of both. As John V. Fleming writes, in *The Anti-Communist Manifestos* (2009), this "startling perspective allows us to see how the legal determination of the [Hiss] case brought so little resolution and why so many later commentators have been able to dismiss so much evidence with so much insouciance."

What are the facilitating conditions of a dervish trial? Rebecca West mentions five, all of which must be conjoined for a dervish trial to take place:

> *First of all (1), there must be a series of events which arouse the suspicion that a crime has been committed, and at the same time (2) are so tangled that it is hard to verify or disprove that suspicion. (3) The alleged crime must be of a certain magnitude and offensiveness, and (4) it must be committed in a community split across by an ideological division. (5) The people who in the first instance allege that the crime took place, and those who deny it, must be facing each other across that gulf. What happens after that, as Whittaker Chambers shows, depends on the character of the protagonists and the power of the community to resist moral infection.* (The numbers 1-5 are my interpolations.)

If Rebecca West's ruminations prompt an uncanny sense of recognition, it may be because dervish trials–or

investigations, proceedings, or hearings—appear no less prominent in our time than they were in hers. Senate Judiciary Proceedings for Supreme Court nominations are repeatedly conducted in a dervish atmosphere. This not just because the Senate is a political body and because the Supreme Court's decisions are so politically consequential. It is also because an incumbent president, identified with a political party, chooses whom to nominate. With politics, comes partisanship. With polarized politics, comes hatred, scarifying, hyperbole, and no holds barred attack. One notorious example is Democratic senator Ted Kennedy's denunciation of Robert Bork, a conservative judge nominated to the Supreme Court by President Ronald Reagan in July 1987:

> *Robert Bork's America is a land in which women would be forced into back-alley abortions, blacks would sit at segregated lunch counters, rogue police could break down citizens' doors in midnight raids, schoolchildren could not be taught about evolution, writers and artists could be censored at the whim of the Government, and the doors of the Federal courts would be shut on the fingers of millions of citizens for whom the judiciary is—and is often the only—protector of the individual rights that are the heart of our democracy . . .*

Kennedy's attack was scurrilous, a wanton distortion of Bork's judicial record, but it worked and Bork's confirmation was denied 58-42, mostly along party lines. The affair even gave birth to a new verb – to be borked. Merriam-Webster defines it as follows: "to attack or defeat (a nominee or candidate for public office) unfairly through an organized campaign of harsh public criticism or vilification."

Though Bork's record and, even more, his character were flayed by critics, no one accused him of any criminal wrong doing—and it is a crime, real or alleged, that Rebecca West considers integral to a dervish trial. The trial for murder of O.J. Simpson in 1995 is thus probably closer to what

she had in mind. The football superstar and screen celebrity was accused of stabbing his wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ron Goldman. Though the evidence against O.J. Simpson, which included DNA identification, seemed compelling, a majority-black jury acquitted him. US opinion on the case split on racial lines; approximately three quarters of whites and three quarters of blacks polled at the time came to opposite conclusions. (By the turn of the century a majority of both blacks and whites considered Simpson guilty of the murders.) Did the slain victims get justice? That is doubtful. Could the slain victims get justice? That is doubtful too. The trial was held in Los Angeles. Three years before, South Central LA had ignited in riots after a video was released of four LA police officers assaulting the black fugitive Rodney King. The acquittal of O.J. Simpson was an act of payback and solidarity: payback to white policemen who beat up blacks, solidarity for blacks in a criminal system seemingly stacked against them. The racial division "over the legitimacy of the criminal justice system" had turned a trial into a social protest. (The quote and my account draw on Christopher Caldwell's masterful *The Age of Entitlement: America since the Sixties*, Simon and Schuster: 2020.)

Two decades after O.J. Simpson's acquittal, another dervish event took place. It occurred in the Senate Judiciary public hearings for Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh in September 2018. Like Robert Bork, Kavanaugh is a conservative-leaning lawyer and judge, nominated by a Republican president (Donald J. Trump). But several factors in the Kavanaugh case were unique. Ronald Reagan was only disliked or ridiculed by Democratic politicians. The legitimacy of his election was never in dispute. A two-term president, Reagan in 1980 and 1984 won decisive popular and electoral college majorities. By contrast, Donald Trump is despised by Democrats many of whom consider his election stolen. Democratic rival Hillary Clinton lost the electoral college but won a majority of the popular vote. Allegations of Russian meddling, and Trump's collusion

with the Russians, further besmirched Trump's victory. It was predictable that any Supreme Court candidate of a radioactive President would register high on the political Geiger counter.

Still, what made the Kavanaugh hearing explosive was another ingredient: sex antagonism. To be sure, sexual scandal in the higher reaches of politics and the judiciary is nothing new. It had catalyzed the impeachment of President Clinton and almost destroyed Judge Clarence Thomas's elevation to the Supreme Court. Both were accused of different forms of sexual harassment. (Clinton was found guilty of perjury, the same crime that had sunk Alger Hiss.) Brett Kavanaugh, by contrast, was accused by three women of sexual assault—none proven—and these accusations occurred in a social context that was new: the #MeToo movement. Triggered in October 2017, following the allegations of sexual abuse by the American film producer Harvey Weinstein, #MeToo dervishes invaded the Kavanaugh hearings.

Bill Clinton's female accusers were themselves often dismissed, by high profile Democrats, as trailer trash squeezers. Bill Clinton's own wife, a feisty feminist, pilloried her husband's female detractors. By the time of the Kavanaugh hearing, these tactics were no longer viable. #MeToo sacralized the words of a woman. A woman who claimed to be a victim of male predation was a woman speaking truthfully about it. The alleged victim must be believed, while the accused must be condemned even absent of formal proof of a crime. At a stroke, the most basic axiom of legal due process was inverted: that a person is innocent until proven guilty. To question the reliability, much less the motive, of a female witness was immediately to be branded a misogynist. The gravest threat to the liberal constitutional idea of law occurs whenever individuals are judged as symbols of social and political division, rather than for any actual wrongdoing they can be proved to have done.

This is not the place to describe the details of the

Kavenaugh dervish drama: wild allegations on cable news, uproar from protesters outside the Supreme Court and in Congressional chambers, a posture of intimidation towards every Republican female senator who supported the embattled nominee. Suffice it to say that while Brett Kavanaugh is now a Supreme Court justice, only one Democratic senator, Joe Manchin, voted to approve his nomination. Were the whirling dervishes stilled? They were just resting. Their spinning resumed, in the fall of 2019, for the House impeachment of Donald Trump.

Conclusion

These are the elements that define Rebecca West's liberalism: her commitments to free expression and the political obligation to be intelligent, her emphasis on human maturity, her non-sentimental empathy, and her rejection of cruelty. I have tried to convey my admiration for Rebecca West, and I hope to have persuaded you of her lasting value.

In a BBC radio broadcast, delivered on Sept. 14, 1976, called "The Novelist's Voice," the eighty-three-year old West explains why, though fiction was her greatest love, she devoted so much of her life to journalism. The need for money, especially in the early days, was one pressing reason. But another, she recounts, was her alarm at the changing state of the world. Obligated to take a stand, chiefly against fascism and Communism, journalism was the medium through which West weighed in. The price she paid for this literary reorientation was expensive; journalism, she laments, is a craft that "dries up the steady flow of the imagination." We hear in West's words the voice of regret: journalism atrophied her powers as a novelist. But, as I mentioned in an earlier part of this talk, it seems to me that she brought the wise voice of the novelist to her political writings.

Her commitment to truthfulness also shines from them. "Liberals" she affirms, "cannot afford to be silly or

untruthful. The other side can be those things without losing their dynamic power, for they are not thereby betraying their own creed. But if we abandon our sense of reality, we are false to our vows and we become disguised reactionaries, contriving the defeat of the forces we pretend to serve." An intelligent liberalism is discerning; it makes distinctions; it is aware of paradox and tragedy; it understands that not all good things hang together; it grasps without bitterness, as Rebecca puts it in *Black Lamb and Gray Falcon* (1941), that "this is not a strictly moral universe."

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