Tom Wolfe and the Ascent of Mass Man

by Pedro Blas González (April 2020)



If Not, Not, R. B. Kitaj, 1975

For there is no doubt that the most radical division that

> *it is possible to make of humanity is that which splits it into two classes of creatures: those who make great demands on themselves, piling up difficulties and duties; and those who demand nothing special of themselves, but for whom to live is to be every moment what they already are, without imposing on themselves any effort towards perfection; more buoys that float on the waves.*[1] —José Ortega y Gasset

The collapse of objective journalism has made it impossible for intelligent and responsible people to understand the values that underpin world affairs today. As a consequence, the destruction of objective reporting protects itself through calumny, character defamation and censorship. The latter is the only way that mediocrity and moral corruption can be accepted as the new norm in postmodernity.

In the balkanization of values, the winners are those who create the immoral bread and circuses that W.B. Yates describes as the "widening gyre" in his poem, "The Second Coming." The widening gyre is what happens to history and human society when disorder and corruption of innocence reign supreme.

One profound effect of moral relativity—best understood as radicalization of values—is the annihilation of reason. The authority of reason, as the begetter of knowledge and genuine understanding, is precisely what postmodernism denies.

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Moral relativism means the exhaustion of constructive values and the embrace of values that justify opportunism and "Me-ism." Moral relativism is akin to sophism and sensualism that gears life in the direction of living for the moment, for the next pleasure, the next high—and eschews all forms of moral high road.

The greatest liability of moral relativism is the inability for goodwill to contribute to the greater good. While some people lament the latter, opportunism and Me-ism makes moral oversight anathema to postmodernity. All that is left, then, is censorship that is propped up by coercion and violence.

While misinformed commentary places the burden of balkanization squarely on the shoulders of policy, etc., few commentators today possess the historical savvy and perspicuity to realize that the ultimate, and perhaps definitive form of balkanization in the twenty-first century, will come about as the result of the sinister attempt to normalize relativized values.

The Case of Tom Wolfe's Novel *Back to Blood*

> She was never ironic or sarcastic or cynical or nihilistic or contemptuous or any of those things, which are all the

> signs of the tarantula in smart people, the resentful small deadly creature that never fights . . . that only waits to bite fiercely and maybe kill you that way.[2] —Wolfe

As a writer, Tom Wolfe's New Journalism enabled him to delve into the subjects he investigated. This allowed him to engage his stories with existential vigor, rather than sterile reporting. This new technique of journalistic writing was a sign of things to come for Wolfe, given his literary penchant for animated description and gift for storytelling. Yet Wolfe did not participate in the subjects and topics that he wrote about. This cannot be said of other writers who engaged in New Journalism, beginning in the 1960s.

As a thinker, Wolfe's intellectual and cultural prowess enabled him to hover above his contemporaries. For one, it is a little appreciated fact that much of Wolfe's understanding of post WWII nihilism comes via the nineteenth century philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. This knowledge is applied to and informs Wolfe's treatment of the Marxist countercultural aberrations that he wrote about.

What dominant traits and motifs did Wolfe notice in 1960s postmodern man that prompted him to engage this period of aggressive dissolution of values with such alertness and authority?

Nietzsche's Ressentiment and the Smart-Set Versus Intelligence

Wolfe’s work can be aptly defined by his paying heed to the distinction between the smart-set and intelligence. The smart-set is the intelligentsia, the hip priests of postmodern moral relativism. While the smart-set continues to be ruled by moral craftiness and dishonest intellectual calisthenics, it has not made headway into the realm of intelligence, which is truly a rare bird in postmodernity.

His novel *Back to Blood*, published in 2012, is a perfect example of how the smart-set—their politically correct censorship, enforced through bureaucracy and academic theory—has become the ruling ideology in Western democracies.

The opposite of the smart-set is bona fide intelligence. There is no substitute for intelligence, for intelligence cannot be feigned. While the former serves the coerced ideology of opportunism and Me-ism, the latter is a creative force that has delivered civilization the fruits that Western man enjoys, circa 2020.

Back to Blood is a novel about postmodern social/political fragmentation and what this means for Western democracies. Many characters in the novel are morally corrupt and serve as agents of corruption for others. Moral corruption, Wolfe suggests, cannot afford to leave a stone unturned, for this creates its web of power.

Back to Blood is a work of nihilism, not in its theoretical application: the annihilation of all values. Lamentably, postmodern man has already eclipsed the framework of theoretical nihilism. Instead, Wolfe looks at the effects of

nihilism as this corrosive worldview makes it its praxis to dismantle coherent reflection on the nature of the human person.

Nietzsche argued that man is an envious being who is often motivated by debilitating *ressentiment*—he used the French word—that unpacks its most destructive energy through social/political categories. Karl Marx, Nietzsche pointed out, made envy and ressentiment fashionable by intellectualizing it as the foundation of socialism/communism.

While ressentiment and envy have been seminal human emotions from time immemorial, Marx created an intellectualized edifice to house these emotions. Rather than looking inward through self-reflection, ressentiment and envy turn their glance on other people and institutions. The natural response to the world, other people and human reality of ressentiment and envy, Marx posited, is destruction of morality and existential longing. Social/political activism as "commitment" does the rest. Marxist radical theory and its many variants seek vindication by making a stand in the world through the practice of violence—intellectual and physical.

While ressentiment and envy ought not to be confused with each other, they are indeed cousins. Ressentiment is an emotion that concentrates on the proverbial "I have been wronged by someone, something, the world—life itself." This appears to describe the human condition. How many people can disagree with this description? Yet ressentiment is not embraced by the vast majority of people, and of those who embrace it, only few have had their lives radicalized by it. Why is this?

While the vast majority of people come to the realization that human contingency is often a blind tiger, only resentful people find it necessary to take revenge. In the natural state of human affairs, that is, in the absence of intellectualized, radicalized terror and the promise of distributive violence, people simply learn to accept their misfortunes.

Ressentiment is a self-consuming emotion that ultimately becomes a pathological condition in some people. Thus, these individuals cannot cure themselves, given that the focus of human contingency and difficulty is always channeled away from the self. By viewing free will as a burden, such individuals have no other outlet than seething contempt for other people. Radical social/political categories, they believe, assuage discontent with their perceived lot in life.

Envy is a much more socially/politically coy emotion. Envy is the desire to possess or enjoy what others have. Envy is the direct opposite of contentment. Contentment is a mature and humble form of happiness. Envy's great enemy is the inability to compliment other people. The Christian understanding that God endowed people with different abilities, and that their lives must embrace different trajectories, falls on deaf ears for resentful secularists.

Nietzsche explains the interplay of these emotions in a section of *The Dawn of Day*, "The destroyers of the World"*:*

> When some men fail to accomplish what they desire to do they exclaim angrily, 'May the whole world perish!' This repulsive emotion is the pinnacle of envy, whose

> implication is, ‘if I cannot have something, no one can have anything, no one is to be anything!’[3]

Wolfe’s “The Intelligent Coed’s Guide to America”

> He sounded like Jean-Francois Revel, a French socialist writer who talks about one of the great unexplained phenomena of modern astronomy: namely, that the dark night of fascism is always descending in the United States and yet lands only in Europe.[4]—Wolfe

By 1976, when Tom Wolfe published *Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine,* he had already mastered the nuances of New Journalism. By that time, Wolfe understood that unmasking fashionable chic leftist hypocrisy was to be his signature contribution to literature. The passage of time has proven this to be the case. For, how many thinkers of his generation had the courage to take on the arrogant moral vacuity of the people, policies and institutions that Wolfe describes in his work?

“The Intelligent Coed’s Guide to America” and “The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening” are two of the essays that make up *Mauve Gloves & Madmen*. They are included in a section entitled “The spirit of the Age (and what it longs for).”

One distinguishing mark of importance of Wolfe’s New Journalism treatment of American life, customs and letters

post WWII is the amount of field research he undertook. This is significantly different from the lazy and ideological way that many academics present this same period. While academic theories are abstractions that evade empirical reality—like Dracula sunlight—Wolfe wrote about what he witnessed firsthand.

As the years pass and postmodernity exhausts itself in destroying constructive values, generations of future thinkers will have the difficult task of having to separate reality from the vacuous claims of postmodern leftism.

Future thinkers will undoubtedly have to become something akin to archaeologists in order to decipher truth from appearance, and worse, damaging lies. Nietzsche's philosophical *oeuvre* was precisely that, a call to future thinkers to set the course of human intelligence strait. Unfortunately, that time has not yet arrived, as postmodern intellectuals, circa 2020, act as obfuscators of truth, not the thoughtful thinkers who can correct the corrosive spirit of our age.

"The intelligent Coed's Guide to America" puts on display Wolfe's insight into the pop psychology of the "moral indignation" that post WWII intellectuals peddled to university students during the 1970s:

> Moral indignation was the main thing; that, and a certain pattern of consumption. In fact, by the 1960s it was no longer necessary to produce literature, scholarship, or art—or even to be involved in such matters, except as a consumer—in order to qualify as an intellectual. It was

> only necessary to live *la vie intellectuelle*.[5]

Wolfe ends this chapter in stunning fashion, at least by the touchy-feely movable standards of today's postmodern leftism. He presents Lionel Trilling's proposal that the liberal-arts curriculum in universities be abandoned for one generation. Imagine that.

Trilling argued that students come to universities and are given a package of indoctrination and opinions that they must accept *prima facie*, no questions asked. His provocative and Platonic contention was that "in time there might develop a generation of intelligent people who had experienced American life directly and 'earned' their opinions."[6]

"The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening"

> In a single slogan she had summed up what might be described as the secular side of the Me Decade. "If I've only one life, let me live it as a _____!" (You have only to fill in the blank.)[7] —Wolfe

In another essay, I have written that Wolfe's writing serves as a valuable education, especially as his work is a corrective to the indoctrination that young people are subjected to, from high school to university.[8]

Wolfe's description of what people today refer to lazily as postmodernism is nothing more than his grappling with the ascent of mass man. The twentieth century witnessed the ascent of mass man to the forefront of the hierarchy of values. Mass man's claim to power is the inversion of the essences that animate axiological order. The second half of the twentieth and the first two decades of the twenty first century have proven to be the consummation of this violent inversion.

A fine example of this is his essay "The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening." In typical Wolfian New Journalism lingo, the essay begins with yet another case of postmodern moral or social/political aberration. In this case, it is the vulgarity of the mass man that the Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset, describes in his seminal 1930 work, *The Revolt of the Masses*. Ortega writes: "The mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select."[9]

Not finding it necessary to delve here into the particular form of vulgarity that Wolfe points out, it is an example of the need for so-called liberated, 1970s postmodern people to "take their fingers right off the old repress button."[10]

From its first example of vulgarity, the chapter cites further variations on that theme. The chapter culminates with an intelligent discussion of the Soviet new man (homo novus). The curious form that the new man takes in Western democracies, Wolfe informs the reader, has come about in a rather circuitous fashion. The big revelation of this new liberated man and woman was the discovery of "Me." The hollow confines of me are the direct opposite of life-affirming introspection.

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- The Archaeology of Living Rooms

The break with the past, especially ancestors, makes the Me Generation a hedonistic mood—for we cannot call it a philosophy—that thinks of itself as a moral force to be reckon with, even if it is merely a self-indulgent case of *causa sui*: Me . . . Me . . . Me . . .

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[1] José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1957), 15

[2] Tom Wolfe, *Back to Blood*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), 177.

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Dawn of Day*, section 304.

[4] Tom Wolfe, *Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 116.

[5] Ibid., 120.

[6] Ibid., 124.

[7] Ibid., 153.

[8] Pedro Blas González, "Tom Wolfe's Mastery of Postmodern America," *New English Review*, January 1, 2020.

[9] Ortega y Gasset, 18.

[10] Wolfe, 127.

«Previous Article Table of Contents Next Article»

Pedro Blas González is Professor of Philosophy at Barry University, Miami Shores, Florida. He earned his doctoral degree in Philosophy at DePaul University in 1995. Dr. González has published extensively on leading Spanish philosophers, such as Ortega y Gasset and Unamuno. His books have included *Ortega's 'Revolt of the Masses' and the Triumph of the New Man*, *Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity*. He also published a translation and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset's last work to appear in English, "Medio siglo de Filosofia" (1951) in