

Friends Like These

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“What I want to make plain,” wrote Lionel Trilling in a 1947 letter to a friend, “is my deep distaste for liberal culture.” Coming from a purported liberal and the soon-to-be author of *The Liberal Imagination*, Trilling recognized such a sentiment was “difficult to explain.” He found himself to be “in accord with most of the liberal ideas of freedom, tolerance, etc.,” and yet

the tone in which these ideals are uttered depress[es] me endlessly. I find it wholly debased, downright sniveling, usually quite insincere. It sells everything out in human life in order to gain a few things it can understand as good. It isn’t merely that I believe that our liberal culture doesn’t produce great art and lacks imagination—it is that I think it produces horrible art and has a hideous imagination.

One could read this passage as demonstrating Trilling’s openness to the criticisms of liberalism, and therefore as exemplifying what the well-known contemporary liberal critic Adam Gopnik calls, in his latest book *A Thousand Small Sanities: The Moral Adventure of Liberalism* (2019), liberalism’s “tolerance for difference.” But that would be to miss, from the perspective of much of what we call liberal cultural criticism today, what is most striking about it. Trilling was not just *open* to critics of liberalism; he was one. He did not merely tolerate the distaste others expressed for liberalism’s “sniveling” imagination; he felt it himself.

On the basis of reputation alone, it would be possible to think of Gopnik as a figure who is laboring in Trilling's drift. The author of several books on modern art and culture, Gopnik has been a polymathic fixture in the *New Yorker* since 1986, when he introduced himself with an essay about the similarities between his two passions: fifteenth-century Italian painting and the Montreal Expos. For Gopnik, as for Trilling, if we want to understand liberalism as a political "program" we have first to understand it as "a temperament." And for Gopnik, as for Trilling, it is best to look for the inner nature of that temperament not in Hobbes or Locke but in Montaigne, whose "undulating and diverse being" Trilling cited as an ideal for the liberal critic. Montaigne, Gopnik writes, "saw, in the late Renaissance, that we are double in ourselves," that "we condemn the thing we believe and embrace the thing we condemn."

But while Gopnik voices appreciation for this doubleness, his writing bears little trace of it. In *A Thousand Small Sanities*, he does not condemn the thing he believes; he embraces it. And that thing is liberalism. On the first page he tells us liberalism has been "proven true by history," and the remainder of the book is devoted to harassing us into accepting this proof, with fusillades of superlatives when necessary. (Later in the introduction, Gopnik calls liberalism "one of the great moral adventures in human history"; a sentence after that, in what I assume will come as a surprise to people of faith, he calls it "the most singular spiritual episode in all of human history.") This is not to say Gopnik is insensible to the perceived shortcomings of liberalism. He would not be a good liberal, he acknowledges, unless he tried, as "eloquently" as he could, to grapple with the arguments against liberal ideas. Close to half of *Small Sanities* is taken up with his competent reproductions of the traditional lines of anti-liberal attack. But while Gopnik's liberal commitment to openness may enjoin him to give the criticisms of liberalism a fair hearing, what never seems to occur to him is what Trilling felt viscerally: that the criticisms of liberalism could be true.

The distinction marks both a difference and a deterioration. Since 2016, there have been a parade of books from writers across the ideological spectrum attempting to account for the decline of liberalism as a political tradition or an ideology. Among the more coherent and edifying are Helena Rosenblatt's *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*, Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* and Katrina Forrester's *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy*. *A Thousand Small Sanities* is worse than any of these books—sloppier, less informative and less curious—and yet to read it is to become aware of something about both the style and the success of liberalism's discontents that the more scholarly productions tend to obscure. For the recent animus against liberalism is not only about ideology or interests. It is also about what Trilling called, with a disgust verging on despair, its “tone.” And as a concentrated exemplar of this tone, *A Thousand Small Sanities* cannot be beat. It offers as helpful a primer as we are likely to find on what makes today's avatars of liberal temperament seem so shallow and self-exculpatory to so many.



A Thousand Small Sanities opens with Gopnik taking his teenage daughter Olivia on a walk. It is early in the morning on November 9, 2016, and father and daughter are trying to come to terms with the disturbing election result. What had most shocked Olivia, Gopnik says, “wasn't that her team lost”; it was, rather, “that for the first time in her life—in my life, too—the rules of the democratic game seemed under assault.”

Leaving aside this suspicious formulation of a teenager's internal monologue, let's grant that Gopnik captures a worry he and his daughter shared. Gopnik notes that, although he tried clumsily to comfort Olivia by talking about the resourcefulness of the liberal tradition, Olivia only felt better when she “turned

back, inevitably, to her cell phone,” and began texting with her friends. Gopnik intends the anecdote to frame the task before him: what he wasn’t able to fully communicate to his daughter on election night, he will now convey over some 250 pages. Yet in a book that seeks to shift our attention from the abstract notions of liberal theory to the personalities that reflect and recommend them, it seems fair to note that the opening anecdote reveals Gopnik as the kind of person who, having observed that his conversation partner is beginning to lose interest, is still lecturing her on the same topic three years later.

The outlines of this lecture—which takes us briskly from the Enlightenment through Martin Luther King, Jr.—will be familiar to anyone who has been in earshot of an op-ed page since 2016. What is distinctive is only Gopnik’s method of telling it. Early on he avers distaste for what he calls the “intellectual telephone game,” by which he means the attempt to carefully trace the interrelation of ideas. Gopnik prefers instead to explain liberalism through a series of poignant scenes, which can show us how liberal ideas developed out of the lives and loves of notable power couples, like John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, or George Henry Lewes and Marian Evans (better known as the novelist George Eliot). Before the end of the introduction, this strategy yields a scene of Mill and Taylor meeting by a rhino’s cage in the London zoo around 1830. On the bench by what Taylor called “our old friend Rhino,” Gopnik imagines, the couple simultaneously were “contemplating adultery” and having the conversations that laid the groundwork for those future fixtures in the liberal canon, *On Liberty* and “The Subjection of Women.” In this way, Mill and Taylor’s “clandestine” courtship became intertwined with the origins of modern liberalism, which fused their egalitarianism, their experimental approach to social life and their concern for “self-development.”

Given the centrality of these scenes to Gopnik's case for liberalism, it is worth lingering over some of their details. It is characteristic that this scene, after beginning with a concrete historical event—Mill and Taylor's affair—soon wanders off into metaphor. If you've read enough of Gopnik's writing, you won't be surprised to learn that Mill and Taylor's rhinoceros will not be allowed to remain merely a rhinoceros: within pages, Gopnik has dubbed the rhino the "perfect symbol of liberalism." This in turn necessitates a counter-symbol, and Gopnik has one ready. All other ideologies, he says, are "unicorns." "People idealize unicorns and imagine unicorns and make icons out of unicorns and write fables out of unicorns. ... They're perfect. The only trouble with them is that they do not exist." The rhino, on the other hand, "is ungainly and ugly and short-legged and imperfect and squat." But its imperfection is what alerts us to its decisive difference from other ideologies. "The rhinoceros is real," he concludes. "It exists."

Here one can get a sense of the mystical associative logic by which *A Thousand Small Sanities* progresses, this being a stylistic trademark which Gopnik attempts to pass off as indicative of his liberal attraction to complexity ("liberals like muddles"). On the most basic level, this makes the book indulgent and at times indecipherable. Putting that aside, however, there is also a substantive point to be made about the meaning of the rhino metaphor: if liberalism is distinguishable from Marxism, libertarianism and socialism chiefly on account of its pragmatism, realism and durability, then Gopnik shows throughout *Small Sanities* that he is incapable of being a good liberal.

On page after page, Gopnik portrays liberalism as the only political perspective that is "open to the evidence of experience." Only liberals, with their capacity for experimentation and "self-correction," Gopnik contends, are able to perform ungainly but essential tasks like cleaning up the sewers in nineteenth-century London—an achievement he mentions several times and says saved "possibly

millions” of lives—or curbing a crime wave in twentieth-century New York. And yet, even as he presses these points, Gopnik shows his incapacity to attend in any concentrated way to the mire of the actual. Most conspicuously, he neglects the most recent challenges to his story about the “triumph of liberal ideals”—from Brexit to Bolsonaro—with the justification that it is not necessary for him to discuss “obvious contemporary political issues,” since “there’s a lot of that already.” Lame as this explanation may seem on the surface, the reality is worse. Gopnik not only fails to attend to the proximate causes of the “shock” with which his book begins; he seems to want his readers to forget some of its most obvious sources. How else to explain, in a book supposedly meant for a generation that cannot remember a time when America was not at war in the Middle East, the existence of sentences like: “Liberals believe in fighting wars as hard as necessary; ending them as soon as possible; and rebuilding the defeated country as charitably as one can.” Or that, in a book meant to trumpet the achievements of modern liberalism, there are so many pages devoted to the cleaning of the sewers in London 160 years ago, and not one word about the lack of drinking water in Flint, Michigan in 2019.

In the book’s conclusion, Gopnik offers yet another perplexing image, worrying that liberalism “may be crushed at any time by its own inability to stop the stampede of unicorns that we call the utopian imagination.” Even if it were less confusing—do unicorns stampede? How can something imaginary (unicorns) crush something real (rhinos/liberalism)?—this would be an image that was meant less to explain something than to explain it away. Gopnik began writing for the *New Yorker* just before the end of the Cold War, and he now writes from the middle of Donald Trump’s first term. Only one utopian imagination held sway during most of this period, and it was that of end-of-history liberalism. If many in recent years have come to find this expression of the liberal tradition wanting, it would seem incumbent upon one who endeavored to defend it to wonder why. But to wonder why would mean to separate real-world conditions

from symbolic ones; in fact, such a task may be primarily concerned with measuring the gap between the “formal” victories of liberal democracies during this period, and the lived experience of the majority of their citizens. But it is precisely this measurement that Gopnik repeatedly shows himself unwilling to take.



In the commentary following the book’s release in May, Gopnik was predictably cast as a defender of the embattled liberal establishment. Those who praised the book, like former George W. Bush speechwriter David Frum in the *New York Times Book Review*, saw in it a rebuke of both the “authoritarian” right and the “illiberal” left. The book’s critics, like the *New Republic*’s David Sessions, seized on it as evidence of the “emptiness” of the “old liberal consensus”—especially in its inability to adequately account for the economic and political crises that have brought on the Trump presidency. Sessions is closer to the mark than Frum. But Gopnik is no political theorist, and his defense of liberalism as ideology is so impressionistic that it is not clear it can stand as evidence of anything beyond his own intellectual imprecision. If the book is symptomatic, it is not because it represents the decline of a once-robust political consensus, but rather because of the way it exemplifies the abiding “distastefulness” of the cultural temperament that appears to be decaying alongside it.

To their great discredit, this is a decay that the liberals in Gopnik’s generation seem hardly to have noticed, despite there being evidence for it almost daily in the rising hostility—from viral memes to vitriolic election campaigns—against boomer liberalism. In chapters entitled “Why the Right Hates Liberalism” and “Why the Left Hates Liberalism,” Gopnik provides able summaries of the main lines of argument against liberalism as a political tradition: that liberalism corrodes community and faith, that it is overfriendly to capitalism, and that it

chooses reform even when revolution is clearly called for. But it may strike a reader how disconnected these conceptual grievances are from the tenor of the current hostility directed at liberal culture. Trump did not campaign, after all, against liberalism as a political philosophy: he campaigned against people and institutions who are identified as *liberal*—their names were Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, the “elite” media, the “failing” *New York Times*. Likewise, and without wishing to minimize the very real fault lines between liberalism and leftism, few in Gopnik’s daughter’s generation can be found expressing “hatred” for liberal values like pluralism or pragmatism. What is easy to find, in the spheres of intellect and culture at least, are those who despise liberals like Adam Gopnik.

But what is a liberal like Gopnik? In notices about *A Thousand Small Sanities*, Gopnik was sometimes compared to the Harvard linguist Steven Pinker, whose recent book *Enlightenment Now* makes an analogous case, but with more data and less alliteration, about the long-range achievements of humanistic liberalism. The French political philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, whom Gopnik quotes approvingly in his introduction, is another touchstone. Along with *New York Times* columnists David Brooks and Thomas Friedman, Neera Tanden of the Center for American Progress and centrist conservative commentators like Frum, such figures form a kind of center-liberal pantheon for leftist intellectual derision. (Occasionally someone is anointed from further afield, like screenwriter Aaron Sorkin, or Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, but without regular TV or newspaper appearances staying power can be elusive.) Not all of this derision is merited, or even coherent. But the attention these figures command, from admirers and detractors alike, makes it easy to conclude that incuriosity, moralism and an obsession with Facebook stocks, fine wine and foreign wars are, instead of personal character flaws, hallmarks of a specifically *liberal* sensibility. The nice thing about liberal governance, Gopnik insists at one point, is that it gives us so much free time: “When we aren’t fighting every

minute for minimal rights, or reasserting our territory, or worrying about the next clan's claims, we can look at the stars and taste new cheeses and make love, sometimes with the wrong person." So depressing as an example of the places Gopnik ends up when he lets his imagination run wild, the passage trips over every stereotype of boomer liberal debasement all at once: that the liberal confuses culture with connoisseurship, that the best thing he can think to do with his freedom is to make sexual mistakes, that he stares at the stars while many continue to fight to enjoy the benefits of the "minimal rights" he has long since taken for granted.

Although the two charges are often conflated, the animus against Gopnik's generation of liberal intellectuals is predicated less on their subscribing to a moribund ideology than on the suspicion that they use their ideology instrumentally, to blur the line between their privileges and their principles. If Gopnik had set out to reinforce this perception, he could hardly have come up with a better way to do so than in his book's rejoinder to its opening stroll on the Upper East Side, when he bikes with Olivia around Wellfleet, Massachusetts, the Cape Cod town and "liberal hotbed" where Gopnik's family rents in the summer. Gopnik acknowledges that the enclave represents a "largely segregated world," populated mostly by upper-middle-class white liberals like himself, but, in his customary fashion of treating what is in fact a fatal objection as if it were merely a regrettable aberration, this does not stop him from presenting it as encompassing "all the signs of liberal comity, in all its absurdity and all its humanity":

There are yoga studios everywhere you look—at least six by my count. There are Bernie Sanders stickers on bumpers—more than you *can* count. There is a former Zen monk who doubles as a therapeutic masseuse. There is a center for the study of gestalt therapy, and there are six or seven progressive churches. There are farmers' markets, several of them. ... At each farmers' market, there's a pickup guitar and banjo band of very old guys playing Grateful Dead songs who once were very young guys playing Grateful Dead songs.

When, twenty pages later, Gopnik confesses he is “kept awake at night by the thought that liberal cities and liberal civilization really could disappear,” it is hard not to think back on this tableau and wonder whether we ought to give the unicorns a chance.



Writing at a time when, as he famously put it in the introduction to *The Liberal Imagination*, liberalism was “not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition,” Trilling did not see his task as being to “defend” that tradition against its ideological enemies. In his essays on literature, rather, he was interested in “putting under some degree of pressure” the assumptions of his liberal readers. When he wrote about T. S. Eliot’s “The Idea of a Christian Society,” it was not to endorse or condemn Eliot’s vision of a “Community of Christians”; it was to show how that vision challenged liberal intellectuals who, in their rush to construct the progressive utopia of the future, sometimes neglected to “value the humanity of the present.” In his essay on Henry James’s *The Princess Casamassima*, he emphasized the novel’s staging of the inherent contradiction, often covered over or denied in liberal society, between the “ideal

of adventurous experience” and the “necessities of radical democracy.” The assumption underlying such interventions was that liberalism was not a stationary metaphor or a precious inheritance but a living dynamism—one that might, with the right critical education, grow and expand. Or that would, if it gave into its own worst impulses, merely grow old, and die.

Contemporary liberals face a different intellectual situation than did Trilling. Even though liberalism remains the official ideology of many of our most powerful institutions, it is no mirage that present-day intellectuals on both the right and left are hastening to dissociate themselves from its legacy. While history lessons like Gopnik’s may continue to resonate with boomers like Frum, their backward-looking triumphalism mainly reinforces the impression, especially among younger readers, that liberalism is a zombie ideology, staggering forward on the diminishing strength of past achievement. Who can bring it back to life? Clearly it is not a job for the Gopniks and Pinkers. But neither can it fall to those who profess the end or “failure” of the liberal project, embracing authoritarianism, Marxism or any other variety of what the Trump-era journal *American Affairs* likes to call “nonliberalism.”

Yet there remain critics today who appear committed to following Trilling’s example of fusing an appreciation for the real virtues of liberal ideals with a critical vigilance about the smug myopia of many who tout them. In an essay called “Fences”—subtitled “A Brexit Diary”—for the *New York Review of Books* in 2016, the novelist and essayist Zadie Smith tried to come to terms, as Gopnik does in the beginning of *A Thousand Small Sanities*, with a political event that had shocked and outraged her and her liberal friends. But whereas Gopnik’s impulse in such a moment is to deliver a lecture defending the liberal tradition to his daughter, Smith’s is to subject her own liberal ideas to the “pressure” of her experience as a liberal in London. Her title is meant as an indictment of a dissonant truth about liberals like herself that Gopnik’s writing merely reflects.

Wherever the liberals in her generation have flourished, Smith notes, they have built fences—literal fences around playgrounds, metaphorical ones between good and bad school districts, or between those who had the right “taste” in art and culture and those who did not. Brexit had showed Smith how high of a fence separated her from the Leave voters, not one of whom she had ever spoken to. How could she and her well-meaning friends have been so blindsided? As liberals committed to openness and diversity, why didn’t they know more about the people in their own country?

Midway through the piece, Smith recounts a dinner party conversation that has wound its way from disquiet over the referendum to the “younger lefty generation” and its habit of censoring or silencing opinions they believe to be wrong. At the end of the conversation, she quotes a friend she describes as “the cleverest among us”:

Well, they got that habit from us. We always wanted to be seen to be right. To be on the right side of an issue. More so even than doing anything. Being right was always the most important thing.

The insight simultaneously indicates the tallest metaphorical fence in the piece—that separating the liberals for whom the most important thing is “to be on the right side of an issue” from those who had “chosen to be flagrantly, shamelessly wrong” by voting for Leave—and draws a line between one liberal generation’s distasteful self-righteousness and the next’s. It also tells us something about the essential political function of the liberal cultural critic. Neither the desire to be right, nor the reluctance to engage with people who are wrong, are problems for liberal *ideology*: in theory, as Gopnik repeatedly insists, liberalism is devoted to pluralism and therefore to the toleration and even the

encouragement of conflicting perspectives. But to truly engage in political life with people you disapprove of or perhaps are merely uninterested in—to keep from erecting fences between you and them even when you have the power to do so—is a moral and a practical challenge more than it is a theoretical one. It is a problem of temperament. For those of us in the generations below Gopnik and Smith, it will take more than an ideological adjustment to cultivate the imagination necessary to meet it.