

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments January 1990

The revolution devours its own

On leftist attacks on Susan Sontag.

Strange things are happening in the more recondite precincts of the cultural Left. The tragic, devastating spread of AIDS has sparked a host of militant new orthodoxies that exploit the disease for political capital. Competing for the privilege of defining the “correct” attitude toward AIDS, warring factions seek to discredit each other even while using the whole phenomenon of AIDS as a litmus test for political virtue.

The continually updated list of enemies in this ideological struggle includes some surprising names. We note with astonishment that the Summer 1989 issue of the radical quarterly *October* carries a characteristically hermetic article by D. A. Miller, a professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley, attacking Susan Sontag for “homophobia, racism, and cultural conservatism” and claiming that her language “continues to ratify the prejudice, oppression, and violence that gay people and people with aids daily encounter.”

A more unlikely candidate for this conjunction of epithets and criticism than Miss Sontag is hard to imagine.

A more unlikely candidate for this conjunction of epithets and criticism than Miss Sontag is hard to imagine. The primary occasion for Miller’s attack was Sontag’s own bristly contribution to the aids controversy, *aids and Its Metaphors*, which was published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux last year. To be sure, there is plenty to criticize in Sontag’s book. Miller complains about its “unrelenting intellectualization of aids,” and, indeed, like so much of what Sontag writes, the book really is an exercise in intellectual aestheticism—but one that its author clearly intended to be as radical as it was meant to be chic.

Essentially, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* continues the campaign that Sontag began in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) against applying certain stigmatizing figures of speech to disease. She is especially unhappy about military metaphors—describing a disease as an “invasion” of the body, for example—and about the seemingly inextricable habit of viewing disease in moral terms: “The

persistence of the belief,” as she puts it, “that illness reveals, and is a punishment for, moral laxity or turpitude.”

But what really stamps both books as a product of Sontag’s pen are the accessory condemnations—her claim that scientific speculation that aids may have originated in Africa is racist, the throw-away digs at Western political systems as “authoritarian political ideologies [that] have a vested interest in promoting fear,” and so on. Clearly, Sontag assumes that words like “homophobia,” “racism,” and “cultural conservatism” are part of *her* rhetorical toolbox. Yet here we have Professor Miller complaining about “her colonization of aids for high culture” and concluding that “from its general conception down to the grain of its prose” *aids and Its Metaphors* stands in “the same irrationally phobic relation to aids that she alleges an interest in demystifying.” Who would have dreamed that an academic radical would one day appropriate the celebrated Sontag oratory and turn it against her?

Miller even goes back to Sontag’s celebrated essay “Notes on ‘Camp’” (the piece that, as he notes, instantly established her early reputation among the New York literati when it appeared in 1964) and finds it guilty of a “phobic de-homosexualization of Camp”—and this, remember, about an essay that extravagantly championed the Camp sensibility and its origins in homosexual culture. What is going on here? What does it mean that Susan Sontag should suddenly find her latest expostulation contemptuously dismissed as deserving “to be set next to Allan Bloom’s or E. D. Hirsch’s” books as a defense of high culture and conservatism? (Susan Sontag and Allan Bloom? The mind reels.)

The Left has a long tradition of intellectual fratricide, ruthlessly punishing any defection from current orthodoxy with expulsion from ideological grace. What Miller’s piece demonstrates is the extent to which this familiar factionalism has erupted into the discussion of AIDS, further politicizing an already egregiously over-politicized issue. Factionalism is always a grubby business, morally as well as intellectually. It seems especially reprehensible when it exploits a deadly disease for political gain. D. A. Miller is right about Sontag’s intellectualizing AIDS; but he is guilty of exactly the same tactics—deployed, of course, à la October, in a shriller, more virulent style than even Susan Sontag might ever have thought possible.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 8 Number 5 , on page 4

Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/1990/1/the-revolution-devours-its-own>