American’s cultural revolution

Marking the beginning of the series Reflections on a cultural revolution by Roger Kimball

When we began publishing The New Criterion in September 1982, we prefaced the first issue with a note detailing some reasons for wishing to start a new cultural review that aimed at providing a “dissenting critical voice.” In the course of that note, we remarked on the “fateful collapse in critical standards” that was part of “a more general cultural drift.” As for the source of that collapse, we observed that we are still living in the aftermath of the insidious assault on mind that was one of the most repulsive features of the radical movement of the Sixties. The cultural consequences of this leftward turn in our political life have been far graver than is commonly supposed. In everything from the writing of textbooks to the reviewing of trade books, from the introduction of kitsch into the museums to the decline of literacy in the schools to the corruption of scholarly research, the effect on the life of culture has been ongoing and catastrophic. Yet the subject is one that has scarcely been studied.

Over the course of the past fifteen years, we have had many occasions to comment on the disastrous legacy of the Sixties. And yet, despite this—and despite the publication of many books on the “culture wars”—no comprehensive assessment of the radical counterculture has yet appeared.

It is for this reason that we are inaugurating with this issue “Reflections on a Cultural Revolution.” Written by Roger Kimball, this series of essays will run throughout our 1997–98 season and will provide a systematic analysis of the radical agenda of the counterculture. As with all revolutions, the promise of liberation figures centrally in the claims of the counterculture: liberation from the past, from the strictures of traditional morality, and from inherited canons of artistic and intellectual achievement. The results—in the emotional and intellectual life of our culture—have been as pernicious as they have been widespread. “Reflections on a Cultural Revolution” will provide a series of vivid damage reports, exposing the illusions of liberation foisted by a malign radicalism on the public which has rushed to embrace them.