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Left Brain, Lame Brain


American culture has no shortage of critiques from across the political spectrum decrying the advance of technology and the media-dominated Information Age. Add to this list *The Great Brain Suck*, by University of Notre Dame sociology professor Eugene Halton. Less from South Bend than around the bend, the book is an unintentional parody of an anti-modern, anti-materialist primal scream. It helps us understand why no one is listening to this slice of the academic left.

A collection of fourteen essays that brings new meaning to the word kaleidoscopic, *The Great Brain Suck* more or less sets its sights on the power, pleasure and practicality of the material world. "Things" have disabled Americans' capacity to have "self-originating experiences." As a result, we are dominated by "the politics of franchised hamburger totalitarianism." University students remind Halton of "proto-corporate versions of pod-spawned, unemotional, prefabricated creatures from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

Halton's second thematic attack is leveled at technology, enlisting an array of support from Victor Havel, Lewis Mumford, Fritz Lang and George Orwell. Technology, he repeats, has led Americans to "the goods life," instead of the "good life." In a typically grandiose statement, Halton argues that "the entire mechanical universe of modern civilization has as its hidden teleology the absorption and ultimate replacement of human life with its own humanoid image: brain suck." And again: "I take the establishment of both the ancient and modern mega-machine as contractions of consciousness." Halton attacks the computer, the automobile, and, of course, the American Military Industrial Complex as mega-machines which have turned Americans into "Big Zombies." The problem is dire, "requiring a questioning of the whole fabric of civilization" which will involve a "reawakening of what it means to be human."

Finally, the author subscribes to the idea that Aboriginal intelligence provides insight into the way out of the oppression of mega-mechanic culture. Halton approaches orgasm in describing the great Native American chief Geronimo's appearance at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair and his chance interaction with Pygmy chieftain Ota Benga. Later, Halton approvingly quotes "eco-philosopher" Paul Stewart: "Foraging people typically spend thousands of hours every year pondering and studying animals around them and discussing the events of the day."

What passes for analysis in *The Great Brain Suck* comes encased in a self-indulgent, self-referential narrative. One example should suffice. After receiving a hand-crafted chair as a gift on a trip to London, Halton is changed forever:

I was and am, like you, a commodity magician, immersed within this phantasmagoria of civilization and its goods. Yet
less than a month after I was given the handcrafted chair in England, I was at the other extreme, learning the basic arts and crafts of hunter-and-gatherer life ...at Tom Brown Jr.’s wilderness school. There I found myself building a shelter, making tools and clothing, finding food, practicing the tracking and camouflage and meditation ways Brown learned from his Apache master Stalking Wolf...After that bare glimpse into hunter-gatherer life, I must admit that the world from which Amazonian Xinguano originated is the one that seems magical to me.

Halton begins to dream about the Geronimo/Ota Benga rendezvous:

I leaped awake first at dawn, infused with dream-world images of Geronimo, Ota Benga and others...welcoming the dawn in St. Louis as the "White Eyes" world slept, sharing their wide-eyed wonder in the face of the ant colony and perennial freak show that is civilization.

*The Great Brain Suck* oscillates between a Walden wannabe’s wails, whines, and wishes about America's terrible eating habits, the corn-dominated food culture, the horrors of the Military War Machine and reality television, on the one hand; and discourses on the craftsman Wharton Esherick, the Parthenon in Nashville, Tennessee and a visit to Alzheimer’s-afflicted Lewis Mumford, on the other. And then, in an essay so boring that it would make Prometheus check his watch and wonder why the bird is so late, Halton gives a solipsistic tour of his own home.

*The Great Brain Suck* sucks. It’s a wonder -- and a worry -- that the book has been legitimized by the University of Chicago Press, one of the country’s finest. Who, in heaven's name, do the editors think the book will reach, let alone convince?

There are, of course, serious issues raised by the advance of technology, the spread of consumerism and the rise of a ubiquitous media. But *The Great Brain Suck* has nothing new to say about them. Halton is no Thoreau. He's not even, God help us, a Charles Reich. We can only hope that undergraduates at Notre Dame and readers in search of enlightenment about American epiphanies circumnavigate Halton's South Bend home for the incurably sociological, where cliches of the academic left go to die-late.