Anyone interested in understanding the concept of justice, Martha Nussbaum, professor of philosophy, law, and religion at the University of Chicago once noted, must rise above the details of the immediate situation and craft theories that address many different times and places. Unfortunately, Ms. Nussbaum added, there is something about public culture in the United States "that's not that friendly to philosophy."

Carlin Romano does not agree. If philosophy is defined broadly as an ever-expanding, pragmatic "practice of persuasion" directed at our lived reality (rather than as a narrow, ahistorical, abstract, academic discipline that "hunts down eternal verities"), he insists, then America "plainly outstrips any rival as the paramount philosophical culture." Blessed with marvelous means of communication and "the widest boundaries of freedom of expression of any country in history," it is anything but "a land of casual anti-intellectuals" who reduce discourse to the lowest common denominator.

In "America The Philosophical," Mr. Romano, the book critic for The Philadelphia Inquirer from 1984-2009 and now a professor of philosophy at Ursinus College, surveys and celebrates the contemporary marketplace of ideas. His book is capacious and audacious. His assessment of "philosophers" ranging from John Rawls and Richard Posner to Susan Sontag and Camille Paglia to cybercritics and cybercynics does, indeed, demonstrate that the public square in the United States contains a not inconsequential share of serious thinkers. His overall argument, however, is not all that persuasive.

Mr. Romano seems content to call just about any public person a philosopher. And, it seems to me, "America The Philosophical" often appears to contain a thesis in search of corroborating evidence. Mr. Romano claims, for example, that market-driven vulgarization does not pose all that great a danger to American culture. A time capsule of vulgarity from the 1990s, he writes, would contain "evidence of its own impotence" because Geraldo, Richard Simmons, Larry Flynt, Jerry Falwell, Tammy Bakker, Brian Bosworth and Chuck Barris are not "still going strong." Does he deny, one wonders, that our popular culture and our politics are at least as vulgar in the 21st century?

Does he really believe that sound-bite, slogan-driven and personality-based political advertisements and pundit-talk on radio and television sustain a system "in which every side of an argument gets maximum focused support"? Or that the presence of C-Span and Bill Moyers on public television constitutes a compelling case that broadcast culture is serious and substantive?
Mr. Romano suggests as well that Robert Fulghum, the author of "All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten," has a right to regard himself as a philosopher: his heroes are Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell, Marcel Duchamp and Richard Feynman. Acknowledging their sentimentality and childlike optimism (the world would be far better off if everyone had milk and cookies every afternoon "and then lay down with our blankies for a nap"), Mr. Fulghum's books, he asserts, without much elaboration, contain common sense and "uncommon thoughts on common things."

Mr. Romano concludes by anointing Barack Obama as our nation's "philosopher in chief" and predicting another vibrant century for "America The Philosophical." As the president addressed complex issues, including cosmopolitanism, maintaining power through consent rather than coercion, human rights, the rights of minorities and the importance of placing the collective good and legitimate political processes ahead of party, according to Mr. Romano, his fellow citizens, with their "insouciant independence," pragmatism and a predilection to question elite establishment thought, "had his back."

Perhaps. These days, however, while the public square cannot be deemed naked, substantive, reasoned and reasonable exchanges about the difficult and urgent problems we face appear to be in short supply. The United States surely does not seem philosophical.

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