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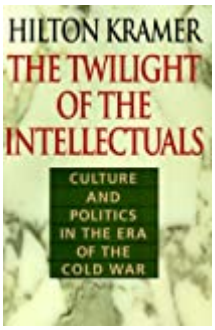

Hilton Kramer. *The Twilight of the Intellectuals: Culture and Politics in the Era of the Cold War.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1999. xx + 363 pp. $27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-222-5.

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The Cold War, observes Hilton Kramer, longtime cultural critic and editor of the neo-conservative journal *The New Criterion*, "was always as much a war of ideas as it was a contest for military superiority." Indeed, as Kramer notes, arguments over the relative merits of capitalism, democracy, and socialism increasingly took the shape of cultural, rather than specifically political, debates during the Cold War decades (p. xiii). *The Twilight of the Intellectuals*, a collection of some two dozen essays on politics and culture, most of which have been published previously, is intended to limn "the intellectual history of the Cold War," not merely as a diplomatic and military standoff between the U.S. and USSR, but in the broadest cultural ramifications of the contest between communism and capitalism, totalitarianism and democracy.

The decades stretching from World War I to the end of the Cold War now seem to be of a piece, marking an era during which European powers fought one another in two world wars, only to become caught in the bipolar tension of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. These violent, tumultuous decades occasioned an intense intellectual debate over the promise and perils of communism and socialism in which many Western intellectuals hailed the Soviet Union as the exemplar of a political and economic system superior to liberal democracy and capitalism. At the same time, intellectuals grappled with the promise and demise of the modernist cultural enterprise, with its insistence that innovative artistic works would liberate citizens from stultifying artistic conventions of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. At century's end, the communist agenda seems not only dead, but discredited, while the modernist enterprise is, if not altogether moribund, largely eclipsed by the postmodern rejection of the modernists' elevation of the power of art and their effort to cordon off the realm of artistic creation from the grubby world of politics and commerce. Because much of twentieth-century intellectual debate revolved around the issues of communism and modernism, Kramer contends, we stand now at twilight, a moment in which intellectuals' influence on our culture is rapidly being enveloped in the long shadow of these once vivid, now seemingly obsolete, concerns.

Kramer is determined not merely to recount the history of the Cold War, but to ensure that those American and European intellectuals who gave aid and comfort to the communist cause are held accountable for their views. Throughout much of the twentieth century, Kramer charges, some of the most intelligent thinkers in the West "fought on the side of the political enemy," supporting, or at least tacitly condoning, tyranny against

freedom (p. xv). Kramer's interpretation of the Cold War, rather than fusing political and intellectual history, reduces much of recent intellectual history to the debate over Stalinism. Writers and artists, in Kramer's ledger, are tallied either as pro-Stalinist or anti-Stalinist. Nuance is often rounded off, and entire careers are hailed or castigated based on the artists' opinions, however informed or misguided, about the Soviet Union. *The Twilight of the Intellectuals* thus offers a highly politicized treatment of Cold War thought, rather than a broadly conceived history of American culture during the Cold War.

The Stalinist regime was, to be sure, one of the most monstrous in history. As incontrovertible evidence of the regime's brutality and duplicity–intolerance of dissent, purges of supposedly disloyal citizens, sham trials, the Nazi-Soviet Pact, subjugation of Eastern Europe–gained wide exposure in the West between the 1930s and 1950s, its supporters seem increasingly culpable for their willful denial of facts and disingenuous support for tyranny.

Most Western leaders, thinkers, and citizens, of course, were resolutely determined to resist the USSR's expansion and promote its demise–a decision amply justified by history, indeed, one amply justified as early as the 1930s. Kramer, however, seemingly endorses Senator Joseph McCarthy's dire warning that communism was "a conspiracy so immense" that it was poised to undermine American democracy. The Communist Party, he writes, exerted "immense power and influence on American cultural life," while Stalinism played an "immense role in this country's politics and culture" in the 1930s and 1940s (p. 72).

From Kramer's vantage, communism, if it were to gain power in the United States, would proceed from the pen, the paintbrush, and the motion picture camera, rather than the ballot box or the barrel of a gun. Kramer approvingly cites French philosopher Raymond Aron, who noted that twentieth-century revolutions have not sprung from the grievances of "the people" but from the schemes of intellectuals. Academicians, writers, publishers, artists, and movie-makers were all held in thrall by the prospect that the Soviet revolution would eventually spark revolutions around the globe, especially in the United States. McCarthy and other anticommunists (Kramer, presumably, among them) feared, despite considerable evidence to the contrary, that millions of American citizens might subscribe to the appeal of a classless society and the dictatorship of the proletariat. This ascribes a great deal more influence to intellectuals and artists than even some of the most dour Frankfurt School critics of a docile, easily manipulable populace would allow.

According to Kramer, Stalinism was nothing less than an article of faith for many American and European intellectuals, and so was impervious to logic and facts (pp. 50, 308). This "faith" shaped the views not only of its acolytes, but even those of many doubters and nonbelievers as well: advocating revolution became such a powerful "orthodoxy" that many American liberals–and even many conservatives(!)–were too timid to broach even the slightest criticism of the Soviet Union, even as the evidence of Stalin's ruthless oppression of his own people mounted in the 1930s and 1940s. Even anticommunists, according to Kramer, were often reluctant to appear too hostile to the fashionable radical agenda of striving to usher in a socialist utopia.

Kramer considerably enlarges the size of the Stalinist conspiracy by consistently conflating liberalism, various stripes of leftist and progressive thought, and outright Stalinism. Irrespective of their views on other political issues, Kramer derides many liberals and leftists as pro-Stalinist. For decades, conservatives have pointed in horror to the deplorable history of communist regimes in the twentieth century to de-legitimize virtually any advocacy of socialist or even liberal political reform. The 1948-49 trial of Alger Hiss for espionage, which in some respects marks the beginning of the Federal government's highly-publicized Cold War crusade against communist infiltration (and has, dismayingly, remained virtually a political litmus test for both conservatives and leftists ever since), is, fittingly, the subject of the first two essays in this collection. For Kramer, Hiss's guilt confirms not merely that communism had indeed made inroads into the American government, but that American liberalism was tainted by its obeisance to Marxist and socialist ideals. Kramer also discounts the Cold War suppression of alleged "subversives," real and imagined. He cavalierly describes Joe McCarthy's four-year rampage through American politics as mere "vagaries," and he upholds the Federal government's scrutiny of citizens' political views as an entirely warranted defense of national security (pp. 74, 78).

Even if we endorse the Cold Warriors' effort to resist domestic communism and bring about the eventual destruction of the Soviet empire, however, legitimate questions remain about the United States' conduct of the Cold War both abroad and at home. Unfortunately, Kramer's tendentious essays leave little common ground for debate. Is it fair to brand critics of American foreign policy

during the 1950s and 1960s as pro-Stalinist? Were all opponents of the colossal blunder in Vietnam, as Kramer declares, "pro-totalitarian" and "anti-American"? Even George Kennan, who in the 1940s counseled patient, vigilant containment of the Soviet Union until it crumbled from within, later declared the war in Southeast Asia "the greatest policy disaster in nearly two centuries of the Republic's history." Many critics of America's Cold War strategy accepted the imperative need to resist the USSR, but believed that containment could be implemented successfully without such a gigantic peacetime military establishment, without abrogating the citizens' right to criticize their government, and without shifting our political spectrum substantially rightward.

As a critic of art and literature, Kramer is similarly unsparing of those whose aesthetic or political vision he finds wanting. For Kramer, Matthew Arnold's almost reverent estimation of the function of high culture, penned some one hundred fifty years ago, still lights a path into the postmodern "twilight." Kramer endorses Arnold's contention that the arts ought to strive toward perfecting the human soul and enduring aesthetic achievement. Kramer thus finds much to admire in modernist culture, with its apotheosis of the arts and their indispensable role in society. The intrusion of political agendas, Kramer maintains, almost invariably corrupts both the creative and the critical enterprise. He thus applauds Lincoln Kirstein, founder the New York City Ballet, as the embodiment of an artist who hearkened to the muses, rather than to ideology, while he castigates art critic Meyer Schapiro for failing to set aside his socialist ideology when writing art criticism. Yet Kramer's insistence on separating political and aesthetic concerns is belied by his own tendency to castigate writers and painters for their political views. Artists, writers, and critics who espoused leftist opinions are sometimes dismissed, as though their entire creative or intellectual contributions are entirely undone by their support, however eager or half-hearted, for the chimera of proletarian revolution. Renewed interest in the writings of Josephine Herbst (and I share Kramer's estimation of her limited literary talents) as a stalwart leftist or proto-feminist are fundamentally misguided, according to Kramer, since Herbst's life, like her prose, was blighted by her inability to renounce the Stalinist creed. Similarly, Kramer condemns Malcolm Cowley and Lillian Hellman for their unabashed Stalinism, lauds Edmund Wilson and Sidney Hook for renouncing their early support for the USSR, ridicules Dwight Macdonald's ill-considered, opportunistic political views, and criticizes Irving Howe, who for not moving further toward the right when he disavowed leftism (Kramer also cattily derides Howe for moving to "a smart address on the Upper East Side of Manhattan" [p. 152]). Lionel Trilling's unwavering support for liberalism and opposition to Stalinism qualifies him among the few heroes in Kramer's almost relentlessly unhappy tale of Cold War thought.

Kramer is particularly dismayed that the intellectual left was not altogether vanquished during the 1940s and 1950s, but once again became influential beginning in the 1960s. Certainly the New Left resuscitated the careers of many older leftists by lionizing their defiance of, or victimization by, McCarthyism. Nonetheless, is it accurate to say that American politics and, especially, American culture was "re-Stalinized"–in the sense that unfettered debate was destroyed by almost compulsory support for a liberal or even leftist political agenda–by the upheaval of the 1960s (p. 337)? Or that American liberalism has waved the flag of "surrender" to socialist ideology (p. 15)? Kramer's withering essay on Susan Sontag's rise to intellectual celebrity and his denunciation of Lillian Hellman, an unrepentant Stalinist who became a heroine to many American liberals and leftists, especially after she published her recollections of the McCarthy era *Scoundrel Time* in 1976, both attest to his ongoing reaction against the political turmoil of the 1960s.

Most of Kramer's essays focus on American political and intellectual life between the 1930s and the 1960s (the Depression decade and the rise of the New Left, he observes were the critical moments in the development of American radicalism and in establishing the role of intellectuals as critics of American life and politics [p. xiii]), and he is a good deal quieter about the later history of the Cold War. Still, despite his contention that we stand at the "end of an historical epoch" (p. xii), Kramer insists that Stalinism continues to cast a pall over American culture, here at the supposed dusk of the age of ideology. Although the United States has no organized political left, Kramer complains that 1960s radicals remain the darlings of the academy and the media. American culture, he asserts, has once again been "re-Stalinized," as the old left-right political spectrum has been projected onto debates over multiculturalism and "political correctness" in the 1980s and 1990s (p. 337). Such invective, from an erudite and generally careful writer, seems not merely inaccurate, but downright heedless. Certainly we have endured no shortage of partisanship and even outright intolerance gussied up in the language of scholarship from those with divergent views over, say, feminism, Affirmative Action, or multiculturalism, but this intolerance

and specious reasoning has scarcely been confined to one side. Kramer conspicuously fails to acknowledge that the left has no monopoly on the selective use of history and evidence, or on the elevation of political and economic precepts to the status of "articles of faith." To suggest that even the rancorous political and intellectual climate of the so-called "culture wars" is latter-day Stalinism, with its utter intolerance of dissent, strains even Kramer's estimate of an "immense" conspiracy to its breaking point. Not content to write a historical account of the Cold War, Kramer seems determined to keep fighting it, and so rails against the falling of the twilight.

As we hurtle toward 2000, we are buffeted by efforts to sum up our century virtually every time we open a newspaper or turn on the television. Display tables at Barnes and Noble and Borders, laden with facile histories of the century, groan under the weight of the past. Most of these cursory histories of the century's greatest people and achievements, along with its worst debacles, render the twentieth century as innocuous as an old issue of Life magazine, reducing life-or-death struggles and vexing intellectual debates to a few iconic photographs and flaccid paragraphs. *Twilight of the Intellectuals*, by contrast, addresses head-on some of the political, intellectual, and cultural debates that animated a century of extraordinary violence, tumultuous politics, and bewildering cultural change. Some readers will cheer Kramer's history of the Cold War era, while others will recoil from his opinions. Few are likely to be won over to a new point of view, but all stand to benefit from joining the debate. Kramer's views, however tendentious, thus merit consideration by those who regard him an ally or an adversary.

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