
The Great Brain Suck: And Other American Epiphanies, by **Eugene Halton**. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 319pp. \$25.00 paper. ISBN: 9780226314662.

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Eugene Halton remains our discipline's most adroit and uncompromising critic of modern social thought. His *Bereft of Reason* (1995) is both a blasphemous assault upon the "holy trinity" of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim and an irreverent defrocking of the reigning high priests of modernity and postmodernity—Jürgen Habermas and Richard Rorty. Seldom cited and easily misunderstood, far too few sociologists are familiar with Halton's work.

He sees the canonization of Saints Karl, Max, and Emile as a moribund mistake. Because none of these foundational thinkers questioned the inevitability of modernity, their contemporary adherents remain blind to the roads not taken. Like the theological partisans of Europe's religious wars, most social theorists today see little alternative but to take up arms as either modernists or post-modernists.

By contrast, Halton is a pre-modernist. Consequently, this Notre Dame professor is as incomprehensible to the average social scientist as a pagan was to those early modern Catholics and Protestants. He anticipated this confounding effect in *Bereft*: "I hope to suggest some beginnings for a new and non-modern basis for contemporary thought. . . . This perspective may appear strange and perhaps even retrograde to the sophisticated contemporary reader" (1995:36).

Halton's last two books have been dense theoretical works, primarily compiled from journal articles and chapters in academic books. In this new collection of "epiphanies" about American life, Halton has been reborn as a free-range essayist. Inspired by Emerson's "The American Scholar," this professor of sociology and American studies dismisses the academy as "ingrown with expertise, hidebound by 'peer-reviewed' juggernauts and university standards designed to insure bureaucratic conformity" (p. x).

While a couple of chapters are nearly 20 years old, some of the finest essays appear here for the first time. As is the case with anyone mastering a different genre, the results are mixed. The dissimilarities between a scholarly article and an essay are not only stylistic but intellectual as well. Much of this volume's uneven quality, I suspect, is due to the ongoing evolution of Halton's work.

What Wayne Booth called the "rhetorical stance" is a three-legged dance: a series of steps seeking to balance subject, audience, and voice. The title of any composition poses a subject, seeks an audience, and projects a voice. The name of both this new book and its lead essay—*The Great Brain Suck*—sounds more like a tabloid headline than the publication of a respected academic press. What were they thinking?

"Feel free to roam the book," Halton tells us, "nonsequentially" (p. ix). Please, take him at his word: skip "The Great Brain Suck." Originally written for an academic anthology, this chapter is neither a scholarly article nor an essay. In a fire-and-brimstone sermon, Halton's subject is "the colonization of the human self by consumer culture" (p. 3). Given his updated sci-fi film version of the road to perdition, his intended audience seems to be those academics who are pop-culture aficionados. His voice is an upper-case parody ("BIG Zombie," "BIG SUV," "BIG McMansion") of Tom Wolfe's *New Journalism*. Like an exorcist, Halton invokes Dr. Binnell's warning at the end of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*: "THEY'RE HERE ALREADY! YOU'RE NEXT! YOU'RE NEXT! YOU'RE NEXT . . ." (p. 30).

Do not be deterred by this false start. To paraphrase an old adage, you can't judge a book by its title (or its first chapter). Halton's literary craft flourishes, particularly in the newer essays, when he sticks close to the ground. His voice becomes more authentic when conversing with common readers about "neglected masters, narratives, and artifacts" (p. ix). Whenever he adheres to Williams Carlos Williams's advice of "no ideas but in things," Halton bursts into poignant plainsong.

"There was once a man who kept a copy of Thoreau's *Walden* next to his bed throughout his life" is how Halton begins "Home on Mount Misery" (p. 177). The son of a wealthy

Philadelphia merchant, Wharton Esherick rejects commerce by winning a scholarship in 1911 to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Soon after discovering Thoreau, he settles into the nearby countryside, intent on becoming a modernist painter. With little artistic or financial success, he soon moves to a utopian community in Fairhope, Alabama, teaching at the progressive School for Organic Education. While there, he meets the novelist Sherwood Anderson who gives him a set of wood chiseling tools. So begins Esherick's turn from paint to wood.

Halton fashions these events into the story of a failed painter who, "in his wood, found his Buddha nature" (p. 180). Eulogized in 1970 as the "dean of American craftsmen," Wharton Esherick's enduring monument is his own "Home on Mount Misery" (p. 179). The Pennsylvania studio/home that he began endlessly constructing in 1926 is now a museum, filled with his organically functional furniture, sculpture, wooden utensils, and interior design. In 25 pages of text, supplemented by glossy color plates, Halton brings alive this long-neglected artisan and the artifacts he left for posterity at the "Wharton Walden" (p. 197).

"The Last Days of Lewis Mumford" is a moving account of the author's visits to the elderly Mumford couple in rural New York. The essay is homage to an exemplar, a man who Halton has persistently proclaimed a "noncanonical sociologist" (p. 255). Like all of us who cherish last conversations with loved ones, the author probes Mumford's life and times, seeking answers to all those questions, which at death will forever go unanswered. While not shying from the "dark side" of his hero, Halton remains a devotee of Mumford's normative and organic humanism.

To understand Halton's lineage and credo, you need to travel back in time: beyond the "holy trinity," beyond Kant, beyond Hobbes, all the way back to Aristotle. Hostile to an organic understanding of nature, Hobbes's atomistic and mechanistic worldview was a foundational schism between the Ancients and the Moderns. The social scientific determinism of Hobbes's *Leviathan* was an explicit repudiation of Aristotle's deliberative *polis*. Eugene Halton is an

Ancient—he is Aristotle's revenge upon
modernity.
