

THE NEW PHILISTINES
(SOHRAB AHMARI)

October 8, 2019

I am a Sohrab Ahmari fanboy. I endorse his recent full-throated calls for creation of a post-liberal future, and admire that he has boldly claimed the mantle of leadership. What matter if Ahmari's prescriptions are not yet fully coherent? The mark of a true leader is one who can inspire others to follow him. A man who claims to know with precision every step along the way, and the solution for every problem, is an ideologue or a grifter, not a man of destiny. This short book, Ahmari's first, though barely three years old, is interesting primarily not for its topic, the ideological degradation of contemporary art. Rather, it's interesting for what it shows about the arc of Ahmari's thinking, about the march of post-liberalism, and about how art relates to post-liberalism.

Ahmari's growth, to appropriate a term beloved by the Left, has been pretty dramatic. As he relates in his 2018 memoir, *From Fire, By Water*, he grew up a Marxist semi-agnostic in Islamic Iran, then moved to the United States as a teenager, and gradually drifted rightward. Most recently, a fight he initiated with David French of *National Review* exposed fracture lines on the Right and brought into the open a burgeoning line of conservative thought, one that is tired of being a beautiful loser and instead insists that winning is both possible and necessary. We will not discuss that much here, even though it is a fascinating topic, and one upon which much turns. What matters is that competent, rational, unashamed post-liberals have emerged on the Right. By that term, I mean someone who rejects most or all of the Enlightenment as a failed project, and who regards wholesale rework of the American system as both desirable and necessary. Under this definition, a populist conservative such as Tucker Carlson is not a post-liberal. He overlaps some, and he may be an ally in the wars to come, but the distinction is that Carlson, for today, still maintains that a restoration, not a rework, is possible of the American system. Those who have moved beyond that are post-liberals.

By itself, that's not enough to make a movement. The ferment on the Right throws up lots of new ideas, some good, some bad, some in-between. Most die unloved and unknown. What makes Ahmari

different is two things. First, Ahmari occupies a prominent public position, op-ed editor of the *New York Post*. No other conservative, much less post-liberal conservative, occupies such a position; conservatives are all either stuck in the conservative ghetto with no relevance beyond it, or like David Brooks, are house conservatives on the plantations of the Left, docile and obedient to their masters, and careful to never pose any actual challenge to Left hegemony. Second, Ahmari is the only prominent post-liberal with any charisma. That is, there exist several fairly prominent post-liberals, notably Curtis Yarvin and Adrian Vermeule (very different from each other, to be sure). Their collective charisma does not register on any meter one can find. And true, there are some semi-prominent men with charisma who seem like they are working up to become post-liberals, notably Michael Anton. But he has not come out of the Enlightenment closet, though as I have said, he will, soon enough. That leaves Ahmari, for now at least, as the man of the hour on the post-liberal Right.

This seems like an odd introduction to a book putatively about art and its degradation. Certainly, Ahmari wrote *The New Philistines* in 2016 about art, not about post-liberalism. But viewed from 2019, it is a stepping stone, a puzzle piece, in the development of Ahmari's thought. If it were a book purely about art, I would have little to say, since with all forms of art, I am not able to say much of worth to others, because my own discernment and insight is close to zero. Whether it is music, painting, theater, or architecture, I do not especially enjoy it, or really understand it. (My Jordan Peterson-approved five-factor personality test confirms this gut understanding of myself; I score very low in "creativity and aesthetic sensitivity.") I am not repelled by painting, or sculpture, but do not go out of my way to view it. Mozart sounds like elevator music to me. Theater is boring. Architecture I view instrumentally, as modes for living and a projection of power, although if I had to pick an art where I had some actual thoughts, it would be architecture.

Ahmari wrote this book about art. So let's at least do him the courtesy of evaluating what he says. Ahmari does not claim that he has special insight, but he is a lot more appreciative of art than I am. He is at pains on the first page to acknowledge that since Aristotle, claims have been made that art has declined, and to distinguish this historical tendency from what is happening now. His claim, which he attempts

to demonstrate within the book, is that “Things that are going wrong with art are qualitatively worse than all that came before.” Ahmari does not dislike Modernist art, for example, or if he does dislike it personally, he does not reject that it has artistic value, even if it is based on “radical ideas about what counts as beautiful and how to convey truth.” Today’s art world, however, is wholly and deliberately disconnected from any conception of beauty. Rather, it is a set of noxious manifestations of identity politics, a tool in the struggle to obtain power and release from supposed oppression, rather than being “a mirror and repository of the human spirit.”

Now, I suspect this idea that one generation usually thinks that art has declined since the previous one is exaggerated. Perhaps it is sometimes difficult to distinguish fashion from art, but I suspect the Ancient Greeks may sometimes have carped about changes in art, yet still for the most part attempted to make objective aesthetic judgments, and did not assume newer was not as good. The same was probably true for other eras of the efflorescence of high art, from the High Middle Ages to the Renaissance to the Islamic Golden Age. I could be wrong, not being at all an expert in art history, but I suspect that this exaggeration is deliberate and a form of modern propagandistic sophistry designed to shut down criticism. My bet is that we are often lectured that unfavorable comparisons of today’s art to art of the past are the historical norm is merely an attempt to prevent us from complaining about actual degradation that is occurring in modern times, by making the complaint seem uniformed and illegitimate, and therefore not calling for any response except contempt.

This is part of a broader pattern of historical propaganda about intergenerational conflict. I have been wondering lately if it is true, as you age, you become a curmudgeon, viscerally rejecting and unable to accept change, and unable to discern whether change is good or bad. Is the common belief that you become a fuddy-duddy as you age true, in other words? After some thought, I am pretty sure that to the extent this is true, it is a modern phenomenon. In any pre-1800 society, to be sure, there was always some conflict between young and old. After all, the young are impetuous and ambitious, desirous of making their way in the world, and the old are more cautious, due to experience and the desire not to lose what they have.

But there is a crucial distinction between demands for energetic action and demands to change the framework of society. In the pre-modern past the young did not see the ideas, the principles, the morals, the values of the old as stagnant. Young and old accepted the same things, usually; the differences arose from choosing tactics to achieve common ends, and the young expected and desired to mature into the old. If you read about the history of Venice, for example, there are none of these demands by the young for necessary change, or resistance by the old to it. Instead, everyone evaluated proposed actions from his perspective and with the wisdom he had. Examining history, it becomes clear that creating conflict among the generations about the basic values and morals of a society is yet another poisonous fruit of the Enlightenment, created by the fantasy that society must always change and move “forward”—that new emancipations must always be discovered, and new supposed oppressions therefore laid at the feet of the old. The good news is that like most Enlightenment ideas, this one is coming to its inevitable end, along with the destruction wrought. In a post-liberal society, under Foundationalism, the young will cooperate with the old; it will look more like the Venice of 1400, in this respect, than any modern Western society.

Well, that was another long tangent. Ahmari wrote this book when he was still living in London, so all the art he directly profiles is there. He begins with the ruination of the Shakespeare program offered at the restored Globe theater, citing the insane and creepy things that the new director, Emma Rice, appointed in 2016, did and said in the few months she was in charge before the book was published. All revolve around identity politics; all are dumb, from making *A Midsummer Night's Dream* about homosexuals to mandating that male characters must be played by women in order to achieve 50-50 “gender parity.” Ahmari accurately and insightfully compares it all to Socialist Realism—art in the service of politics, not transgressive, just “drearily conformist.”

What Ahmari could not have known is that Rice was fired in April 2018. The cover story given was that the Globe’s board didn’t like her use of “sound and light rigging.” That’s obviously not the real reason; presumably the theater, which as Ahmari notes caters primarily to “tourists and students,” had lost money when it moved away from traditional enactments of Shakespeare’s plays. But maybe not—the Globe

immediately hired another woman, Michelle Terry, who also insisted on “gender parity,” and promptly staged a version of *Hamlet*—with herself as Hamlet, a man far taller than her playing Ophelia, and a tiny woman playing Laertes. Or maybe the board, in thrall to woke capitalism, just couldn’t bring itself to hire a normal person who would offer plays the audience actually wanted.

Talk about Shakespeare is windup. The “New Philistines” of the book’s title are the critics and other art “professionals” who evaluate art purely on the basis of the politics of the hour. They, and especially the insider’s magazine *Artforum*, are Ahmari’s main target. Much of what Ahmari is trying to do is simply explain to normal people the thought processes and vocabulary used by these professionals, who form a deliberately insular yet highly influential group, “artists” who reject all beauty and all traditional purposes of art, yet are massively funded both by government largesse and private handouts. Ahmari notes that *Artforum*, and all its ilk, are basically “a mix of radical feminism, racial grievance, anti-capitalism, and queer theory.” (A glance at their website at this moment will confirm that nothing has changed.) Ahmari does us the favor of explaining what queer theory is, to the very limited extent it is coherently explainable. He also talks about the buzzwords always found jumbled with queer theory, such as intersectionality, visibility, and legibility, all of which of course are merely kaleidoscopic cant used by those untalented and unproductive to demand they receive unearned and undeserved power and money. At some level, it’s all so boring, or would be, if it wasn’t so destructive and evil.

We end the book with Ahmari travelling around London to art galleries, narrating the various worthless garbage he finds. All true, though not really all that new. Normal people paying even the slightest attention to contemporary art have known for decades exactly what our betters are doing, often with our money, while showering contempt on us. What does Ahmari propose in response? That is where things get interesting.

Bizarrely, given his current political stance, Ahmari’s 2016 prescriptions sound like Jonah Goldberg. Ahmari has more style, but what he wants here is the same ineffectual pleas that loser conservatives have been pushing for decades. More (classical) liberalism! More Enlightenment thought! (He even quotes the odious Lionel Trilling, who used to be famous but now, like most Baby Boomer idols, is mostly

forgotten, about how awesome liberalism is.) Invocations of “individual rights,” “popular sovereignty,” and the like, we are told, are the cure for identitarian power politics, whose advocates are anti-liberal, opposed to a beneficial universalist culture that has no particular values. All we need is more tolerance for all. John Stuart Mill is not mentioned, but might as well be. Ahmari even claims that the market will ensure that, while this degradation has a trickle-down effect, most popular entertainment will stay “immune to the politicisation exerted by the New Philistines.” You know whom the Ahmari of 2016 sounds exactly like? You guessed it. David French.

Perhaps part of why Ahmari has, this year, changed his tune is because he realized that he had not understood his enemies. In this book, he naively attributes their actions to ignorance or incoherence, not to the malice that actually motivates them. “It escapes the identitarians’ notice that their embrace of absolute relativism makes hogwash of all their pretensions to social justice: why should their measure of morality, aesthetic value or justice stand, if all such measures are contingent about history, institutions, and power relations?” As I have discussed at length elsewhere, such coherence is far less important to most ideologies than some combination of money (which flows in massive quantities to the identitarians, and not only in art), the sweet feeling of transcendence and meaning, and, most of all, the luscious feeling of having both moral superiority and power over others. Ahmari wonders why creators of identitarian “art” don’t see they bring no joy, and that the masses still flock instead to the older art available (for now) in galleries. There is nothing to wonder about; for Ahmari refuses to draw the obvious conclusion—they have no interest in joy, only in feeling superior to, and lording it over, others, while profiting handsomely.

Change his tune he has, though. As I say, the details of that is a topic beyond this review, but one I have addressed at some length elsewhere. It is all part of the ferment on the Right from which something will arise, and that right soon. Talking about art, however, has made me want to turn to two related topics about which I have been thinking for some time. First, why is it that in modernity, art is associated with the Left, whereas that is not the historical pattern? Second, what will art look like under Foundationalism, my own prescribed post-liberal system?

By art being associated with the Left, I mean that today it appears that the vast majority of those earning their living from creating art are personally leftist and frequently overtly use their art to support leftist causes. At the same time, those who, on any significant scale, support artists with money or other benefits are also all leftists, equally eager to further the use of art to achieve political ends. The result is that today determining where art ends and left-wing agitprop begins is very frequently impossible. Much neutral art exists, of course, but very little in what might be considered high, or more accurately, high-publicity, art. And zero right-wing artists or right-wing art of any relevance or competence appear to exist. The result is that the vast majority of money paid to artists, both government money and private purchases or donations, flows to leftist artists, creating a self-reinforcing system of leftist dominance of the arts.

Why, though? In the pre-modern past, this was not true at all. I think it is because high art has always been a reflection of the ruling class, and we in the Western world for many decades have had a terrible ruling class rapidly getting worse. It is not a coincidence that art became degraded in parallel to the rise of the Left to dominance in the twentieth century, which is itself the natural end-state of Enlightenment thinking. Unlike Ahmari (or at least unlike the Ahmari of 2016), I think all twentieth-century modern art is essentially just as worthless as the degraded pseudo-art of our own time, and that the degradation of art began when such art acquired traction. As far as I can tell with my admittedly limited knowledge, art declined along with, and in parallel to, our own society, throughout the twentieth century, accelerating since the 1960s.

This is not, therefore, a problem with government funding, as French-ite conservatives have it. Rather, it is a problem of social rot. Until quite recently, the government did not support artists directly in any meaningful way, so all funding was private, and mostly in the form of payments for artworks, not handouts to support artists in general (though after World War II such handouts dramatically increased). Thus, long before the government started shoveling money at artists to create degraded works, private individuals in the ruling class used their money to ensure the ascendance of leftists creating degraded art. When exactly this began I am not sure. I cannot tell you, for example,

what high art was actually produced and valued in the Europe of, say, 1910. Since the New Philistines control discussion of art, we are always told that the first decades of the twentieth century were a march toward modernist art and away from all the art that came before. I suspect this is a largely falsified history and that Modernist art was mostly ignored by the ruling classes until well after World War II. (James Stevens Curl's *Making Dystopia* covers this as applied to architecture.) In any case, what we have today is the ruling classes endorsing nihilism as art, and using their control of government to leverage support for art as agitprop, for no more complicated reason than that those ruling classes are awful. The result is uniformly leftist artists and art, and a vicious circle, as right-wing artists can never even get started, so adopt a different career path, or themselves drift left under pressure.

A possible counter-argument, made plausible by an apparent mapping to reality, is that those on the political left tend to be more open to new things as a personality trait, and that art is in large part the creation of new things, so therefore artists tend to be more left. That would not explain the total dominance of the Left of art, but it would explain some degree of imbalance. But this confuses the creation of new art with the creation of something qualitatively new, different from what came before, change for the sake of change. Great art is new, by definition, for it is not copied, but it has the qualities of beauty driven by talent, as all great art always has. When it leaves those behind for simple newness, as those "open to experience" may desire in the restless search for novelty, it does not become better art, rather most likely the reverse. And, of course, this counter-argument buys into the Left's caricature of the Right as being primarily interested in avoiding change. It is an implicit suggestion that all art that is not qualitatively new is mere copying, which is obviously false. The caricature is not honest analysis, of course; it is a weapon, like almost all leftist speech, a rhetorical device used disingenuously to insist that any resistance to, and even more rollback of, Left victory is inherently irrational and illegitimate.

The exact interplay of the ruling class and art, historically, is complex. The ruling class to some extent wants art, the art for which it pays, to reflect its prejudices, desires, and ideologies. Today's Left is no different in that. On the other hand, great patrons of art, from Augustus to the Medicis, usually preferred to fund the best artists, figuring (correctly)

that in its reflection they would show themselves off in the best light. The Left, of course, has abandoned this approach. But what follows is that if we change our ruling class we can change our art and the approach of artists. Defenestrating this ruling class is my goal, so let's turn to Foundationalism, and the role of art and artists in that future political structure. There are really two parts to this—getting to Foundationalism, and flourishing under Foundationalism.

As to getting to Foundationalism, I distinguish art in the sense we are using it today, high art, from persuasive art, which has a strong element of propaganda. Foundationalism is most definitely not a democratic system, but as José Ortega y Gasset noted, force follows public opinion; Julius Caesar and Augustus both cultivated public opinion assiduously. And in the modern world, technology and mass culture have made persuasive art essential to cultivating public opinion. Yet the Right has always done a terrible job of it (though certainly the National Socialists and the Fascists did a great job of it, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch discussed in *Three New Deals*, so it's possible for the Right, broadly viewed, to be very persuasive through art). The first thing I'm going to do when launching Foundationalism is to hire a world-class set of artists to create persuasive art. Any takers? (I mean truly world-class; I have come to understand that in any endeavor, even of those who do well and are outwardly successful, only a tiny fraction are truly the best, and they stand apart, not on a continuum.)

But that's different from high art. Under Foundationalism, since our current ruling class will have been entirely replaced or reformed, through, among other devices, lustration and confiscation of ill-gotten gains, a new ruling class will by definition form. It will not be Left. That doesn't mean artists have to be right-wing under Foundationalism. In fact, Foundationalism anticipates similarity to pre-modern political systems, in which most people were apolitical about matters beyond the local sphere, both because they will have no say in such matters, and because subsidiarity will be the order of the day, or rather of the future centuries. And the ruling class will generally seek objective excellence in art, not agitprop. Thus, artists will mostly be apolitical, like everyone else, and their art also mostly non-political, though tending to reflect the themes of the ruling class. Say, the Solar Imperium and the rebirth

of Christianity. We'll see. What it won't have any connection to is the trash covered by this book.

That brings up the obvious question—will leftist art be directly suppressed, since no doubt there will be many shiftless leftist artists around for a while? Since their art is objectively not high art, but garbage, they will find no place in a system that rewards excellence in art. And because their funding sources will dry up, most of them will probably have to turn to honest labor to earn their bread, or change their political tune. Thus, there will be no need to suppress leftist art, because nobody will care about it anymore, and it will wither naturally. Leftist art collectives can have all the exhibitions they want, if they can afford to. The rest of us will return to the days when art was a joy, inspiration, and comfort to everyone, and forget that any of this unfortunate detour in art ever happened.