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Radical Chic ©

Readers are apt to remember Tom Wolfe's books – *The Electric Cool-Aid Acid Test*, *The Right Stuff*, *Bonfire of the Vanities*, and all the rest – as much for their style as their subject matter. And while his subject matter tends to age poorly, *Radical Chic* reminds that Wolfe's style – loquacious, informal, freakishly extravagant – still inspires admiration.

In *Radical Chic*, Wolfe's account of the infamous "Panther Party" thrown by Leonard Bernstein and its unhappy consequences for the aggrieved conductor and his wife, the author's stylistic tricks are readily apparent. Wolfe begins by writing as if he himself were a charter member of mid-60s New York Society. He drops names ("Jason Robards, John and D.D. Ryan, Gian-Carlo Menotti, Schuyler Chapin, Goddard Lieberson, Mike Nichols, Lillian Hellman, Larry Rivers, Aaron Copland, Richard Avedon, Milton and Amy Greene, Lukas Foss, Jennie Tourel, Samuel Barber, Jerome Robbins, Steve Sondheim, Adolph and Phyllis Green, Betty Comden, and the Patrick O'Neils..."). He slips in a bit of fashionable French (*en passant*, *politesse*, *nostalgie de la boue*), but not too much; that would be *gauche*.

He proclaims, as only an elitist East Side aesthete can, the *absolute psychological necessity* of the servant class ("...with the morning workout on the velvet swings at Kounovsky's and the late mornings on the telephone, and lunch at the Running Footman, which is now regarded as really better than La Grenouille, Lutece, Lafayette, La Caravelle, and the rest of the general Frog Pond, less ostentatious, more of the David Hicks feeling, less of the Parish-Hadley look, and then – well, then, the idea of not having servants is unthinkable. But even that does not say it all. It makes it sound like a matter of convenience, when actually it is a fundamental matter of – *having servants*. Does one comprehend?"). These touches, combined with an effete catch-phrase repeated at various intervals ("Deny it if you want to!"), the inclusion of *Vogue* magazine's recipe for "Sweet Potato Pone" – presumably a Panther favorite – and a treatise on "Old" New York Society and "New" New York Society, set the stage for the Panther Party and its fallout.

The party scene itself is a masterpiece of comic dialogue interspersed with Wolfe's devastating description of its self-consciously hip, reflexively neurotic and hopelessly out of touch Park Avenue participants. Maestro Bernstein interrupts the neo-Marxist shtick of Panther "Field Marshall" Cox:

"When you say 'capitalist' in that pejorative tone, it reminds me of Stokely. When you read Stokely's statement in the *New York Review of Books* ... you realize that he is talking about setting up a socialist government –"

"Let me answer the question," Cox says, and he says to Lenny: "We believe that the government is obligated to give every man employment or a guaranteed income ...see... but if the white businessman will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the businessman and placed in the community, with the people."

Lenny says: "How? I dig it! But how?"

"Right on!" Someone in the back digs it, too.

"Right on!" (Wolfe 56-57)

Bernstein's wife Felicia gains the floor and solemnly reads a letter in *The New Yorker* about how it *really* feels to be a member of an oppressed minority. Lenny expresses outrage to the mortified Field Marshall that he, Lenny, lives in an obscenely exclusive duplex. Cox and cranky Otto Preminger engage in a contentious bit of dialogue worthy of *The Sunshine Boys* (until, of course, Preminger "reached out and grabbed Cox by the forearm in some kind of grip of goodwill and brotherhood ... beaming as if to say, I didn't mean anything by it"). The party ends with a rich white lawyer fervently proposing the drawing up of a new, more socially equitable constitution, a constitution "that would give us all the power, and we could make it so deep and legitimate that you would have to kill us to change it!"

Julie Belfonte rises up in front and says, "Then we'll kill you!"

"Power to the people!" says Leon Quaat... and all rise to their feet... and Charlotte Curtis puts the finishing touches in her notebook... and the white servants wait patiently in the wings to wipe the drink rings off the Ambonia tables... (Wolfe 67)

The passage above neatly encapsulates Wolfe's stylistic method in the essay, presenting quoted material that exposes the foolish behavior of Bernstein's well heeled guests followed by a wry indictment of Radical Chic itself. Instead of savaging his targets – a richly deserved but too obvious approach – Wolfe allows the absurdity of the situation to make his point. A quaint relic of a bygone era, *Radical Chic* nonetheless remains a revealing and entertaining read thirty years after publication. Though doubtless disinclined to do so, folks like Barbara Walters can thank Tom Wolfe, and his inimitable style, for that.