

H-Ideas Forum: "A Brave Old World: Utopia, Dystopia, and the Intellectual Historian"

H-ArtHist (Bruhn)

Intellectual Historian"

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H-IDEAS announces

"A Brave Old World: Utopia, Dystopia, and the Intellectual Historian"

an online discussion with Professor Russell Jacoby, Department of History,
University of California-Los Angeles, beginning Tuesday, Feb. 13, 2001,
at 9:00 a.m. CST

H-NET JOINS THE DEBATE ON THE FUTURE OF THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

Russell Jacoby of UCLA will be joining the wider H-Net community from Feb. 13-19 to field questions and participate in a wider discussion on the past and future of public intellectuals. The H-Ideas editors hope to spark discussion on a debate that in recent weeks has spilled into the pages of *Harper's Magazine* and *The Nation*: have public intellectuals abandoned all hope of a more humane society?

This online discussion is unrelated to, but neatly coincides with, the publication of a forum, held several weeks ago in New York City, on the "future of the public intellectual" (*The Nation*, Feb. 12, 2001).

Panelists in this forum included Russell Jacoby, Stephen Carter, Herbert Gans, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Christopher Hitchens, John Donatich, and Steven Johnson. A transcript of their exchange can be viewed at <http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20010212&s=forum>.

AGENDA

Over the past decade, historian Russell Jacoby has distinguished himself as an incisive and provocative critic of contemporary liberalism. In his most

recent book, *The End of Utopia*, Professor Jacoby lamented the retreat of public intellectuals from once-inspiring Enlightenment ideals. Their inward turn has hastened the decline of a critically-engaged progressive politics: "radicals have lost their bite," he wrote, "and liberals their backbone."^[1]

Two months ago, in an article printed in *Harper's Magazine*, Professor Jacoby focused his critique on early twentieth-century thinkers, including Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper. Revulsion at Nazism and Soviet Communism fueled in these intellectual historians a deep skepticism of utopian platitudes. But despite the defeat of Nazism, the retreat from utopianism continued unabated. Jacoby finds contemporary intellectuals awash in a "convenient cynicism" that "dismiss[es] utopian visionaries as dangerous cranks." Lost is the spirit of hope that "inequality and suffering are not inherent to the human condition, that a more humane society is possible."^[2]

The H-Ideas editors have invited Professor Jacoby to help us address a vital question, one that transcends the putative boundaries between politics and the practice of the history of ideas:

Have public intellectuals--specifically, intellectual historians--abandoned all hope of a more humane society?

NOTES

^[1] Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xii.

^[2] Russell Jacoby, "A Brave Old World: Looking Forward to a Nineteenth-Century Utopia," *Harper's Magazine*, vol. 301 (Dec. 2000), 80.

SCHEDULE

Preparations for the H-Ideas exchange with Professor Jacoby will begin on Feb. 9, when a summary of his *Harpers* article will be posted to the H-Ideas discussion list. After a brief exchange between Professor Jacoby and the H-Ideas editors, the discussion will be opened to the entire H-Net community on the morning of TUESDAY, FEB. 13. ALL list subscribers are invited to post questions to Professor Jacoby and participate in a moderated discussion.

Those interested in the discussion may monitor its progress <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~ideas/>. Potential participants should subscribe to the H-Ideas discussion list. (Subscription instructions are provided on the aforementioned website.) For more information, please contact Andrew

Rieser, Co-Editor, H-Ideas, acrieser@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

Reference:

CONF: H-Ideas Forum: "A Brave Old World: Utopia, Dystopia, and the Intellectual Historian". In: Arthist.net, Feb 10, 2001 (accessed Jul 1, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/24319>>.