

Reason, Why?

John Ralston Saul's credentials for his wide-ranging critique of Western society seem unprecedented. First, he's a Canadian author whose riveting novels look at the West from a Third World viewpoint. (Un-



BEVERLY ROCKETT

Saul: Giving aid to the antitheorists

fortunately, published in Canada, they're currently unavailable in the U.S.) He has a Ph.D. in history from King's College, he ran an investment firm in France, and he was once an executive for Canada's national oil company. In researching his fiction, he's lived with Eskimos in the Arctic Circle, nomads in the Sahara, and drug runners in Southeast Asia.

As Saul explains at length, rationalism was so successful in overthrowing pre-Enlightenment monarchies that we have come to regard *rational* almost as a synonym for *good*. And yet, rationality is inherently amoral, simply a method of proceeding from one assertion to another, as useful for evil purposes as good. We uphold an illusory but "absolute belief that the solution to our problems must be a more determined application

An End to Theory

*John Ralston Saul
and the Evils of
Rationalism*

BY KYLE GANN

Woody Allen's *Bananas*, who arbitrarily changes the national language to Swedish. Suddenly, one is forbidden to "appropriate" any music that doesn't belong to one's ethnic background. After two decades of lively culture-swapping, all those composers who had been studying tabla and Balinese gamelan quietly hid their hobby in the background.

cific sexual persuasion. Or we could accept that life and art are vastly mysterious things, with an incorrigible tendency not to conform to theories.

Theories are fun to play with, but taken seriously they do violence to the real world. As Saul points out, once you accept the Nazis' theories, the Holocaust was a perfectly rational program. The leaders of the Khmer Rouge learned Marxist theory in France, then slaughtered thousands of fellow Cambodians in applying it. White men have long held theories about the intellectual capacities of blacks and the competence of women, devised to ratio-

to solve. What could we rely on instead? Pointing to ancient societies more holistic than ours, Saul suggests that human happiness involves integrating reason with our other faculties: spirit, appetite, feeling, imagination, intuition, instinct, experience, common sense. These capacities allow for flexibility, doubt, gray areas, case-by-case attention to issues that fall through the unsubtle grid of rational methods. But society's increasing emphasis on efficiency, management, and the bottom line indicates we're moving in the opposite direction.

I was more optimistic about the left than Saul is. I expected, as part of its ongoing critique of the patriarchal, macho, rationalist, white male viewpoint, that we'd explore and incorporate the feminine sensibility, the black sensibility, the artistic, the gay, Asian, Hispanic, and American Indian, and in the process transcend the unimaginative rationalism of the white male. Instead, we have theories of all flavors: multicultural, deconstructionist, identity politics. Scholars of all genders and ethnicities have mastered the white male academic's sterile, technocratic, tautological, jargon-filled prose style, effectively silencing themselves since, like white men before them, they are no longer speaking to the public. (Example: Marcia J. Citron's *Gender and the Musical Canon*, such a jumble of reiterated academic buzzwords that I couldn't make sense out of the first chapter.) The better victory would have

In my 13 years as a critic, I have said in every way I could think of that music is in crisis because of its overreliance on rationalism. Now I've found an author, John Ralston Saul, who says the same thing is true of politics, business, economics, literature, the military, and academia. Saul's *Voltaire's Bastards* (Vintage, \$16) is perhaps the most important modern book I've read. I've sent over a dozen copies to composers I know, and three of them recently told me it has changed their lives. Through examples from many disciplines and areas of life, Saul shows that rationalism, long assumed to go hand-in-hand with humanism and democracy, is actually opposed to them, and that rational methods have been chipping away at human freedom and equality for four centuries. Citizens realize their governing structures no longer work, but neither left nor right can offer solutions because neither knows how to step outside the bureaucratic channels that rationalism has created.

Widely read and discussed in Europe and Canada, Saul seems to have had little impact in New York. A Czech expatriate sent *Voltaire's Bastards* to the Czech premier, who reportedly found it thought-provoking, and the Canadian prime minister recently mentioned Saul in a public address. In January, the *Utne Reader* included Saul as one of 100 visionaries who are changing the world. In New York, though, *Voltaire's Bastards* was trashed in the *Times Book Review* by a conservative who missed its entire point. (The *Voice* has never reviewed Saul's books.)

There may be deep reasons the left hasn't picked up on Saul. For several years the attack on theory has come from the right, and it hasn't been much



more determined application of rationally organized expertise. The reality is that our problems are largely the product of that application."

Saul saves his harshest words for neoconservatives, but he gives no comfort to those who nurture leftist ideology. His definition of deconstructionism in *The Doubter's Companion* (Free Press) is classic: "Jacques Derrida and his disciples protest that what they actually mean is that language never means exactly what it says. If so, they have come rather late in life to what has always been a given between writers and readers. . . . [T]he practical intent of deconstructionism is to demote the communications of the writer and the citizen to the level of naivety if not idiocy and to insert the critic or professor as the essential intermediary.... Individual deconstructionists may well think of themselves as socialists or liberals or conservatives or something else. But since their argument undermines the value of public discourse, they can't help but be the servants of whatever anti-democratic forces are at work."

—KYLE GANN

from the right, and it hasn't been much acknowledged that there is an anti-theoretical left as well. Musicians may be especially susceptible to the anti-theoretical movement, for while we feel oppressed by the right, leftist theory has done nothing to help us. On the right, university music theory, drawn not from the basics of acoustics but from examples by the great composers, is inherently conservative, reinforcing the primacy of European standards at every step. Every Downtown musician begins by learning Europe-grown theory and ends by throwing it away. Furthermore, we know what a dead end rationalism can lead to when not enriched by feeling and experience: we survived 12-tone music.

Unless you count the idiosyncratic jottings of Harry Partch, La Monte Young, and a few others, Downtown music hasn't come up with an overriding theory, and that theory-lessness is its glory. Composers have an astonishingly diverse plenitude of techniques at their disposal—multitempo structures, game theory, just intonation pitch systems, Indian drumming patterns, jazz changes, computerized rule improvisation, and on and on and on—unhampered by a single theoretical dogma to tell them what they're supposed to be doing. Then along comes the left, sounding much like the Central American dictator in



According to leftist ideology, a straight person can't internalize a gay person's feelings sufficiently to express them in art. Yet Frederic Rzewski's *De Profundis*, a setting of Oscar Wilde's searing manifesto written while imprisoned for homosexuality, has been bringing audiences to tears. Rzewski, according to what I've heard, is straight. A phone call might settle the matter beyond doubt, but making it would entail finding his sexual orientation relevant. Musicologist Susan McClary finds evidence of Schubert's homosexuality in his looser thematic logic and the emphasis and sensuality of his second themes. But those are the very reasons I've always preferred Schubert's sonatas to Beethoven's more rigorously uptight ones. You could tell me that that means I'm latently homosexual, and I could tell you that in Jung's framework I'm a feeling type, not a rational type, and that sensuality is not unvaryingly linked to a spe-

cialize stacking the deck in their own favor. (Saul reminds us that, until recently, "to rationalize" meant to lie to oneself.) Leftist theory is a way of fighting back—as Blake wrote, "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's"—but what we need is disarmament.

Multicultural arts guidelines are a classic example of applied rationalism. Funders, embarrassed by controversies surrounding the art they supported, attempted to bypass the panel process by imposing guidelines that would automatically produce the kind of art wanted. Like all bureaucrats, they superstitiously believed that rationalism could produce magic verbal formulas to cover all conceivable cases. But it doesn't work, because bad artists can always make art to meet the guidelines, while artists who remain true to their vision get filtered out. Rationalism's cut-and-dried methods generally exacerbate the problems they're meant

sense out of the first chapter.) The better victory would have been, not to beat the white boys at their private language game, but to force them to speak plain English so that they could no longer hide from public debate.

Who wields the white man's weapon becomes, to some extent, the white man. Perhaps the most optimistic spin one could put on the

culture wars is that they're the final death throes of the age of reason, the ultimate realization that logic can't give life meaning. Saul tells the story of Cardinal Richelieu, one of the chief founders of modern rationalist technique, who appeared before the pope and gave a learned argument to prove a certain point. The next day, he returned and used the same facts to prove the opposite point, just to show the pope what a conveniently flexible tool this new rational method could be. Left and right duplicate Richelieu's feat, using the same body of evidence to make diametrically opposed points, often depending more on the temperament of the arguer than on the value of the evidence. After all, armed with any theory, supporting evidence is easy to find. But Downtown musicians have gotten along without theory for many years now, and some of us, reading *Voltaire's Bastards*, feel like our instincts were right all along. ♦