

New York Times columnist Frank Rich at the University of Michigan: thin gruel

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Frank Rich, op-ed columnist for the *New York Times* and the newspaper's theater critic from 1980 to 1993, spoke before an audience of several hundred people at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor on March 20. The subject of his talk was the current state of culture and politics in the US.

Rich is a liberal commentator, one of the relatively few who remain in prominent positions in the US media, and a principled one at that. He has expressed consistent contempt for the Bush administration and its cast of sinister characters, and opposition to the war in Iraq.

A column that appeared in the *Times* on November 27, 2005, for instance, was headlined "Dishonest, Reprehensible, Corrupt ...," and included the following passage: "The more we learn about the road to Iraq, the more we realize that it's a losing game to ask what lies the White House told along the way. A simpler question might be: What was not a lie?"

A month earlier, on October 16, he wrote, "It is surely a joke of history that even as the White House sells this weekend's constitutional referendum as yet another 'victory' for democracy in Iraq, we still don't know the whole story of how our own democracy was hijacked on the way to war."

Responding in September, 2005 to the Bush administration's criminal neglect in relation to Hurricane Katrina, Rich commented, "The worst storm in our history proved perfect for exposing this president because in one big blast it illuminated all his failings: the rampant cronyism, the empty sloganeering of 'compassionate conservatism,' the lack of concern for the 'underprivileged' his mother condescended to at the Astrodome, the reckless lack of planning for all government operations except tax cuts, the use of spin and photo-ops to camouflage failure and to substitute for action."

Rich is also the author of a memoir, *Ghost Light* (2000), written with a certain intelligence and sensitivity, about growing up in Washington in the 1950s and 1960s, the child of middle class Jewish parents whose marriage ended in divorce while he was still young. He describes his increasing fascination and association with the theater as life with his abusive, erratic new stepfather becomes ever more difficult.

In person, the *Times* columnist comes across as a pleasant and well-meaning individual. Unfortunately, his presentation Monday night was quite disappointing, so limited in its account

of recent developments as to shed little light on political and cultural life in the US. One did not anticipate a scathing, left-wing analysis of American society, but here was not even a serious liberal critique, or perhaps this is what has become of the American liberal critique.

Rich first commented on the tendency toward the "erosion of reality" in American politics and media. He recalled a passage from an article published in the *Times* in 2004 by Ron Suskind, in which the author reported on a discussion with a top Bush aide. The latter rejected what he called the "reality-based community," founded in a "judicious study of discernible reality," and argued instead that "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality."

Rich, who is currently writing a book on this subject, wondered out loud how this decline in a belief in reality had occurred. He suggested that this was "first of all a cultural story about how America got its news." The biggest division, he argued, was not between "red and blue" (Republican and Democrat), but between fiction and non-fiction.

"The history of this," he asserted, "goes back to Hollywood in the 1970s," when the studios, concerned about ratings, happened on the idea of the mini-series, i.e., moving daytime soap operas into prime time. The process began with "Roots" on ABC, and it was so enormously successful that it was imitated. It turned out, Rich argued, that "people were captivated by the idea of taking history and turning it into a sort of soap opera."

Rich then jumped ahead to 1991 and the Persian Gulf War. Another network was in difficulty, CNN this time. Ted Turner, the speaker remarked, figured out there was a way to package news *as though* it were a miniseries. The war had a logo, it had theme music, its own title, "War in the Gulf". "It had a cast of hundreds who would come on and talk about it without actually knowing what was happening."

Rich discussed a number of media stories, including the deaths of Princess Diana and John F. Kennedy Jr., in these same terms, as moments in the growth of a non-stop "mediathon," with less and less reference to the real world. He noted that broadcast news had been swallowed up by entertainment companies (Disney, Viacom, Time Warner, etc.). While traditional journalism prized efforts to find the most

accurate version of events, the “values of drama are different—fast-paced, racy, dramatic.”

Rich noted the “lunatic element” to the coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, and media-created hysteria in 2001 over the Gary Condit-Chandra Levy case, shark attacks and child abductions. “Shark attacks and abductions were actually down. But the media hysteria created a sort of forest fire,” Rich noted.

Into this stew of “infotainment,” he dumped the media’s eagerness to transmit the Bush administration’s claims about the Saddam Hussein regime and weapons of mass destruction. He pointed in passing to the *Times*’ role in transmitting false information. “Even papers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were swept along ...it just adds to the problem.”

When it came to the Iraq war, the administration did a “brilliant” job of marketing “shock and awe.” Events were sanitized; “Iraqis were simply the extras in a B movie.” The military apparently spent \$250,000 on a set for Gen. Tommy Franks in Qatar, built by the same person who designed the set for ABC’s “Good Morning America.” When there were real setbacks, Rich said, the Pentagon created the Jessica Lynch story with its fictional rescue.

“In the election that followed,” Rich suggested, “the war in Iraq was never debated. The Democratic candidate couldn’t make up his mind as to what he thought about it.”

In conclusion, the *Times* columnist asked, “Where is this going?” He asked rhetorically why the American people were not marching in the street. “What’s happening to America’s political culture?” He suggested that Americans ought to “seize back some of this culture,” and offered the line in the film *Network*, written by Paddy Chayevsky and famously uttered by actor Peter Finch, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore” as a possible model.

When asked by this writer during the question-and-answer period to what he attributed the absence of a critical attitude toward the foundations of society and the extraordinary degree of self-censorship, in American culture as a whole, not simply the media, Rich had relatively little to say. In the end, he suggested things weren’t so bad; American television currently enjoyed some more complex and interesting programming, such as “The Sopranos”.

This is pretty thin gruel indeed.

Rich has written relatively impassioned columns, which have gained him a following, like those cited above, where he has delivered rather stinging rebukes to the Bush administration. His talk, on the other hand, was somewhat complacently delivered, including too many facetious remarks designed to evoke a predictable response from his audience. It may be that Rich is more suited to writing newspaper columns than speaking publicly on critical social issues. He may not be able to sustain his “impassioned” moments or expand them to the dimensions of a public address.

In fact, there may be any number of immediate explanations for the extreme limitations of Monday’s presentation, but, in the final analysis, the inadequacy is rooted in the weakness and inconsistency of Rich’s own outlook.

Above all, it seems, despite his decent intentions and instincts, Rich lacks a broader socio-historical framework in which he can place events and make genuine sense of them. He touched on a series of media episodes, for the most part epiphenomena, over the past several decades without once making reference to political or social life.

In the first place, the American media and culture suffered severe, long-term damage as a result of the McCarthyite witch-hunts of the 1950s. Rich is perfectly well aware of this, having had contact, as his memoir makes clear, with various left-wing personalities, including victims of the Cold War hysteria. But he remains silent on the issue.

In the more recent period, is it possible that the content of network television news could have been gutted, that American culture as a whole could sink to such a degraded state, that a perpetual “mediathon” could emerge that avoids discussion of any of the pressing problems that masses of people confront, without there being some fundamental social processes at work?

Rich studiously avoided the question of social inequality and its relation to these cultural and political problems. That America has been transformed into an oligarchy, where the bulk of the wealth ends up in a very few hands and social policy is geared toward the maximization of that personal wealth, must have some bearing on the ability and willingness of the media to speak the truth about life in this country. Media personalities themselves have become multimillionaires. Katie Couric of NBC’s “Today” show, essentially a non-entity, has reportedly been offered \$15 million by CBS to host its evening news program—and that would represent a cut in pay!

After all, it isn’t simply a matter of some amorphous “infotainment” without social or political content. What Rich also failed to spell out for his listeners was the remarkable lurch rightward on the part of the political establishment and the media, including his own newspaper. Critical events of the past decade, the manufactured sex scandal that nearly brought down the Clinton administration in a coup d’état and the hijacking of the 2000 election, in which the mass media played a central and profoundly reactionary role, were either mentioned only in passing or not referred to at all in his presentation.

It would not have been realistic to expect Rich to treat these questions in any depth, but Monday’s talk was disappointing nonetheless.



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