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Article abstract

In my wide-ranging 3,300-word essay, I first briefly introduce the life and work of the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955). Then I discuss Thomas B. Edsall's op-ed column "Trump Would Be Long Gone if Only We Could . . ." (dated June 12, 2024) in the New York Times.

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Thomas B. Edsall on the Convicted Felon Trump, and Walter J. Ong's Thought

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Abstract: In my wide-ranging 3,300-word essay, I first briefly introduce the life and work of the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955). Then I discuss Thomas B. Edsall's op-ed column "Trump Would Be Long Gone if Only We Could . . ." (dated June 12, 2024) in the *New York Times*.

My favorite scholar is my former teacher at Saint Louis University, the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955).

After Ong had been ordained a Jesuit priest and had completed his lengthy Jesuit formation, he followed in the footsteps of his former teacher at Saint Louis University, Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), who had undertaken to write his 1943 Cambridge University doctoral dissertation on the history of the verbal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic in our Western cultural history. McLuhan's 1943 dissertation was published posthumously, unrevised but with an editorial apparatus, as the book *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time*, edited by W. Terrence Gordon (2006). In any event, when young McLuhan was teaching English at Saint Louis University, and was working on his 1943 Cambridge University doctoral dissertation, he called young Ong's attention to Harvard's Perry Miller's massively researched 1939 book *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*. In it, Miller discussed the work of the then-largely-forgotten French Renaissance logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr Peter Ramus (1515-1572) to the best of his ability. However, in the end, Miller called for somebody to undertake a more thorough account of Ramus.

Ramus' work in logic dominated the curriculum at the newly founded Harvard College in Massachusetts Bay Colony (founded in 1636; for specific page references to Ramus, see the entry on Ramus in the "Index" of Miller's book [p. 528]). On the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the founding of Harvard College, scholars began to notice the prominence of Ramus' logic in the Harvard curriculum. But Ramus' logic had also dominated the curriculum at Cambridge University when young John Milton had studied there.

In any event, the recently ordained Father Ong set off to undertake his doctoral studies in English at Harvard University – and to undertake his doctoral dissertation on Ramus and the history of the verbal art of rhetoric and logic in our western cultural history from antiquity onwards, with Professor Miller serving as the director of his dissertation.

In 1958, Harvard University Press published Ong's massively researched doctoral dissertation in two volumes: (1) *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason*; and (2) *Ramus and Talon Inventory*. *Ramus and Talon Inventory* features the dedication "For/ Herbert Marshall McLuhan/ who started all this" (meaning that young

McLuhan had started young Ong's interest in Ramus and the history of the verbal arts.

Now, I have discussed Ong's life and eleven of his books and selected articles in my introductory-level book *Walter Ong's Contributions to Cultural Studies: The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication* (2000) – winner of the Marshall McLuhan Award for Outstanding Book in the Field of Media Ecology, conferred by the Media Ecology Association in June 2001.

Ong described his work as phenomenological and personalist in cast, and I have honored both the phenomenological and the personalist cast of his work in the lengthy subtitle of my introductory survey book about his life and work. Ong's own widely read and widely translated 1982 book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* is his most accessible introductory survey of notable themes in his work. The 600-page anthology titled *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (2000), features an accessible introductory survey of his essays. Ong's 400 or so distinct publications (not counting translations or reprintings as distinct publications) are listed in chronological order in Thomas M. Walsh's "Walter J. Ong, S.J.: A Bibliography 1926-2006" in the anthology *Language, Culture, and Identity: The Legacy of Walter J. Ong, S.J.*, edited by Sara van den Berg and Thomas M. Walsh (2011, pp. 185-245).

Now, in the present short review essay, I undertake to focus my much more narrowly limited discussion of Ong's work on Thomas B. Edsall's op-ed column titled "Trump Would Be Long Gone if Only We Could . . ." (dated June 12, 2024) in the *New York Times*:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/12/opinion/trump-biden-democrats-strategy.html?searchResultPosition=1>

As you may know, Edsall's weekly op-ed column is usually somewhat lengthy. He typically explores a variety of views regarding a certain matter – views that are not mutually exclusive.

In Edsall's column "Trump Would Be Long Gone if Only We Could . . .," he explores a variety of views about former President Donald Trump's appeal to voter in the upcoming November 2024 presidential election now that he is a convicted felon.

Yes, to my great surprise, in Trump's criminal trial in New York City, the jury found him guilty on all 34 felony charges brought against him. But what impact, if any, will his felony convictions have on the vote in the November 2024 presidential election?

At a certain juncture in "Trump Would Be Long Gone if Only We Could . . .," Edsall discusses the views of John Ganz, the author of the new 2024 book *When the Clock Broke: Con Men, Conspiracists and How America Cracked Up in the Early 1990s* – and of the 2024 online essay "The Shadow of the Mob: Trump's Gangster Gemeinschaft," which Edsall discusses. See Ganz's 2024 online essay "The Shadow of the Mob" at <https://www.unpopularfront.news/p/the-shadow-of-the-mob>

Now, Ganz's new 2024 book *When the Clock Broke* was reviewed by Jennifer Szalai in her piece titled "The 1990s Were Weirder Than You Think. We're Feeling the Effects. In 'When the Clock Broke,' John Ganz shows how a decade remembered as one of placid consensus was

roiled by resentment, unrest and the rise of the radical right” (dated June 12, 2024) in the *New York Times*:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/12/books/review/when-the-clock-broke-john-ganz.html?searchResultPosition=2>

Trump is also well-known for his appeals to resentment.

In her review of Ganz’s 2024 book Szalai says, in part, “Toward the end of the book, Ganz discusses an analysis by [the far-right intellectual Sam] Francis of ‘The Godfather,’ in which he connects the film to the sociological concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* – a traditional community based on kinship ties [*Gemeinschaft*] doing battle with modern legalistic forces [*Gesellschaft*].”

In any event, I align what Ganz refers to as Trump’s Gangster *Gemeinschaft* with what the co-authors Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler refer to as authoritarianism in their books *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (2009) and *Prius or Pickup? How the Answers to Four Simple Questions Explain America’s Great Divide* (2018).

Now, according to Edsall, Ganz, in his online essay “The Shadow of the Mob: Trump’s Gangster *Gemeinschaft*,” wrote that Trump, who is now a convicted felon, “talks and acts like a Mafioso. He’s not trying to hide it. He has compared himself to Al Capone frequently. The *New York Times* reported last week, ‘Trump Leans Into an Outlaw Image as His Criminal Trial Concludes’ [the title of a piece by Maggie Haberman and Jonah E. Bromwich; dated May 28, 2024 – before the guilty verdict came in]”:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/28/us/politics/trump-criminals.html?searchResultPosition=1>

Toward the end of their article, Haberman and Bromwich say the following: “Prosecutors recently asked the judge overseeing the documents case [against Trump] to change Mr. Trump’s conditions of release by barring him from making any further remarks that could endanger federal agents working on the case. In response, the Trump team accused them of ‘unsupported histrionics’ and demanded sanctions against them.

“‘He either does not know the truth, which is reckless, or he knows the truth and lied about it, which is abhorrent,’ Chuck Rosenberg, a former United States attorney and F.B.I. official, said of the standard procedures that Mr. Trump has misrepresented.

“‘He cares very much about wielding power, but not in the service of some greater good,’ Mr. Rosenberg said. ‘Rather, he wants power – including over the Justice Department – to benefit himself and his friends, and to harm others. He sees that power as only appropriate in his hands. That is a wretched corruption of what the rule of law means – and ought to mean – in this country, and it is deeply dangerous.’”

Yes, Trump is also well-known for his use of “‘unsupported histrionics.’”

Trump’s characteristic unsupported histrionics and his general litigiousness represent what Ong refers to as male agonism in his 1981 book *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality [Gender], and Consciousness*, the published version of his 1979 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University. In it, he switched to using the terms agonism and agonistic in preference to the term polemic that he uses in his earlier book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, the expanded version of his 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University (1967; for specific page references, see the entry on polemic in the “Index” [p. 354]). Etymologically, the Greek terms *polemos* (war, struggle) and *agon* (contest, struggle) have somewhat related meanings.

In any event, the psychodynamic that Ong variously refers to as polemic and agonistic involves the part of the psyche that both Plato and Aristotle refer to as *thumos* (or *thymos*), the spirited part of the human psyche. For a relevant study, see Barbara Koziak's book *Retrieving Political Emotion: Thumos, Aristotle, and Gender* (2000).

Now, Trump's basic playbook was shaped by his tutelage under mob lawyer Roy Cohn. Because Trump is once again the Republican Party's presidential candidate in 2024, the new movie titled *The Apprentice*, starring Jeremy Strong as the red-baiting mob lawyer Roy Cohn, and Sebastian Stan as young Donald Trump, sounds like it might be a box office hit. However, the Trump team is working hard to prevent the movie's release in the United States. See Michelle Goldberg's op-ed column titled "The Chilling Reason You May Never See the New Trump Movie" (dated June 14, 2024) in the *New York Times*:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/14/opinion/the-apprentice-trump-movie.html>

In it, Goldberg says, "But *The Apprentice* also gives you a sense of the audacious glamour Trump projected before he became a caricature, and it makes his decision to pursue Manhattan's Commodore Hotel in the 1970s, when Midtown was a sleazy wasteland, seem visionary. It offers a fresh way of understanding how Trump – of Cohn, who once served as chief counsel to Joseph McCarthy – evolved from an almost charming Queens striver into the lawless predator now bestriding American politics. I wish you could see it. Unfortunately, you may not get a chance to anytime soon, at least in the United States."

Now, Kai Bird, co-author (with Martin J. Sherwin) of the award-winning 2005 book *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, is working on a biography of Roy Cohn. Before the New York jury found Trump guilty on all 34 felony charges brought against him, Kai Bird contributed the op-ed commentary "Will Roy Cohn Save Donald Trump's Hide One Last Time?" (dated May 28, 2024) in the *New York Times*:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/28/opinion/roy-cohn-trump-court.html?searchResultPosition=2>

In it, Kai Bird says, "Of all the lessons Mr. Trump learned from his mentor, the value of treating people transactionally may have been the most important. The former president has run through countless lawyers in his decades of legal proceedings. Many were discarded. Some were not paid. But he held Mr. Cohn in high regard and took his lessons to heart. In 1981, he gave his mentor a pair of huge diamond cuff links as a gesture of profound gratitude. Years later, a friend of Mr. Cohn's had them appraised. They were worthless fakes."

Now, I want to step back a bit from Trump's convictions in his New York criminal trial. Grace Elizabeth Hale in history at the University of Virginia published her book about twentieth-century American history titled *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* in 2011.

It strikes me that Trump has appealed to white non-college-educated American voters precisely by tapping into that postwar American attitude of rebellion. Ah, but why did that postwar American attitude of rebellion emerge after President Harry Truman brought World War II (1939-1945) to its conclusion by dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? In all honesty, I do not have an answer to offer you regarding that crucial question.

In any event, the American physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer's key role in the development of the atomic bomb is detailed in the award-winning 2005 book *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, mentioned above, and in Christopher Nolan's award-winning 2023 movie *Oppenheimer*, starring Cillian Murphy as Oppenheimer.

Now, the communications media that accentuate sound (such as television, the telephone, radio, tape recorders) reach a certain critical mass in postwar America. Ong famously coined the terms secondary orality and secondary oral culture to differentiate the communications media that accentuate sound from the pre-historic and pre-literate primary orality and primary oral culture, including residual forms of primary oral culture in ancient and medieval Western cultural history.

I discuss Ong's account of secondary orality in my essay "Secondary Orality and Consciousness Today" in the anthology *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*, edited by Bruce E. Gronbeck, Thomas J. Farrell, and Paul A. Soukup (1991, pp. 194-209).

Now, Hale's 2011 book *A Nation of Outsiders* caught my attention because my favorite scholar Walter J. Ong, mentioned above, had published the title essay "The Barbarian Within: Outsiders Inside Society Today" in his 1962 book *The Barbarian Within: And Other Fugitive Essays and Studies* (pp. 260-285).

It is reprinted in *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Development*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (2002, pp. 277-300). In Ong's 1962 title essay, he constructs, and compares and contrasts, two philosophical positions: (1) The Greek position; and (2) the barbarian position. For a study of the ancient Greek construction of the barbarian, see Edith Hall's 1989 book *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy*.

Now, let's see what happens when we consider Ong's two philosophical positions and Hale's account of postwar American culture and the spirit of rebellion.

Now, in 1960, Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts ran as a Democrat for president of the United States – and he won narrowly. Inasmuch as he was Harvard-educated, he represented what Ong refers to as the Greek position. However, inasmuch as he was a Roman Catholic in a predominantly Protestant American culture, he also represented what Ong refers to as the barbarian position.

No doubt what Hale refers to as the spirit of rebellion in the white middle class in postwar American culture coincided in 1960 with Kennedy's representing what Ong refers to as the barbarian position.

But another way to view Kennedy's election in 1960 is to consider Robert C. Christopher's book *Crashing the Gates: The De-WASPIing of America's Power Elite* (1989; the acronym WASP = White Anglo-Saxon Protestant).

Briefly, there is a certain parallel between what Hale refers to as the spirit of rebellion in the white middle class in postwar American culture, on the one hand, and, on the other, what Christopher refers to as crashing the WASP gates, figuratively speaking.

If we leave aside Christopher's specification of WASP, Christopher is describing a spirit of

what Hale refers to as rebellion in postwar American culture – and Trump and his most ardent MAGA supporters in the twenty-first century are tapping into that postwar spirit of rebellion in the 2024 presidential election, thereby aligning Trump and his most ardent MAGA supporters with what Ong refers to as the barbarian position.

However, before Trump emerged as a predominating force in the Republican Party in 2016, the Republican Party tended to be aligned with what Ong characterizes the Greek position inasmuch as wealthy Republicans represented the insiders of their day – not the outsiders.

At least since Franklin Delano Roosevelt campaigned on an appeal to the little guy, the Democratic Party has tended to represent what Ong refers to as the barbarian position. This brings me President Joe Biden in the 2024 presidential election. Like President Kennedy, President Biden is a Roman Catholic. Anti-Catholic sentiment may not yet be dead in the United States.

See Philip Jenkins' book *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (2003); and Mark S. Massa's book *Anti-Catholicism in America: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (2003).

But in the 2024 presidential election, protecting the little guy means defending our American form of representative democracy (which defense represents what Ong refers to as the Greek position) against the authoritarianism of the convicted felon Trump (which authoritarian position represents what Ong refers to as the barbarian position).

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