

The Stern Measuring Yardstick of Modernity

Plenty of Blame, but None for Us

by Joseph Varga

In noting Weber's inclusion of if not emphasis on violence as what defines the modern State, we cannot forget how decidedly flat, how instrumental, his notion of violence generally seems to be; how decidedly reified it is, as if violence were a substance, so many ergs of spermatic effluvial power that the father exerts in the private fastness of the family, with permission of the State, and that the State exerts over civil society and, at times, over other states.

—Michael Taussig

I often feel that I have lost the ability to be truly appalled, only to be jolted back into truly appalling space, the space of my own righteousness. The morning after the craven Senate vote awarding President W the right to use "force" in Iraq, the New York morning talk show that I monitor (my own morbid fascination) when I crave appalling space and righteousness, considered the burning issue of the day: whether actors who performed on "The Sopranos" should be allowed to march in the Columbus Day Parade. The host, concerned with the negative portrayal of Italian-Americans on TV, sug-

gested that if a particular character, who I blessedly in my righteousness have never heard of, acted in a certain (proper) way in the script, then it would be proper if the actress who portrayed her be allowed to parade.¹ You can't make this stuff up.

The morning's revelry, complete with the all-important "Traffic and Weather, TOGETHER," reminded me, in some vague and appalling way, of the framing of that wonderful word "modernity" within the context of our most recent national orgy. I have heard a disturbing number of my colleagues, who should know better, and quite a few public figures (I hesitate to use the word intellectuals here, for fear that my fingers would fall off typing it) framing the current passion of crisis in terms of *modernity*. From the

