
A Post-Liberal Thinker

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Post-Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought, by John Gray. *New York and London: Routledge, 1993. 358 pp. \$45.*

Beyond the New Right: Markets, Government and the Common Environment, by John Gray. *New York and London: Routledge, 1993. 195 pp. \$34.50.*

John Gray has long been identified with the conventional, pro-capitalist, Anglo-American right-wing. But although these two works continue what he began in his earlier book *Liberalisms* (1989)—indeed, *Post-Liberalism* is explicitly identified as its sequel—Gray decisively breaks with the conventional right-wing position in the last section of *Beyond the New Right*. Despite an intensely scholarly style, all of these works forthrightly engage various critical aspects of the period of late modernity in which we live.

Except for the concluding “What Is Dead and What is Living in Liberalism?” *Post-Liberalism* is a collection of Gray’s previously published essays, organized under the themes of “Thinkers,” “Critiques,” and “Ques-

tions.” The book also includes extensive notes and an index.

“Thinkers” looks at figures who—apart from Santayana, an eclectic conservative—might be termed eclectic liberals: Hobbes, Hayek, Oakeshott, James Buchanan, and Isaiah Berlin. What Gray is searching for is a solidly liberal critique of what he sees as the manifest excrescences of liberal theorizing and practice in late modernity.

In the first “Critiques” essay, “A System of Ruins,” Gray confusedly argues (following Ernst Nolte) that Marxism constitutes a largely unprogressive, nationalistic, and conservative critique of modernity; is he trying to endear it to genuine conservatives? “The Delusion of Glasnost” shows Gray’s predictive powers at their weakest. In “The Aca-

demic Romance of Marxism," he skewers the American Marxist academic *nomenklatura*. The next piece examines Marxism as a philosophy (Marcuse); a science (G. A. Cohen); and a mythopoeia (Sorel); Gray concludes that the Marxian "system" is simply incoherent. "Against Cohen on Proletarian Unfreedom" is a turgid theory piece dedicated to disproving G. A. Cohen's arguments that "proletarians" in the West are less free than "workers" under Communism.

The following essay, written in October 1989, attacks the central postulates of Western Sovietology. Gray argues for the radical discontinuity between authoritarian late Tsarism and totalitarian Soviet Communism; the ongoing Soviet economic dependency on the West; the centrality of Marxist-Leninist ideology in the development of the Soviet Union; the Leninist origins of Soviet totalitarianism; the critical *economic* role of forced labour camps; and the ability of the Soviets to carry out strategic disinformation—positions, however, which give Gray no great predictive power. One of his most interesting, if not wholly original, arguments is that Communism is derived from the rationalistic, Western Enlightenment and therefore constitutes a *Western* imposition on traditional Russian, Chinese, and other societies. Its derivation from some of the most central traditions of Western modernity explains the habitual lack of criticism of Communism in the West.

The book includes an academic parody of Western Marxist philosophical style, in the form of a mock-

reverential book review. It is followed by an essay pointing out the "limits of the Western model" for the post-totalitarian transitions. The now-decadent Western mass democracies should not be imitated, Gray argues. Instead, some form of authoritarianism will probably be necessary for the effective reconstruction of a real civil society.

"Political Power, Social Theory and Essential Contestability" is a dense theoretical essay, concerning the definitional abilities and truth-claims of social science. "An Epitaph for Liberalism" is a review of Joel Feinberg's four-volume study, *The Moral Limits of Criminal Law*. Gray finds that despite Feinberg's heroic endeavours to give a coherent theoretical substance to John Stuart Mill's "one very simple principle," the whole effort is "self-effacing."

"The End of History—or of Liberalism?" is an excellent review of Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, in which the latter's liberal democratic triumphalism is cut down to size.

The "Questions" section is perhaps the weightiest part of the book. In "The Politics of Cultural Diversity" Gray argues for a non-interventionist state, primarily against the Marxists and dogmatic liberals who want to use the state to destroy rooted cultural identities, but also against nationalists and conservatives who seek to use it to defend and enhance a given way of life.

In the next piece both neoliberalism (*i.e.*, neocapitalism)—because of its exclusively economic and quasi-uto-

pian, rationalistic focus—and “holistic High Tory doctrine”—because of its communitarian obsessions—are criticized as paying insufficient attention to the reconstitution of a genuine civil society in Britain, a society which Gray, following Alan Macfarlane, claims has been *individualist* since at least the thirteenth century.

The final, theoretically rich essay subjects the standard liberal doctrines (as typified by John Stuart Mill)—moral or normative individualism; universalism (on which innate rights are predicated); meliorism; and egalitarianism—to the acid-test of *objective pluralism*: the belief in the fundamental incommensurability of ultimate values, excellences, flourishings, and ways of life (a position which is distinct, however, from subjectivism and relativism). Liberalism as an ideology is found to collapse under the pressure; but what is left, Gray argues (inspired by Isaiah Berlin), is the practice of liberty in a liberal civil society, which realistically embodies these values. The heritage of a society where people, as individuals, are able to choose from a field of divergent but choiceworthy options is upheld as the ideal that must be defended both from modernist fundamentalisms (such as Marxism and liberal ideology itself) as well as barbarous atavisms.

Beyond the New Right—Gray means by the latter term the neoliberal, classical liberal, libertarian, and neoconservative tendencies typified by Thatcher and Reagan—is divided into an introduction, four long essays, notes, and an index. The concluding original es-

say stands apart from the preceding three, which had been published earlier. In “Limited Government: A Positive Agenda,” Gray criticizes the libertarian minimal state while offering certain solutions that seem distinctly libertarian: for example, the possible privatization of the issuance of money (following Hayek), and the elimination of taxes on corporations. In “A Conservative Disposition: Individualism, the Free Market and the Common Life,” the dogma of the unrestricted free market is trenchantly attacked. In “The Moral Foundations of Market Institutions,” Gray puts stress on the moral and social *context* that makes the market possible, the support of which requires a truly “enabling welfare state,” one different from the welfare state in its contemporary incarnations. He sees the “social market economy” enunciated by the post-World War II Freiburg School in West Germany as a possible positive model. He rejects libertarianism, egalitarianism, market socialism, and the socialist command-economy.

However, it is “An agenda for Green Conservatism” that is truly revolutionary. It attempts to identify a possible convergence of true conservatism and true ecology: “Green theory is an invaluable corrective of the Whiggish, anthropocentric, technological optimism by which all the modernist political religions are animated and which has, in the form of neo-liberalism, even infected most of what passes today as conservatism.”

Gray advocates the “stationary-state” as an alternative to the ceaseless inflammation of the desire for

perpetual economic growth. He discusses John Stuart Mill's passages in support of a stationary-state economy—an inspired piece of scholarship which turns Mill's own well-known arguments to contrary ends. Gray stresses the necessity of a worldwide immigration and population control policy. In energy policy, Gray argues for a rejection of the nuclear taboo common among Greens, while in agriculture he points to the destructive processes of "agricultural industry" as probably one of the greatest threats to the biosphere. He sensibly argues for policies that would enhance the patterns of traditional rural agriculture in the Third World, rejecting a model that tries to mimic the processes of Western industrialization. In urban and transport policy, Gray inveighs

against the car, calling for transport alternatives. He also calls for very strong planning controls in urban centers that will try to keep them livable. Throughout the book, Gray is particularly critical of the United States, as embodying all the worst aspects of a future he would seek to avoid.

Gray's essential argument is for a regrounding of human social experience in history and nature. If we want to live in a society that is even minimally civilized, there is simply no room for growth without end and ever-more-expansive rights doctrines. His book can be taken as a salutary warning to the soft denizens of the socially and culturally disintegrating—and ecologically destructive—America and Western world.

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