

Mugged by Reality—Again: The Iraq War as Philosophy of History

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Review : John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*. London: Allen Lane, 2007.

Every major political disaster spawns its own philosophy of history. The Terror gave us Condorcet's sketch of the human spirit's progress, in addition to providing Hegel with an occasion to demonstrate reason's ruses. Twentieth-century totalitarianism was particularly fruitful, inspiring the conjectures of Jacob Talmon, Hannah Arendt, and Eric Voegelin. Indirectly and belatedly, the Soviet Union and the postwar people's democracies were woven into Francis Fukuyama's tale of the "end of history." In *Black Mass*, the British philosopher John Gray brings this tradition up-to-date, proposing a philosophical account of the most significant political disaster of our time: the Iraq war. According to Gray, the neoconservative ideology that fueled the American decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein in 2003 is merely the latest avatar of Enlightenment-inspired utopianism—an outlook that, in its chiliastic faith in historical progress, is residually Christian, however vehemently it might profess its secularism. Raymond Aron once coined the term "secular religion" to describe—and to delegitimize—modern ideologies which, like communism and Nazism, espouse a politics of this-worldly salvation. Gray makes the case for applying the same term to American neoconservatism. While advancing this bold argument, which places the advocates of a "new American century" in the historical lineage of Stalin and Hitler, Gray also sets out to settle a few scores

within the Anglo-American conservatism. A onetime supporter of Margaret Thatcher, he is appalled at the current state of the political right, which he believes is paying the price for its recent utopian commitments. Such thinking has always seduced the left, but cautious, tradition-revering conservatives were supposed to be constitutionally allergic to the allure of earthly paradises achieved through human striving. Hence Gray's question: Why did the American right trade in conservatism for neoconservatism, succumbing to the catastrophic project of democratic utopianism?

Gray begins by presenting us with a genealogy of twentieth-century totalitarianism. Soviet communism is not the heir to tsarist autocracy, nor was Nazism merely a particularly high-strung form of German Romanticism. Both, Gray contends, are pure products of the Enlightenment creed that human beings can, through the use of their own faculties, build a perfect city of man. But if the Enlightenment bears responsibility for Hitler and Stalin, it is because the Enlightenment itself, in Gray's view, is merely bastardized Christianity: the belief that history follows a pattern, that it can be forced into a meaningful narrative, is Christianity's most enduring legacy to Western thought. Specifically, Christianity teaches that history is a story of human salvation, in which evil, conflict, and misery are decisively defeated in a final apocalyptic struggle. Yet this argument, as far as it goes, is very much old hat. The claim that European modernity rests on the secularized patterns of Christian thought has been defended in various ways by Karl Löwith, Carl Schmitt, and others. The assertion that Nazism and communism are secular religions was a staple of cold war liberalism (think of Aron and Talmon), as well as of more recent political thought marked by the anti-totalitarian tradition (e.g., that of François Furet and Marcel Gauchet). Why rehash these arguments now?

The reason, Gray seems to believe, is that recent history gives us reason to reappraise the political philosophy that these earlier thinkers considered the obvious antidote to secular religiosity: liberalism. For an Aron or a Talmon, the appeal of liberal democracy was precisely that it renounced the pretensions of totalitarian ideologies to achieve this-worldly salvation through political means. The victory of democracy, first in 1945 and again in 1989, was believed to have laid the specter of Christianity, which expressed itself as political millenarianism, to rest. What liberals failed to see, Gray

contends, is that such triumphalism reinstates, albeit in new forms, the very utopian longings that they had hoped to dispel. Where cold-war intellectuals believed that liberalism could inoculate modern politics from its messianic tendencies, Gray asserts that liberalism itself is infected with the messianic virus. “Nowadays,” he writes, “the ‘West’ defines itself in terms of liberal democracy and human rights. The implication is that the totalitarian movements of the last century formed no part of the West, when in truth these movements renewed some of the oldest western traditions. If anything defines ‘the West’ it is the pursuit of salvation in history ... What is unique to the modern West is the formative role of the faith that violence can save the world” (p. 73).

Neoconservatism’s historical significance is to have brought the latent millenarianism embedded within liberalism to the surface. Gray plots the rise of neoconservatism along two historical coordinates. The first is Margaret Thatcher’s reign in Britain during the 1980s. When she assumed the prime minstership in 1979, Thatcher was bent on ending the “postwar settlement” which, she believed, had led Britain to stagnation, an invasive state, and creeping socialism. But, Gray insists, her agenda, at the outset, was hardly the neoliberal revolution that it has since become in conservative mythology. Labor governments had already tried, unsuccessfully, to reform the British economy. The Tories’ 1979 election manifesto was a remarkably moderate document, barely mentioning the word “privatization” and with no plans to inject market mechanisms into public services (p. 79). Moreover, her agenda had a decidedly national focus—Gray even compares her to De Gaulle—rather than becoming a recipe for structural reform on a global scale.

Even so, the liberal economic theory underpinning Thatcher’s policies contained within it a utopian seed that would ultimately prove its undoing. F. A. Hayek, Milton Friedman, and the other gurus of 1980s neoliberalism “were exponents of a late twentieth-century Enlightenment ideology whose basic tenets—despite being advanced as the results of scientific inquiry—are rooted in religious faith” (p. 85). Recalling Pierre Rosanvallon’s argument about classical political economy,¹ Gray claims that the Thatcherites embraced a kind of “utopian capitalism,” believing that a perfect society

¹ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Capitalisme utopique: critique de l'idéologie économique* (Paris: Seuil, 1979).

could be achieved by allowing the free market to perform its magic. Furthermore, Gray accuses Hayek, the Austrian liberal upon whom he had heaped praise in a book written in Thatcherism's heyday,² of the very sin that the economist had once detected in socialism: an unfounded conviction in the scientific status of its pronouncements. Thatcherism is thus little more than warmed over Marxism. "Despite its claim to scientific rationality, neoliberalism is rooted in a teleological interpretation of history as a process with a preordained destination, and in this as in other respects it has a close affinity with Marxism" (p. 76). Elsewhere, he calls Thatcherite neoliberalism a "successor-ideology to Marxism" (p. 83). Departing from the moderation and pragmatism that brought her to power, Gray contends, Thatcher increasingly came to believe that her policies could be applied universally. In particular, she invested inordinate faith in the United States, which she came to believe would be the force that could usher in the neoliberal millennium. In the process, she destroyed British conservatism as a political project.

Yet Thatcher's neoliberalism could only make its bold claim to global significance because of a second historical event: the collapse of communism in 1989. The fall of the Berlin Wall persuaded liberals that they were witnessing a phenomenon that came to be known as "democratic convergence": the gradual obsolescence of every regime except Western-style liberal democracy and free-market capitalism. Calling this convergence the "end of history," Fukuyama gave this insight its most sophisticated theoretical formulation.

In generating such hubris, 1989 set the stage for the current international crisis. For the liberal theories of "democratic convergence" and the "end of history" rested upon a crucial misunderstanding. George W. Bush and Tony Blair gullibly "interpreted the collapse of communism not as a setback for western universalism—which it was—but as a sign of the triumph of 'the West.' Lacking any longer historical perspective, they understood the challenges of the early twenty-first century in terms of the triumphal illusions of the post-Cold War era" (p. 104). Neoconservatism, and indeed the entire body of rightwing thought that made declared war against Iraq as the dominant national

² John Gray, *Hayek on Liberty* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

priority, thus represent what Gray calls, in a striking phrase, “the Americanization of the apocalypse”: “In a flight that would have delighted Hegel,” he observes, Enlightenment-inspired utopianism has “migrated to America where it settled on the neoconservative Right” (p. 33).

As Gray makes abundantly clear, one misunderstands neoconservatism and the foreign policy it has instigated if one sees it as anything other than utopian. Like Jacobinism, communism, and Nazism, neoconservatism believes that once its armed missionaries triumph over evil in a final apocalyptic battle, a new era of human affairs will begin. As Gray perceptively remarks, the unsettling character of George W. Bush’s worldview is not that it is Manichean, as it has often been called, but rather that it denies the existence of radical evil, insofar as Bush believes that through war, it can be purged from human affairs once and for all. This claim informs Gray’s unsparing analysis of Bush’s military ventures. As with all utopian undertakings, the American project in Iraq was founded on self-deception, making its goals inherently unachievable. The problem is less with the particular delusions Bush’s advisors embraced—for instance, its belief that the post-’89 model of democratic transition could be applied to the Middle East, or its misunderstanding of the fractured nature of Iraqi society—then the fact that realism never entered its calculations to begin with.

The neoconservatives’ reality problem has deep roots. In an intriguing excursus on the writings of their German-born *maître à penser*, he explains how Leo Strauss condemned modern liberalism’s moral nihilism from the standpoint of the lost world of natural law, while celebrating those thinkers who preserved this tradition in a secret form, revealing its truths to those initiated into the arts of reading esoteric texts while concealing them from everyone else. In this way, Gray argues, Strauss effectively taught his disciples that the keepers of a hidden truth can in good conscience deceive the public of their true intentions if doing so serves a higher goal. This way of thinking informed many Bush administration officials in the build-up to the Iraq invasion. The Office of Special Plans (OSP), a special Pentagon unit created by Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz in 2002 to bypass the CIA in gathering intelligence on Iraq, operated on little more than a “faith-based methodology” and its own “occult insight” into the nature of

Saddam Hussein's regime (p. 143). Irving Kristol, a founder of neoconservatism, once described himself as a liberal (in the American sense of the term) who had been "mugged by reality." If one accepts Gray's argument, neoconservatives merely traded in one utopian illusion for another. On the streets of Baghdad, the neoconservative illusion has suffered a brutal mugging indeed.

In the end, Gray's essay is not so much an exercise in the philosophy of history as an indictment of it. In 2003, he suggests, neoconservatives essentially still accepted Fukuyama's claims about the "end of history"—they simply thought a little more effort was required to get there. So where we have arrived? The carnage in Iraq, Gray hopes, reminds us that utopian politics are doomed. Yet when the secular religion of utopianism fails yet again, all that remains to fill the void is "old-time religion" (p. 184): "The age of utopias ended in Fallujah, a city crazed by rival fundamentalists. The secular era is not in the future, as liberal humanists believe. It is in the past, which we have yet to understand" (p. 185). In his conclusion, Gray suggests that one of the misguided tenets of the neoconservative project in the Middle East was its blind faith in secularization as a teleological narrative. Even secularization is too Christian a concept for Gray, resting as it does on a progressive view on history and the Western distinction between the sacred and the secular. Abandoning utopianism thus requires renouncing the quasi-religious faith that religion might be excised from human experience. Building on arguments that he has made in earlier books, Gray argues that we must reject anthropocentrism in all its forms, and recognize that human beings are animals of no particular metaphysical significance.³ Still, even from this perspective, the wisest approach to religion is to accept it as "a primary human need." Recognizing that religion—and the great variety of religious experience—cannot be overcome thus appears, oddly, as the most potent antidote to the apocalyptic urge to pave for the way for a "secular monolith" (p. 208). Gray, the disappointed conservative, hopes that this insight might inform a new philosophy of realism, one that dispenses with teleological frameworks for understanding history, rejects the view that all goods converge in some moral vanishing point, and learns to live with "the innate defects of human beings" (p. 198).

³ John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2002).

The big idea of Gray's book is his claim that the cold war liberal analysis of communism and Nazism as secular religions can be applied to understand the neoconservative-inspired war on Iraq. This contention itself rests on the assumption that neoconservatism is essentially a variety of liberalism. Aside from the fact that the conceptual demarcations between liberalism, neoliberalism, and neoconservatism in Gray's book are often unclear, these assertions are highly debatable. If the criticisms leveled by foreign policy realists such as James Baker and Brent Scowcroft are any indication, Gray is right to emphasize the extent to which neoconservatism contains a utopian strand often missing from conservative politics. But in insisting on the liberal origins of the current administration's Iraq policy, he overplays his hand. In the post-cold war era, an overriding concern of American foreign policy has been the United States' emergence as the world's sole superpower. While the policies stemming from this insight could be considered messianic, they could just as plausibly be seen as conventional exercises in power politics. Neoconservatives themselves have often defined their agenda in these terms. As Robert Kagan has argued in his much-discussed thesis, the United States is fated, in the post-cold war context, to see the world in Hobbesian terms: Americans are inclined to use force to eliminate threats both because they can, and because, as the dominant international power, they are more likely to be threatened.⁴ But Kagan's picture is one in which the United States' very strength leads it to accept war's inevitability; it is the far weaker Europeans who endorse a Kantian utopianism of perpetual peace. Presuming that Kagan does indeed represent their outlook, the real problem with neoconservatism may lie in its pessimistic vision of a world existing in a perpetual state of emergency, rather than in its messianic faith in the eventual triumph of peace and democracy.

This contestable characterization of neoconservatism undercuts, at times, Gray's attempt to define a realist alternative to Bush's and Blair's foreign policy. For even as he labels neoconservatism as messianic, Gray implicitly acknowledges its aspirations to be a kind of *realpolitik*. Consequently, he finds it difficult to define the realism that he endorses. On the one hand, he argues that realism does not entail a complete rejection of values in politics. He dismisses as "crackpot realism" the views of those who, like the

⁴ Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

neoconservative nuclear strategist, Albert Wohlstetter, believe that “decisions about war and peace can be reduced to a game-theoretic calculus,” as this ultimately amounts to little more than “a symbiosis of rationalism and magic—in other words, a superstition” (p. 94). At the same time, he believes that to be a realist is to recognize that most conflicts between values cannot be settled rationally, and that many values are mutually exclusive (the desire to overthrow a dictator and to the desire to protect a population from civil war and anarchy may not be compatible). But could a realism defined in such hair-splitting terms ever actually define a course of action?

Finally, Gray’s conclusion that utopia is dead while religion is alive and well is unconvincing. If religion embodies a primary human need, then why is this not also true of utopianism, especially if it must be considered, as Gray asserts, as religion in a secularized form? And are we really to believe that is neoconservatism that bankrupted political messianism as a political project—that the acolytes of Paul Wolfowitz discredited this way of thinking even more than did the followers of Stalin and Hitler?

For all that Gray’s thesis might be questioned on these grounds, *Black Mass* remains an interesting symptom of the state of political thinking in the American and British world as the Bush-Blair axis fades slowly into the past. In the wake of a war conducted at least partly in its name, liberalism finds itself plausibly accused of the very political messianism that its cold war defenders hoped it would ward off. Now that the right has fought a disastrous war on utopian grounds, the left is struggling to define its vision of international relations, caught between a liberal interventionism tainted by its proximity to neoconservatism, and a realism redolent of traditional conservatism. At the very least, Gray’s book helps us to start to think about some of the implications of the twenty-first century’s first major political disaster.

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