

Pessimism and Progress:
Left Conservatism in Modern American Political Thought

by

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation will introduce readers to an overlooked, misunderstood, and failed tradition in twentieth century American political thought and social criticism. This tradition, which I call Tory Socialism, emerged from a crisis of political identity suffered by American intellectuals between the end of World War I and the 1980s. On the one hand, Tory Socialist thinkers believed themselves committed to that variety of centrist politics that in the United States tends to go by the name of “liberal.” On the other hand, they also came to think that liberalism’s foundational philosophy—the ideas of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment—had been discredited by the disastrous twentieth century. As a consequence, these intellectuals tried to develop a new language of centrist politics that could replace what they saw as the doomed ideas of Enlightenment liberalism.

The major figures of Tory Socialism are hardly unknown. Indeed, they include some of the giants of American social criticism. In the 1940s and 1950s, Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau criticized the Enlightenment for its “naïve” and “optimistic” conception of politics, but described themselves as “realistic” or “chastened” liberals. In the sixties, Neoconservatives like Irving Kristol lambasted the eighteenth century’s “utopianism,” while still declaring their loyalty to the vision of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. In the seventies and eighties, mellowing New Leftists including Christopher Lasch and Michael Walzer accused bourgeois liberalism of draining the civic spirit from modern democracy, seeing the solution in a kind of communitarian social democracy or petty bourgeois socialism. Realism, Neoconservatism, Communitarianism: despite significant variation, all three discourses exhibited a strikingly similar pattern of argument. They rejected the Enlightenment while seeking democratic compromises between

bourgeois and socialist politics. Despite their similarities, however, little effort has been made to connect these figures and movements. It has rather been customary to treat Neoconservatism, Realism, and Communitarianism as political discourses isolated in particular moments of recent political and intellectual history. They often appear as academic sideshows, the ideas of heterogeneous oddballs, or halfway-house positions in a given thinker's journey from left to right.

I argue instead that these ideas and intellectual currents point to a single, recurring tendency in twentieth-century political thought and social criticism: the attempt to craft a new political center by synthesizing conservative anti-modernism with welfare state politics. We might adopt any number of names for this critical persuasion. In the mid-nineteenth century, Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli called the alliance between the newly enfranchised working class and the embattled English aristocracy a "Tory Democracy."¹ In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels described the Young England movement out of which Disraeli and the critic Robert Carlyle had grown as "feudal socialism."² In the midst of his 1969 run for mayor of New York, Norman Mailer declared himself a "left-conservative," a position he elaborated in his novel, *Armies of the Night*.³

I draw my preferred term, Tory Socialism, from the work of political theorists Gad Horowitz and Louis Hartz. Writing in the 1950s and 1960s, Hartz and Horowitz argued that the

¹ Richard Shannon, *The Age of Disraeli, 1868-1881: The Rise of Tory Democracy* (New York: Longman, 1992).

² Marx and Engels describe feudal socialism as "half lamentation, half lampoon; half echo of the past, half menace to the future; at times, by its bitter, witty and incisive criticism, striking the bourgeoisie to the very heart's core; but always ludicrous in its effect, through total incapacity to comprehend the march of modern history." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 491-92.

³ On Mailer's political ideas, such as they are, see Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh, "Political Prophecy in Contemporary American Literature: The Left-Conservative Vision of Norman Mailer," *The Review of Politics* 69, no. 4 (2007): 625-49.

chief antagonists of bourgeois modernity—socialism and Toryism—had both arisen from within the context of European feudalism. Both ideologies looked backwards to an imagined medieval past and deployed a picture of organic, corporate, pre-modern communities to attack the fundamental vulgarity and irresponsibility of liberal, capitalist society. The affinities of conservatism and socialism made it possible for countries with feudal pasts to produce hybrid versions of the two ideologies, a culturally conservative Left and a socially conscious Right. By contrast, the absence of feudalism in the United States (outside the South) had deprived American liberalism of meaningful ideological competition. Instead of aristocratic anti-moderns, American conservatives were essentially right-wing liberals, and the character of American socialism remained primarily Marxist and progressive, rather than non-Marxist and preservationist. There are a host of debatable claims here, but we do not need to endorse the Hartz-Horowitz thesis in all its detail in order to see its usefulness in outlining the Tory Socialist project. Realism, Neoconservatism, and Communitarianism were all attempts to introduce precisely this kind of hybrid ideology into American life, an ideology that privileged security, stability, and community, and that could accordingly counter the commitment to progress and modernization allegedly shared by the existing American Right, Left, and center.⁴

This dissertation traces the rise and fall of this American Counter-Enlightenment in twentieth-century political thought and social criticism. Tory Socialism emerged in the era of disillusionment and carnage that stretched between the First and Second World Wars, reaching the height of its influence during the early years of the Cold War. It slowly transformed over the

⁴ For the Hartz-Horowitz thesis, see Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1955); Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and Australia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964); Gad Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968); Horowitz, “Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism in Canada: An Interpretation,” *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science / Revue Canadienne d’Economie et de Science Politique* 32, no. 2 (1966): 143–71.

course of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, as the questions of national security that animated figures like Niebuhr and Morgenthau gave way to the so-called Culture Wars. Finally, Tory Socialism went into eclipse during the 1990s, when a newly confident liberalism appeared to sweep its enemies before it. Even with some Tory Socialist ideas echoing in turn-of-the-century thought, I contend that the movement is now over, and unlikely to return.

Focusing on the travails of the Tory Socialist persuasion allows us to see recent American intellectual history in a different light. It assists us, first, in understanding Tory Socialism's chief rival, liberalism. Despite efforts to define it with greater analytical precision, liberalism remains a relatively amorphous term in the American political lexicon.⁵ Foregrounding the Tory Socialist alternative—an alternative that shared much of modern liberalism's politics but vehemently rejected its ethos—can help us clarify liberalism's character and its real role in twentieth-century American thought and politics. Second, the concept of Tory Socialism can aid us in making better sense of what Gary Gerstle and Steve Fraser labeled the "New Deal Order."⁶ In this dissertation, the central decades of the twentieth century appear not as an era of liberal triumph, but as a period of intense ideological confusion, when centrist intellectuals experimented with new political identities and when American political thought and practice often seemed poised to move permanently beyond liberalism. Third, Tory Socialism enriches our understanding of the varieties of American conservatism and frees us from our tendency to reduce right-wing thought and politics in the United States to the story of the Conservative Movement. Finally, and most importantly, it allows us to reframe Werner Sombart's old question of why socialism failed in the

⁵ See Duncan Bell, "What is Liberalism?," *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (2014): 682–71.

⁶ Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

United States.⁷ We have customarily imagined that socialism must take the form of a radical, populist, and egalitarian challenge to the status quo. Tory Socialism, however, was a conservative tendency within the establishment, anti-modern and aristocratic. Despite their prominence as public intellectuals, Tory Socialists were ultimately unable to translate their ideas into a permanent feature of political life, thereby depriving the United States of a variety of conservatism that proved instrumental in creating the more robust welfare states of Europe. In other words, historians have been so fixated on the relative weakness of the American Left that they have overlooked the possibility that the United States' meager common provision may have resulted from its failure to develop the right kind of Right.

Liberalism and its Crises

One of the reasons that Tory Socialist thought has been hard to see is that we already possess a working history of the creation of welfare state politics: the supposed transition from “classical” to “modern” forms of liberalism. In our standard narrative, between the end of the Civil War and first decades of the twentieth century, the crisis of industrial capitalism led a large number of so-called “classical” liberals to rethink their commitment to purely “negative” liberty, that is, freedom conceived as freedom to live without interference from the state. Figures like John Dewey and Herbert Croly concluded that truly meaningful freedom required adequate social resources for its exercise, and thus a new species of liberal became committed to “positive” or social liberty.⁸ Modern liberals thus came to support an expansive welfare state and the regulation of large concentrations of private wealth in order to secure meaningful freedom for

⁷ Werner Sombart, *Why is There No Socialism in the United States?* (London: MacMillan, 1976).

⁸ Here I am paraphrasing the version of the positive/negative distinction in freedom that has worked its way into this particular corner of Americanist historiography. One should note that the debate over various concepts of liberty has become quite a bit more complicated among analytic philosophers and political theorists.

the majority of people.⁹ This new liberal vision reached its apotheosis during the 1930s, under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

In the following two decades, so the story goes, a pervasive "liberal consensus" characterized American life. Even Republicans like Dwight Eisenhower and George Romney conceded the necessity of a minimal welfare state. In the 1960s, however, the liberal vision cracked beneath the strain of the Civil Rights Movement, the student revolt, deindustrialization, and especially the Vietnam War. Liberals bumbled through the sixties, eventually managing to lose the support of Americans who wanted more reform as well as those who thought change was occurring too quickly. In the resulting moment of liberal vulnerability, conservatives seized the initiative and led the United States into a long, dark age of right-wing ascendance.¹⁰

While this narrative obviously contains a great deal of truth, it also subtly distorts our ability to make sense of twentieth-century American thought and politics. In particular, it treats liberalism as the natural ideology of the American welfare state, and thus assumes that the rise and fall of modern liberalism must follow the trajectory of the New Deal Order.¹¹ As a result, the stories we tell about the history of thought and the history of politics mutually reinforce one another. We reflexively describe the strategies of midcentury American social legislation, from

⁹ We lack a properly neutral term for the variety of political-economic order that emerged in the midcentury decades and eroded between the 1970s and the end of the century. There is a tendency in many circles to call it "social democracy," but this can tend to confuse matters, since that label also refers to specific political parties in Europe, as well as an older evolutionary socialist tradition. Nils Gilman has evocatively referred to the midcentury years as the "social modernist era," but unfortunately has forwarded two rather different examples of what that might mean. Compare Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 16, with Gilman, "The Twin Insurgency," *The American Interest*, June 15, 2014, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/06/15/the-twin-insurgency/>. I will use "welfare state" in full awareness that that term has difficulties of its own.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that this account of liberalism's history, developed over the course the 1980s, collates and re-describes three distinct narratives. I discuss and complicate the classical-to-modern narrative in chapter 1, the liberal consensus in chapter 2, and the collapse of liberalism in chapter 5.

¹¹ See Fraser and Gerstle, *Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*.

the New Deal to the Great Society, as expressions of liberal theory. Challenges to liberalism become challenges to the American welfare state, while calls to resuscitate America's moribund social compact are expressed as calls for a return to liberalism. It becomes virtually impossible, consequently, to understand "third way" politics in the United States outside the matrix of a classical-to-modern story.

In the past two decades, historians have increasingly called this linear transition into question. Many scholars have drawn much richer characterizations of American liberalism as an ideological and cultural formation. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberal commitments to individual rights and limited government, they have argued, can only be understood fully when they are embedded in a broader cultural field occupied by Anglo-American Protestantism, middle-class codes of professionalism and propriety, and an ardent ethno-nationalism. While not diminishing the importance of liberalism as political theory, such renderings represent it more expansively as a form of civil religion, as Andrew Rieser puts it, the white middle class's "civic religion of progress."¹² In these accounts, liberalism first appeared as a radical religious movement in New England during the 1820s. In its original American sense, to be a liberal was to be a free spirit, free from prejudice and unjustified deference to traditional authorities.¹³ Moral

¹² Andrew Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism, 1874-1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 8. On the concept of civil religion more generally, see Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 1-21; Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹³ Liberalism, in this account, is distinguished from Republicanism less by its concept of freedom's *nature* than by its concept of freedom's *basis*. Classical republicanism also imagined that the *res publica* should belong only to free men. For republicans, however, the basis of this freedom was martial and material, rooted in the arms-bearing, land-holding, gentlemanly tradition. Meanwhile, liberals imagined external freedom as proceeding from mental emancipation, freedom from dogmatic ideas and disorderly appetites. See Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 1-42.

progress, in the liberal view, depended upon liberating individuals from the political, spiritual, and economic constraints imposed on them by superstition, unreason, and tradition.¹⁴

A powerful, flexible, and volatile worldview, the language of liberalism could be fitted to a wide array of politics and social experience. It could serve as a defense of the Anglo-Protestant majority against the demands of African Americans or Catholics to be considered as fully American, or of men and women's roles as rulers of separate spheres. It could also, however, take the form of a radical critique of white supremacy and patriarchy as irrational and unjustifiable modes of traditional authority. It might depict "rational religion" as a socially conscious evangelicalism, ecumenical religious modernism, Protestant-inflected deism, or anti-supernaturalism. Its ideal of social life might be the petty bourgeoisie of the old middle class, or the university-trained professionals of the new. In every variant, however, liberalism fueled a civilizing mission aimed at ending the rule of prejudice and privilege and replacing it with the rule of reason.¹⁵ Beyond their commitment to representative institutions, private property, and civil liberties, liberals agreed that the rational use of freedom was the engine of human progress. The primary hindrance to social betterment was the prison of tradition. Openness—of markets,

¹⁴ This culturalist account of liberalism retains a strong affinity with Marxist interpretations of liberalism as "possessive individualism." It differs from those interpretations in the expansiveness of its conception of self-ownership, equating it with not only with the ability to sell one's labor, but also with individual autonomy, inner freedom, and the mastery of unruly appetites. For the still very valuable classical interpretation, see Harold Laski, *The Rise of European Liberalism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997) and C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

¹⁵ For culturalist accounts of classical liberalism, notable in their identification of liberalism with heterodox Anglo-Protestantism, see Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism*; Eric P. Kaufmann, *The Rise and Fall of Anglo-America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005); Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Amy Kittelstrom, *The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition* (New York: Penguin, 2015); David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Leslie Butler, *Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); James E. Block, *A Nation of Agents: The American Path to a Modern Self and Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

minds, borders, or politics—would allow human ingenuity to assert itself against the previously insoluble problems of existence.

Between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, the liberal vision of openness, autonomy, and meritocracy suffered a series of shocks. The Civil War, the rise of the corporation and the ensuing years of labor conflict, the waves of Catholic and Jewish immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, the horror of Jim Crow, the United States' formal acquisition of colonies, and the disaster of WWI: each in its own way threatened the idea of a society predicated on the enlightened rule of white Protestant men. If a liberal society did not, in fact, reward the truly worthy, if fairness actually required collective action to change the rules of the social order and liberalism led to catastrophic war, what did that say about a philosophy that presupposed the ability to rationalize the self and society? Responses to these crises generated a characteristically Protestant ideological fissuring, as different kinds of liberals rushed to explain the new world in terms that retained those elements of their worldview that they regarded as most important.¹⁶

In this picture, liberalism's crisis ran far deeper than the well-documented failure of laissez-faire economics.¹⁷ It now appears less that some American liberals discovered positive liberty while others pathetically clung to John Locke, and more that it became harder and harder

¹⁶ For the turn-of-the-century crisis and its effects on liberal thought, see Henry Farnham May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); T. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Paul Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Stuart Rochester, *American Liberal Disillusionment: In the Wake of World War I* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977).

¹⁷ I am borrowing this phrase from John Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

for liberals to reach consensus on how to go about rationalizing the world. One of the most recognizable and lasting splits did occur over the central state's role in planning the economy, yet liberals also divided over segregation, immigration, women's suffrage, prohibition, eugenics, and imperialism. Liberals could be found on both sides of each of these contentious issues, all equally convinced that their view represented the only hope for preserving a future for rationality and freedom.¹⁸

If liberalism's transformation from classical to modern has begun to look considerably murkier, so too has the tight linkage between that transformation and the growth of the American welfare state. As numerous scholars of American political development have noted, the political order of the nineteenth-century US was hardly laissez-faire. Though the Federal Government remained relatively anemic during the 1800s, individual states exercised an extensive ability to shape public life through the use of the police powers granted by the Constitution. The revolution of the central state's role in American life arose not from a modern liberal theory of the common good, but rather from a drawn-out jurisdictional struggle between the center and the localities. The Federal Government triumphed in that conflict largely because the United States entered a semi-permanent condition of war after 1941, a condition that demanded mobilization of resources on a scale that only the central state could achieve.¹⁹ The modern welfare state, it would appear, simply rode into existence on the back of this new fiscal-military order.²⁰

¹⁸ On the contentious character of progressive liberal reform, see Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (October 1994): 1043–73; Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003); James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

¹⁹ The study of American state building catalyzed a quiet revolution that has made it respectable to study politics again, and created a space of genuinely interdisciplinary collaboration. See, among others, Gary Gerstle, *Liberty and Coercion: The Paradox of American Government from the Founding to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); James T. Sparrow, William J. Novak, and Stephen W. Sawyer, eds., *Boundaries of the State in US History* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2015); Ajay K. Mehrotra, *Making the Modern American Fiscal State: Law, Politics, and the Rise of Progressive Taxation, 1877–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

Further, Steve Fraser, Lizabeth Cohen, and others have argued that it makes little sense to think of the American welfare state as resulting from a liberal change of heart, when every significant expansion of the American concept of social citizenship has stemmed at least in part from popular insurgency. From the Gilded Age's social wars, to women's suffrage, to labor militancy during the 1930s, to the Civil Rights Movement, mass social movements have always had to forcefully pry concessions from the hands of American elites, liberals included. Indeed, many liberal theorists looked upon these exercises in popular politics with horror, taking them as evidence that democracy could not work after all.²¹

Finally, a growing body of literature has cast doubt on the New Deal state's liberal character. Historians have long recognized that conservative efforts to contain social legislation curtailed the expansion of the American welfare state, with the power of Southern Democrats in Congress, in particular, blunting the challenge to the Jim Crow. Yet it is now becoming clear that conservative ideas and agendas also helped *constitute* the American welfare state. Social Security, the GI Bill, and other key features of the New Deal political order not only failed to eliminate privilege, but actually subsidized patriarchal, suburban, white "breadwinner"

2013); Anne Kornhauser, *Debating the American State: Liberal Anxieties and the New Leviathan, 1930-1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Julian E. Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy: The Politics of National Security—from World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Lisa McGirr, *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State* (New York: Norton, 2015).

²⁰ John Brewer charts a similar transformation of the English fiscal-military state in the 1700s. See John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

²¹ For some of the now voluminous literature that reimagines the long Age of Reform from below, see Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2015); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233–63.

families.²² In many ways, America's particular model of the welfare state appears in retrospect as conservative rather than liberal in its political aims and accomplishments.²³

From these histories emerge a picture of modern American liberalism as a worldview simultaneously strong and weak. Across the broad middle of the twentieth century, self-described liberals inhabited the commanding heights of American government. Theorists of modern liberalism developed a powerful philosophical history in which their creed stood as the natural consequence of the end of laissez-faire civilization and the confrontation with totalitarian government, a story that made them the natural custodians of the American welfare state and the natural center of American political thought. At the same time, the core commitment of liberal thought and culture—that reason and merit would prevail when all other things were equal—took a severe beating between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. This, in turn, suggests a wider gap between the practice of welfare state politics in the United States and the evolution of liberal theory than the conventional classical to modern narrative allows. Indeed, much liberal theory in the twentieth century, from Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma* to John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, might be seen as a form of ideological work designed to close that gap, to depict the politics of the democratic welfare state as inextricably linked to the liberal vision of rationality and moral progress.

²² See Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Alice Kessler Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012); Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White* (New York: Norton, 2005); Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Norton, 2013); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²³ On the varieties of welfare state forms, see Goesta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

The Uses of Counter-Enlightenment

Tory Socialism acted as a kind of shadow cabinet to these liberal attempts to claim the politics of the welfare state. In their writings, Tory Socialist critics interpreted the politics of general welfare not as an affirmation of progress, but as a protest and safeguard against liberal irresponsibility. The primary means by which Tory Socialists sought to contest liberalism's monopoly on American welfare state politics was through the language of Counter-Enlightenment. There is, by now, a substantial literature documenting the history and proliferation of "Counter-Enlightenment" ideas in the modern West. Yet, at the same time, Counter-Enlightenment is a term about which historians have learned to be careful. The eighteenth-century *philosophes* generated no shortage of enemies in their own time and after, but as James Schmidt, Zeev Sternhell, Darrin McMahon, and Graeme Garrard point out, the *term* "Counter-Enlightenment" did not come into widespread English use until the middle of the twentieth century.²⁴ It is most famously associated with Sir Isaiah Berlin, who explored the dialectic between the Enlightenment and its enemies in a series of essays written during the 1960s and 1970s, and especially in his entry on the subject for the *Dictionary of the History of*

²⁴ On the concept of Counter-Enlightenment, see Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Graeme Garrard, *Counter-Enlightenments: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2004). The term itself appeared periodically in German during the 1800s, but not generally in the contexts one would expect. James Schmidt, for example, finds instances of its use as a rough equivalent of "counter-intelligence" or "counter-argument." James Schmidt, "Fabricating the 'Counter-Enlightenment,' Part II—German Uses, 1875-1925," *Persistent Enlightenment*, November 17, 2013, <https://persistentenlightenment.wordpress.com/2013/11/17/gegenaufklarung/>. The earliest appearances in English occur during the first decades of the twentieth century, most notably in the philosopher William Barrett's 1948 *Partisan Review* essay of Lionel Trilling's *Liberal Imagination*. Barrett later argued that European existentialism represented "the counter enlightenment come at last to philosophic expression." William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1962), 274-75. Schmidt discusses Barrett and Trilling in "Inventing a Counter-Enlightenment: Liberalism, Nihilism, and Totalitarianism" (paper presented at American Historical Association, Boston, MA, January 6, 2011).

Ideas in 1973.²⁵ For Berlin, the Counter-Enlightenment served both as the source of the “mystical patriotism” of European fascism, and also more positively as the foundation of modern pluralistic thought.²⁶ Berlin’s characteristically idiosyncratic approach has since come in for some considerable revision, though his emphasis on tracing the deep intellectual roots of the modern right has remained.

What has become clear is that Counter-Enlightenment thought is best understood as a particular pattern of anti-liberal argument, a “rhetoric of reaction” that originated in the ideas expressed by the *philosophes*’ contemporary opponents, but that a variety of romantic, conservative, Catholic, and counter-revolutionary thinkers elaborated over the course of the 1700s and 1800s.²⁷ As a constructive theory, Counter-Enlightenment thought aimed to legitimate the hierarchical world of Europe’s Old Regime: Church, monarchy, patriarchy, aristocracy, and empire. The society that the Enlightenment attacked was, thinkers such as Edmund Burke and Joseph De Maistre admitted, a society that contained plenty of unfairness. Traditional authorities all abused their privileges; they all relied on mystery and coercion to maintain their power. Yet,

²⁵ Isaiah Berlin, “The Counter-Enlightenment,” reprinted in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1-32.

²⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 7. Berlin followed a standard romanticism-to-fascism line, but his conception of the history of pluralism was more original. For Berlin, the mainstream of Western thought from Plato to the eighteenth century had been transfixed by the doctrine of “monism,” the belief that all truths could be harmonized into a single whole. Denying this, Berlin argued, Counter-Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau, Vico, and Hamann made it possible to see the world of politics and morality in terms of mutually exclusive truths and values, a landscape of perpetual conflict where one had to choose which goods one wanted to keep and which one could stand to do without.

²⁷ In addition to the specialized work on the Counter-Enlightenment covered in note 24, there exists a literature on the development of conservatism after the French Revolution more generally. The work on the European right of the long nineteenth century is substantial, to say the least. Fine overviews can be found in the *Cambridge Histories of Political Thought*. Albert Hirschman’s highly accessible work is indispensable for understanding the central tropes of conservative argument: Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). Also very useful, but controversial and slightly clunky, is Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). One of the most important areas in the study of nineteenth-century right-wing thought has been on the deep intellectual origins of Fascism and Nazism. See Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961); George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964).

in spite of everything that was wrong with them, the institutions of Europe's Old Regime also generated positive goods, and not simply for those occupying positions of power and privilege. The Church gave shape to the lives of everyday people, marking their births, marriages, and deaths, and providing them with community and continuity. It gave an assurance that their personal conduct, regardless of their material circumstances, had real significance in this life and the next. Aristocrats served as the governors of their communities, adjudicating disputes, enforcing communal standards, and providing assistance when help was needed. At the top of this feudal hierarchy sat the King, overseeing his kingdom like the patriarch of a great family; balancing interests and insuring justice. Imperfect in liberty and equality, the Old Regime was nevertheless a world of stability and order.

Accompanying this idealized portrait of Old Regime society was a caricature of the *philosophes* themselves, an attack that proved so successful that it eventually found its way into the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of Enlightenment: "the spirit and aims of the French philosophers of the 18th c., or of others whom it is intended to associate with them in the implied charge of shallow and pretentious intellectualism, unreasonable contempt for tradition and authority, etc."²⁸ Highly portable, this caricature could be deployed in a number of ways. It acted as an anti-philosophical smear, contrasting the "utopianism" and "abstraction" of intellectuals with the unmediated practical knowledge generated by "real" politics. Drawing on the image of the French Revolution's descent into terror, the caricature undermined the very logic of reform. All efforts to change the rules of social life would necessarily follow the template of Paris in 1793, trading unfairness for tyranny and wholesale butchery. Finally, it linked together an archipelago of characters that haunted the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conservative

²⁸ On the history of the OED definition, see James Schmidt, "Inventing the Enlightenment: Anti-Jacobins, British Hegelians, and the Oxford English Dictionary," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64, no. 3 (2003): 421–43.

imagination: Jacobins, industrialists, Jews, socialists, communists, and democrats. Standing outside the organic, communal society of feudal Europe, these “rootless” moderns sought to destroy it out of hubris, naïveté, and relentless ambition.

In the United States, this aristocratic-reactionary language of conservatism first found a home in the South, where the defenders of slavery and later Jim Crow had considerable use for a conception that cast conservatism as an anti-capitalist paternalism and liberalism as the ideology of dreamy, impractical busybodies.²⁹ Counter-Enlightenment thought, albeit with its inconvenient anti-capitalist and anti-Semitic overtones edited out, also proved itself extremely useful to the New Right that arose in the United States during the mid-twentieth century.³⁰ Looking to mobilize public opinion against the emerging order of North Atlantic welfare states, so-called “traditionalist” conservatives like Russell Kirk and Whitaker Chambers deployed classic Counter-Enlightenment arguments in order to draw closer together the New Deal Order and its professed enemy, the Soviet Union.³¹ Kirk, for one, thought the welfare state was the great flattener of human variety; his “Gothic Mind” could not abide it. “The men of the Enlightenment had cold hearts and smug heads,” he wrote in 1963, “Now their successors [are] imposing a dreary conformity on the world—abstractions preferred to all those fascinating and

²⁹ See Louis Hartz’s discussion of the “reactionary enlightenment” in the South in Hartz, *Liberal Tradition in America*, 145-72. Hartz’s ideas are unjustly maligned, and have been extremely influential for me.

³⁰ There is a line of argument, notably advanced by Bruce Schulman, that the politics of the New Right emerged first in the South, and that the Movement’s rise thus expressed itself partially in a southernization of American national politics and culture. Though the right-populism of figures such as Wallace and Thurmond certainly made enormous contributions to the New Right and the Southern states provided its most loyal political bloc, it is misleading to think of it as a primarily Southern formation. Key figures of Movement Conservatism—McCarthy, Buckley, Rand, and Goldwater—emerged from a variety of distinctly non-Southern circumstances.

³¹ On the uses of traditionalist conservatism, see George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America, since 1945* (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998) and Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities throughout American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). For a long history of conservative ambivalence toward capitalism, see Peter Kolozi, “Conservatives Against Capitalism: The Conservative Critique of Capitalism in American Political Thought” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2011).

lovable particularities of human nature and human society which are the products of prescription and tradition.”³² As we shall see in chapter three, the general thrust of this traditionalist strategy was to provide a powerful legitimating argument for capitalism. Claiming that any state intervention in the economy—be it Soviet-style planning or the humblest forms of milquetoast liberal regulation—comprised a kind of wild-eyed rationalist hubris allowed conservatives to make their attacks on the welfare state speak the language of Edmund Burke.

In the years that followed the 1960s, a sector of American radicalism also began deploying Counter-Enlightenment rhetoric. Drawing on longstanding critiques developed by Western Marxists, as well as newer theoretical imports from France, New Social Movement thinkers increasingly identified the Enlightenment as an agent of sham-liberation, or “pseudo universalism,” as Cornel West would later put it.³³ From this perspective, the Enlightenment’s overt commitments to emancipatory politics served as cover for modern imperialism and white supremacy. Moving away from the critique of liberal *hypocrisy* that had been popular among members of the early New Left, like C. Wright Mills, these radicals insisted instead that the ideas of rationality and progress *themselves* constituted a vocabulary of oppression, as the Enlightenment’s bifurcation of the world into rational and irrational supported a whole series of further dichotomies that worked to the advantage of Western, straight, white men: human/nature,

³² Russell Kirk, *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory: Episodes and Reflections of a Vagrant Career* (New York: Fleet Publishing, 1963), 23.

³³ Cornel West, “A Matter of Life and Death,” *October* 61 (Summer 1992): 22-23. This term, “New Social Movement Thought,” is admittedly clunky, but it is still superior to the fundamentally pejorative monikers “postmodernism” or “identity politics.” Treatments of New Social Movement thought typically suffer from being written by its champions or enemies. Of the more partisan accounts, one of the very best is Razmig Keucheyan, *Left Hemisphere: Mapping Contemporary Theory* (New York: Verso Books, 2013). The most thorough and fair-minded historical accounts are Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: The US Left since the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), chap. 5-7; Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 190-208; Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), esp. chap. 3-5.

man/woman, civilized/barbarous. To praise rationality was, in effect, to lock oneself into a conceptual scheme that inevitably resulted in white supremacy, patriarchy, and the devastation of the natural world. Thinking one's way out of the Enlightenment thus became one of the hallmarks of New Social Movement philosophy, the source of its most electrifying arguments as well as its most infuriatingly obscurantist tendencies.³⁴

We are most familiar with Counter-Enlightenment ideas in America in these contexts, as the languages deployed by the post-sixties Left and the Conservative Movement to discredit a vital liberal center. Given our evolving understanding of history of liberalism, however, we should recognize that the techniques of Counter-Enlightenment had other uses as well. As Tory Socialists saw it, modern democratic government had to be protected from the civic religion of progress. Middle-class liberals would always confuse good government with their own desire to impose their modernizing vision on the world, and in the long run their confusion would create perilous conditions of irresponsibility and insecurity. The Enlightenment, for Tory Socialists, thus served as a stand-in for liberalism's distinctive collection of metaphysical commitments, the tissue of beliefs that rendered the paradigmatic practices of liberal politics—religious toleration, free trade, political equality, etc.—as the engines of history. While many Tory Socialists insisted that they themselves remained liberals, they also argued that the Enlightenment cosmology that traditionally animated liberalism could not in good conscience be defended. The language of Counter-Enlightenment allowed them to separate the liberal techniques they admired from the liberal ethos they abhorred.

³⁴ On critical theory and the history of the Frankfurt School in the United States, see Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1973). Also useful is Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). On the migration of French Theory to the United States, see François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

Communion and Failure

Tory Socialist critics shared other characteristics in addition to their antipathy to the Enlightenment. They all attacked middle-class culture in the name of working-class and aristocratic values, secularism in the name of religion, religious liberalism in the name of neo-orthodoxy, cosmopolitanism in the name of parochial identity, expertise in the name of philosophy, social science in the name of politics, and in some instances pacifism in the name of war and empire. In one way or another, they all looked to England as an example of a more mature and well-balanced Anglophone culture, invoking Burke and Churchill and Orwell as exemplars of thinkers and political actors, and occasionally calling for the United States to emulate the British Empire. Indeed, we might detect in American Tory Socialism a desire to create an American elite culture more British in its character, and therefore more respectable in its carriage and more responsible in its conduct.

Considering these attitudes, it should surprise no one that these intellectual insurgencies were composed almost entirely of white, middle-aged, middle class men, most of whom made their livings as journalists or academics. Truly, American Tory Socialist critics did not represent a cross-section of the American population in any meaningful sense, and it would be easy enough to conclude from this fact that the appeal of Tory Socialism grew from a sense of imperiled social position. Tory Socialists had a stake in the status quo; the more thoughtful among them recognized as much. Their respective turns to Burke, Aristotle, and the Populist movement emerged at least in part out of these men's more pronounced sense of what they—and, in their estimation, everyone else—stood to lose by liberal society's refusal to dampen its enthusiasm for the destruction of taboos in every sphere of life.

We should not, however, allow the Tory Socialists' social position or the reactionary turf guarding in their thought to lead us into crude reductionism. Historians do themselves no favors when they homogenize the concepts of "elites" or "the establishment," or assume that the entities that go by those names are motivated solely by interest or power. Tory Socialists were unremarkable in their social composition. They came predominantly from the Northeast and Midwest of the United States, but also as exiles from Nazi Germany, and as the occasional transplant from elsewhere in the Anglophone world. They were Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and unbelievers, displaying all the range of identification and commitment that religious labels tend to obscure. Many of them were ex-radicals, having spent time on both the Old Left and the New, and their experiences sometimes haunted their efforts to remake themselves as centrists. They were beneficiaries of what Jefferson Cowie calls the "Great Exception."³⁵ Born into working-class or farming families, they ended their lives as comfortable members of the college-educated professional class. These were all social characteristics that Tory Socialists shared with more conventionally liberal members of the intellectual "establishment." Yet these thinkers spent most of their careers deeply at odds with the prevailing wisdom of the liberal intelligentsia.

Many Tory Socialists sensed some kind of kinship with one another, even if they never consciously formed a unified intellectual or political movement. Late in his career, Christopher Lasch looked to Niebuhr, just as Irving Kristol had in his first forays as a social critic. Niebuhr described Carl Becker as "a kindred spirit," though the two of them never actually met.³⁶ Despite this sense of affinity, American Tory Socialism always remained—to borrow Thomas Kuhn's

³⁵ Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

³⁶ Burleigh Wilkins, *Carl Becker: A Biographical Study in American Intellectual History* (Boston: MIT Press, 1961), 164n98.

useful but ugly analytical language—in a pre-paradigmatic state.³⁷ There has never been a self-conscious “school” of Tory Socialist thinkers in the United States, much less a conscious political formation. There are structural reasons for this, among them the two-party system, the submerged nature of the American welfare state, the power of the Conservative Movement, and the tainted association of aristocratic government with the Southern racial order. As an historian of ideas, however, I feel obliged to argue that the American political imagination’s limitations represent another major—and readily overlooked—reason for the diffuse and frustrated character of the would-be Tory Socialist “movement” in the US.

We are well accustomed to a combination of support for the American welfare state with conservatism at a cultural level, especially as historians have often invoked it to describe the reflexive outlook of the “white working class” and explain the politics of American Labor Unions. Yet we continue to have difficulty rendering this synthesis intelligible as a distinct political philosophy.³⁸ As we shall see, those attempting to move beyond liberalism suffered the same difficulties. Most Tory Socialists gradually found themselves re-adopting liberal categories for making sense of human behavior and politics, and thus eventually rejoined the ranks of a conventional, modernizing liberalism of the right or left. Ultimately, I argue that Tory Socialism’s inability to establish itself as a viable force in the United States’ public culture stands as a testament to the power of liberalism’s hold on the worldview of the American political elite.

³⁷ Thomas Kuhn, *Structures of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 10-22. Many commentators have become touchy about the deployment of Kuhn’s ideas in anything other than the original context that Kuhn intended. I do not think we need to be so precise.

³⁸ We might note here the recent tendency in American political discourse to assume that “moderate” necessarily implies a synthesis of the 1960s bohemianism and Reagan-era economic pieties, the “socially liberal, fiscally conservative” trope. See for example, David Brooks’s only worthwhile contribution to social criticism: *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

The following study, then, is the history of a philosophical and political failure.³⁹ For those who have embraced the transformation of American manners and mores since the 1960s, or who see the projection of US power as neo-imperialism, or who believe that the breakdown of civil religion is the first step to a more properly multinational polity in America, this failure might seem like something to celebrate rather than mourn. This would be a mistake. There are many reasons to take Tory Socialism seriously, but here I will give just one. In our assessments of contemporary politics, Americans have a tendency to lump rather than to split. The great difficulty with the insistence that every political position be fitted into one or two overarching ideological families, as we are now discovering, is that it makes it difficult to sort out the relationships between different ideas and programs: if “liberals” are characterized by the advocacy of more generous social spending, then what is the difference in *moral* vision between poor relief and a guaranteed income, or between a national health service and a managed private insurance market? Are these programs different in degree or in kind? Sound political thinking requires the ability to distinguish between the alternatives before us, and that requires a fuller sense of the variety of ways in which moral and political visions can be assembled and deployed. Excavating the ruins of the Tory Socialist experiment, then, ought to aid us in making sense of the present as well as the past.

Chapter Summary

This dissertation consists of individual case studies, which both overlap and also proceed in a roughly chronological order. The first two chapters deal with versions of Tory Socialism that

³⁹ For the purposes of intellectual historians, the study of failures ought to be particularly attractive, partly because it sidesteps the thorny question of the causal efficacy of ideas.

embraced Counter-Enlightenment ideas while remaining explicitly committed to a liberal political identity. Chapter 1 follows the late intellectual biography of the Progressive historian and social critic Carl Becker. Becker's relationship to the Enlightenment, I argue, has long been misunderstood. Remembering him chiefly for his 1932 book, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*, historians have depicted Becker as a quintessential modernist, who rejected eighteenth-century rationalism in favor of pragmatism and natural science. I demonstrate, however, that Becker's position was rather more complicated. Like other pragmatists and progressives, Becker thought that eighteenth-century rationalism had run out of gas, but unlike John Dewey or Charles Beard, he came to doubt the whole metaphysical architecture of freedom, rationality, and progress that underlay contemporary liberalism. By the end of his life, he had formulated a political position in which the welfare state served as the instrument to protect the class interests of liberal intellectuals.

Chapter 2 examines the postwar conflict over the philosophical foundations of modern liberalism. During the 1940s and 1950s, such figures as Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau attacked the Enlightenment legacy to contemporary liberalism and attempted to formulate an ideology more appropriate to the emerging national security state and its role in the world. To their minds, a new civil religion rooted in pessimistic estimates of human nature and conflict-based models of power politics would enable the United States to assume its role as a responsible great power. Although their efforts succeeded in making hard-boiled rhetoric a permanent part of liberal argument, realists failed in their effort to convert American elites to a pessimistic conception of politics. Liberal intellectuals toyed with the idea that they were the new aristocratic ruling class, but ultimately abandoned this understanding by the early 1960s.

Chapter 3 shifts away from Counter-Enlightenment liberals to the multiple meanings of Neoconservatism, using the career of Irving Kristol as its principal example. As I contend, Kristol embodies the attempt to develop a form of conservatism that could simultaneously serve as an alternative to the midcentury liberal establishment and to Movement Conservatism. An amalgam of Weimar anti-modernism, Catholic Natural Law, and Anglo-American “classical liberalism,” Kristol’s conservatism existed in a tense relationship with the emerging Conservative Movement. Looking askance at what he saw as the moral anemia of postwar liberal society, Kristol was nevertheless initially ambivalent about Movement Conservatives’ bellicosity, intransigent nationalism, and Social Darwinist conceptions of capitalism. Despite these misgivings, Kristol and many other Neoconservatives gradually became dependent for their notoriety and wealth on the Conservative Movement’s largesse. By the 1980s, consequently, Kristol’s critical project had mutated into an effort to make Movement Conservatism intellectually respectable.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Communitarian movement of the 1980s, tracing its evolution from an afterlife of the early New Left to a language of Clinton-era neoliberalism. During the 1970s and 1980s, thinkers such as Christopher Lasch and Michael Walzer argued that the New Left had gone too far in uncritically embracing “liberation” as its core political concept. As a consequence, they believed, it had become the mirror image of the liberalism it opposed. Emulating the “continuist” version of English Democratic Socialism, they argued that any future American Left would have to root itself deeply in the language of tradition. During the 1980s, however, this project became confused as Democratic Party activists seeking a post-McGovern politics tried to re-fashion themselves as belonging to the center-Right. Adopting the language of

communitarianism, triangulating Democrats transformed it from a defense of traditional authority and working-class culture to a milder version of Neoconservatism.

The final chapter examines what I call Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a number of critics attacked what they called the “Academic Left,” a polemical designation for the growing prominence of New Social Movement thought on the Left generally, and in the universities in particular. Ironically, these Neo-Enlightenment Liberals inherited much of the Tory Socialist outlook, making use of realist, neoconservative, and communitarian arguments and motifs in their attempts to reclaim an amorphous tradition of “left-liberalism” from “postmodernism” and “identity politics.” By the 1990s, however, the politics of creating such a counter-tradition had metamorphosed once more. Battling the New Social Movements and the Evangelical Right simultaneously, Neo-Enlightenment Liberals came to see themselves as the descendants and defenders of Enlightenment rationality. In this sense, they took their place as the center-left in an emerging consensus that included triangulating liberals, Neoconservatives, and libertarians, and that re-embraced the old liberal cosmology of modernization and progress. The appearance of Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism thus signaled the decline of Tory Socialism as a major feature on the American critical landscape.

Taken together, these studies provide a record of a lost tradition of American politics. The story of Tory Socialism is one of intellectuals in search of a different kind of centrism, combining elements of liberalism, conservatism, and socialism in ways that appear alien to most Americans, then and now. Although we must ultimately judge their efforts to have been unsuccessful, the struggle of Tory Socialist thinkers can put us in a position to reassess the strange political journey of the twentieth-century United States. This dissertation asks us to think of the central decades of the twentieth century as characterized not by the rise and fall of

liberalism, but rather by a set of experiments aimed at escaping the burdens of our political and intellectual inheritance. These experiments failed, and we live in the slipstream of their failure

CHAPTER I

THE COUNTER-ENLIGHTENMENT LIBERALISM OF CARL BECKER

In January 1933, the British political theorist Harold Laski wrote to his friend Carl Becker to congratulate him on the success of his new book, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*. Like many of Becker's admirers, Laski fulsomely praised the book's style.¹ Becker's prose was "pure magic," and his erudition "as impressive as it is gracefully borne." In Laski's view, however, *Heavenly City's* primary virtues resided elsewhere. "What I value infinitely more," he wrote, "is the intellectual beauty of the book's attitude—the sense of compassion for high aims mingled with a fine detachment from all dogmas, an ability to explain the battle without feeling necessary to pass a moral judgment on the bona fides of the combatants. That spirit is what I mean by liberalism; and I think it the rarest, as I think it the most exquisite of human qualities."²

As a work of history, Becker's *Heavenly City* has not held up terribly well. Becker argued, in essence, that the eighteenth century failed in its attempt to break with the medieval

¹ Becker's talents as a stylist always received rapturous praise from his admirers. Later in 1933, a young Henry Steele Commager also wrote Becker to congratulate him on the success of *Heavenly City*: "May I not take this opportunity to tell you how much pleasure I have had from your 'Heavenly City' lectures. They had more of the intellectual climate of the eighteenth century than anything I have ever read, but my keenest delight in them was perhaps a sensuous one rather than an intellectual one. The style, I remember, had a delicacy and an intricacy and a richness like a Chopin Fantasia. I am very much in your debt for the book." Commager to Becker, 10/26/33, Carl Becker Papers, Cornell University, Box 9.

² Laski to Becker, 1/21/33, Becker Papers, Box 9. Laski made a career of trying to synthesize Marxism with liberal sensibilities. His *Rise of European Liberalism* would prove enormously influential, if mainly through the work of his student, C. B. MacPherson. On Laski, see Isaac Kramnick, *Harold Laski: A Life on the Left* (New York: Penguin Press, 1993).

past. Enlightenment philosophers had merely reworked Christian categories, expelling the supernaturalisms of the Middle Ages—Original Sin, miracles, the afterlife—and replaced them with supernaturalisms of their own—progress, reason, nature. “The *philosophes*,” as Becker wryly put it, “demolished the Heavenly City of St. Augustine, only to rebuild it with more up to date materials.”³ As early as the mid-fifties, professional historians called into question the accuracy of Becker’s interpretation. Peter Gay, who would write the great two-volume history of the Enlightenment in the 1960s, called it “a witty and perverse little book.”⁴ Becker’s stylistic genius, according to Gay, masked a superficial understanding of eighteenth-century thought. In his view, *Heavenly City* possessed “every virtue save one, the virtue of being right.”⁵ Subsequent historical work on the age of Enlightenment seems to have borne out Gay’s criticism of *Heavenly City*’s scholarly substance, inasmuch as the ceaseless sociological churning of the historical profession bears out anything. Regarded as a minor classic of “Enlightenment Studies,” Becker’s book is now generally treated more as an historiographical artifact than as a living hypothesis about the nature of eighteenth-century thought, the sort of book one finds on a graduate syllabus paired with a more recent and much larger volume, a demonstration of how far the state of scholarship has advanced.

Setting aside the justice of this sort of treatment, it is not clear that Becker himself intended the book to be a major scholarly intervention. Inscribing a copy of *Heavenly City* for a friend, he wrote on the flyleaf, “this certainly isn’t history. I hope it’s philosophy, because if it’s

³ Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), 31.

⁴ Peter Gay, “The Enlightenment in the History of Political Theory,” *Political Science Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (September 1954): 376.

⁵ Peter Gay, “Becker’s Heavenly City,” in *Carl Becker’s Heavenly City Revisited*, ed. Raymond Rockwood (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), 51.

not, it's probably moonshine—or do you think the distinction is overly subtle?" Becker's argument is thus perhaps better understood in terms of Laski's assessment of the book's attitude than Gay's criticism of its historical accuracy. That is, *Heavenly City* should be seen as a contribution to American liberalism, albeit an odd and slightly esoteric one. By the 1930s, Becker had firmly established himself as a minor celebrity of the interwar liberal intelligentsia. His network of friends and correspondents included Charles Beard, Max Lerner, William Dodd, and Felix Frankfurter. During WWI he had served briefly on the Creel Committee, and during WWII he would participate in a War Department advisory panel examining the effectiveness of strategic bombing. One of his last books, a set of proposals concerning postwar reconstruction, circulated among members of the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. He wrote regularly for *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and the *Yale Review*. H. L. Mencken lobbied him for articles to put in the *Mercury*. He received fan mail from Carl Sandberg and Van Wyck Brooks, as well as from dozens of high school students who had read his textbook, *Modern History* (1932).⁶

Becker's critique of the Enlightenment, however, marks him out as a particular sort of liberal. In what follows, I use Becker's thought on the relationship between the Enlightenment and the modern liberal order to gain a perspective on what Gary Gerstle has called the "Protean character of American liberalism."⁷ In particular, I want to argue that Becker's "Counter-

⁶ Attention to Becker's career has come in fits and starts. The most extensive treatments of his life and thought are Wilkins, *Carl Becker*; Cushing Strout, *The Pragmatic Revolt in American History: Carl Becker and Charles Beard* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958); Charlotte Smith, *Carl Becker: On History & the Climate of Opinion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956). Assuming that most figures require reassessment every few generations, we are likely due another biographical study sometime soon. In the meantime, the early modernist Johnson Kent Wright has had some of the most interesting things to say about Becker's work. See in particular Johnson Kent Wright, "The Pre-Postmodernism of Carl Becker," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 25, no. 2 (July 1999): 323–40.

⁷ Gerstle, "Protean Character of American Liberalism." Gerstle is virtually alone among interpreters of liberalism in understanding that the many transformations of liberal philosophy between the end of the nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth centuries had to do with concerns about rationality and irrationality, rather than just a reaction to the rise of socialism. My account is somewhat more chaotic than his, but it is mainly a matter of emphasis.

Enlightenment liberalism” offers a novel way of understanding the liberal embrace of “social democracy” during the first half of the twentieth century. Unlike John Dewey and other so-called “modern liberals,” Becker did not see the welfare state as the natural conclusion of a revised, “positive” conception of liberty. He did endorse something called “social democracy” in the 1930s and 1940s, but he did not see its relationship with liberalism as necessarily natural or even happy. Instead, he saw freedom of thought as the unique social interest of intellectuals like himself, and economic stability provided by the welfare state as the only means of protecting that interest from the mercurial “common man.” I argue that remained a liberal throughout his life, but that in his later years he is best understood as drifting toward a kind of Tory Socialism, and that his late writing presaged the postwar Tory Socialist thought of Arthur Schlesinger, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Richard Hofstadter.

The Death of the Eighteenth Century

For Gay, the historical significance of Becker’s engagement with Counter-Enlightenment ideas was clear, whether Becker knew it or not. Becker, according to Gay, “portrayed the *philosophes* as naïve and as a little fraudulent.” In doing so, the *Heavenly City* advanced the cause of reactionary politics. “Becker was no conservative,” Gay conceded, “but the conservative implications of *The Heavenly City* are plain.”⁸ This should come as no surprise. As a refugee from Nazi Germany, Gay’s own work on eighteenth-century thought synthesized a generation of European anti-fascist scholarship. As Margaret Jacob and Lynn Hunt point out, Paul Hazard’s *Crisis of the European Mind*, Ernst Cassirer’s *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, and Franco Venturi’s multi-volume *History of the Old Regime* all sought to link the defense of

⁸ Gay, “Becker’s Heavenly City,” 51.

Enlightenment thought with resistance to fascism.⁹ For these writers, the entire European humanitarian tradition, including both democracy and socialism, could trace its heritage back to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Similarly, conservatives of every stripe could find common ground in their shared distaste for the eighteenth century's call for liberty, equality, and fraternity. Fascism was the old counter-revolutionary impulse cranked up to apocalyptic levels, and thus one could not mock the pretenses of the Enlightenment without providing aid and comfort to the right.

Gay misapprehended *The Heavenly City*, as Becker's book arose out of an earlier and rather different set of philosophical histories. Between 1900 and 1930, Henry Adams, H. L. Mencken, Walter Lippmann, Joseph Wood Krutch and others declared the death of Victorian bourgeois culture and the consequent end of the promises of the Enlightenment. The eighteenth century, they believed, had been the taproot of Victorian optimism, the source of Newtonian physics and "self-evident" rights, of universal truths and harmonious natural laws. The *philosophes* had given up the faith in an all-powerful, interventionist deity and replaced it with a divine clockmaker, "a constitutional monarch who reigns but does not govern," as Lippmann put it.¹⁰ Disquieting discoveries in the biological and physical sciences, however, had dissolved this picture of a Rational Universe, and consequently the Enlightenment foundations of Victorian religion and morality. Modern science revealed the course of history not as the forward march of

⁹ On Cassirer, see Edward Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). On Hazard, see Anthony Grafton's introduction to the *New York Review of Books*'s recent edition of *Crisis*: Grafton, introduction to *The Crisis of the European Mind, 1680-1715* by Paul Hazard (New York: NYRB Classics, 2013), vii-xii. On the still badly under-studied Venturi, see John Robertson, "Franco Venturi's Enlightenment," *Past & Present* 137, no. 1 (November 1992): 183–206. A useful overview of the anti-fascist roots of midcentury European Enlightenment scholarship is Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, "Enlightenment Studies," in *The Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, vol. 1, ed. Alan Charles Kors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 418-30.

¹⁰ Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (London: Macmillan, 1929), 55. The best biography of Lippmann is Barry Riccio, *Walter Lippmann: Odyssey of a Liberal* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1993).

progress and rationality, but as a chaotic, cruel, and ultimately futile struggle for survival. These anti-foundationalist writers thought of themselves as onetime children of the Enlightenment, now orphaned by Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, and the second law of thermodynamics.¹¹

The most eloquent exponent of this sense of modernist alienation was Henry Adams.¹² As Daniel Borus notes, Adams's masterpiece, *The Education of Henry Adams*, was largely a meditation on the experience of an "eighteenth century mind" navigating a brutal and meaningless machine age.¹³ In *The Education*, as well as in his "Letter to the American Teachers of History," Adams depicted humankind as inhabiting a universe defined by uncontrollable chaos and gradually winding down to an inevitable heat death. "This much is clear," Vernon Parrington wrote of Adams and those influenced by him, "for them the end of the theological age had come, and the end also of the great hopes of the Enlightenment."¹⁴

Adams's pessimism about living in a post-Enlightenment world, however, was a minority view. More often, the death of the eighteenth century served as the backdrop for a kind of Promethean self-fashioning. The new age presented the opportunity to perform a "strenuous life"

¹¹ The literature on American Modernist thought is substantial. The most important work remains Henry Farnham May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959). Other significant interpretations include John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt against Formalism* (New York: Viking Press, 1949); and Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹² Becker read *The Education of Henry Adams* in late 1918, "with great pleasure and some exasperation." Becker to Dodd, 1919, Becker Papers, Box 7. Reprinted in Carl Becker and Michael Kammen, "What's the Good of History?," *Selected Letters of Carl Becker, 1900-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 60. His review of Adams's book appeared in the *American Historical Review* later in 1919.

¹³ Daniel Borus, *Twentieth-Century Multiplicity: American Thought and Culture, 1900-1920* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 3. On Adams, see Diggins, *Promise of Pragmatism*, chap. 1-2; T. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), chap. 7.

¹⁴ Vernon Parrington, *Main Currents of American Thought*, vol. 3, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, 1860-1920* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927). 203.

of the mind. For many forward-looking thinkers, the collapse of the Enlightenment's clockwork universe promised a kind of liberation—from religion, from positivism, from the constraints of stifling conventional moralities. “We are freer than any previous age,” claimed the historian (and Becker's graduate advisor) James Harvey Robinson, “from the various prepossessions and prejudices which we now see hampered the ‘free thinking’ of the eighteenth century.”¹⁵ The ability to make peace with the flux and uncertainty of the modern world was the chief intellectual virtue that marked off the “tough” from the “tender minded.” Indeed, according to *The Nation's* literary editor, Joseph Wood Krutch, all claims to cosmic significance, religious or scientific, should be understood as childish wish fulfillment. After Darwin, the only option open to the modern mind was psychological and moral adjustment to nihilism. “Like the child growing into manhood,” the truly modern thinker passes “from a world which is fitted to him into a world for which he must fit himself.”¹⁶ The end of the Enlightenment heralded an age of unprecedented scientific achievement accompanied by unprecedented intellectual humility.

For similar reasons, many progressive political thinkers also sought to break with the eighteenth century.¹⁷ In the view of Jane Addams, John Dewey, Vernon Parrington, Thorstein Veblen, Walter Lippmann, Charles Beard and others, the social dislocations occasioned by the transformation from proprietary to industrial capitalism undermined the philosophical

¹⁵ James Harvey Robinson, *Mind in the Making: The Relation of Intelligence to Social Reform* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1921), 207.

¹⁶ Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Modern Temper: A Study and a Confession* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1956), 6.

¹⁷ It used to be common to argue that the progressives were so diverse that no synthesis of their thought was possible. More recently, splitting has given way to lumping. Of the new syntheses, Michael McGerr's notion of “middle class radicalism” is probably the most convincing: Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003). The two indispensable works on progressive political philosophy remain the very difficult James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and the much easier Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

justification linking freedom of contract with democratic government. In the relatively simple world of the eighteenth century, they argued, it had been possible to imagine that the economic, religious, and political freedoms of the middle class were of a piece, and that producing a more egalitarian society meant nothing more than removing the tyranny of unearned privilege. “The philosophers and statesmen of the eighteenth century,” Jane Addams wrote in *Newer Ideals of Peace*, “believed that the universal franchise would cure all ills.” The naïve Enlighteners imagined that fighting against the Old Regime’s inherited privileges “constituted the full duty of the progressive patriot.”¹⁸ Once kings, guilds, established churches, and other archaisms and monopolies had gotten out of the way, individual initiative and free competition would allow a genuine meritocracy to emerge.

The emergence of large collectivities—national states, corporations, trade unions—as the primary shapers of economic and political life rendered these older individualist theories obsolete. “The notion that an intricate and delicately poised industrial mechanism could be operated by uneducated men snatching competitively at profits,” now appeared as “a simple-minded delusion,” wrote Walter Lippmann in *A Preface To Morals*.¹⁹ Consequently, as Dewey put it, America’s newly “organized society” had to move beyond this old eighteenth-century liberalism and commit itself to “using its powers to establish the conditions under which the mass of individuals can possess actual as distinct from merely legal liberty.”²⁰ *Real* freedom was the product of politics, an artificial state created by human ingenuity and collective action, not a pre-political abstraction. Here, then, was another sense in which the modern experience rendered the eighteenth century obsolete.

¹⁸ Jane Addams, *New Ideals of Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1907), 42.

¹⁹ Lippmann, *Preface to Morals*, 243.

²⁰ John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963), 27.

In a country whose constitutional settlement was itself a product of Enlightenment ideas, the turn of the twentieth century was thus a rare moment in which appeals to the authority of “The Founders” had remarkably little purchase in American political discourse.²¹ For progressive politicians and social thinkers, diminishing the grip of Enlightenment assumptions upon American cultural and institutional life was a necessary first step toward ameliorating the social question. As a result, according to David Sehat, displays of irreverence towards the eighteenth century became a hallmark of American fin-de-siècle political writing. Charles Beard’s *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, for example, treated early American politics as an elaborate effort to protect the prerogatives of property-holders. Other popular works brought the founding generation down to earth and mocked the American tendency to deify them.²² The founders, Lippmann asserted, “believed in democracy for men who had an aristocratic training. Jefferson, for example, had an instinctive fear of the urban rabble, that most democratic part of the population. The society of free men which he dreamed about was composed of those who had the discipline, the standards of honor and the taste, without the privileges or the corruptions that are to be found in a society of well-bred country gentlemen.”²³

Again, these works asserted that the fundamental difficulty lay in the relative simplicity of social life at the end of the 1700s. Woodrow Wilson put it succinctly in his *Character of Democracy in the United States*: “What was true of our early circumstances is not true of our present.”²⁴ The eighteenth century, the progressives argued, had no substantial sense of social

²¹ David Sehat, *The Jefferson Rule: How the Founding Fathers Became Infallible and Our Politics Inflexible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), chap. 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 107-20.

²³ Lippmann, *Preface to Morals*, 16.

²⁴ Quoted in Raymond Seidelman and Edward J. Harpham, *Disenchanted Realists: Political Science and the American Crisis*, 2nd ed. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), 42.

interdependence. Writing in *The Dial*, social theorist Thorstein Veblen argued that “those thoughtful men in the eighteenth century did not contemplate anything like the system of large wealth, large scale industry, and large scale commerce and credit which prevails today. They did not foresee the new order of things that has come on since their time.”²⁵ If liberals failed to adjust, they would find themselves fighting all the wrong battles. In 1913, Lippmann claimed that persistent anti-statism among liberals and radicals indicated a “confusion of thought.” Still entranced by “the ideal of Jefferson,” they failed to realize that repressive state measures such as postal surveillance and the prohibition movement represented “intrusions of the eighteenth century upon the twentieth,” antiquated notions of the state as a policeman of morality.²⁶ Similarly, during the presidential campaign of 1928, the editors of the *New Republic* lambasted Herbert Hoover as living dreamily in the uncomplicated world of Enlightened, laissez-faire thought.²⁷

These narratives of the Enlightenment’s demise served two purposes, one moral and one political. Their moral function, to build some new structure of values upon the wreckage of the old, was ostentatiously self-flattering. Anti-foundationalists made up the brave and happy few who had the courage to live “without illusions” in the modern world. Their task was nothing less than to usher in a new philosophical order, where the consolations of superstition, whether religious or positivist, would no longer be necessary and the test of intellectual worthiness would require owning up to the meaninglessness of one’s own existence. The political purpose was more admirable and less obnoxious. In a country perpetually besotted by its own constitutional

²⁵ Thorstein Veblen, “The Modern Point of View,” *The Dial*, January 25, 1919, 76.

²⁶ Walter Lippmann, *Preface to Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 270.

²⁷ “Herbert Hoover: Conservative,” *The New Republic*, October 31, 1928. See also Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 17-18.

traditions, diminishing the eighteenth century provided a rare opportunity to present Americans with ideological innovations that would, under normal conditions, be laughed out of the room. Treating the framers' political sensibilities and the constitutional settlement they produced as outmoded could thus serve to justify ambitious and badly needed programs of political reconstruction.²⁸

Carl Becker, Post-Protestant Progressive

As a young man, Becker was an avid participant in this progressive culture of disenchantment. Indeed, in many ways, Becker led an almost stereotypical progressive life. His father, Charles Becker, moved his family from New York to the edge of the civilized world, Iowa, in 1867, purchasing a farm in Blackhawk County. Here Carl Lotus Becker was born in 1873. A veteran of the Grand Army of the Republic, Charles did all the things expected of a midwestern farmer: he worked hard, attended Methodist Church every Sunday, and voted Republican in every election. He was also lucky. The land was productive, "eighty acres of as good farm land as there is anywhere to be found," Becker wrote later.²⁹ As a consequence, the Beckers prospered and Charles became one of the leading citizens of Waterloo, Iowa. Carl fled these circumstances as soon as he could. He attended college first in Iowa, then at the University of Wisconsin Madison. He had aspirations to become variously a lawyer, a novelist, and an engineer. His crisis of vocation ended when he settled on American history, studying under the great progressive historian Frederick Jackson Turner. When Becker finished at Madison, he went

²⁸ Becker did not think much of constitutional tinkering. In the wake of the "court-packing" scandal in 1937, he wrote to a friend that "liberals and radicals always think the court a nuisance when they have a liberal President & Congress. But suppose you get a thoroughly reactionary President & Congress, and no Court to put a little check on it. Then they might regret the abolition of Court power to check it." Becker to Val R. Lowin, 2/1937, Becker Papers, Box 12. Reprinted in Becker and Kammen, *Selected Letters*, 251.

²⁹ Carl Becker, *Our Great Experiment in Democracy: A History of the United States* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1920), 240.

on to Columbia University, where he earned a doctorate under the supervision of James Harvey Robinson.³⁰ An eminent progressive historian in his own right, Robinson was also a popularizer of Dewey's pragmatism and an advocate of social science's indispensable role in positive social reform.³¹

By the 1920s, along with Charles Beard, Becker became the chief proponent of "relativism" in historical inquiry. As Peter Novick points out, the term itself, which has degenerated into an epithet, is not what one might initially presume.³² Historical facts, Becker argued as early as 1912, are unintelligible apart from the needs of the age in which one finds oneself. History has only a subjective meaning, and that meaning must necessarily shift as the social concerns surrounding it change. As he put it in his 1932 presidential address to the American Historical Association, "however accurately we may determine the 'facts' of history, the facts themselves and our interpretations of them, and our interpretations of our interpretations, will be seen in a different perspective or a less vivid light as mankind moves into the unknown future."³³ In Becker's view, an age of recurrent economic turmoil will accentuate the role of material factors in the past, while one facing problems of religious division will concern itself with the history of toleration and coexistence. Historical problems appear and disappear not through discovery and solution, but rather relative to the flow of current events. In

³⁰ "I trust that Columbia has a football team," Turner wrote Becker after his acceptance to graduate study. "If not, don't think of remaining there next year." Turner to Becker, 11/7/1898, Becker Papers, Box 7. A sound historical judgment, if ever there was one.

³¹ As Robert Westbrook notes, Dewey and Robinson were close colleagues at Columbia, helping to found the New School for Social Research in 1919. Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 278. See also Peter M. Rutkoff and William B. Scott, *New School: A History of the New School for Social Research* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986).

³² Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 252-58.

³³ Carl Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1935), 255.

short, Becker's "relativism" was a kind of loose version of Deweyan pragmatism, a connection that he affirmed, in characteristic fashion, in 1938: "John Dewey's books I find hard to understand, but his ideas, coming through to me through other writers, have confirmed a native tendency to pragmatic theory."³⁴

Ernst Breisach's entry on Becker in *The Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing* claims that his historical training "caused a break with the certainties of small town Protestant America."³⁵ Perhaps, but it is difficult to find evidence that Becker ever possessed an affection for the traditional religiosity of Blackhawk County. The earliest indications we have of Becker's religious attitudes suggest an inward-looking and personalized variant of post-Protestantism. In a notebook he kept while studying at Madison in the 1890s, he recorded his thoughts on the nature of religion:

Religion is the relation of man to God. A man's religion is thus a secret part of his soul which is never revealed to mortal man and which is known to himself and god alone. A man's religion concerns himself and god only. Christianity is an attempt to formulate religion. Every man has a religion. It may be good or it may perhaps be bad, but it is no man's business, but his own. A man's religion is the best there is of him.³⁶

There is some evidence that this idiosyncratic post-Protestantism sat alongside a contempt for conventional Christianity, and especially the Methodism in which Becker had been raised. During a trip to Waterloo in 1928, Becker noted a marked decline in religious observance. After returning to Ithaca, he wrote a friend, "another generation and the thing [Methodism] will be virtually dead. The auto, the movie, and fundamentalism are destroying the menace. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad! For if Methodism is slowly dying in Iowa there is hope for the world. It

³⁴ Becker and Kammen, *Selected Letters*, 264.

³⁵ Ernst Breisach, "Carl Becker," *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, ed. Kelly Boyd (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1999), 87.

³⁶ "Wild Thoughts Notebook," Becker Papers, Box 7.

may yet go to the devil in peace.”³⁷ According to at least one account, in Becker’s later years this playful irreverence had hardened into an open contempt for displays of piety. After Becker’s death, a former student observed that he was “very intolerant when it came to students who approached life with any kind of religious presuppositions. . . . On one occasion Becker made the remark that if he saw any student enter a church he automatically put him down as a second rate mind.”³⁸

Becker’s gradual conversion to post-Christianity appears to have caused him little anguish. The conclusion of the First World War, by contrast, was shattering. Like many reform-minded intellectuals, Becker threw himself behind war mobilization in 1917. He spent 1918 working in George Creel’s Committee for Public Information, authoring a textbook on American democratic values and a pamphlet explicating the philosophy of the Fourteen Points. The latter came to the attention of the President himself, who, “with some minor liberties here and there,” gave it his “unhesitating approval.”³⁹ Yet the Treaty of Versailles and the collapse of the League of Nations enraged Becker, who came to see Wilson as an egoist and a liar.⁴⁰ “The man has no humor, no objectivity, no abiding sense of or contact with reality,” he wrote to the diplomat William Dodd in 1920.⁴¹ Later that year, also to Dodd, Becker complained of the postwar order, “if this is progress, what in Heaven’s name would retardation be?”⁴² Indeed, he told Dodd, the

³⁷ Becker to Elias R.B. Willis, 6/13/1928, Becker Papers, Box 8. Reprinted in Becker and Kammen, *Selected Letters*, 124-25.

³⁸ Ernest G. Schwiebert to Phil L. Snyder, 2/27/1956, Becker Papers, Box 17.

³⁹ Wilson to Creel, 10/26/1918, Becker Papers, Box 7.

⁴⁰ In the years immediately following the war, Becker seems to have thought, as did many others, that Herbert Hoover could right the American ship. In a letter from 1920, he said of Hoover that: “I don’t know what his political philosophy is, but he is an honest man and an able one, and I am ready to gamble on him.” Becker to Richard T. Newhall, 3/24/1920, Becker Papers, Box 7. Reprinted in Becker and Kammen, *Selected Letters*, 66.

⁴¹ Becker to Dodd, late spring 1920, Becker papers, Box 7. Reprinted in Becker and Kammen, *Selected Letters*, 70.

⁴² *Ibid.*

outcome of the war definitively had demonstrated for him the emptiness of the Enlightenment's optimistic outlook: "The conclusion I draw is not that the world is divided into good men and bad, and that all will be well when the bad men are circumvented and the ignorant are enlightened. This old eighteenth century view is too naive and simple."⁴³

Heavenly City as Modernist Satire

As an argumentative trope in early-twentieth-century discourse, the demise of the eighteenth century may be understood as broadly post-Christian, pragmatist, and progressive. All these descriptors applied to Becker and it is entirely possible, therefore, to interpret *Heavenly City* as a late and particularly elegant statement of the conceits of this American fin-de-siècle anti-foundationalism. Yet, as I demonstrate here, it was also a subtle parody of those conceits. *Heavenly City* begins famously with Becker's borrowing the English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's concept of a "climate of opinion."⁴⁴ It is only because we swim in the same cultural waters, Becker pointed out, that we can even manage to have genuine disagreements with one another. Were we able, by means of a "Mazda lamp," to conjure up the spirit of Thomas Aquinas or Dante Alighieri, and ask them to enlighten us with their views on natural or international law, "the discussion would no doubt begin to drag heavily."⁴⁵ We have no means to agree or disagree with Dante or Thomas, no way to translate our problems or our methods of solving them into terms of which our intellectual forebears could possibly make sense. Without sufficient overlap

⁴³ Becker to Dodd, 6/17/1920, Becker papers, Box 7. Reprinted in Becker and Kammen, *Selected Letters*, 72.

⁴⁴ See A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). In a letter to *The New Republic* in 1938, Becker cited Whitehead's *Science in the Modern World* as one the books that had influenced him the most. Becker and Kammen, *Selected Letters*, 274.

⁴⁵ Becker, *Heavenly City*, 4.

in climates of opinion, then, there is no such thing as productive conversation, and the medievals and the moderns thus have nothing to say to one another.

At bottom, Becker claimed, the cause of the gulf separating the medieval and modern climates was the death of Christianity as an intellectually respectable and living philosophical hypothesis. The medieval climate of opinion inhabited by Thomas and Dante treated human beings as bit players in a “cosmic drama.” Birth, life, and death—all of the moments and decisions of life carried enormous meaning for the medieval mind. The modern outlook, by contrast, had systematically emptied each aspect of existence of any significance. Biology and physics had demonstrated that humankind, instead of the paragon of animals, was just another bit of matter in motion, created and destroyed by the same forces that “rust iron” and “ripen corn,” and destined for inevitable extinction.⁴⁶ This existential gulf stood as the unbridgeable division between the modern and medieval climates of opinion—existence as a “divinely composed and purposeful drama,” or as a “blindly running flux of disintegrating energy.”⁴⁷ We could never have a meaningful discussion with the greats of premodern thought, Becker argued, because they believed that life had a meaning, while we know that it does not.

Becker’s inflammatory move in *Heavenly City*, the one that so exercised Peter Gay, consisted of arguing that the Enlightenment belonged on the medieval side of this divide rather than the modern. In Becker’s estimation, the Enlightenment’s assumed status as the origin of modernity stemmed largely from the fact that “the philosophes themselves made a great point of having renounced the superstition and hocus pocus of medieval Christian thought.”⁴⁸ Their loud

⁴⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 29.

and vicious anti-Christian polemics, however, never rose above “surface cynicisms.”⁴⁹ Their religious skepticism belied their own deep faith that beneath the malformations of human politics and morals lay a harmonious world of Natural Laws.⁵⁰ According to Becker, Comte de Volney provided the best summation of the Enlightenment worldview:

Natural law is the regular and constant order of facts by which God rules the universe; the order which his wisdom presents to the sense and reason of men, to serve them as an equal and common rule of conduct, and to guide them, without distinction of race or sect, toward perfection and happiness.⁵¹

Throughout his career, Becker returned to this passage again and again. It appears in four other works and invariably serves as a stand-in for Enlightenment philosophy as a whole.⁵² It revealed, in Becker’s view, the eighteenth century’s fixation on an underlying natural harmony, and its sense that the key to the reform of self and society lay in bringing all of humanity into conformity with “the laws of nature and nature’s god.” For the Enlightenment mind, morality, science, and politics were all elements of a single, seamless project of reform.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Becker argued, an obvious difficulty with this formulation had presented itself. Ironically, it grew from the philosophers’ own argumentative gambits. Beginning with Locke, Becker claimed, Enlightenment philosophy had rejected the notion of natural depravity, that “black spreading cloud which for centuries had depressed the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁰ Becker seems to have reached this conclusion as early as 1922. In his book on the Declaration of Independence he wrote, “the eighteenth century, obviously, did not cease to bow down and worship; it only gave another form and a new name to the object of worship; it deified nature and denatured God.” Carl Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York: Harcourt, 1922), 51. This is virtually identical to the passage from *Heavenly City*: “Obviously the disciples of the Newtonian philosophy had not ceased to worship. They had only given another form and a new name to the object of worship: having denatured God, the deified nature.” Becker, *Heavenly City*, 63.

⁵¹ Comte de Volney as quoted in Ibid., 45.

⁵² Carl Becker, *Modern Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 1; Becker, *Detachment and the Writing of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), 219; Becker, *New Liberties for Old* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 129; Becker, *Freedom and Responsibility in the American Way of Life* (New York: Knopf, 1944), 31.

human spirit.”⁵³ Instead, the philosophers insisted that one’s environment produced one’s morality, and that the base values of their age therefore stemmed from the prevalence of superstition, enthusiasm, and priestcraft. Yet this failed to provide any satisfying explanation for the evils intrinsic to life itself. If, as Alexander Pope had it, “whatever is, is right,” then all manner of theoretical tangles followed. If nature was good, then how could one explain natural evils like the Lisbon earthquake? After all, by the lights of the age, God’s goodness, “if goodness he could claim, must be inferred from the observable behavior of the world.”⁵⁴ Worse still, if culture and custom could be justly described as extensions of this wholly good nature, what could be wrong with priestcraft, superstition, or absolute monarchy? What possible basis could exist for social criticism? “How could man and his customs ever be out of harmony with nature?”⁵⁵

For Becker, the Enlightenment’s naturalism thus foundered, like so many philosophical schemes before it, on the problem of evil. This “high noon of the Enlightenment” presented the eighteenth century’s thinkers with a difficult choice.⁵⁶ The philosophers could embrace the indifference of nature and move “forward toward atheism” or reject their naturalism and head “back toward Christian faith.”⁵⁷ According to Becker, aside from a few idiosyncratic materialists and reckless libertines, they found neither option acceptable. Having trapped themselves by their own reasoning, the philosophers spent the rest of the eighteenth century devising a way out. These efforts culminated, Becker argued, in the doctrine of progress. Unable to find a means of

⁵³ Becker, *Heavenly City*, 65.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

separating good nature from evil artifice in the world immediately about them, they located their ideal in the future: “The world was neither a completed drama, nor a perfected machine, but rather something as yet unfinished, something still in the making.”⁵⁸ They turned accordingly away from abstract speculation about the nature of things to the project of political reform, of remaking the world for the sake of posterity. The future would be a “new heaven to replace the old,” and Progress “a new way of salvation.”⁵⁹ Having destroyed the rational basis for revealed religion, the philosophers used their conception of moral progress to quietly reestablish the distinction between good and evil that their own withering criticism had undone.

The Heavenly City would therefore seem to press hard on the distinctiveness of the modern age. Pushing the climates of opinion of the eighteenth and thirteenth centuries closer together, Becker denied the Enlightenment any meaningful connection with the twentieth century. He asserted repeatedly the modern age’s comfort with the emptiness of the universe, its willingness to content itself solely with measurement and with facts: “Our supreme object is to measure and master the world rather than understand it.”⁶⁰ Only the Bolshevik Revolution, he argued, with its visions of inevitable progress and an earthly paradise to come, threatened to resurrect the medieval mind’s cosmic drama.⁶¹ Like Krutch’s *The Modern Temper*, Lippmann’s *Preface to Morals*, and other heroic anti-foundationalist narratives, *Heavenly City* seemed to

⁵⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁵⁹ Becker made much the same argument in 1921, while reviewing J. B. Bury’s *Idea of Progress in Human History*: “It is no accident that the belief in Progress and a concern for ‘posterity’ waxed in proportion as the belief in Providence and a concern for a future life waned. The former belief—illusion, if you prefer—is man’s compensation for the loss of the latter.” Carl Becker, Review of *The Idea of Progress* by J. B. Bury, *The American Historical Review* 26, no. 1 (October 1920): 78.

⁶⁰ Becker, *Heavenly City*, 16-17.

⁶¹ Ibid., 163-68.

contrast the Enlightenment's rationalistic optimism with the hardheaded empiricism of the twentieth-century machine age.

And yet, on closer inspection, it is not at all clear that this is *Heavenly City's* intended message. Becker gave considerable space to the attempts of the Enlightenment to appropriate history for the cause of social reform. According to Becker, at roughly the same moment the philosophers turned away from their early optimism, they began to heap scorn on the stale antiquarianism of historical practice. Rather than the dull chronicling of wars and politics, they demanded that history become "philosophy teaching by example."⁶² In other words, Enlightenment thinkers felt that history should be made useful for reform, demonstrating which values and social arrangements were most conducive to human happiness, and which were hindrances to humankind's moral progress. Becker called these revisionist efforts "The New History," a sidelong reference to his old Columbia teacher, James Harvey Robinson, who had published a collection of essays entitled *The New History* in 1912. Just as Enlightenment thinkers had sneered at the antiquarians of their age, Robinson mocked the pseudoscientific disciples of Leopold von Ranke for reducing history to a "great many trifling details of dynasties and military history."⁶³ Robinson, also like the eighteenth-century philosophers, sought to revolutionize historical practice, to "turn on the past and exploit it in the interests of advance."⁶⁴

Robinson thus seems to have restated the central concerns of the eighteenth-century philosophers, at least as Becker represented them. He replicated their disdain for the endless cataloging of "facts" and their sense that intellectual life should serve the purposes of social

⁶² Ibid., 88.

⁶³ James Harvey Robinson, *The New History: Essays Illustrating the Modern Historical Outlook* (Springfield: The Walden Press, 1912), 8.

⁶⁴ Robinson, *New History*, 24.

reform. As Becker put it, “in the very accents, and almost in the very words, of James Harvey Robinson the philosophers . . . raised the cry for a New History.”⁶⁵ On the face of it, Becker’s comparison of Robinson to the *philosophes* seems more than a little strange, given that Becker’s stated purpose is to put daylight between the Enlightenment’s optimistic presumptions and those of the hardheaded twentieth century. But this is not the only instance in which Becker seems to have covertly undermined his own thesis. *Heavenly City* continually raises subtle parallelisms between Enlightenment thought and the modern “world pattern.” The early-eighteenth-century optimists, still convinced that centuries of Christian dominance had obscured the pure and harmonious truth, thought nothing more necessary than to dig up “the cold facts” and thus “spoil the game of the mystery mongers.”⁶⁶ Instead they discovered that the facts disclosed a morally incomprehensible universe. Moderns appear to have run into a similar if not identical conundrum: “It is one of the engaging ironies of modern thought that the scientific method, which it was once fondly hoped would banish mystery from the world, leaves it every day more inexplicable.”⁶⁷ Just as the eighteenth-century philosophers saw the world as “something as yet unfinished, something still in the making,”⁶⁸ Becker’s moderns now viewed it as “something in the making, something which can at best be tentatively understood since it is not finished.”⁶⁹ Indeed, Becker might well have been writing of Krutch or Lippmann when he claimed that the typical Enlightenment thinker “could not grasp the modern idea of progress . . . until he analyzed

⁶⁵ Becker, *Heavenly City*, 90.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

away his inferiority complex toward the past, and realized that his own generation was superior to any yet known.”⁷⁰

Even as he declared his allegiance to the modern view of life, Becker mocked its pretensions. He adopted the language of modernist anti-foundationalism while picking away at its claims to historical singularity. As moderns, Becker teased, “nothing is alien to us,” and so “we are rarely caught wondering” about matters of great significance. The twentieth century concerns itself only with practical matters: “So long as we can make efficient use of things, we feel no irresistible need to understand them. No doubt it is for this reason that the modern mind can be so wonderfully at ease in a mysterious universe.” On occasion, Becker ventriloquized other modernist texts. In describing the post-Newtonian picture of an anarchic and unknowable universe, Becker quoted Aristophanes: “Whirl is King, having displaced Zeus.” This, coincidentally, is precisely the same quote around which Walter Lippmann built the opening chapter of his bestselling *Preface to Morals*, which had appeared in 1929. Becker’s description of human fate being governed by the same laws that “rust iron” and “ripen corn” is quoted verbatim—and without attribution—from the writings of the Victorian writer Walter Pater. In his *Renaissance* (1877), Pater had written, “The Physical life is a perpetual motion . . . the passage of blood, the waste and repairing of the lenses of the eye, the modification of the tissues of the brain under every ray of light and sound [are] processes that science reduces to simpler and more elementary forces. Like the elements of which we are composed, the action of these forces extends beyond us; it rusts iron and ripens corn.”⁷¹

⁷⁰ Ibid., 131.

⁷¹ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance, Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 186.

Becker's intentions seem clearer when considered in light of his claim that the Enlightenment was only one of many episodes in the history of Western thought to make use of the concept of a "New History." According to Becker, St. Augustine in the sixth century, the Humanists of the fifteenth century, and the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth all practiced some variety of "New" history, that is, one whose purposes were explicitly didactic and that arrayed itself against a stale relaying of dead facts.⁷² The Church fathers, he insisted, simply remade the classical mythology of founding new orders, with the semi-divine patriarch Lycurgus replaced by the fully divine Christian God and the lost pagan Golden Age by Christianity's sinless Eden.⁷³ They all saw themselves as breaking decisively with the past when, in fact, they robbed the corpses of their intellectual opponents after doing them in. Genuine antiquarianism was, in Becker's view, a rare exception in historical practice, the contingent product of those rare episodes in Western history when things became stable enough for scholars to be properly boring.

For Becker, the eighteenth century imagined itself as breaking decisively with the past, when in fact all that differentiates any climate of opinion from another is the contents of its faith: "Their faith, like the faith by which any age lives, was born of their experience, and their needs."⁷⁴ Becker's point was not that ideas are a mere cover for material interests. His point was that we enter the contest of ideas not as detached, free-floating intellects withholding commitment until all the essential arguments have been made and all the relevant evidence collected. Rather, we arrive looking to substantiate commitments that are already in place, and consequently we tend to find the things we are looking for. At the end of our inquiries we

⁷² Becker, *Heavenly City*, 89.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

discover, to our astonishment, that we have been right from the beginning. The reason we could not speak meaningfully with Dante or Thomas is not because they are enchanted and we are free, but because the material circumstances of the thirteenth century and those of the twentieth generated different needs and anxieties, and thus required different fantasy worlds.

At the heart of *Heavenly City* is a joke, and Becker makes it at the expense of the early twentieth century as much as that of the eighteenth. Becker's Enlightenment attacked the old world with a blithe confidence in what we would call "creative destruction," a sense that the process of discarding the accreted artificial constraints on human social and mental life would ultimately produce a new and better understanding of "reality." Human beings would, at last, be able to bring themselves, individually and collectively, into accord with things as they actually are, the world of experience instead of the world of fancy. Purged of mystery and ignorance, the world would reveal its true values to human minds. What the philosophers found instead was nothing more than an indifferent universe of matter in motion, a meaningless set of accidents that took no interest in human "perfection" or "happiness." And so they beat a "strategic retreat" toward projects and progress.⁷⁵ It is only partially correct, therefore, to say that the thesis of *Heavenly City* is that the Enlightenment was a secularized form of Christianity. The eighteenth-century philosophers may have reconstructed Augustine's heavenly city with more "up to date materials," but Augustine himself, and Christianity more generally, did little more than rework the categories of classical thought. It was not the case, in Becker's view, that what Dewey often called the "free play of intelligence" would lead to the discovery of new and better values. It had led instead to the brink of the abyss. Philosophical reconstruction, then, surreptitiously smuggles in old values, carefully re-describing closely-held prejudices such that

⁷⁵ Ibid., 86.

they will be insulated from the ravages of criticism. “Progress” is merely the name we assign to the space midway between nihilism and convention.

The target of Becker’s critique in *Heavenly City* was not the philosophers of the eighteenth century alone, but rather the conceit of a Promethean “break with the past,” the framing of intellectual change in terms of epoch-making emancipation from archaic modes of thought. The twentieth-century modernists who congratulated themselves for their existential toughness were actually caught in the same cycles of philosophical recurrence that marked Western thought from the classical era forward. Like every other generation of philosophers, their dramatic gestures of iconoclasm and reconstruction never produced the world-shattering discoveries they envisioned. The terms of philosophy are continually reworked such that one age thinks of itself as advancing on its predecessors, such that one era cannot communicate with one another, but the underlying grammars of Western thought remain essentially unaltered. To the extent that there is a distinctively modern climate of opinion, in Becker’s view, it is a wild, careening dance of Victorian overconfidence, Lippmann’s anti-foundationalist vertigo, and James Harvey Robinson’s commitment to progressive reform. But this remains only the most recent turn on the wheel. It is fitting, in this respect, that Becker closes *The Heavenly City* with Marcus Aurelius’s lament that “the man of forty years, if he have a grain of sense, in view of this sameness has seen all that has been and shall be.”⁷⁶

Liberal Values in an Illiberal World

In April 1945, Carl Becker died of uremic poisoning, finally succumbing to the sickliness that had plagued much of his adult life. Since the 1920s, he had suffered from recurrent stomach

⁷⁶ Ibid., 168.

ulcers and, as is often the case with chronic illnesses that set in with middle age, he seemed to be capable only of battling them to a temporary stalemate. His personal papers are filled with medical bills, hospital discharge forms, and letters from friends wishing him a speedy recovery. In the early forties, he would finally find some relief after a major surgery removed a considerable portion of his stomach, but by that point he was already in his seventies and had little time left. Becker died too early to see the final defeat of Nazi Germany, but late enough to know that that defeat was both inevitable and imminent. He missed, however, the dubious opportunity of becoming a “Cold War” or “postwar” liberal.

Louis Gottschalk, one of Becker’s former students, reviewed his final book in *The Journal of Modern History* a year later.⁷⁷ Gottschalk took the opportunity to reflect on the last decade of Becker’s life. Since the publication of *Heavenly City*, Becker had been extraordinarily prolific, publishing eight books: *Everyman his own Historian* (1935), *The Story of Civilization* (1938), *Progress and Power* (1936), *Modern Democracy* (1941), *The Cornell Tradition* (1940), *New Liberties for Old* (1941), *How New Will the Better World Be?* (1944), and *Freedom and Responsibility in the American Way of Life* (1945). With the exception of his world history textbook and the work on the history of Cornell (Becker’s first extensive archival effort since his dissertation), all of the books were meditations on the worsening global crisis. Understandably, many of these ruminations proved gloomy, so much so that Gottschalk wondered if the rise of the dictatorships had not led Becker to become temporarily more “skeptical” than “humanist.” Thankfully, Gottschalk concluded, Becker’s final work suggested a recovery of nerve.

Like Gottschalk, Becker’s other students and biographers always sought to save him from the fate of being identified too closely with the deep skepticism of *Heavenly City*. They have

⁷⁷ Louis Gottschalk, “Carl Becker: Skeptic or Humanist?,” *The Journal of Modern History* 18, no. 2 (June 1946): 160-62.

insisted, repeatedly, on his ultimately firm eighteenth-century allegiances. He was, according to John Braeman and John C. Rule, a “twentieth century philosophe.”⁷⁸ John Cairns wrote that “with Becker, hopefulness came and went and varied from time to time, but never entirely vanished.”⁷⁹ His Cornell colleague and personal friend George Sabine wrote that Becker “found his true intellectual affinity” in “the faith of the Enlightenment in intelligence and humanity.”⁸⁰ By the end of his life, according to Leo Gershoy, “he had rejoined the company of Voltaire and Condorcet and Wells and all the goodly company who wished humanity well.”⁸¹ *Heavenly City*, they suggested, represented the nadir of a temporary skepticism about politics that had beset Becker following the First World War. His recurrent bouts of illness and the collapse of the Wilsonian project had left Becker in the doldrums, deeply cynical about the prospects for democracy. The rise of fascism and the coming of a Second World War, these writers argued, pulled Becker back from the brink and pushed him to embrace again the Enlightenment’s “generalities that still glitter.”⁸² The chapter titles of Burleigh Taylor Wilkins’ biography of Becker illustrate particularly well the presumed trajectory of his late intellectual development. Becker’s work in the twenties and thirties reflected the “social thought of a tired liberal.” *Heavenly City* marked an historian’s descent into a “near complete relativism,” while World War II prompted a “recovery of faith.”⁸³

⁷⁸ John Braeman and John C. Rule, “Carl Becker: Twentieth-Century Philosophe,” *American Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (December 1961): 534–39.

⁷⁹ John Cairns, “Carl Becker: An American Liberal,” *Journal of Politics* 16, no. 4 (November 1954): 624.

⁸⁰ George Sabine, Introduction to *Freedom and Responsibility in the American Way of Life*, xii.

⁸¹ Leo Gershoy, introduction to *Progress and Power* by Carl Becker (New York: Knopf, 1949), xxxvii.

⁸² Carl Becker, “Some Generalities that Still Glitter,” in *New Liberties for Old*, 124-51. The title paraphrases Rufus Choate.

⁸³ See Wilkins, *Carl Becker*.

In a far more critical vein, in the 1950s, the literary historian Cushing Strout argued that Becker never really abandoned his earlier attachment to positivism. Like most Progressive intellectuals, according to Strout, Becker's posture of disenchantment was largely designed to deflect criticism of the movement's failure to reform American society root and branch, and the credulity of many Progressives during the First World War. "He hoped to bring 'spiritual first-aid to a harassed generation,'" Strout wrote, "and his disenchantment was only with one version of reason; he was thoroughly and naively enchanted by technical reason."⁸⁴ Strout held, in other words, that Becker may have rejected eighteenth-century rationalism, but nevertheless remained committed to the idea that science could effectively reconstruct society along rational lines. The "pragmatic revolt" of which Becker was a member constituted a "twentieth century enlightenment," guilty of all the same philosophical errors of the eighteenth. According to Strout, Becker and his pragmatist fellows had "mistaken technocratic rationalism for liberalism."⁸⁵

There is something to all this. It is true that, as the thirties and forties wore on, Becker became more and more likely to write confidently about "liberal values." The rise of Hitler and the seeming inevitability of war suffuse his late writings. Closer to home, Becker had his only substantial run-in with what he called "the Patriotic Lunatic Fringe" during the 1930s.⁸⁶ A campaign by the Committee of the Federation of Citizens' Associations in 1935 identified Becker as a "well-known communist writer" and sought to have his *Modern History* textbook removed from Washington, DC's high schools.⁸⁷ Predictably, the Hearst-run *Washington Herald*

⁸⁴ Cushing Strout, "The Twentieth-Century Enlightenment," *The American Political Science Review* 49, no. 2 (June 1955): 331.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁸⁶ Becker and Kammen, *Selected Letters*, 242.

⁸⁷ In *Freedom and Responsibility*, Becker claimed that this effort had actually been part of a smear campaign in local politics.

took up the story.⁸⁸ In private correspondence, Becker remained flip about the whole affair, but he did feel compelled to publish a letter in the *Ithaca Journal* declaring, “I am not a communist . . . never have advocated revolution as a means of solving social problems, and I much prefer the American system of government to any dictatorship, Communist or Fascist.”⁸⁹ Nothing concrete ever came of these accusations, but it would obviously be difficult for anyone under such circumstances to remain aloof or detached about the rise of right-wing politics.⁹⁰

It is also true that Becker’s writings in the thirties sometimes suggest an on-again, off-again romance with the positivist and progressive enthusiasms of his earlier life. In *Progress and Power*, for example, Becker argued that the only sense in which the concept of progress remained intelligible was in terms of scientific and technological development. He entertained with hope in *New Liberties for Old* the possibility of a future state in which superstition will finally give way and “social ideology will take on the flexible, pragmatic character of a scientific hypothesis.”⁹¹ He even endorsed the arguments of Bertrand Russell and Robert Hutchins that in earlier years had been directed against his own views, namely that philosophical relativism leads ineluctably to fascism’s celebration of force and of might-makes-right.⁹² With the rise of Hitler and Stalin, he argued in 1940, “the anti-intellectual relativist trend of thought reaches a final, fantastic form: truth and morality turn out to be relative to the purposes of any egocentric

⁸⁸ Wilkins, *Carl Becker*, 173.

⁸⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 173.

⁹⁰ The *American Legion Magazine* drummed up the same accusations in 1940, though on this occasion the writers ultimately apologized to Becker. Wilkins, *Carl Becker*, 172.

⁹¹ Becker, *New Liberties for Old*, 43.

⁹² For this neo-Victorian critique of relativism, see Edward Purcell, *Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1973).

somnambulist who can succeed, by a ruthless projection of his personality, in creating the power to impose his unrestrained will upon the world.”⁹³

Still, the assertions that Becker’s encounter with the ascendant right cured him of his skepticism, or that he never really abandoned conventional Progressive ideas are hard to sustain. The arc from post-Versailles disillusionment to recommitment in the face of fascism is a stereotype of interwar American intellectual life, and it is badly limited when it comes to Becker. It ignores, on the one hand, the fact that he periodically espoused the central argument of *Heavenly City* until the very end of his life. Indeed, the assertion that Enlightenment thought secularized Christianity appears prominently in *Freedom and Responsibility in the American Way of Life*, the very book that Gottshalk felt signaled Becker’s return to the humanist fold.⁹⁴ On the other hand, it is crucial to be specific about the sense in which Becker “recommitted” to liberal values. While he did occasionally lapse into the we-will-only-survive-by-becoming-scientific register of polemical writing so common during the thirties and forties, more often he sought to divide the tenets of liberal philosophy into two distinct categories: a set of values centering on the integrity of the individual and a set of guesses about how those values might be realized. The central premise of early-eighteenth-century philosophy, he contended, was that no such division existed, indeed, that no such division *could* exist in the actual scheme of things. This was the essence of the Volney quotation to which he frequently turned for a summation of Enlightenment thought. The subsequent scientific, economic, and intellectual revolutions largely invalidated the optimistic predictions of eighteenth-century philosophy. As a result, Becker

⁹³ Becker, *New Liberties for Old*, 145.

⁹⁴ Becker, *Freedom and Responsibility*, 28-30.

believed, there had emerged over the course of the nineteenth century a chasm between the ideal and the reality of liberal democracy:

In terms of the ideal, there should have emerged from the liberal-democratic revolution a relatively simple society of free, equal, and prosperous citizens, fraternally cooperating to effect by rational discussion and mutual concession, the common good. In fact there emerged a highly complex society in which highly intricate and impersonal economic forces, stronger than good will or deliberate intention or rational direction, brought about an increasing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the fortunate few, and thereby nullified, for the majority of the people, many of those essential liberties which provide both the theoretical justifications and the necessary conditions for the practical success of democratic institutions.⁹⁵

This is heady stuff, and it would seem to locate Becker well within the mainstream of liberal thought during the era of totalitarianism. On its face, it is essentially a statement of the transition from classical to modern liberalism, a narrative that, by the end of the 1930s, had already taken its place in textbooks of the history of political thought such as *History of Political Theory* by Becker's Cornell colleague George Sabine.⁹⁶ For Becker, however, the project of protecting liberal values in the machine age went beyond a shift from "negative" to "positive" conceptions of liberty. It meant abandoning liberalism's traditional fixation on rationalizing politics. Eighteenth-century thought, to Becker's mind, was predicated on an especially bad bet, namely Volney's gamble that government by Natural Law, instead of the capricious will of other people, naturally guides individuals and societies toward "happiness" and "perfection."

Becker addressed these issues most extensively in his penultimate and most commercially successful book, *How New Will the Better World Be?* Composed mostly of essays previously published in the *Yale Review*, where Becker served as contributing editor, *How New* sought to sketch an ambitious program of postwar reconstruction. In the domestic sphere, the

⁹⁵ Becker, *New Liberties for Old*, 61.

⁹⁶ On the development of the classical-to-modern narrative see James Farr, "Political Theory as Disciplinary Genre," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, ed. John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 225-44.

state would have to harness rather than suppress chauvinistic nationalism. The totalitarian dictatorships had managed to establish themselves only by mobilizing mass political movements, and the Allies' eventual victory resulted from a similar mobilization. Further, in his view, domestic stability required international stability. Becker envisioned that, following the war, the United States and the remaining great powers would have to cooperate to maintain global peace. He emphatically did not imagine that this organization would be at all similar to the League of Nations. Rather, it would be a quasi-imperial alliance between the United States, Great Britain, the USSR, and China. He thought that it would function as a global successor to the Concert of Powers that maintained relative peace in Europe following the defeat of Napoleon.⁹⁷

Underlying the politics of *How New*, as well as Becker's other late work, was a sharpened sense of liberalism not just as a philosophy, but also as the concrete interest of a specific social class, namely intellectuals. As he jokingly put it in a letter to Leo Gershoy, "I would be a fool to fight for communism. I am a professor, that is to say a tool of Capitalism which supports me; and why should I not, therefore, fight for my class & my own interests?"⁹⁸ This was Becker being glib, but he made much the same argument in public. The political activism of the eighteenth century had aimed at freeing the bourgeoisie from the claustrophobic world of rank, privilege, and tradition. That sort of freedom suited aspiring capitalist buccaneers, but it also benefitted the middle class's growing body of professionally heterodox thinkers. Just as the transformation of the economy eroded the power of the industrial class, it also meant the

⁹⁷ Carl Becker, *How New Will the Better World Be?* (New York: Knopf, 1944).

⁹⁸ Becker to Gottschalk, 12/26/1938, Becker Papers, Box 13. Reprinted in Becker and Kammen, *Selected Letters*, 265. In a similar vein, Becker wrote Max Lerner in 1938, "I have no desire to protect the minorities that so largely control the economic welfare in their interest. But the danger is that the people, in freeing themselves from this minority, will willingly sacrifice the minorities who are like you and me who believe . . . that in the long run no freedom can be worth much that does not include freedom to discuss the means and ends of social organization." Becker and Kammen, *Selected Letters*, 260. It goes without saying that Becker is not using the term minority in the way that it is used now.

future would no longer belong to bourgeois intellectuals, if it ever had. Quoting his friend Max Lerner's *Ideas are Weapons*, Becker wrote, "the rational right thinking man has ceased to be the center of our intellectual system as surely as the earth has ceased to be the center of our planetary system."⁹⁹

History belongs instead to the "*dumb pressure of common men and machines.*"¹⁰⁰ The common man had little interest in the liberties prized by university professors or by the titans of industry.¹⁰¹ For Becker, "What the common man needs is the opportunity to acquire by his own effort, in an occupation for which he is fitted, the economic security which is essential to decent and independent living."¹⁰² He is "suspicious of eccentricity" and desirous of an "equality of mediocrity." He wants the security provided by "bread and motor cars," and any government that can provide those things for him will immediately earn his allegiance. Once materially secure, the average man "will never know, or soon forget, that liberty has departed."¹⁰³ Of course, this kind of talk is resonant of certain streams of anti-democratic cultural criticism and political thought that became common in the 1920s. In the face of the red scares and race riots that followed the First World War, Mencken, Lippmann and others spent that decade lamenting the state of average Americans, their inability to move beyond "pioneer values" and embrace more modern modes of thinking.¹⁰⁴ Often these thinkers expressed a sense that the irredeemably

⁹⁹ Max Lerner, *Ideas Are Weapons: The History and Uses of Ideas* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991), 4-5.

¹⁰⁰ Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian*, 99.

¹⁰¹ Becker often paired freedom of thought with freedom of economic activity.

¹⁰² Becker, *Modern Democracy*, 62-63.

¹⁰³ Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian*, 99.

¹⁰⁴ Gerstle, "Protean Character of American Liberalism," 1055.

irrational character of Americans meant that technocracy or some form of authoritarianism was preferable to democracy.

Becker did not conclude, as these New Era cultural critics did, that the irrationality of ordinary Americans precluded any possibility of meaningful democratic reform. Becker was an elitist, to be sure, but his elitism, ironically, drove his politics leftward. In Becker's view, the rise of the dictatorships revealed the profound fragility of the liberal victories in the modern era. It may have been possible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to imagine "democratic government, and the liberties that went with it, as a permanent conquest of the human spirit," but the inability or unwillingness of democratic regimes to achieve material security for the common run of people demonstrated that to be nothing more than a utopian dream.¹⁰⁵ The foremost task facing modern states was not ensuring the lofty aspirations of personal liberty, but keeping people employed. The ascent of technology and common men as the primary movers in politics meant that "collectivism," according to Becker, was no longer something Americans could choose to accept or reject. The only remaining question was the form that it would take. Becker identified four models: Socialism, Communism, Fascism, and "what for lack of a better term we may call Social Democracy."¹⁰⁶ This social democratic variant, which he identified with Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, amounted to American democracy plus "whatever restrictions of economic enterprise may be necessary for the economic welfare of the people as a whole."¹⁰⁷ Further, Becker argued that the social democratic strategy would have to go beyond proposing piecemeal solutions to specific problems. Future national security would involve addressing the "social question" at a more fundamental level, taming the power of business and massively

¹⁰⁵ Becker, *Modern Democracy*, 7.

¹⁰⁶ Becker, *How New Will the Better World Be?*, 136.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

expanding the welfare state. To do so without doing away with democracy in the process would prove the signal challenge of the coming years.

Finally, Becker argued, if Americans failed to solve the social problem via democratic means, a more authoritarian form of collectivism would result. Another depression or an extended period of bloody class conflict could produce, in relatively short order, “a loss of faith in the slow, cumbersome, and expensive democratic political procedure.”¹⁰⁸ Among the available options, Becker saw fascism as standing the best chance of taking hold in the United States. Americans, he observed with a touch of bewilderment, worried far more about infiltration by “Reds” disguised as liberals than they did about creeping fascism. Under the leadership of a charismatic and characteristically American figure resembling Theodore Roosevelt, William Jennings Bryan, or Huey Long, a fascistic movement modeled on the Ku Klux Klan or the old frontier vigilance committees and going by the name of the “national cleanup” or “the new Americanism” could easily gain control of American life.¹⁰⁹

Nationalism, imperialism, and just enough “Social Democracy” to keep the masses at home: by the end of his life, Becker often sounded more than a little like a nineteenth-century Tory. Indeed, Becker opened and closed *How New* with an epigram from Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Specifically, Becker looked to Burke’s qualification of social contract theory. Society is not just any social contract, Burke had argued, akin to a vulgar and commercial “partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco.”¹¹⁰ Rather, it is analogous to an entailed inheritance, a “partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.” The

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 163.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 245.

preservation of liberal ideals in the twentieth-century machine age would not involve the end of imperialism, or power politics, or the restoration of untrammelled free enterprise. Protecting the ability of individuals to think and speak freely—the liberal professor’s primary social interest—meant securing material wellbeing for ordinary people. To borrow Becker’s own gendered terms, if thinking men failed to create the kind of society that common men could enjoy, then common men would take thinking men’s freedoms away from them.

Gottschalk’s dichotomy of humanism and skepticism, in this sense, proved false. By the end of his life, Becker was both a humanist and a skeptic. In his assessment, the inescapable problems of the twentieth century were the issues of war and unemployment, and the eighteenth century’s liberal philosophy did not contain the solution to those problems. Becker also insisted, however, that “intelligence, integrity and good will” were the “the primary values of life, the values upon which in the long run all the other values depend.”¹¹¹ Sometimes he glossed his preferred “social democratic” politics in terms that might have been recognizable to Jefferson. Indeed, he argued that, with minor amendments, Jefferson’s philosophy of democracy “is as valid for our time as it was for his.”¹¹² On other occasions, he articulated a political vision that would have been less intelligible to the Sage of Monticello than it would have been to Metternich, Disraeli, or Bismarck. By 1932, Becker had decided that the ideology of progress to which he himself subscribed was a mythology not in any significant sense different than the mythologies that had animated Athens in the fifth century, Florence in the fifteenth, or Paris in the eighteenth. Over the next decade, the distinction blurred still further. Liberal values, he wrote at the end of his life, are “rational and humane values which for more than two thousand years

¹¹¹ Becker, *Detachment and the Writing of History*, xiv.

¹¹² Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian*, 237.

men have commonly accepted as the test of civilized living.”¹¹³ In a strange flight of universalism, he claimed that they were the values upheld by “Buddha and Confucius, Solomon and Zoroaster, Plato and Aristotle, Socrates and Jesus.”¹¹⁴ Quite clearly, Becker could not make up his mind, and rather than try and pin him to one of the many positions he took over the course of the thirties and forties, we ought to identify his liberalism with his chronic, almost obsessive indeterminacy.

Conclusion: Becker and Tory Socialism

Becker is largely forgotten today, for reasons that have partially to do with the internal dynamics of historiography and the historical profession. On one level, *Heavenly City* is a contribution to the historiography of the Enlightenment, that is, a contribution to the body of scholarship on the ideas of the eighteenth century and their historical context. It would be difficult to argue from that perspective that *Heavenly City* has not been superseded. Professional historians are the arbiters of what remains relevant to the practice of historical research and the study of the Enlightenment has obviously moved on from Carl Becker. Given its focus on the mechanisms of philosophical change, another potential home for *Heavenly City* would be among studies of “historical thought” or “the philosophy of history.” Apart from the history of science, however, disciplinary attention to the philosophical assumptions underlying historical research was largely a contingent product of the Cold War and of the brief moment when analytic philosophers displayed interest in questions of historical causation.¹¹⁵ For better or worse,

¹¹³ Becker, *New Liberties for Old*, 146.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹¹⁵ On midcentury debates over the philosophy of history, see Kerwin Klein, *From History to Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), chap. 2.

historians no longer feel especially compelled to argue with Marx, and the analytic philosophers have thankfully taken their search for “covering laws” of causation elsewhere.

The rough utilitarianism of historiography has little place for a work that is as “outdated” as *Heavenly City*, and without sufficient interest in something called “historical thought,” Becker gets left out in the cold. This is a more significant problem than one might imagine, as some of the United States’ most important political thinkers and social critics, from Henry Adams to Richard Hofstadter —have used history as their primary medium of argument. Still, apart from the New Left-inflected literature on liberalism’s “consensus” history, we have very little in the way of serious discussions of American political thought that incorporate thinkers who sought to “turn on the past and exploit it in the interests of advance.” Becker was a minor thinker compared to Hofstadter or Schlesinger, but he was engaged in much the same project: capturing the narrative of modern history for the eclectic and profoundly dysfunctional blend of liberalism and socialism we call the New Deal Order.

Confronted by the growing role of irrationality in politics, but dubious about other progressive intellectuals’ self-aggrandizing solutions, Becker tried to combine his various sensibilities into a not-altogether-stable philosophical whole. *Heavenly City* was part of this confused search for a more realistic form of liberalism, one that could move beyond “eighteenth-century values” without falling in love with itself in the process. In that respect, he was of a piece with other liberals who thought it time for the United States to leave the Enlightenment behind. Indeed, we might see Becker as part of a long tradition of twentieth-century liberal thought that tried to preserve liberal politics by purging it of progressive metaphysics. He therefore represents an early example of the kind of “anti-metaphysical” liberalism we associate in different ways with Judith Shklar, Richard Rorty, and the later John Rawls.

Yet, unlike these other liberals, Becker did not consider the democratization of liberal values a worthwhile political objective. He did not think ordinary people were capable of appreciating intellectual values. He thought they were capable of humbler virtues, but freedom of thought mattered too little in their daily lives to become an issue of primary importance. Instead, Becker reimagined the liberal life of the mind as essentially the private project of intellectuals, something akin to the amateur laboratories of English country squires during the seventeenth century. For Becker, the love of truth might have been the value upon which all other values depended, but its pursuit was a hobby of the privileged, not the foundation of good order. In Becker's view, social peace was produced by brute material forces and preserved only by the "crude ideas" of "common men."

In this respect, Peter Gay was correct when he argued that *Heavenly City* carried "conservative implications." Becker was never anything approaching a conventional conservative, at least in the American sense, but his bid to pull liberalism away from its investments in eighteenth-century thought did take on a distinctly aristocratic, counter-revolutionary character over the course of the 1930s. In that respect, *Heavenly City* and Becker's other late work, represent an attempt to articulate a "third way" in twentieth-century American political thought, namely, a philosophy of Tory Socialism. Becker's struggle to combine elements of liberalism, conservatism, and socialism continued in the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr and Arthur Schlesinger, among others. Like Becker, these thinkers shared a deep sense that Enlightenment philosophy's preoccupation with rationality made liberal politics unsustainable in a world where rationality had little place. The central challenges of building such a third tradition were precisely those that animated Becker: How can one escape the Enlightenment without in the process embracing political cynicism, and how can one preserve

the virtues of the liberal tradition without simultaneously resurrecting the errors of the eighteenth century?

I do not think that we need to endorse Becker's conception of the relations between liberalism and social democracy. But if we wish to make proper sense of the long and complicated history of modern American liberalism, then we need to do a better job of accounting for the various roads not taken. Becker's aristocratic, counter-revolutionary conception of the New Deal as a prophylactic against social chaos is certainly one such road. Indeed, if we take that interpretation of the American welfare state seriously, we may find ourselves asking how the middle decades of the twentieth century might have been different if the Beckers and Hofstadters and Schlesingers of the world had simply declared themselves a species of conservative. That is, we might ask ourselves whether we have the right analytical vocabulary for making sense of the social democratic world that we have lost. Moreover, we may find Becker, a genuinely independent thinker who struggled mightily with his liberal inheritance, an example worth emulating in our own pinched and foolish era.

CHAPTER II

PESSIMISM, PROGRESS, AND THE LIBERAL INTELLIGENTSIA

In chapter 1, we saw how a prominent interwar intellectual, Carl Becker, struggled to reconcile his liberal identity with his growing suspicion that the world envisioned by Enlightenment political theory did not exist. In this chapter, I want to pursue the issues raised by Becker's personal crisis further, through an examination of a set of conflicts within the midcentury liberal intelligentsia. During the 1940s and 1950s, there emerged a species of establishment intellectual—what I call a liberal pessimist—whose self-presentation involved an emphatic rejection of conventional liberal and progressive pieties and an embrace of counter-revolutionary and Counter-Enlightenment ideas. Uniting this community of discourse—which included the prominent thinkers Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., among many others—was a rhetoric of disillusionment targeting what they dubbed “Enlightenment Rationalism.” In the eyes of these self-described “realists,” Enlightenment Rationalism had failed, not only to produce viable projects of political reform, but also to prevent the West's slide into barbarism during the 1930s. They disdained the Age of Reason as the common philosophical grounding of classical liberalism, progressive modern liberalism, and Marxism, and as the source of these ideologies' supposed naïveté about “real” politics. The defense and extension of American democracy in the postwar world, they argued, could not be derived from rationalist philosophical systems, all of which resolved in hopeless optimism or a self-righteous turn toward terror.

This midcentury attack on the Enlightenment's legacy to liberalism offers a means of

enriching our understanding of midcentury intellectual life. The proliferation of Counter-Enlightenment ideas among establishment intellectuals represented one theater in a larger conflict over which cultural ideals ought to animate the politics that Americans had by that time taken to calling “liberal.” For thinkers in what I am describing as the “liberal progressive tradition,” such as John Dewey and Sidney Hook, modern thinking and modern liberal politics both grew out of crises of capitalism and faith in the late nineteenth century. They saw the emergence of welfare capitalism in the West as inseparable from a process of cultural modernization in which superstition and parochial identities were gradually giving way to a more cosmopolitan, scientific culture. Liberal pessimists like Niebuhr and Morgenthau, I argue, were trying to supplant that philosophical-historical meta-narrative with one where “true” liberalism emerged from the ruins of a failed culture of bourgeois progressivism descended from the Enlightenment. In a dispute both petty and profound, intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s wrangled over which of these pictures of mental autonomy stood to inherit the post-bourgeois, post-capitalist version of American liberalism.

In thus addressing the ideological composition of the midcentury intelligentsia, I am covering well-trodden ground. It is a commonplace that the politics of knowledge and models of mental autonomy stood at the center of postwar political culture, as an easy means to draw distinctions between the supposed skepticism and open-mindedness of the free world and the Soviets’ totalitarian thought control.¹ My aim in focusing on the struggle between pessimists and

¹ For accounts that emphasize the ideal of mental autonomy as a fixture of postwar intellectual life, see Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985); Jamie Cohen-Cole, *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Robert Fowler, *Believing Skeptics: American Political Intellectuals, 1945-64* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978).

progressives, however, is to highlight the ways in which liberalism's skeptical politics could be invested with antagonistic cultural programs. The liberal progressive tradition oriented itself around what David Hollinger called the ideal of "cognitivism": a desire to organize American culture around the ideals of science, broadly construed.² In Hollinger's view, this ideal of scientific knowledge arrayed itself against an aesthetic modernism that idealized self-creation and artistic genius. My purpose is not to deny this two-cultures opposition, but rather to argue that alongside science and art, an additional ideal of *statecraft* vied for space in the imagination of midcentury liberal intellectuals. Instead of the liberal progressives' scientist who dares to know, liberal pessimists elevated as a culture hero the political leader who risks personal moral corruption in order to preserve the possibility of civilized life. Liberal pessimism thus promoted a cultural program wherein power politics, rather than science or art, was the arena where one learned the intellectual discipline necessary to cope with the uncertainties of modern life. Insofar as American liberals toyed with adopting an identity based on this conservative, counter-enlightenment ideal of statecraft, they entertained the possibility that they themselves, as well as the political order they sought to defend, were not liberal at all. Liberal pessimism was a form of Tory Socialism, and its entanglement with more conventional forms of progressive liberalism is fundamental to understanding both the internal tensions of midcentury political thought as well as the longer arc of American cultural politics, intellectual historiography, and social criticism in the late twentieth century.

² David Hollinger, "The Knower and the Artificer," in *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences, 1870-1930*, ed. Dorothy Ross (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 26-53. For other works that highlight the simultaneous centrality and ambiguity of "modernism" in midcentury thought, see Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconciliation in the 1940s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986); Robert Genter, *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010). The best general exploration of the concept itself remains, to my mind, Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).

The Enlightenment and the War Party

By the middle of the twentieth century, there existed two long-standing critiques of the Enlightenment in American discourse: an attack on egalitarian reform derived from European conservatism and a Progressive line of argument that treated Enlightenment thought as the exhausted taproot of laissez-faire liberalism.³ In the 1940s and 1950s, however, there emerged among certain sectors of the American intelligentsia a way of talking about politics that blended together these two anti-Enlightenment discourses. This critical sensibility has gone under different analytical names, with “political realism” being the most common.⁴ My own preferred term is liberal pessimism, given this perspective’s roots in an attempt to graft onto American democratic politics a declinist philosophy of history and a Hobbesian account of moral anthropology.⁵

Like earlier instances of Counter-Enlightenment discourse, the liberal-pessimist attack on the Enlightenment arose from a combination of indigenous and imported sources. The former is a familiar one: the deep disillusionment with Progressive ideas in politics and religion that engulfed many liberals in the aftermath the First World War. In the years following the Treaty of

³ See the introduction and chapter 1, respectively, for more extensive discussions of these critiques.

⁴ On political realism, see Duncan Bell, ed., *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Joel H. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists: Political Realism, Responsible Power, and American Culture in the Nuclear Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991); John W. Coffey, *Political Realism in American Thought* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1977); Vibeke Schou Tjalve, *Realist Strategies of Republican Peace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Nicolas Guilhot, ed., *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁵ Very little work has been done to explicate the philosophy of pessimism. The key work is Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Versailles, many writers concluded that democracy had demonstrated itself too soft and effete to effectively confront the growing danger of mass politics, as well as too naïve about the willingness of capitalists to reform themselves without a fight.⁶ From this emerged a carefully cultivated, “anti-utopian” identity calibrated against the Progressive Movement, the Social Gospel, and the figure of Woodrow Wilson in particular. Such “counter-progressivism” could be deployed against old liberalism, new liberalism, Marxism, or any other formation that supposedly relied on a linear conception of history. This language of disillusionment served as a kind of shibboleth for American intellectuals looking to change their political allegiances, and also formed an important stream of the so-called “end of ideology” debate.⁷

During the 1930s and 1940s, another strain of Counter-Enlightenment rhetoric joined this anti-Wilsonian sensibility as refugee scholars fleeing from Nazi Germany arrived in the United States. We are familiar enough with this broader intellectual migration, as it included Theodor Adorno, Leo Strauss, and Hannah Arendt, among others. As Udi Greenberg and Nicholas Guilhot have demonstrated, an equally significant but less studied cohort of thinkers in the German exile community played a key role in the development of international relations theory, which in turn was deeply intertwined with the American foreign policy establishment. Many of these émigré theorists of International Relations carried with them not only the vivid memory of Weimar’s collapse, but also an elaborate language of cultural pessimism and Realpolitik they had

⁶ Rochester, *American Liberal Disillusionment*; David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 10-21.

⁷ Gene Wise, mainly referring to a historiographical tendency, called this outlook “counter-progressivism.” Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Foundation for Grounded Inquiry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 296-362. On the End of Ideology debate see Brick, *Daniel Bell*, and Brick, “The End of Ideology Thesis” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent, and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 90-114.

learned from learned from thinkers such as Oswald Spengler, Max Weber, and Carl Schmitt.⁸ As they carved out a disciplinary space for themselves in American political science, these thinkers used the language of Counter-Enlightenment to attack the Chicago school behavioralism that dominated the discipline.

The pessimist insurgency gathered together a wide array of thinkers from a variety of fields in the human sciences—predominately history and international relations—in the both the United States and Great Britain. Their ranks included Herbert Butterfield, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Lewis Mumford, Waldo Frank, Hans Morgenthau, Carl Becker, George Kennan, John Bennett, E. H. Carr, John Herz, Kenneth Thompson, Max Lerner, and Felix Gilbert, among others.⁹ The key figure of this community, however, was undoubtedly the pastor and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.¹⁰ Niebuhr provided much of pessimistic liberalism’s distinctive rhetorical style, and additionally acted as an institutional node connecting various like-minded thinkers. He was also a kind of intellectual celebrity, serving as the public face of liberal pessimism’s tragic sense of politics. In 1948, he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, and in 1962, journalist Richard Rovere dubbed him the “theologian of the Establishment.”¹¹

⁸ For the influence of Weimar culture on “political realism,” see Udi Greenberg, *The Weimar Century: German Émigrés and the Ideological Foundations of the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Williams, *Realist Tradition and Limits of International Relations*, 84-93; Nicolas Guilhot, “American Katechon: When Political Theology Became International Relations Theory,” *Constellations* 17, no. 2 (June 2010): 224–53.

⁹ There are obvious parallels between the concerns of these liberal pessimists and those of the early Frankfurt School, especially the assertion of conventional liberalism’s disastrous obsession with technical mastery. I would maintain, however, that the Frankfurt School still belongs primarily to the history of heterodox Marxism, and that the inclusion of Horkheimer and Adorno would needlessly muddy the waters here.

¹⁰ The output on Niebuhr, scholarly and otherwise, is astounding. The best works are those by Richard Wightman Fox and Daniel Rice. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*; Daniel Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey: An American Odyssey* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹¹ Richard Rovere, *The American Establishment and Other Reports, Opinions, and Speculations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), as quoted in Eugene McCarthy, *Christian Critics: Religion and the Impasse in Modern American Social Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 91.

The unrelenting atmosphere of political crisis between the 1930s and the 1950s provided ample opportunities to advance a pessimistic version of center-left politics. First, as the situation in Europe deteriorated in the 1930s, advocates of American intervention had to combat not only traditional “isolationist” sentiments, but also philosophical pacifists and aging Progressives determined not to repeat the mistake they believed they had made in backing Wilson in 1917.¹² Second, between the death of Franklin Roosevelt and the election campaign of 1948, two factions tried to claim the late president’s mantle and leadership in the rapidly transforming Democratic Party. One group coalesced around former Vice President Henry Wallace and sought conciliation with USSR, while another, based among the Americans for Democratic Action, backed President Truman and took a much more strident anti-communist line.¹³ Finally, the Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb in 1949 and the resulting nuclear stalemate initiated a period of extensive reassessment of the nature of foreign policy and stimulated a general atmosphere of existential crisis and visceral fear that would linger for years to come.¹⁴

Without much exaggeration, Niebuhr and rest of the pessimistic insurgency may be described as a “war party” within the ranks of the midcentury American intellectual establishment. This is not because they necessarily believed, in the manner of Progressive

¹² On the interventionist efforts of American intellectuals, see Pells, *Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*, chap. 1; Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire*, 56-81; Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 167-223; Mark Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941-1993* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 1-48; Purcell, *Crisis of Democratic Theory*, chap. 12.

¹³ On the rivalry between the Americans for Democratic Action and the Progressive Citizens of America, see Steven Gillon, *Politics and Vision: The ADA and American Liberalism, 1947-1985* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Norman Markowitz, *The Rise and Fall of the People’s Century* (New York: Free Press, 1973).

¹⁴ On the formulation of early Cold War foreign policy, see Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, chap. 11-12; Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992). On the culture of dread generated by the early years of Cold War confrontation, see Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) and George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), chap. 4.

supporters of US involvement in WWI, that war mobilization would lead to positive social change, or because their pessimistic beliefs about global security compelled them to consistently adopt pro-intervention stances.¹⁵ It is rather because the salient feature of liberal pessimist thought was its conviction that war, revolution, and social collapse had become and would remain the dominant reality of world politics for the indefinite future. They believed that the conflict with fascism, subsequent tensions with the USSR, and the possibility of nuclear apocalypse comprised the necessary audit of any proposed democratic or international political vision. As the *New York Times* review of Arthur Schlesinger's *The Vital Center* put it, "This [book] . . . represents the thinking of a man born since the Time of Troubles began. Mr. Schlesinger is 32, which is to say he has no experience of a time of international peace. The result of a lifetime spent among wars and the rumors of wars is here presented; and it is striking. Mr. Schlesinger is convinced that there is no peace, and there will be none, certainly not within the span of his generation."¹⁶

In virtually all its iterations, liberal pessimism's diagnosis of contemporary politics rested upon a rejection of eighteenth-century thought, particularly the caricature derisively labeled Enlightenment Rationalism. The Enlightenment had, the pessimists argued, rejected the long tradition of Western political thought in favor of a narrow scientism. Entranced by Newtonian physics in particular, eighteenth-century philosophers had come to believe that human social life obeyed a set of laws analogous to those governing the natural world. If the laws of society could be discovered, then politics could be manipulated and controlled in the same manner that humans had learned to manipulate their environment. Just as it steadily resolved questions in the natural

¹⁵ As Edward Purcell has noted, it is virtually impossible to use philosophical commitments to predict positions on intervention in the Second World War. Purcell, *Crisis of Democratic Theory*, 229.

¹⁶ Gerald W. Johnson, "In Defense of Liberalism," *New York Times Book Review*, September 11, 1949, 6.

world, the growth of science made it theoretically possible to identify and resolve the stubborn problems of social life.¹⁷ The Enlightenment held, as Morgenthau put it, that “one body of laws governs man and nature alike and, by learning to understand those laws, man will not only be able to guide the physical world to his needs but also to mold his destiny intelligently and to become the master of his fate.”¹⁸

In this conception of Enlightenment thought, social problems resulted from ignorance rather than anything inherent in human nature itself. Indeed, according to the pessimists, rationalism relied for its coherence on a faith in humankind’s essential goodness, a faith that virtually every Western democracy and every liberal reformer had inherited. “The conception of human nature that underlies the social and political attitudes of a liberal democratic culture,” wrote Niebuhr, “is that of an essentially harmless individual.”¹⁹ The Enlightenment’s confidence in social science and human goodness led rationalists to identify mental emancipation as the necessary preamble to political reform. Grippled by their faith in an intelligible social order and their optimism about human nature, followers of the Enlightenment radically overestimated the possibilities inherent in “modern liberal education” and institutional change.²⁰ According to Morgenthau, rationalists believed that “the deficiencies of human action stem from lack of knowledge,” and that, consequently, “education will overcome the ‘social stupidity’ which alone

¹⁷ Niebuhr’s most extensive critique of scientism is Niebuhr, “Ideology and the Scientific Method,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 215-16.

¹⁸ Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 12.

¹⁹ Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, 18. See also Kenneth Thompson, *Political Realism and the Crisis of World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 75; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1949), 40; Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, chap. 5.

²⁰ Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, 131.

stands in the way of progress and reason.”²¹ Once reason had freed them from cognitive enslavement, ordinary people would find the intelligence and will to overthrow the social oppressions that warped the harmonious natural order. In its eighteenth-century context, this project of modernization entailed the destruction of feudalism, the displacement of religion by natural science, the installation of republican government or, at the very least, constitutional monarchy, and the free operation of commerce. At its origin, then, Enlightenment rationalism was both utopian and hopelessly bourgeois.

Pessimist argumentation hinged on an expansive chronology of the Age of Enlightenment, which they described as extending from the late seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century. In addition to the standard cast of early modern men and women of letters, the pessimist conception of Enlightenment also encompassed the entire Victorian philosophical landscape, pulling in radicals, liberals, physiocrats, progressives, *philosophes*, and pragmatists. It captured Kant, Godwin, Bentham, Spencer, and Dewey alike, thereby allowing pessimists to group together “eighteenth and nineteenth century liberalism.”²² In this view, despite any surface differences in their political outlooks, all the great minds of bourgeois civilization allegedly subscribed to one or another version of Enlightenment Rationalism. According to Niebuhr, for example, Smith’s invisible hand embodied the rationalist vision of a benign natural order, but so too did Marx’s conception of un-alienated labor under communism. Both Smith and Marx believed that human ignorance had distorted the world and produced injustice, and both also believed that this ignorance could be fixed. “Marxism,” according to Niebuhr, “was convinced that after the triumph of the lower classes of society, a new society would emerge in which

²¹ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, 210.

²² Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Scribner, 1952), 84.

exactly that kind of harmony between all social forces would be established, which Adam Smith had regarded as a possibility for any kind of society. The similarities between classical laissez-faire theory and the vision of an anarchistic millennium are significant, whatever may be the superficial differences.”²³

Unlike conventional conservative condemnations of modernity, pessimist discourse did not limit this critique of the “Enlightenment faith” to secular philosophy. Though eighteenth-century rationalists had called for liberty and equality in the struggle with the Old Regime, Niebuhr believed their ideas “originated in the previous century among the Christian radicals on the left wing of Cromwell’s army. The Enlightenment merely provided a secular version of the apocalyptic visions of these Christian sectaries.”²⁴ On other occasions, Niebuhr claimed to detect little difference between the liberalism of “eighteenth-century democrats” and the natural law doctrines of the nineteenth-century Catholic Church. Though one represented the interests of the insurgent bourgeoisie and the other those of the fading feudal class, each insisted that it alone had discovered the “self-evident truths of reason.”²⁵ Liberal Protestantism, Niebuhr’s old enemy from the 1920s, had also proven indispensable in making a home for Enlightenment rationalism in the United States.²⁶

Pessimists further subscribed to a kind of negative exceptionalism, depicting the United States as the natural and enduring home of Enlightenment rationalism. “Americans,” Niebuhr

²³ Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, 31-32.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 70. According to Niebuhr, the Enlightenment’s notions of property were almost indistinguishable from those advocated in Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical on the Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor. *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁶ On the parallels between “Enlightenment Optimism” and the Social Gospel, see also Reinhold Niebuhr, “Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective,” *Religion in Life* 27 (Autumn 1958): 532-35, reprinted in Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics: A Commentary on Religious, Social, and Political Thought in a Technological Age* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 33-46.

observed in 1958, were “the only unreconstructed heirs of the French Enlightenment.”²⁷ Writing in the *New Republic* in 1955, he asserted that it was only “when sectarian Christian perfectionism merged with the thought of the Enlightenment on our frontier, [that] perfectionist illusions in regard to man became the staples of the American liberal movement.”²⁸ Similarly, Schlesinger attributed Americans’ unflappable confidence in historical progress to “the Enlightenment, cross fertilized with allied growths such as science, bourgeois complacency, Unitarianism, and a faith in the goodness of man.”²⁹ Felix Gilbert traced a direct line from the thought of the *philosophes* to American isolationism.³⁰ The wealth and power that Americans had stumbled upon in the New World had long protected them from having to confront the silliness of their liberal pieties. While the rest of the Western powers grew up to face questions of industry and mass democracy, the United States stubbornly remained in the eighteenth century. This enduring national innocence, pessimists believed, explained American liberals’ blinkered inability to recognize the Soviet Union’s descent into brutality, or to understand the unprecedented threat posed by German fascism.³¹ Having committed themselves to a vision of orderly moral progress in which

²⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Pious and Secular America* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 129. See also Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 4; Niebuhr “The Truth of Myths” in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde MacLeish*, ed. Julius Bixler, Robert Calhoun, and H. L. Niebuhr (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937). Examples of this negative exceptionalism can even be found in popular culture. An article in *Life* magazine, titled “Untragic America,” declared that, “Except among Marxists (for Marx swallowed it whole), the idea of progress has nowhere taken root deeper than in America.” Unsigned editorial, “Untragic America: Our Democratic Faith Needs Correcting if We are to Produce Great Tragic Drama,” *Life*, December 2, 1946, 32.

²⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Liberalism: Illusions and Realities,” *The New Republic*, July 4, 1955, 5.

²⁹ Schlesinger, *Vital Center*, 38.

³⁰ Felix Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 44-75.

³¹ Niebuhr’s slow-burning hostility to what he regarded as progressive naïveté followed a familiar course. On the one hand, his encounters with American communists eventually led him to abandon the Socialist Party and begin experimenting with a series of leftist organizations that actively excluded communists. On the other hand, the stubborn pacifism of many progressives during the late thirties, particularly the editors of the Liberal Protestant weekly *Christian Century*, drove Niebuhr to start a rival periodical. This project, *Christianity and Crisis*, was modeled on *Christian Century*, but it served as platform for Niebuhr to develop his own brand of realism and to advocate for Allied intervention in Europe. See Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left*, chap. 1-2.

the rationalization of social life was supposed to go together with a gradual reduction of cruelty and stupidity, they could not explain total war, atavistic nationalism, or the rise of authoritarianism.

In some cases, the pessimists contended, the resulting crisis of progressive metaphysics actually rendered liberals vulnerable to slipping into extremism themselves. Frustrated liberals in the 1930s and 1940s had given up on reform and piecemeal social engineering, drifting instead to revolution and authoritarianism. Given the shared humanitarian aspirations and Enlightenment origins of liberalism and Marxism, the general direction of this drift tended toward the Communist Party and the USSR. Yet liberal attractions to authoritarian government were not limited to the Left. In the pessimist account, the utilitarian character of rationalism could easily be harnessed to fascist brutality. A bewildered liberal, disillusioned with democracy, could find direction and meaning in fascism's will to power.³² According to Hans Morgenthau, far from an atavistic throwback, Nazism was "truly progressive." One could find no better "models of technical rationality," he sneered, than "Goebbels' propaganda machine and the gas chambers of Himmler."³³

The pessimist thus rejected a cultural politics that divided the world between "the friends and enemies of progress."³⁴ This Whiggish interpretive mode, they believed, had grown out of the fierce contest between philosophers and their traditionalist opponents during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and captivated the minds of European and American thinkers across the

³² Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, 33-41. Fascism in the forties and fifties tended to be treated as cynical gangsterism, romanticism run amok, or the endpoint of nihilism. All three typically fell into the lap of Friedrich Nietzsche. See Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 219-62. Of the pessimists discussed here, only Schlesinger appears to have been comfortable ascribing a special affinity between more conventional conservatism and fascism. Schlesinger, *Vital Center*, 11-34; Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, 133-34.

³³ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, 4.

³⁴ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: Norton, 1965), 5.

political spectrum ever since. It had also failed utterly to prevent or resolve the crises of mass politics that engulfed the Western world after 1914. Despite their best efforts, freethinking contemporary philosophers such as John Dewey merely comprised the avant-garde of an Enlightenment culture that had collapsed completely in the face of war, depression, and totalitarianism. That failure, the pessimists believed, went straight to the core of the liberal worldview. Rooted in the same complex of rationalism that had produced both dialectical materialism and the Gospel of Wealth, liberal ideology could only make marginal adjustments to laissez-faire social thought or blunder backwards into support for Soviet despotism.

This polemical construction of the Enlightenment and its legacy allowed pessimistic thinkers to depict conventional liberal commitments to reason and progress as a form of delusion. Appropriating the language that older liberals themselves used to mock unscientific and reactionary thinking, pessimists claimed that rationalists willfully ignored “the facts” of politics and history, instead embracing their own whims and fancies. Liberals clung to idols and fetishes—science, reason, and logic—to keep them safe from harm. Recasting their enemies’ supposed rationalism as a modern instance of weak-minded superstition, the pessimists used such gambits to push ostensibly secular ideas, including “Enlightenment” and “the scientific method,” into the realm of mythology: products of human invention particular to a specific time, place, and social milieu.³⁵ This particular argumentative strategem, of course, had also been part of earlier forms of philosophical and cultural pessimism—Nietzsche made precisely this point—

³⁵ Here again, it is worth pointing out the startling parallels between the critique of the Enlightenment developed by liberal pessimists and the arguments of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which also emphasized that Enlightenment was itself a form of mythology.

but this was different, as rationality now appeared to lose its special, transcendent role in liberal-democratic philosophy and politics.³⁶

Recasting liberal metaphysics as a kind of modern mythology effectively placed the Enlightenment on the same plane as conventional forms of religiosity. Pessimists asked their audiences to believe that a mythology ought not be judged by its ability to describe the course of historical events. “Religion is betrayed,” wrote Niebuhr in 1958, “by regarding its myths and symbols as actual history.”³⁷ Mythology should be instead understood as a framework for organizing and transcending the chaotic stream of lived experience. Survival in a dangerous world demanded the skill of seeing correctly, of being able to distinguish between illusions, mirages, and reality. Lacking immediate access to the whole of experience, myths served as cognitive tools, either inhibiting or enhancing one’s ability to decipher the world. The problem with conventional liberalism was that it was incapable of rendering the world legible for responsible political action: “Political reality disavows, and does so continually and drastically, the postulates of liberal philosophy.”³⁸

From this point of view, virtually any myth was preferable to the Enlightenment’s faith in progress and science. “The medieval astrologer with his superstitious ‘system,’” wrote Waldo Frank, “had hold of a myth—in that he guessed the interrelation of every birth and the world’s farthest reaches—more true than all the hundred volumes of Voltaire.”³⁹ Lewis Mumford held up an “ideal liberalism” embodied in early American thought, which he imagined as insulated from

³⁶ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, 153-67.

³⁷ Niebuhr, *Pious and Secular America*, 19.

³⁸ Morgenthau, *Dilemmas of Politics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, Press, 1958), 112.

³⁹ Waldo Frank, *Chart for Rough Waters: Our Role in a New World* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1940), 123.

the general stream of eighteenth-century rationalism.⁴⁰ Morgenthau and other scholars of international relations constructed a canon of “realist” philosophers that ran from Thucydides through Augustine to Machiavelli, a canon they contrasted with the liberal idealism that originated in the eighteenth century.⁴¹ Schlesinger was fond of invoking Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard. Above all, pessimists followed Niebuhr in turning to Protestant neo-orthodoxy, especially the doctrine of Original Sin. No other myth, it seemed, more ably made sense of the human appetite for destruction and its political consequences. “The doctrine of sin makes an important contribution to any adequate social and political theory,” Niebuhr insisted, “for it emphasizes a fact which every page of human history attests.”⁴²

Liberal pessimists interpreted the defeat of fascism and the confrontation with Soviet power as providing liberalism with the opportunity to reinvent itself in accordance with the facts of the 1930s and 1940s. “To save the permanent human core of liberalism,” Mumford declared in 1940, “we must slough off the morbid tissue that surrounds it.”⁴³ Instead of a political theory premised on a naïve and unhistorical faith in human goodness and natural harmony, liberals could instead cultivate a political philosophy that presumed a much lower estimate of human beings and a social world whose natural tendencies were to either consolidate into tyranny or disintegrate into anarchy. With the disasters of the 1930s and 1940s as their interpretive

⁴⁰ Lewis Mumford, *Values for Survival: Essays, Addresses, and Letters on Politics and Education* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946), 25-26.

⁴¹ See, for example, Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*, 42; Max Lerner, Introduction to *The Prince and the Discourses* by Niccolò Machiavelli (New York: Modern Library, 1940), xlii-xlvi; Thompson, *Political Realism and The Crisis of World Politics*, chap. 1; Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism*, chap. 2. On the process of canon formation in realist thought, see Guilhot, “The First Modern Realist: Felix Gilbert’s Machiavelli and the Realist Tradition In International Thought” *Modern Intellectual History* (July 2016), 1-31.

⁴² Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, 17. There is some question as to the precise degree of reality that Niebuhr himself ascribed to the doctrine of Original Sin. In 1968, an interviewer asked him if he believed that Original Sin was just pride. Niebuhr replied, “Did you think it was something else?” As quoted in Tjalve, *Realist Strategies of Republican Peace*, 63.

⁴³ Mumford, *Values for Survival*, 24.

foundation, liberals could cease to think of themselves as agents of bourgeois Enlightenment and instead as the members of what Schlesinger called the “pragmatic left,” pursuing mundane projects of reform in the shadow of totalitarianism and social collapse.⁴⁴

Against Defeatism: The Failure of Nerve Thesis

Encountering this blustery critique of the Enlightenment’s “optimism” and its faith in the “perfectibility” of human beings, historians tend to wince, run back to the sources, and declare a lack of scholarly rigor, thus displaying an impulse conditioned by the endless recycling of Niebuhrian polemical motifs by craven politicians and hack pundits. The “Condorcet maybe, but Hume never!” response has its merits, but focusing on what Niebuhr and others got wrong in their historical understanding of the eighteenth century misses a crucial feature of the pessimist attack on the Enlightenment, namely its misreading of the intellectual character of its liberal opponents.⁴⁵ Many interwar liberals, broadly construed, could rightfully be accused of an enchantment with social engineering and a willful blindness to the misdeeds of the Soviet Union.⁴⁶ Some were certainly guilty of “scientism.” It is nonetheless wrong-headed to attribute these lapses of judgment to the influence of an abstract “philosophical rationalism” descended from the salons of the eighteenth century. After all, many of the pessimists’ immediate targets were themselves philosophical pragmatists, deeply preoccupied with the dangers of “abstract” and “dogmatic” thinking. Their ranks included John Dewey, Sidney Hook, and Horace Kallen, thinkers who in the interwar years regularly tangled with Neo-Thomists like Mortimer Adler and

⁴⁴ Schlesinger, *Vital Center*, 36.

⁴⁵ See Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 165-66.

⁴⁶ On the attitudes of interwar Western intellectuals toward the USSR, see Peter G. Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment, 1917-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013) and Christopher Lasch, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972).

Robert Hutchins, and who insisted continually on the instrumentality, contingency, and relativity of all human values.⁴⁷ Indeed, as James Kloppenberg has so ably demonstrated, the progressive and social democratic politics promoted by the “left-liberal” intelligentsia during the first third of the twentieth century were deeply intertwined with radical theories of knowledge.⁴⁸ In short, many of the figures that Niebuhr and his compatriots depicted as the epitome of rationalism regarded themselves as decidedly post-rationalist.⁴⁹

Moreover, as Duncan Bell points out, in the 1940s and 1950s this older liberal progressive ideological formation was already in the midst of consolidating its own historical narrative of the conditions that had produced modern liberal ideas and practice. In early accounts of the making of modern liberalism, such as Dewey’s *Liberalism and Social Action* and Vernon Parrington’s *Main Currents of American Thought*, the wrenching experiences of industrialization and urbanization coincided with the rise of Darwinian biology.⁵⁰ Just as permanent wage labor and the corporate form undermined proprietary capitalism, the theory of evolution by natural selection undid any attempt to imagine a world held together by natural or revealed religion. To be a liberal meant coming to terms with this dual revolution of living and thinking, casting off

⁴⁷ While it originated as a movement in nineteenth-century Catholic theology, Neo-Thomism came to denote a range of attempts to resurrect philosophical rationalism generally and natural theory in particular. Adler was perhaps its most famous proponent. On the conflict between Neo-Thomists and pragmatists, see Purcell, *Crisis of Democratic Theory*, 139-58.

⁴⁸ See Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, chap. 2,

⁴⁹ Ernst Nagel, in his review of *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, wrote “Mr. Morgenthau’s intended target is the empirical rationalism of modern natural science and the use of its method in social inquiry. His actual fire, however, succeeds only in bringing down the already dead duck of 19th century individualistic liberalism. He makes telling though familiar criticisms of the shallow optimism and the tidy rationalism of what is essentially the philosophy of the Enlightenment; and he scores heavily against those who place a fatuous and sentimental reliance on mere ‘appeals to reason’ for solving the problems of men. But he obtains a crushing victory over ‘scientism’ only by using the debater’s trick of so exaggerating the claims of empirical rationalism that even to its proponents the views demolished are legitimate subjects for ridicule.” Ernst Nagel, Review of *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* by Hans Morgenthau, *Yale Law Journal* 56, no. 5 (May 1947): 907.

⁵⁰ Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*; Parrington, *Main Currents of American Thought*, vol. 3.

outmoded laissez-faire illusions while finding a home in a world evacuated of any cosmic significance. The challenge of modern political thinking was whether one could face the emptiness of a Godless universe and still feel called to the task of social reconstruction.

In this view, the “scientific ethos” already provided a model for coping with a world of uncertainty, rendering it unnecessary to ground democratic practice in dark estimates of human nature. Accustomed to the continual overthrow of old assumptions by new ideas, scientists understood epistemic precariousness better than anyone, and thus the scientific mind was uniquely resistant to the desire to impose one’s wholly fallible will on others. The self-correcting empiricism of the scientific method inoculated the intellect against the dogmatism.⁵¹ Further, as we saw in chapter 1, this conception of science’s unique epistemological character and its Promethean role in modern history did not leave early twentieth century liberal thinkers necessarily well disposed toward the eighteenth century. It is difficult to find in the writings of the more prominent interwar liberals an extended exposition, much less a defense, of the Enlightenment. To the degree that the eighteenth century represented a chapter in the long march of empiricism or democratic theory, it could be incorporated into the stories told by pragmatists and progressives about their intellectual heritage. But their estimation of eighteenth-century thought, what Dewey once described as “the simple faith of the Enlightenment,” was hardly uncritical.⁵² Pragmatists, positivists, and other kinds of liberal progressives could, and often did, treat the *philosophes* as the rationalist foils for their own post-Darwinian instrumentalist outlook.

⁵¹ On the scientific ethos, see David Hollinger, *Morris R. Cohen and the Scientific Ideal* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1975); Hollinger, *In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Intellectual History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Andrew Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁵² John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (New York: J. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1939), 131.

For precisely these reasons, the pessimistic insurgency presented a special sort of problem for the liberal progressive narrative of modern thought. The war party's chief innovation was not its diagnosis of a perfidious age of rationalism or its articulation of a new and less "utopian" version of liberalism, but rather its refusal to allow science and the scientific method to function as a technique for producing an ideal liberal self. Grafting pragmatism and progressivism onto the failed bourgeois civilization of the long nineteenth century, pessimist discourse severed liberalism's skeptical politics from its supposed origins in secularism and social science. Denying any necessary connection between secularity and mental freedom, pessimists thus opened the door for other "useful fictions" such as Original Sin to perform the same intellectual disciplinary work that earlier thinkers had claimed exclusively for the modern "scientific attitude." In short, pessimists sought to appropriate the nimble, eclectic open-mindedness that liberal progressives idealized and house it in a very different sort of philosophical history.

While liberal progressives could explain figures like Adler and Hutchins with relative ease, they had more trouble with figures like Niebuhr, that is, with individuals trying usurp rather than counter their skeptical persona. Liberal pessimists wanted not only to occupy the same space in the political landscape, but also to argue that their dark vision of the thinking life had actually superseded the old scientific naturalism. Pragmatism, the scientific method, critical intelligence; this talk belonged to an innocent Age of Enlightenment that had been negated by disastrous twentieth century. As Niebuhr claimed in his introduction to the 1961 edition of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James displayed the "characteristic optimism of the late nineteenth century, which knew nothing of, and did not anticipate, the anxieties of two world

wars and a nuclear dilemma.”⁵³ Pessimists wanted, in essence, to shift the frame of reference for liberal autonomy from the laboratory to the statesman’s war room. The model of uncertainty would no longer be the scientist’s tentative approach to inquiry, but the pressure of deciding whether or not to have people killed without adequate knowledge of whether it was the right thing to do.

Rather than meet this challenge on its own terms, liberal progressives tried to defang pessimism by assimilating it to more familiar cultural phenomena, the so-called “failure of nerve.” Most familiar now via two symposia conducted in *The Partisan Review* in 1943 and 1950, respectively, the failure of nerve motif, in fact, can be traced to the turn of the century.⁵⁴ As Stephen Weldon has revealed, the English classicist Gilbert Murray coined the phrase while on a speaking tour in the United States in 1910, using it to describe a particular turn of thought and culture that arose amidst the tumult of Hellenistic Greece. With their political world breaking down all around them, Murray claimed, the Greeks had withdrawn from the robust civic life that had characterized Hellenic civilization and retreated into a variety of cults and mystery religions.⁵⁵ In the midst of the midcentury crises, liberal progressives had come to believe that they were living through a similar social situation. Totalitarianism itself marked a

⁵³ Reinhold Niebuhr, Introduction to *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 7.

⁵⁴ The proximate and well-documented cause of the Failure of Nerve series was Hook’s reaction to the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion, which began holding annual meetings at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1941. At the first meeting, Hook was a participant, and his confrontation with Mortimer Adler nearly came to blows. Adler had presented a paper, “God and the Professors,” in which he called for a general revival of “Christian Civilization” as the only means to defeat Nazism. Hook, Dewey, and Horace Kallen convened a rival organization, the Conference on the Scientific Spirit and the Democratic Faith, in 1944, but it ceased meeting after only a few years. See James Gilbert, *Redeeming Culture: American Religion in an Age of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 63-93.

⁵⁵ Stephen Weldon, “The Humanist Enterprise from John Dewey to Carl Sagan: A Study of Science and Religion in American Culture” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin Madison, 1997), chap. 3; Weldon, “In Defense of Science: Secular Intellectuals and the Failure of Nerve Thesis,” *Religious Humanism* 30, no. 1-2 (Winter/Spring 1996): 30-39.

symptom of this failure of nerve, insofar as modern dictatorships could be understood as revivals of divine kingship. Neo-Thomist calls for a return to first principles represented another symptom, amounting to what Hook labeled “the New Medievalism.”⁵⁶

Many liberal progressives identified Reinhold Niebuhr and his ilk as yet another intellectual register of this failure of nerve.⁵⁷ In their view, for all of Niebuhr’s intellectual nimbleness, his worldview rested on a foundation of nothing more than uncritical religious faith.⁵⁸ In attempting to distance himself from religious and philosophical absolutists like Adler, he had succeeded only by escaping into obscurantism and incoherency.⁵⁹ “Religions have a way of demanding total assent, so closely knit are their various elements,” the philosopher Morton White wrote. “Niebuhr’s religion is no different . . . his doctrine of the inevitability of sin rests on a theology which he accepts on faith, and . . . this in turn requires him to abandon logic when faced with a contradiction.”⁶⁰ The same held true for those who White labeled “Atheists for Niebuhr,” that is, secular thinkers who had adopted Niebuhr’s framework of sinfulness for understanding power politics while neglecting the fact that Niebuhr’s formulation relied

⁵⁶ For Hook’s views on Adler, see Hook, “The New Medievalism,” *The New Republic*, October 28, 1940, 602-6.

⁵⁷ Dewey, already very old and considerably less enamored of knife fighting than Hook, tended to argue with a shadowy group of pessimistic theological positions rather than Niebuhr himself. In his contribution to the Failure of Nerve series, for example, Dewey never mentions Niebuhr, though he is clearly the target: “Reference to the pessimism [about the ability of natural science to improve human life] reminds one of the chorus of voices now proclaiming that naturalism is committed to a dangerously romantic, optimistic, utopian view of human nature.” Dewey, “Anti-Naturalism in Extremis,” *Partisan Review* 10, no. 1 (January-February 1943): 37.

⁵⁸ On the critique of Niebuhr’s philosophical acumen, see Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire*, 211-25.

⁵⁹ There is a marked tendency on Hook’s part to try to corral Niebuhr into more conventional expressions of belief. According to Hook, “The trouble with most conceptions of god which differ from the conventional ones is that they are either so vague that no one can tell what they mean, or else they designate something in experience for which a perfectly suitable term already exists.” Hook, “New Failure of Nerve,” *Partisan Review* 10, no. 1 (January-February 1943): 7.

⁶⁰ White, *Social Thought in America*, 264.

explicitly on religious commitments that they would never endorse.⁶¹ White regarded theirs not as “traditional faith,” but rather as a formless mass of existential yearning, a longing for religion that stood in place of “real” religion. Niebuhr’s admirers carefully exchanged the question “Does God exist?” for “Should I be religious?” and thus avoided endorsing the Trinity or the Resurrection by evading the question of belief and fleeing into mysticism or metaphor.⁶²

Niebuhr and his admirers, despite their pretensions to democratic politics, could not escape the reactionary implications of their philosophy; they could not break free of the constraints of conventional religiosity. “Niebuhr is one of those men,” Hook wrote, “whom Emerson said were better than their theology.”⁶³ On Hook’s view, Niebuhr compounded his obscurantism with a kind of cowardice: An honest thinker could line up with religion *or* democracy.⁶⁴ Niebuhr’s attempt to have it both ways made him ridiculous.⁶⁵ In the view of

⁶¹ Morton White, “Religion, Politics, and Higher Learning,” *Confluence: An International Forum* 3, no. 4 (December 1954): 404. It is often mistakenly thought that White was identifying himself with this group. See, for example, Garry Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 270. He was not: “I suggest, therefore, that the ceasefire proposed by the twentieth century for the war of the nineteenth, the attempt to arbitrate the nineteenth-century struggle by granting science a sphere of influence over knowledge and religion a sharply separated sphere of influence of feeling and will, is unworkable and necessarily unstable.” White, “Religion, Politics, and Higher Learning,” 407.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 406.

⁶³ Hook, “New Failure of Nerve,” 13.

⁶⁴ Liberal Protestants offered a different version of this criticism, insisting that Niebuhr’s reliance on mythological concepts such as Original Sin, which tended to bolster authoritarianism, ran contrary to his political purposes: “Dr. Niebuhr rightly emphasizes the soundness and balance of the Christian view of man as a creature capable of both good will and selfishness, a being who commonly can walk humbly with his God and always needs to. He also rightly recognizes that the truth of this view has been dimmed to modern eyes by the obscurantism with which it has been associated. Yet he persists in perpetuating this difficulty by linking this Christian conception with the doctrine of original sin which was unnecessarily dragged into it by Pauline hebraism, and which has historically been connected with so many unethical ideas as to create a negative reaction in the modern mind against everything associated with it.” A. Campbell Garnett, “Solid Ground for Democracy,” *Christian Century*, December 6, 1944, 1414.

⁶⁵ This sort of criticism also appears in Dewey’s own correspondence concerning Niebuhr, though usually not from Dewey himself. The novelist James T. Farrell, for example, wrote Dewey in 1941: “I have just glanced through the first volume of Reinhold Niebuhr’s GIFFORD lectures, THE NATURE AND DESTINY OF MAN. Niebuhr—whom incidentally, the corporation of Mumford, Frank Etc. touts highly—is a disgusting spectacle. You know, he is a man of keen intelligence, and broad background. He was the most intelligent man in the Socialist Party. His fiddling around with Christianity is abhorrent and repellent. You know, the man is really a [Machiavellian]. His

liberal progressive intellectuals, failures of nerve were an unfortunate side effect of human moral progress. Since the Scientific Revolution, Western intellectual life had been characterized by periodic panics, when the unsettling discoveries of natural science generated retreats into the comforts of philosophical system building. As science steadily displaced pretensions concerning humanity's place in the universe, intellectuals unable to cope with their diminished status set about recovering sources of moral and spiritual transcendence. This two-steps-forward, one-step-back perspective unmasked their pessimistic rivals as intellectually immature defeatists, barely different than a "heresy hunting bigot" or "hallucinated fanatic" unable to confront modernity.⁶⁶

According to liberal progressive thinkers, the pessimist attacks on liberalism and science were symptoms of a culture unhinged by economic crisis, extremist ideology, and war. A natural occurrence in modern life, these failures of nerve would disappear only after the crisis had passed. "The 'arguments' of those who have been panicked into embracing the new varieties of transcendental consolation may be met a thousand times over," Hook wrote in the *Partisan Review*. Only the security provided by a "democratic, freedom-and-welfare-planning economy" would reduce cultural panic from "epidemic to episodic proportions."⁶⁷ Historian of art Meyer Shapiro made a similar point in his contribution to the "Religion and the Intellectuals" Symposium. "The great effort at emancipation that began three centuries ago has not been successful," he asserted. "It can succeed only when men are intellectually free and masters of

book, MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY tells us much, in its very title. He makes a polar opposition, man is moral as an individual, society is immoral as a group of men acting together for group [purposes]. [Although] such a premise is a bad one, that book is the product of a man of intelligence. Now, of course, he takes a different view. And again, his piddling around with a reformed Christianity is unworthy of him. But the man is no fool. You can't dismiss him the way you can Brooks and these people. I wonder how he really feels, wearing the praise he gets from such men." Farrell to Dewey, March 31, 1941, in *The Correspondence of John Dewey, 1871-1952*, vol. 3, electronic ed. (Charlottesville: InteLex Corporation, 2005).

⁶⁶ Hook, "New Failure of Nerve," 5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

their own lives. . . . As long as men are subject to authority and fear, the religious ideas will continue to exercise a strong attraction and will also be used as an instrument of power.”⁶⁸

The failure of nerve thesis thus performed a twofold function. It acted, on one level, as an account of religion’s unwillingness to wither and die on schedule. Still more importantly, it reframed the age of catastrophe as an event wholly understandable within a progressive philosophy of history. Sharp moments of insecurity could, for a time, turn back the clock as fearful, desperate people sought answers in the old certainties of the past. Far from demonstrating the bankruptcy of modern secularity and science, as liberal pessimists and traditional conservatives claimed, the totalitarian crisis underlined the need for liberals to recommit themselves to a modernizing, Promethean naturalism. One had to hold fast to reason in the face of rising irrationality. To do otherwise was to engage in “the same flight from responsibility, both on the plane of action and on the plane of belief, that drove the ancient world into the shelters of pagan and Christian supernaturalism.”⁶⁹ Liberal pessimism was an act of cowardice, and rededicating oneself to the old confidence in modernization and secularization an expression of courage.

The failure of nerve strategy was both aided and transformed by the addition of a second stream of liberal progressive discourse during the 1950s and 1960s. Just as the pessimistic insurgency had borrowed much of its polemical language from Weimar anti-modernism, the beleaguered liberal progressives found themselves joined by another cohort of German-Jewish émigrés, generally younger and much more inclined to see the Enlightenment in a positive light. For Peter Gay, Walter Kauffman, Fritz Stern, Judith Shklar, and George Mosse, the struggle over

⁶⁸ Meyer Shapiro, “Religion and the Intellectuals,” *Partisan Review* 17, no. 3 (April 1950): 331. See also Ernst Nagel, “Malicious Philosophies of Science,” *Partisan Review* 10, no. 1 (January-February 1943): 40.

⁶⁹ Hook, “New Failure of Nerve,” 2.

the Enlightenment was intimately connected to the struggle against fascism: National Socialism had arrayed itself as the antithesis of 1789; the Nazis aimed to overturn the Enlightenment and replace it with a brutal modernity of their own making.

All of these émigré intellectuals made major contributions to the study of European and American intellectual history, but the Columbia historian Peter Gay stands out for his elegant and pugnacious defense of the Enlightenment.⁷⁰ In a series of books and essays written between the mid-1950s and the early 1970s, Gay hammered the same basic point again and again: the *philosophes* were neither naïve, overly optimistic, nor obsessed with reason. They never saw in the future a rosy picture of inevitable progress, and while the Enlightenment did contain a few rational system builders, the far greater tendency was towards a wide-ranging skepticism and empiricism.⁷¹ Further, Gay explicitly arrayed this defense of the Enlightenment against the pervasive atmosphere of philosophical pessimism:

The Angst-literature that inundates us, created and fed by the very real horrors of our world, all too often confronts us with a choice which is not really a choice at all. We are told to choose between the Enlightenment, superficial, optimistic, rationalistic, guilty of precipitating “crisis in our time” with its foolish confidence in man, or a dim view of human nature, irrationalism, and acknowledgment of original sin.⁷²

⁷⁰ Peter Gay demands a full-length intellectual biography. In the meantime, see the excellent essays by Helmut Walser Smith, “Peter Gay and Cosmopolitan Work of the Historian,” in *The Second Generation: Émigrés from Nazi Germany as Historians*, ed. Andreas Daum, Harmutt Lehmann, and James Sheehan (Oxford: Berghahn, 2016), 210-27, and Merel Leeman, “Discovering a Lost Intellectuals’ Project: George Mosse and Peter Gay on Myth and Mind in History,” *Reconsidering a Lost Intellectual Project: Exiles’ Reflections on Cultural Differences* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 13-36.

⁷¹ In Gay’s words, “Kant spent most of his life in profound and subtle efforts to determine the limits of reason; Hume developed a thoroughgoing theory of social habit in which reason played a relatively small part; Voltaire, Diderot and d’Alembert dealt with reason realistically and skeptically; and Helvetius’s rather simple belief in the infinite educability of man was severely criticized by the very men who are now charged with naiveté.” Gay, “Political Theory,” 376.

⁷² Peter Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics: The Poet as Realist* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), xi-xii. See also Gay’s comment in a 1954 conference paper: “The last fifty years have been years of continuous disappointments—we have fought wars which we knew to be impossible, we have witnessed revolutions go sour and barbarisms brutal beyond imagination. Under these blows of reality many thoughtful people felt compelled to abandon the heritage of the eighteenth century.” Gay, “Light on the Enlightenment,” in *The Present Day Relevance of Eighteenth Century Thought*, ed. Robert P. McCutcheon (Washington, DC: American Council of Learned Societies, 1956), 41.

The *philosophes* demonstrated the falseness of this choice. The thinkers of the Enlightenment showed, in Gay's view, that one could simultaneously be realistic, cautious, and skeptical, as well as cosmopolitan, scientific, and secular. In every respect, the Enlightenment remained the model for a humane, liberal thinking life. To deny it that status was, unwittingly, to provide comfort to political reaction.

For émigré liberals like Gay, it was a mistake to emphasize, as earlier American Progressive thinkers had, a fin-de-siècle break with the eighteenth century. Rather, they saw a fundamental continuity connecting Enlightenment and modernist thought. For example, Gay later contended that Sigmund Freud was a child of the Enlightenment, not a champion of irrationalism: "In the manner of the eighteenth century philosophes, [Freud] argued that religion and science are mortal enemies and that every attempt at bridging the gap between them is bound to be futile."⁷³ In a similar vein, Gay also participated in Walter Kauffman's project of rehabilitating Nietzsche, noting that the supposed court philosopher of the Nazis had defended the Enlightenment and praised Voltaire in particular. In Gay's words, "It has become fashionable to say that the eighteenth century rationalists were wrong and that modern pessimists like Nietzsche and Freud were right. But to oppose those two men to the Enlightenment is to do violence to both men and movement."⁷⁴

This approach to philosophical history—defending modernity as a whole rather than merely the post-Darwinian turn of mind—quickly won American converts. The philosopher Charles Frankel, in his 1953 *Case for Modern Man*, outlined a picture of Enlightenment thought aimed specifically at rebutting Niebuhr and that treated the *philosophes* as the forerunners of

⁷³ Peter Gay, introduction to *The Future of an Illusion* by Sigmund Freud, ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989), xxiii.

⁷⁴ Gay, "Light on the Enlightenment," 41-42.

pragmatism, the scientific method, and modern liberalism. The liberal belief in progress, wrote Frankel, was “continuous from Voltaire, Gibbon, and Condorcet in the eighteenth century to Bertrand Russell and John Dewey in the twentieth.”⁷⁵ H. Stuart Hughes, in his classic history of fin-de-siècle European thought, similarly claimed that turn-of-the-century anti-positivism represented an effort to preserve rather than repudiate the legacy of the Enlightenment.⁷⁶ In 1961, Hook himself published an essay in *Encounter* titled “In Defense of the Enlightenment,” in which he sketched a picture of the Enlightenment as the direct ancestor of Pragmatism’s ideal of critical intelligence.⁷⁷

During the 1940s, American liberal progressives found themselves confronted with what was essentially a pessimistic inversion of pragmatist philosophy that sought to usurp their skeptical persona. In the course of defending the scientific ethos against that assault, American liberal progressives like Hook gradually abandoned the narrative that ascribed the modern temper to the effects of Darwinian science in favor of an account that located it in the eighteenth-century break with Christianity. In the same way, as émigré liberals like Gay defended the Enlightenment from its detractors, they constructed a picture of the *philosophes* that made them look increasingly like classical pragmatists. The result was a version of liberal progressivism that, in some sense, merged these formerly antagonistic identities, and was actually capable of

⁷⁵ Charles Frankel, *The Case for Modern Man* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955) 36. Recall here Leo Gershoy’s remark, written at precisely this moment, that at the end of his life Becker “had rejoined the company of Voltaire and Condorcet and Wells and all the goodly company who wished humanity well.” Gershoy, introduction to *Progress and Power*, xxxvii.

⁷⁶ H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* (New York: Vintage, 1958), 26-32.

⁷⁷ Sidney Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 195-207.

switching back and forth between their characteristic modes of discourse as the occasion required.⁷⁸

A Burkean Moment?

Here we are observing an extended confrontation over two contending conceptions of what it means to possess a modern, skeptical intellect, and the philosophical histories conscripted to support them. Characterizing all ideologies as forms of mythology, a community of philosophical pessimists argued that the transformation of geopolitics in the twentieth century required Americans to abandon their adolescent attachments to the illusions of science and progress. These pessimists sometimes went so far as to claim that modern mythologies were in some significant sense *less true* than the myths of traditional Christianity, Platonic metaphysics, or the darker corners of Western literary culture. This vision of the skepticism collided with an older model of the free-spirited thinking life rooted in secularity and a naturalistic, scientific ethos. The conflict between these varieties of skepticism during the 1940s and 1950s cannot be reduced to a confrontation between blinkered Enlightenment rationalists and hardheaded realists. Nor was it a Manichean struggle between courageous, freethinking moderns and obscurantist, would-be reactionaries. What we have is an argument over who masterminded the intellectual jailbreak from the Enlightenment's clockwork universe, and who could rightly claim ownership of the means for creating a post-rationalist philosophical self. Both sides agreed that democratic culture required a healthy skepticism to preserve it from collapsing into totalitarianism. Their conflict was, in a manner of speaking, a dispute over intellectual property.

⁷⁸ There is, incidentally, a tantalizing hypothesis embedded here concerning the "eclipse of pragmatism" that has concerned many historians of American philosophy. It was not that McCarthyism undid pragmatism's hold on the philosophical profession, as John McCumber argues, but rather that the concept of liberalism *absorbed* pragmatism and its characteristic modes of self-fashioning.

By the beginning of the 1950s, many thinkers in the liberal progressive camp felt they were losing this battle. Philosopher Morton White registered a sense of puzzlement at the turnabout during the 1940s. “These are days,” he wrote in 1949, “in which Dewey’s views are being replaced by Kierkegaard’s in places where once Dewey was king; when [James Harvey] Robinson is dismissed as a pleasant popularizer; when Keynes comes in triumph over Veblen; when Beard’s work is divided into ‘periods’ so that his later views can be consistently anathematized by those who once made him a hero.”⁷⁹ Similarly, Hook and Dewey’s contributions to *Partisan Review*’s “Religion and the Intellectuals” symposium verged on despair. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the onset of the Cold War had indefinitely postponed the stability Hook thought necessary for a thorough secularization. American intellectuals had abandoned their responsibilities and instead embraced obscurantism.⁸⁰ It seemed that the scientific spirit was everywhere in abeyance, and that conservative ethos was descending on American political life. Niebuhr’s ideas in particular, as Hook put it, “[breathe] a defeatism more congenial to Toryism than to his own political progressivism.”⁸¹

In fact, the pessimistic attacks on Enlightenment liberalism did enable America’s midcentury intelligentsia to experiment with a conservative political identity. The accounts of contemporary politics provided by Niebuhr, Schlesinger, and others exhibited elective affinities with a creeping “Toryism” at midcentury. One of the most popular books of the early 1950s, Whittaker Chambers’s *Witness*, displayed a similar philosophy of history to Niebuhr’s, and

⁷⁹ White, *Social Thought in America*, 3.

⁸⁰ John Dewey, “Religion and the Intellectuals,” *Partisan Review* 17, no. 2 (February 1950): 129-33; Sidney Hook, “Religion and the Intellectuals,” *Partisan Review* 17, no. 3 (March 1950): 225-32.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

Chambers overnight became a right-wing celebrity. Like Niebuhr, Chambers argued that the disasters of the mid-twentieth century could be laid at the feet of modern rationalism.⁸² The neoliberal prophet Friedrich Hayek, too, inveighed against the “scientism” of Progressive and Marxist social thought, insisting that the limits of human nature rendered effective social planning—and therefore a humane socialism—utterly impossible.⁸³ Further, as Mark Edwards has pointed out, there were substantive connections between Niebuhrian pessimists and many of the so-called “new conservative” intellectuals, including Robert Nisbet, Clinton Rossiter, Peter Viereck, and Will Herberg.⁸⁴ As Edwards notes, Herberg dedicated an entire article in the *National Review* in 1961 to claiming Niebuhr for conservatives.⁸⁵ Viereck praised Niebuhr’s *The Irony of American History* in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1952, calling the theologian a “doctor of the soul,” and in his 1962 *The New Conservatism—What Went Wrong?* listed Niebuhr alongside Herberg, Rossiter, and Heckscher as a contemporary “Burkean” philosopher.⁸⁶ Rossiter wrote in 1955 that “some of the best current thinking of an essentially conservative nature is being done by such political progressives as [Walter] Lippmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, Adlai Stevenson, and David Lilienthal.”⁸⁷

⁸² Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (New York: Random House, 1952). Chambers also praised the first volume of the *Nature and Destiny of Man* in 1941, arguing that it served as a theological justification for conservative policy. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 202.

⁸³ F. A. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1952), 15-16.

⁸⁴ Mark Edwards, *The Right of the Protestant Left: God’s Totalitarianism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 146-53.

⁸⁵ Will Herberg, “Reinhold Niebuhr: Burkean Conservative,” *National Review*, December 2, 1961, 379, 394. See Edwards, *Right of The Protestant Left*, 146.

⁸⁶ Peter Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited: The New Conservatism—What Went Wrong?* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 139. In fact, this volume was two books, the first having been written in 1949. In the second piece, dating from 1962, Viereck uses Niebuhrian and Burkean as synonyms.

⁸⁷ Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion* (New York: Vintage, 1955), 208.

Pessimists, meanwhile, often appeared to enjoy the company of these New Conservatives. Schlesinger lauded Viereck's *Metapolitics* and, citing Viereck and August Heckscher, called in the *New York Times* for a revived and respectable conservatism to counterbalance New Deal Liberalism.⁸⁸ "A responsible liberal," he asserted, "would rather have a healthy and intelligent conservative party which might even win an election now and then, than a dull and hopeless conservative party, threatening at any moment to break into pieces and leave its members prey for fascist-minded demagogues." Inhibiting the growth of such a conservative formation was, in Niebuhr's view, the lack of any "social locus in America for a valid 'conservative' philosophy." The social basis of American conservatism remained businessmen, and "the more parochial part of the business community is bound to develop a conservatism in which a decadent *laissez-faire* liberalism in domestic politics is compounded with nationalism."⁸⁹

Pessimistic liberals affection for "true" conservatism went beyond a desire for a genuine loyal opposition. They sometimes, as a number of scholars have noted, tilted toward their own particular brand of Toryism. Schlesinger praised the old American aristocracy for its unwillingness to lapse into narrow class interests. Unlike postwar conservatives who favored "business rule," he argued, American aristocrats from Adams and Hamilton to FDR and Adlai Stevenson had understood their politics in terms of *noblesse oblige*, and thus allied with the Left against a grasping bourgeoisie.⁹⁰ Addressing the Rockefeller Conference in 1954, Niebuhr declared that, "the paramount problem for contemporary study of international relations is to

⁸⁸ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Need for an Intelligent Opposition," *New York Times*, April 2, 1950, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/11/26/specials/schlesinger-opposition.html>.

⁸⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Liberalism: Illusions and Realities," *The New Republic*, July 4, 1955, <https://newrepublic.com/article/72180/liberalism-illusions-and-realities>.

⁹⁰ Schlesinger, *Vital Center*, 25.

supplant the illusions from the French Enlightenment with the wisdom of Edmund Burke.”⁹¹ Morgenthau rarely defended democracy in the 1940s and 1950s (though he would in the 1960s), instead speaking of “the insight and the wisdom” of “the statesman.”⁹² Niebuhr, Schlesinger, and Thompson looked to the Great Britain as a model to which America could and should aspire: a sober, responsible, aristocracy overseeing a robust and expanding welfare state at home while stewarding collective security abroad. Niebuhr called it “the home of pragmatic politics.”⁹³ According to Schlesinger’s rapturous estimation, the model statesman was none other than Winston Churchill:

[Churchill] spoke for something older and deeper than the shopkeepers who had come to power after the Industrial revolution. As Leon Blum remarked, “Il n’a pas du tout l’ame capitaliste.” The business community knew this and always distrusted him. His instincts were those of an imperial aristocrat, with power founded, not on finance, but on land and tradition, bold, vigorous, somewhat contemptuous of “trade,” soaked in the continuities of history, schooled to standards and values alien to plutocracy. He was devoted to an island and an empire rather than to particular business interests, and he was not afraid to fight. In the end, he saved Britain.⁹⁴

We should be careful, however, not to misconstrue these affinities between pessimistic liberalism and conservative thought.⁹⁵ One of the principal challenges of interpreting postwar thought is to avoid reproducing the polemical generalizations of that very moment. In particular, we ought not to necessarily regard the pessimist infatuation with English conservatism as a move

⁹¹ Quoted in Guilhot, *Invention of International Relations Theory*, 153.

⁹² Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, 220. On the marginality of democracy to Morgenthau’s mid-life thought, see Greenberg, *Weimar Century*, 246. As Udi Greenberg notes, Morgenthau took up the issue of American democracy specifically in 1960 in Hans Morgenthau, *The Purposes of American Politics* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1960).

⁹³ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 92. See also Niebuhr, “American Power and World Responsibility,” *Christianity and Crisis*, April 5, 1943, 2-4. On Niebuhr’s Anglophilia, see Richard Wightman Fox, “Reinhold Niebuhr and the Emergence of the Liberal Realist Faith, 1930-1945,” *Review of Politics* 38, no. 2 (April 1976): 256-57.

⁹⁴ Schlesinger, *Vital Center*, 15.

⁹⁵ On this point see Daniel Rice, “The Fiction of Reinhold Niebuhr as a Political Conservative,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 98, no. 1 (2015): 59-83.

toward the variety of right-wing politics that we associate with the Conservative Movement. The New Conservatives cannot, at least in any straightforward sense, be conflated with the New Right that slowly came to dominate American political culture during the 1970s and 1980s. Viereck, Rossiter, Heckscher, and others fought pitched battles to define the ideological contours of American conservatism in the 1950s and, like their counterparts in the Republican Party, lost badly to the likes of Russell Kirk and William Buckley.⁹⁶ Several of the early self-styled New Conservatives, particularly the poet and historian Viereck, found themselves quite capable of endorsing the New Deal.⁹⁷ As Viereck saw it, the New Conservatism aimed at “synthesizing, in some future day, the ethical New Deal social reforms with the more pessimistic, anti-mass insights of America’s Burkean founders.” Viereck, like Niebuhr, saw trade unions as dispersing economic power and thus acting as a check upon tyranny. He disdained the Eisenhower Republicanism of the fifties as the ideology of “de-racinating, technology brandishing industrialists whose so-called freedom and progress is merely the economic ‘individualism’ of Manchester liberal pseudo-conservatism.”⁹⁸ Similarly, he denounced McCarthy and his followers as “thought-control nationalists,” whom true conservatives ought to help repress.⁹⁹ He thus declared, “Conservatives have no more excuse to refuse to cooperate with liberals and New Dealers against right wing nationalist threats to our liberties than to refuse to cooperate with comparable left wing threats.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ See E. J. Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), chap. 6-7; Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, chap. 4.

⁹⁷ Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited*, 123. Viereck was sufficiently heterodox that Eric Goldman characterized him as “an off-beat liberal who enjoys calling himself a conservative.” Eric Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York: Knopf, 1952), 453.

⁹⁸ Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited*, 127.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 127, 139.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

It was possible, of course, to fuse pessimistic argumentative strategies with the more conventional conceptions of laissez-faire or natural law philosophies that flowed into Movement Conservatism. For conservatives like Hayek and Chambers, for example, the inadequacies of human epistemic and moral virtue precluded using social and political reform as vehicles for securing human aspirations. Collective political action was a kind of hubristic rebellion that ultimately would only distort the providential designs of nature itself. To equate liberal pessimism with the New Right required one to omit the critiques of capitalism and economic oligarchy that ran quite strong, albeit also vaguely, throughout the pessimistic writings of the 1940s and 1950s. Reviewing Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*, Niebuhr thus wrote, "Dr. Hayek sees the perils of political power clearly enough: but there is nothing in the book that gives the slightest indication of the perils of inordinate economic power."¹⁰¹ In a similar vein, Schlesinger claimed in *The Vital Center* that "class conflict is essential if freedom is to be preserved, because it is the only barrier against class domination."¹⁰²

It is in this respect that the fatiguing references to human nature in pessimistic liberal writing actually point to something of genuine significance. Niebuhr constructed his political philosophy on his conception of Original Sin, a framework others adopted wholesale or otherwise secularized into humankind's essential "lust for power." Pessimists believed that human beings routinely deceived themselves into thinking that the greater good is synonymous with their own interests and claimed to be discovering the truth about the world when they were actually cutting congenial fictions out of whole cloth. When they tried to embrace nature as a model for human moral life, they became indifferent and cruel. When they presumed to

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Charles Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role and Legacy* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International), 121.

¹⁰² Schlesinger, *Vital Center*, 171.

transcend their status as animals, they became arrogant and hubristic. Human egoism polluted everything, thereby rendering impossible any “natural” equilibrium of interests or power. This conception of political conflict distinguished pessimistic liberal discourse from more conventionally conservative forms of anti-utopianism. Pessimistic liberal discourse did not posit a “traditional” society, rationally discernable natural laws, or a spontaneous order to which Americans or any other nation could return or defer. Nor did they propose that the finiteness of the human mind meant that all forms of economic planning had to be eschewed in favor of the spontaneous action of markets. Indeed, theirs was an ideal of interference, where the concerted and continual action of the state provided the break on the centrifugal tendencies of politics.

Still, Dewey, Hook, and other liberal progressives did not misapprehend the philosophical consequences of the pessimists’ position. The defenders of progress detected a very real correspondence between pessimistic liberalism and a certain variety of conservative politics. As I have already noted, concrete connections existed between the pessimistic insurgency and the languages of European reactionary movements. Despite the protestations of Niebuhr and Schlesinger that they were merely unsentimental liberals, liberal progressives detected that they were witnessing the emergence of an intellectual formation with deep and sometimes unacknowledged affinities with a particularly dangerous species of right-wing thought. Liberal progressives misidentified the precise content of the pessimist challenge largely because they had spent so much time tangling with other kinds of conservative that they had come to assume that such counter-revolutionary rhetoric could not exist apart from reactionary politics. As Niebuhr himself put it, “they illogically assume that if the proponent of justice snatches from the hand of conservatism a weapon which has hitherto been used most exclusively

on the other side of the battle, that the sword snatcher has gone over to the enemy.”¹⁰³ A more accurate assessment would have treated Niebuhrian pessimism as one possible expression of a Tory Socialist sensibility, one that treated social liberal politics as “revolution-preventing reforms,” a means of securing social peace and a prophylactic against future social upheaval.¹⁰⁴ Niebuhrian pessimism mobilized reactionary assessments of the “failures of modernity,” but repackaged them as justifications for, rather than arguments against, the New Deal state.¹⁰⁵

The 1950s, however, hardly represented a moment of unqualified victory for the pessimistic position. We should not conclude from the despair of some thinkers that the pessimistic insurgency transformed the mainstream of liberal thought in any significant way. The majority of establishment thinkers were simply unwilling to give up entirely on the ideal of a secular intellectual as a cosmopolitan *philosophe* or to embrace a Tory Socialist identity. “What appeals to me in the New Conservatism,” Richard Hofstadter stated in 1955, “is simply the old liberalism, chastened by time, and modulated by a growing sense of reality.”¹⁰⁶ Likewise, Niebuhr and John Herz characterized themselves as “realistic liberals.”¹⁰⁷ Rather than envision themselves as moving away from a liberal identity, they instead treated their various critical

¹⁰³ Quoted in Rice, “Fiction of Reinhold Niebuhr,” 65. See also the 1949 exchange between Lionel Trilling, Richard Chase, and William Barrett in *Partisan Review*, in which Barrett attempted a similar maneuver of forcing critics of liberalism to line up with religious reactionaries. William Barrett, Richard Chase, and Lionel Trilling, “The Liberal Mind: Two Communications and a Reply,” *Partisan Review* 6 (June 1949): 649-65.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Viereck, *Shame and Glory of the Intellectuals: Babbitt Jr. vs. the Rediscovery of Values* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), 314. John Blum has described Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. as a “Tory Democrat.” John Blum, “Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.: Tory Democrat,” in *The Liberal Persuasion: Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and the Challenge of the American Past*, ed. John Patrick Diggins (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 67-72.

¹⁰⁵ This elective affinity between “pessimistic liberalism” and darker forms of reactionary modernism is not as strange as it might seem. Sheri Berman has argued quite convincingly that the social democratic form and fascism are best understood as part of the same ideological family, insofar as both demand the subordination of economics to politics. See Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe’s Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁰⁶ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 15.

¹⁰⁷ Niebuhr, “Liberalism, Illusions and Realities”; John Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), chap. 4-6.

innovations as an ongoing elaboration of the liberal tradition. In other words, as they sorted out what exactly it meant to be a liberal in light of the Great Depression, Stalin's purges, Nazi gas chambers, and the atomic bomb, many members of the intellectual establishment sometimes found it useful to expand the boundaries of disenchantment to include the categories of science and secular philosophy. Reason and science could serve as touchstones of liberal thought, but like orthodox Christianity or Marxism, they could also enslave the intellect.¹⁰⁸

While liberal pessimism and the reactions to it impinged at various moments on the consciousness of establishment intellectuals, most of the time establishment thinkers treated the arguments of pessimists as a repository of argumentative techniques and modes of self-fashioning that could be easily assimilated into a liberal progressive persona. One could complain of growing irrationalism when confronted with McCarthyites or sound the alarm on rationalist hubris when it came to the Soviets. No clear victor emerged from the extended confrontation between pessimists and liberal progressives. Instead, the dispute generated an arms race in philosophical eclecticism, wherein the chief virtue was a kind of "ironic imagination," evidenced by the ability to simultaneously deploy and keep at arm's length multiple languages of political and philosophical commitment.¹⁰⁹ The great vice for midcentury liberals, accordingly, was to be overcome by the categories of one's political imagination, whether secular or religious. Lionel Trilling summed up this sensibility well in his distinction between the creative and the neurotic mind. "The whole difference," he wrote in the *Liberal Imagination*, is that "the poet is

¹⁰⁸ In this respect, the primary success of the pessimistic insurgency was that it added to the liberal toolkit a historicist skepticism about scientific knowledge that would find its apotheosis in Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

¹⁰⁹ On the "ironic imagination," see Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Pre-History of Virtual Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

in command of his fantasy, while it is exactly the mark of the neurotic that he is possessed by his fantasy.”¹¹⁰

Conclusion: Liberalism’s Ironic Imagination

The image of the liberal intellectual that emerged from the midcentury crisis was animated by two overlapping though often antagonistic modes of constituting a skeptical self, two strategies of disciplining one’s intellectual and ideological personality. Liberal progressives stressed the imperative of cultivating the “pragmatic” or “scientific” habits of mind required to avoid dogmatism and thus be at home in the modern world. Pessimists warned against the philosophical hubris that would lead a humane intelligence to stumble into totalitarianism. The uneven stalemate between these two regimes of intellectual discipline produced a multitude of rival programs of self-cultivation in the postwar years, some emphasizing science and others politics, literature, or religion. Despite the various accusations that midcentury liberals hurled at one another, however, virtually all such schemes were deeply conscious of epistemic fallibility and equally concerned with the perils of finite human beings trying to translate their values into political realities.

One way to understand “midcentury liberalism,” then, is as a cluster of disputes over how to properly constitute an ideal liberal subject. Pessimists and liberal progressives alike asked: How does one construct a skeptical, autonomous intellect? Does a liberal outlook result from a break with the stultifying world of tradition and custom, or does it flow instead from a conscious effort to leave behind precisely that sort of Promethean thinking? Is it a part of a project of Enlightenment, however construed, or is it a reflection on the inevitable failure of such projects?

¹¹⁰ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review Books, 2008), 44. Originally published in 1950..

The struggle to answer these questions, and the intense regime of self-interrogation that any possible answer implied, generated much of the characteristic style that we associate with the establishment social criticism of the 1940s and 1950s –its preoccupation with irony and paradox as well as its playful oscillation between seemingly incompatible cultural ideals. Without the confrontation between and intermingling of the ideals of pessimism and progress, it would arguably have been impossible to imagine figures like Lionel Trilling, Jacques Barzun, or even Isaiah Berlin.

That skeptical style, as we have been continually reminded for fifty years, had its limits. It is customary to suggest, with Edward Purcell, that because postwar intellectuals insisted upon “identifying ideology with abstract, a priori rationalism and comprehensive authoritarian systems of thought” they failed to realize that their own “pragmatic, empirical, pluralistic” commitments had taken on the character of dogmatism.¹¹¹ As Edward Fowler put it, postwar thinkers were “believing skeptics.” That is, they were skeptical about most things, but their self-fashioning blinded them to the dogmas that undergirded their own thought, particularly anticommunism. This is an easy accusation to make, and not without good reason.¹¹² The opposition to communism and the knee-jerk politics it often generated certainly can be interpreted as an unacknowledged dogmatism, one that did a great deal of damage indeed.

Yet I would argue that the main defect of midcentury liberal thought was the opposite of this alleged faux-skepticism. Like the older liberal progressive view it challenged, the pessimistic insurgency demanded an ordered skepticism, that is, a skepticism conditioned and constrained by a particular cultural ideal. Pessimists argued that the honest assessment of the years between

¹¹¹ Purcell, *Crisis of Democratic Theory*, 272.

¹¹² Fowler, *Believing Skeptics*.

1914 and 1949 proscribed certain defective modes of reflection, and that ridding oneself of those defective ideas freed one to think clearly and act boldly. That rigor, however, did not sustain itself. Rather than pushing towards a Tory Socialist identity that could better accommodate their philosophical pessimism, they instead continued to fashion as liberals, relying on the cultural memory of the 1930s and 1940s to animate their critical style and direct it toward center-left forms of government. As that cultural memory became faded and distorted, so too did any substantial connection between their rhetoric of “realism” and the picture of the postwar welfare state as means of preventing social chaos. Domestic politics remained up for grabs, and rapidly the dour warnings of Niebuhr and other pessimists gave way to more hopeful political aspirations. Indeed, by the early 1960s, the realists’ complaints about liberalism’s vulnerabilities were being supplanted by a renewed enthusiasm for the capacity of technology and expertise to transform the conduct of politics, an enthusiasm that Howard Brick, borrowing from Clark Kerr, tellingly calls a “new Enlightenment.”¹¹³

The rhetorical motifs of liberal pessimism endured as features of public culture and liberal social critique even after political realism went out of fashion in the 1960s. We still often hear of the need to face reality, or embrace the politics of the center over those of the extremes.¹¹⁴ We are continually reminded of the presence of evil in the world and of the urgent need for the United States to combat it.¹¹⁵ The difference between true conservatism and pseudo-conservative radicalism is still invoked to make sense of the difference between the

¹¹³ Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American thought and Culture in the 1960s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 23-44.

¹¹⁴ Michael Lind and Ted Halstead, *The Radical Center: The Future of American Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

¹¹⁵ Thomas Friedman, *Longitudes and Attitudes: Exploring the World after September 11* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2002), 118-120.

conservatives we would like to see and the conservatives that we currently have.¹¹⁶ Reality demands this, that, and the other thing. But these characteristically “realist” tropes are attached to a dizzying and contradictory array of political positions, and there is never any sense that their application to one area of political life demands their application in other areas as well. Without the age of catastrophe lurking in the background, there is no way to determine which facts we ought to use to audit a particular political vision. Instead, we are simply buffeted from realism to realism, applying the same cool, detached attitude of political necessity to each wild swing in opinion. On balance, then, the great intellectual legacy of liberalism’s midcentury romance with cultural pessimism was neither a tough-minded “realism” nor an unacknowledged dogmatism, but rather a profound fecklessness.¹¹⁷

The pessimists’ failure to more fully convert elite culture is not, however, the war party’s only legacy to the United States. Philosophical pessimism’s temporary appeal to the liberal intelligentsia represents one aspect of a larger militarization of American society and culture, a phenomenon whose consequences appear in retrospect more mixed than many would care to admit. As we are discovering, the politics of semi-permanent war, as much as they generated McCarthyite witch hunting and imperial misadventures, also acted as a catalyst for social reform and responsible governance. Mary Ann Dudziak and Thomas Borstelmann have argued that many of the early civil rights strategies were premised upon embarrassing the Eisenhower and

¹¹⁶ Thomas Friedman, “We Need a Conservative Party” *New York Times*, 8/21/2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/22/opinion/friedman-we-need-a-conservative-party.html>.

¹¹⁷ See, for example, Tony Judt’s observations about the lead up to the Iraq war, in which liberal intellectuals used the language of realism in order to stave off discussions of prudent foreign policy. Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 384-92.

Kennedy administrations into taking action in the South.¹¹⁸ No one wished to be caught lecturing the Soviets about the wonders of freedom and democracy while the Alabama State Police set dogs on children. David Engerman has demonstrated that concern for national security also helped to ensure Federal funding for the humanities and social sciences.¹¹⁹ Area studies especially, but also anything that could be attached the program of elaborating and defending the culture of the West, stood to receive the benefits of state largesse. National security imperatives also drove unprecedented investments in national infrastructure, including dam building, electrification projects, and the interstate highway system.¹²⁰

For all the wickedness it caused in the short and the long run, the political establishment's war mentality was often good to the United States. The politics of fear that liberal pessimists helped to promote in the 1940s and 1950s momentarily generated an American political class more concerned with social stability and responsible leadership than before or since. Though it never could bring itself to adopt the name, that governing class represents the high water mark of Tory Socialism as a form of political thought and practice in the United States, and its accomplishments ought not to be overlooked. The "liberal" elites of midcentury, even as they vacillated between ideals of science and Aristocratic realpolitik, had sufficient moral capacity and political imagination that it was sometimes possible to cajole, embarrass, or frighten them into doing the right thing. That is probably the best one can ever say about political establishments in a democracy.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹¹⁹ David C. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹²⁰ Gerstle, *Liberty and Coercion*, 262-70.

CHAPTER III

IRVING KRISTOL'S ENLIGHTENMENT

Reflecting on the relentlessly depressing election season of 1968, the journalist Gary Wills became convinced that he was witnessing the end of liberalism in the United States. He did not believe, as many others did, that America stood on the edge of revolution or social collapse. He meant instead that the American national mythology of self-made men hustling in a market society could no longer be reconciled to the kind of political order that the United States had become. Liberalism—what Wills called “the philosophy of the marketplace”—belonged to the innocence of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After nearly two hundred years, it had finally played itself out.¹ Since the Great Depression, Americans had engaged in all manner of social policy innovation, but they had stubbornly and torturously continued to describe those innovations as the modification of markets, that is, as revisions of liberalism. That would no longer do. The sixties had made it clear that talk of “expanded opportunities,” “ending disadvantages,” or “moving the starting line” no longer made sense. In the future, Americans would have to adopt new and alien ways of talking about politics, in the process accepting difficult truths about themselves and their history.

Wills’s “crisis of the self-made man” suggests one form that Tory Socialist criticism might have taken in the 1970s, one that certainly had precedent in an extensive postwar practice of hand wringing over whether the “American liberal tradition” still had legs in the age of welfare capitalism. Louis Hartz, Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset, John Kenneth Galbraith,

¹ Gary Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: Crisis of the Self-made Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), xvii. Originally published in 1970 by Houghton Mifflin.

and many other thinkers imagined that the direction of global economic development suggested a gradual convergence toward state-planned welfare economies, with corporations and markets much more tightly bound to social purposes.² Half a century later, this seems like so much wishful thinking. A new language of American Christian Democracy, democratic socialism, or social democracy did not emerge from the 1970s, or at least did not emerge victorious. Instead, American elites rediscovered and reinvented classical liberal philosophy, investing the market with awesome powers of self-organization. In the course of these reinventions, many commentators turned Wills's formulation on its head. Capitulation to the realities of contemporary life, they argued, entailed an acknowledgement that the postwar liberal order—the attempt to subordinate the economic world to political needs—did not “work.” The New Deal and the attempts to extend its protective reach in the 1960s were expressions of an unredeemable utopianism.

Of these critics, none proved more effective than Irving Kristol. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, Kristol developed a comprehensive defense of the self-made man, touting a “liberal-individualist ethos” rooted in his own particular understanding of American intellectual history. The United States’ “democratic capitalism,” according to Kristol, was the child of the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment, a bourgeois ideological tradition that stood in stark contrast to the messianic utopianism of the French *philosophes*. In this chapter, I examine Kristol's

² On the notion that postwar states were converging on a post-capitalist mode of governance, see Howard Brick, *Transcending Capitalism: Visions of a New Society in Modern American Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006) and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Market Triumphalism and Wishful Liberals,” in *A Contest of Ideas: Capital, Politics, and Labor*, ed. Nelson Lichtenstein (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 167-84. To a certain extent, this group of post-capitalist thinkers actually included Kristol himself. In a 1958 review of Peter Viereck's *Conservatism: From John Adams to Winston Churchill*, Kristol reluctantly endorsed the end of ideology thesis: “The passions that set in motion the age of ideology—for so we might denominate the last century and a half—are slowly receding.” Kristol, “Old Truths and the New Conservatism,” in *The Neoconservative Persuasion: Selected Essays, 1942-2009*, ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 146. Kristol's essay originally appeared in *Yale Review* (May 1958).

development of the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment idea between roughly 1967 and 1985, a period referred to here as the long 1970s.³ Kristol's Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment signaled a transformation of post-liberal criticism in America. Like midcentury liberal pessimists, Kristol argued that human folly, particularly of the "rationalist" variety, remained the primary problem bedeviling modern politics. Where he differed from these thinkers was in his estimation of "reality's" disposition toward human welfare. Niebuhr's dark world of "power politics" inevitably tended towards disintegration and required continual political improvisation to keep the social order from coming apart at the seams. By contrast, the cheerful world of democratic capitalism Kristol envisioned naturally tended toward prosperity and stability. Bourgeois virtues worked in tandem with market mechanisms, thereby producing the best life possible for human beings, the "least romantic" but most successful form of social organization ever conceived.⁴ The crises of the 1960s and 1970s, on Kristol's reading, resulted from a hubristic abandonment of this Anglo-Scottish understanding of the interdependence of markets and virtuous citizenship. Americans chafed at the strictures of bourgeois custom and convention, but in undoing them they had deeply wounded American democracy.

By examining Kristol's thought, I also wish to make a broader point concerning the transformation of American political culture in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and the special role of "neoconservatism" within it. This transformation is typically understood in terms of a "backlash," whereby the cultural upheavals of the 1960s fractured the New Deal coalition, leaving many culturally conservative Cold War liberals without a natural ideological home and

³ The long 1970s arguably represent the height of neoconservative thought, despite the fact that the movement's practical influence reached its peak over the next several decades. During the seventies, Neoconservatives moved beyond a simple rejection of Great Society Liberalism toward an articulation of a unique ideology of their own. Thereafter, they began a long process of assimilation into conservative ideology proper, a process that was largely complete by the end of the eighties.

⁴ Irving Kristol, *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), x.

with little choice but to join forces with the ascending New Right. Neoconservatives, on this view, had changed less than the world around them had. They still saw themselves as supporters of the New Deal order as conceived under Franklin Roosevelt. It was just that the Democratic Party and liberalism more generally now stood further to the left of that position.⁵

Neoconservatives, Kristol included, certainly like to tell the story that way. In my interpretation, however, Neoconservatism is a much messier phenomenon. By emphasizing the disorganization—even the incoherence—of neoconservative political ideas, I demonstrate that a primary feature of the history of Neoconservatism is the difficulty that neoconservative intellectuals experienced in finding a coherent political language to describe themselves. The closer one looks at Neoconservatives like Kristol, the more one sees a collection of intellectuals in the midst of an identity crisis; imaginative enough to see that they did not fit within the conventional definitions of liberalism or conservatism, but insufficiently creative to identify the precise dimensions of their own philosophy. The great puzzle in the history of Neoconservatism, in my view, is not explaining a slide from left to right, but rather figuring out why independent conservatives like Kristol have had such a difficult time articulating a distinct ideological vision, and why their confusion has consistently led them to attach themselves to the Conservative Movement.

⁵ The literature on Neoconservatism is vast and usually polemical. The crisis years of the George W. Bush Administration in particular served to mainstream a view of Neoconservatives as a shadowy group of conspirators bent on world domination. This view is less than helpful. The best interpretation of the movement is also the first. See Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who are Changing America's Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979). Other fine general works on the neoconservatives are: Hartman, *War for the Soul of America*; Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1994* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power* (New York: Times Books, 1986); Gary Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind: Politics, Culture, and the War of Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Dorrien, *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana* (New York: Routledge, 2004). Also useful is Robert L. Richardson, Jr., "Neoconservatism: Origins and Evolution, 1945-1980," PhD diss., University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 2009.

From Tory Socialist to Neoconservative

Kristol first made a name for himself in the 1950s as an anticommunist crusader. A prominent member of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and co-editor of the secretly CIA-backed magazine *Encounter*, his thought during this period is often identified with a single inflammatory essay he wrote during the height of the postwar Red Scare, “Civil Liberties: A Study in Confusion.” Famously, Kristol advanced a half-hearted defense of Joseph McCarthy. “There is one thing the American people know about Senator McCarthy,” he wrote in 1951. “He, like them, is unequivocally anti-communist. About the spokesmen for American liberalism, they know no such thing. And with some justification.” According to Kristol, American liberals mistook communism for an eccentric species of “progressivism,” instead of recognizing it as a Totalitarian Conspiracy. In defending the civil liberties of communists, he declared, liberals obscured the accomplishments of the New Deal and lent legitimacy to McCarthy, who was otherwise nothing more than a “popular demagogue.”⁶

Yet there is more to Kristol’s early political thought than his ardent anticommunism. After a youthful fling with Trotskyism in the 1940s, Kristol seems to have been searching for a philosophical framework that could express both his newfound political centrism and also his enduring distaste for liberal civilization. Some of his essays during this period mimicked Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian Realism, while others reflected on the fate of religion, especially Judaism, in the modern world.⁷ Arguably, at this point, Kristol is best set alongside neo-

⁶ Irving Kristol, “‘Civil Liberties,’ 1952: A Study in Confusion,” in *The Neoconservative Persuasion: Selected Essays, 1942-2009*, ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 48-60. Originally published in *Commentary*, March 1952.

⁷ Especially in these early essays, Kristol struggled to develop a characteristic prose style. His attempts mimic the performances of Trilling, his idol, but Kristol could not orchestrate the same synthesis of cultural, political, and

Aristotelians like Robert Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, Walter Lippmann, and Leo Strauss, critics who sought to resuscitate the tradition of Natural Law as an alternative to the supposed relativism of liberal modernity.⁸ Kristol fretted continually that the ambitions of postwar liberalism were too low and that the conversion of Americans from active citizens to mere consumers would, in the long run, enfeeble the republic and erode its moral foundations. Indeed, as late as 1968, Kristol complained that the chief problem with modern liberalism was its “vulgar, materialistic notion of politics.”⁹

Kristol’s call for a politics of virtue sharpened considerably in the face of the 1960s cultural revolutions.¹⁰ He recoiled at Vietnam War protestors’ lack of patriotism, while the bohemian antics of the counterculture convinced him that he was “bourgeois” down to his bones.¹¹ Horrified by the sudden widespread availability of pornography, a category in which he included *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, Kristol called for censorship.¹² Drugs, too, had to be outlawed, because the young Americans taking marijuana and LSD were attempting to

historical analysis. He had particular difficulty with the complex art of ending short essays—many of the early efforts try to bring their discussions full circle, but instead descend into a strange form of free association.

⁸ On Aristotelian criticism of liberal culture during the 1950s, see George Marsden, *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 43-68 and Barry Riccio, *Walter Lippmann: Odyssey of a Liberal* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1993), 193-220. Edward Purcell provides excellent background on the movement in Purcell, *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism & the Problem of Value* (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 1973).

⁹ Irving Kristol, “The Old Politics, the New Politics, the New, New Politics,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 24, 1968.

¹⁰ In the wake of the sixties, Kristol remarked that “all you had to do to become a neoconservative was stand in place.” Quoted in Hoeveler, *Watch on the Right*, 85.

¹¹ Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: Free Press, 1995), x. The particular timing of this realization must be taken with a grain of salt. One of the central themes of all Kristol’s autobiographical efforts is a continual contrast between his own innate bourgeois tendencies with the swirling bohemianism around him.

¹² Irving Kristol, “Obscenity, Pornography and the Case for Censorship,” in *Reflections of a Neoconservative* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 52.

“secede from our society and our civilization.”¹³ The welfare state, he argued, had gone astray as it unbound the poor, especially poor African Americans, from the patriarchal family structures that constituted the foundation of social stability.¹⁴ Kristol concluded that the mood of activist government under Kennedy and Johnson had distorted and overextended the New Deal welfare state. With Daniel Bell in 1965, he founded *The Public Interest*, a policy journal largely dedicated to attacking the programs and ideals of the Great Society.¹⁵

It is worth noting that throughout this period, Kristol described himself as a political liberal. Responding to a criticism leveled by Arthur Schlesinger in 1952, Kristol wrote that he wished to “defend the heritage of the New Deal in its essential respects.”¹⁶ During the 1968 election season, Kristol endorsed Hubert Humphrey, declaring that the candidate’s “pragmatic liberalism represents the only vital and enduring tradition of American government since 1932.” Humphrey, he insisted, “will best be able to enlarge this tradition to encompass the strange new world toward which we are stumbling.”¹⁷ Despite this, it would seem that “Cold War liberalism” provides a somewhat inadequate description of Kristol’s political outlook, if what we mean by that term is a liberalism attenuated by fear of the Soviet Union abroad and of communist subversion at home. The early Kristol certainly detested communism. He was also suspicious of democracy, populism, and social leveling in general. Prudish, censorious, and utterly tone-deaf on matters of race, gender, and sexuality, he endorsed the midcentury political order, but only

¹³ Irving Kristol, “Urban Civilization and Its Discontents,” in *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, 68. Originally published in *Commentary*, July 1970.

¹⁴ Irving Kristol, “Welfare: The Best of Intentions, the Worst of Results,” in *Neoconservatism*, 43-49. Originally published in *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1971).

¹⁵ On the founding of *The Public Interest* see Hartman, *War for the Soul of America*, 41-43.

¹⁶ Irving Kristol, “Mr. Kristol Replies” *Commentary*, July 1952, 84.

¹⁷ Irving Kristol, “Why I Am for Humphrey,” *The New Republic*, June 8, 1968, reprinted online, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/why-i-am-humphrey>.

insofar as it shored up rather than undermined “traditional” social hierarchies. In short, Kristol was already a kind of conservative thinker, albeit a sort to which we are not well accustomed in the United States: a conservative who sees political reform not as a threat to traditional society, but as a tool to reproduce it.

Prior to the early seventies, Kristol had generally treated the New Right with suspicion and occasional contempt.¹⁸ During the 1970s, however, three events in Kristol’s career cemented his connections with the renascent Conservative Movement. Unsurprisingly, the first was the rise of George McGovern and the New Politics. Kristol and his wife, historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, both supported Scoop Jackson in the run-up to the 1972 presidential elections. Like many other Democrats, they saw the Jackson campaign as the last hope for arresting the influence of the New Left and “neo-isolationism” within the Democratic Party. When it appeared by the middle of the summer in 1972 that McGovern would be the Democrats’ candidate, Kristol and Himmelfarb stunned their friends and colleagues by defecting to the Republicans.¹⁹ Second, from 1972 onward Kristol contributed monthly to the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, which introduced his work to a new and more rightward leaning reading public. Third and most importantly, his connections at the *WSJ* led to an association with the American Enterprise Institute, the newly founded right-wing think tank that helped fuel the Reagan Revolution. In 1976 and 1977, Kristol took sabbatical leave from New York University to become a fellow at

¹⁸ According to Bronitsky, Kristol’s relations with the New Right began to intensify almost immediately after the 1968 election. In 1969, Kristol began attending a bi-monthly luncheon of journalists in Manhattan, hosted by William Buckley. Jonathan Bronitsky, “The Brooklyn Burkeans,” *National Affairs*, Winter 2014, <http://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-brooklyn-burkeans>.

¹⁹ Hartman, *War for the Soul of America*, 42-43; Richardson, “Neoconservatism,” 277. For the broader context see Bruce Miroff, *The Liberals’ Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

AEI.²⁰ There he studied supply-side economics, becoming friends with Jude Wanniski, Robert Bork, and Antonin Scalia.²¹ By the end of the decade, then, Kristol had become a key spokesperson of the right-wing counter intelligentsia. His prominence was so great that he served occasionally as a kind of unofficial advisor to the Reagan administration. As he once put it in an interview, “I don’t pick up the phone and tell them how to run the country, but I will occasionally pick up the phone, and somebody does return my calls.”²²

The Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment

Kristol developed his conception of a distinctly “Anglo-Scottish” Enlightenment across several lengthy essays composed between 1967 and 1981 and collected in his first three books, *On the Democratic Idea in America* (1972), *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (1979), and *Reflections of a Neoconservative* (1983).²³ Kristol’s central concern was to make sense of the United States’ contemporary situation in terms of the history of Western political thought. More specifically, Kristol wondered whether the United States’ recent history suggested a conformity with previous republican experience, namely, “the tendency of democratic republics to depart from—to ‘progress’ away from, one might say—their original animating principles, and as a consequence

²⁰ Kristol had taken a job as the Henry Luce Professor of Urban Values at NYU in 1972. According to Kristol, Sidney Hook arranged the appointment. Kristol, *Neoconservatism*, 32.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²² As quoted in Gary Dorrien, *Neoconservative Mind*, 102.

²³ The most important of these essays, for our purposes, is Irving Kristol, “Adam Smith and the Spirit of Capitalism,” in *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, 139-76. This piece first appeared in the 1976 edition of Mortimer Adler’s *The Great Ideas Today* and subsequently was included in several of Kristol’s books and other collections of conservative writing. According to Tim Lacy, *The Great Books Today* began as a collaboration between Adler’s Great Books Foundation and Encyclopedia Britannica. The principal idea was to provide an annual collection of articles that could help curious readers establish links between the Great Books and contemporary issues. It ranked as the most commercially successful Great Books’ supplement. Tim Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture: Mortimer J. Adler and the Great Books Idea* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 86-89.

to precipitate grave crises in the moral and political order.”²⁴ Kristol ultimately resolved that America’s troubled state in the latter half of the twentieth century stemmed from a great act of collective forgetting. Americans, he argued, had lost all sense of the political tradition that they had inherited from the founding generation. How could they be expected to understand, much less defend, a tradition of which they had no knowledge?

This ignorance, Kristol believed, resulted from the curious interpretive framework Americans used to make sense of their own history. Instead of assessing the founding generation’s system of “capitalist democracy” on its own merits, Americans tended to amputate the idea of capitalism from democracy and treat them separately.²⁵ Democracy thus became the repository of everything Americans admired about their country, while they held capitalism responsible for all of their thwarted aspirations. That is, Americans treated capitalism’s association with their democracy as a kind of historical accident, one that could and perhaps should be undone. To Kristol’s mind, a fairer assessment of America’s ideological foundation would require relocating Madison’s “new science of politics” in its original context, the eighteenth-century Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment.²⁶ Like its French counterpart, Kristol believed, this Enlightenment sought to overcome the central dilemmas that the Reformation and the Commercial Revolution had unleashed on European politics. On the one hand, the fracturing of Christendom and the two centuries of war that followed generated skepticism about religious authority as well as the possibility of an enduring political order. On the other hand, absolute monarchs’ promotion of exploitative mercantilist policies erased the old “classical medieval

²⁴ Irving Kristol, *On the Democratic Idea in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), vii.

²⁵ Kristol, “Adam Smith and the Spirit of Capitalism,” 140.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

political moralism” that elevated communal virtue over self-interest.²⁷ Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the world shifted, and the complexities of a pluralistic and commercial society outran the capacity of premodern political philosophy to make adequate sense of them. The classical sense of justice as the natural purpose of human life came to be supplanted by Thomas Hobbes’ vision of human beings as clusters of insatiable appetites, driven above all to preserve themselves and their interests.

To Kristol’s mind, the Anglo-Scottish and French Enlightenments represented contrasting approaches to this Hobbesian turn in political philosophy. The French *philosophes* advocated an essentially “managerial solution” to the problems of modern society.²⁸ With the spiritual and political foundations of European society crumbling all around them, thinkers such as Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau argued that an entirely new order of human social organization was both possible and necessary. Freed from the superstitions of Christianity and the crushing, arbitrary power of kings, human beings would finally be able to realize their true selves. A “religion of rationalist humanism” would replace the worship of God, and a new morality would supplant custom and convention.²⁹ The difficulty for the *philosophes* lay in the question of how to achieve this paradise. Ordinary people had become accustomed to inhabiting webs of superstition and accommodating themselves to illegitimate power. They had to be freed from those prisons, and this could not always be accomplished with their cooperation. Elites—presumably the *philosophes* themselves—would therefore have to *forcibly* reorder society in ways that rewarded

²⁷ Ibid., 146.

²⁸ Ibid., 149.

²⁹ Ibid., 144.

virtue rather than vice. Human nature would eventually conform to these new conditions, and the result would be the “universal regeneration of Mankind.”³⁰

By contrast, Kristol believed, the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment’s ambitions were deeply prosaic, “melioristic rather than eschatological.”³¹ The British equivalents of the *philosophes*—John Locke, David Hume, Adam Ferguson, and especially Adam Smith—also believed in historical progress, but they did not see elites manipulating human life for ostensibly high purposes as possible or desirable. They held that human life would improve gradually, of its own accord, and largely through economic growth.³² They envisioned that every individual’s “innate human impulse to better his condition,” both materially and morally, would aggregate into an engine of social betterment.³³ In addition to increasing general prosperity, the accumulation of personal wealth would counterbalance the power of the state, and the multiplication of beneficial commercial arrangements would defuse ideological tensions.³⁴ Nor did these thinkers believe in blasting apart Britain’s inherited moral and religious conventions. Although the Anglo-Scots were largely religious skeptics (as was Kristol), they recognized that traditional religious strictures could have a civilizing influence on society. Instead of establishing a religion of reason, they advocated coping with religious conflict through a strategy of privatization and

³⁰ Ibid., 142.

³¹ Ibid.

³² The Anglo-Scottish canon is slightly uneven here, as Kristol recommends omitting Mandeville, sometimes Hume, and obviously Tom Paine, who Kristol identified as “an English Radical who never really understood America.” Irving Kristol, “The American Revolution as a Successful Revolution,” in *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, 87. Originally published as Irving Kristol, *The American Revolution as a Successful Revolution* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1973).

³³ Irving Kristol, “Ideology and Supply-Side Economics,” in Kristol and Himmelfarb, *Neoconservative Persuasion*, 165. Originally published in *Commentary*, April 1981. The phrase “better his condition” belongs to Adam Smith, and Kristol quotes it often.

³⁴ Kristol, “Adam Smith and the Spirit of Capitalism,” 166. The benign influence of accumulated private power ought to be understood as part of Kristol’s project of defending large corporations from the accusation that they were incompatible with democracy.

toleration, with a secular government supporting religious authority in general while never favoring one confession over another.

According to Kristol, these British attitudes toward commercial society and religious toleration necessarily implied a set of deeper political and philosophical commitments, namely “limited government and individual liberty.”³⁵ The Anglo-Scottish tradition constructed and sanctified a sphere of personal, private freedom into which the state could not legitimately intrude. This comprised, Kristol thought, a “freedom that had never before been legitimated in the entire history of Western Civilization.”³⁶ Further, it provided a means of slipping free from the Hobbesian interpretation of political philosophy. While the modern sphere of personal liberty could not resurrect the classical emphasis on virtue, it would allow humans to continue pursuing excellence in their private lives, in commerce, family, and religion.

Kristol maintained that this affable and realistic philosophy of capitalism served as the groundwork for the Founders’ efforts to develop a “new science of politics” in the United States. Even without reading *The Wealth of Nations*, Kristol averred, the founding generation understood Smith and the Anglo-Scots “in their bones.”³⁷ The American Revolution carried all the hallmarks of the Anglo-Scottish tradition. It subordinated passion and enthusiasm to sobriety and skepticism. Kristol argued that the presence of messianic rhetoric ought to be set aside, because the Founders “did not permit themselves to be bewitched by that rhetoric.”³⁸ The practices and institutions that emerged from the revolution give a better indication of its overall tenor because, according to Kristol, they barely altered existing political structures at all. What

³⁵ Ibid., 144.

³⁶ Ibid., 143-44.

³⁷ Ibid., 140.

³⁸ Ibid., 86.

few changes the Founders did implement conformed to Anglo-Scottish sensibilities, insofar as they corralled the state's ability to intrude on the lives of its citizens and placed the burden for the perpetuation of the new country on the private virtue of individuals. As in *The Wealth of Nations*, the central message of the revolution was that “a self-disciplined people can create a community in which an ordered liberty will promote both economic prosperity and political participation.”³⁹

According to Kristol, this natural affinity could be explained sociologically. Smith and the Founders were prototypical bourgeois, “well-adjusted” members of their communities: academics, businessmen, politicians, and soldiers. Indeed, for Kristol one of the most important features of the Anglo-Scottish tradition was that it tended to produce very boring people. Smith “was a man whose habits and demeanor were utterly conventional and whose thinking achieved its influence by synthesizing current intellectual opinion rather than confronting it.”⁴⁰ Like the revolution he led, George Washington was “comparatively ‘dull.’” These were not thinkers inclined to challenge custom or authority in any fundamental way. Rather, they sought the amendment of existing institutions as a means to *preserve* them. The Anglo-Scots and the Founders alike took for granted the necessity of “organized religion, traditional moral values, and the family.”⁴¹ In short, the “system of natural liberty” described in *The Wealth of Nations* appealed to Anglophone thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic because they shared a basic belief in the value of ordinary civilized life, and saw the fundamental purpose of modern politics as the protection and preservation of that life.

³⁹ Ibid., 89.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 156.

⁴¹ Ibid., 168.

The Two Modernities

In Kristol's interpretation, the French *philosophes* lacked the faith in everyday life that animated the Anglo-Scottish thinkers. Existing on the margins, they were "at home in the Parisian Salons but not in society as a whole."⁴² They were more exciting minds than most of the Anglo-Scots, Kristol admitted, and often much more impressive stylists as well. Yet the *philosophes'* wit and philosophical ambition were inseparable from their deep alienation. They hated monarchy, aristocracy, and the Church, because these entities represented a world that failed to recognize their brilliance. As a consequence, they "were inclined to rage against things as they were in the name of what actually might be."⁴³ The French Enlightenment, Kristol insisted, thus gave birth to a degenerate form of modernity: restless, alienated, and uncomfortable with the world.

Not only had communist and socialist states descended from the *philosophes'* tradition, but the Western liberal intelligentsia—"the New Class," in neoconservative parlance—had also inherited the violent utopianism and adversary culture of Voltaire and Diderot. Journalists, academics, bureaucrats, and college-educated adults generally imagined themselves as the agents of modernity, charged with dragging their unregenerate societies toward a more humane and rational future.⁴⁴ Like the *philosophes* and the Bolsheviks before them, the New Class's self-possession led them to blur the lines between social reform and efforts to enhance their own political power. They attacked business and religion because those were the traditional elites charged with shaping opinions and public life. They wanted to redistribute wealth because they

⁴² Ibid., 150.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ As Gary Dorrien notes, the contents of the New Class vary from one neoconservative imagination to another. Kristol's was one of the most expansive. Dorrien, *Neoconservative Mind*, 96-97. See also Steinfeld, *Neoconservatives*, 214-47, 273-94.

themselves were the agents of redistribution. “The *nuovi uomini* are persuaded they can do a better job of running our society,” he argued, “and feel entitled to have the opportunity. This is what *they* mean by ‘equality.’”⁴⁵ The intellectual descendants of the French Enlightenment could not separate their desire to reform society from their fantasy of ruling it.

This strange mash-up of Marxist class analysis and right-wing populism prompted Yosal Rogat to describe Kristol’s ideology as “what Spiro Agnew would sound like if he had gone to CCNY in the thirties.”⁴⁶ Still, Kristol’s hostility to pointy-headed intellectuals belied his larger enthusiasm for the potential of social scientific expertise to underwrite conservative politics. His work at *The Public Interest* and his time at AEI convinced him that social scientific research, particularly the new trend toward supply-side economics, could serve to check the utopianism of intellectuals. While liberals took their cues from the alienated *philosophes*, Kristol argued that the motto of supply-side economics, especially the notion of marginal utility, might be described as “back to Adam Smith.”⁴⁷

The bourgeois and revolutionary approaches to managing social change, Kristol claimed, produced predictably contrasting outcomes. The American Revolution was a “successful revolution” because it culminated in a “constitutional convention” and its leaders “all died in bed.”⁴⁸ The French Revolution, meanwhile, achieved none of its aims and instead “devoured its children.” Like the *philosophes*, contemporary reformers on the Left continually collided with recalcitrant realities. Instead of encouraging citizens to cultivate their character, they expected

⁴⁵ Irving Kristol, “About Inequality,” *Commentary*, November 1972, 43.

⁴⁶ Yosal Rogat, “I’m All Right, Dick,” *New York Review of Books*, September 21, 1972, reprinted online, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1972/sep/21/im-all-right-dick>.

⁴⁷ Kristol, “Ideology and Supply-Side Economics,” 164.

⁴⁸ Kristol, “American Revolution as a Successful Revolution,” 83.

the forced rearrangement of realities on the ground, through community action programs or busing, to somehow produce virtuous people. The new welfare state degraded those it claimed to help, reducing especially African Americans to permanent dependency on federal assistance. As Kristol saw it, the activists behind the Great Society puzzled over why urban poverty seemed to persist in spite of their efforts, blithely ignoring the fact “that the problem they were trying to solve was the problem they were creating.”⁴⁹

Echoing more conventional enthusiasts for free markets such as Friedrich Hayek, as well as counter-cultural libertarians like Murray Rothbard, Kristol interpreted social inequality as an expression of an underlying natural inequality.⁵⁰ To struggle against inequality was thus to struggle against life itself; such struggles could only end in failure. For Kristol, this point ran considerably deeper than typical conservative rhetoric concerning what Albert O. Hirschman has labeled the “perversity thesis.”⁵¹ That is, Kristol’s argument went well beyond the classically conservative insistence that the costs of reform generally outweigh the benefits. He certainly believed that reform does violence to the society it seeks to improve and the people it claims to help, but his faith was that the maintenance of existing institutions carried no significant costs. To put it another way, in Kristol’s view, one could leave the natural order alone because that order was no miser. Economic growth ensured that those who displayed proper virtues could carve out a piece of shared prosperity for themselves and their families. Capitalism could grow the economic pie indefinitely and at little cost. “People who, individually or collectively,

⁴⁹ Irving Kristol, “Welfare,” in *Neoconservatism*, 47.

⁵⁰ Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944) and Murray Rothbard, *Egalitarianism as a Revolt Against Nature, and Other Essays* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2000). Gary Dorrien also notes Kristol’s turn towards naturalism in *Neoconservative Mind*, 99.

⁵¹ See Albert Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1991), 11-42. For Hirschman, the essence of the perversity thesis is that “attempts to reach for liberty will make society sink into slavery, the quest for democracy will produce oligarchy and tyranny, and social welfare programs will create more, rather than less, poverty. *Everything backfires.*” Emphasis in original. *Ibid.*, 12.

subscribe to the social philosophy of a capitalist order,” Kristol claimed, “do indeed better their condition.”⁵²

We should not understate the revolutionary nature of this calculus, upon which the whole of Kristol’s later political thought depended. It is one thing to say that one ought to live rightly, come what may, and another to say that one will prosper if one abides by nature’s laws. It is still another to say, with Kristol, that the world will punish us, “individually or collectively,” for flouting bourgeois virtues and reward us for keeping them. This is a providential conception in which natural law covers virtue and vice as well as profit and loss; conformity with nature’s laws is a matter of both morality *and* prudence. We should therefore not identify Kristol’s enthusiasm for democratic capitalism with Milton Friedman’s sneering assertion in 1970 that “the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits.”⁵³ Kristol could never bring himself to believe in some kind of post-political market anarchy, or that the celebration of greed, selfishness, and materialism was wholly compatible with the good society. “This point of view,” which Kristol variously attributed to mercantilism, Hobbes, Mandeville, and Hume, “makes no distinction between the speculator and the bourgeois entrepreneur: both are selfish creatures who, in the exercise of their private vices (greed, selfishness, avarice) end up creating public benefits.”⁵⁴ It was only the staid bourgeois-puritan virtues—“prudence, diligence, trustworthiness and an ambition channeled toward ‘bettering one’s condition’”—that allowed capitalism to function as an honorable worldview that could stand as an alternative to “simpleminded egalitarianism” on

⁵² Kristol, *Two Cheers for Capitalism*, x.

⁵³ Milton Friedman, “The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase Its Profits,” *The New York Times Magazine*, September 13, 1970, 70. As Friedman notes, this is a slightly less politic version of his 1962 declaration that “there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud.” *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Irving Kristol, “Capitalism, Socialism, and Nihilism” in *Neoconservatism*, 100. Originally published in *The Public Interest* (Spring 1973).

the one hand and nihilism on the other. Even as he embraced the neoliberals' critique of the welfare state, then, Kristol continued to fulminate about the immorality implicit in the work of theorists like Friedman, as well as the more casually Randian cultural politics of the businessmen in whose company he often found himself.⁵⁵

Adam Smith, Kristol asserted, had understood the relations between morality and capitalism far better than contemporary neoliberals. A student of Adam Ferguson's sentimental philosophy, Smith hypothesized that a set of "benevolent affections" inclined humankind towards goodness as much as selfishness.⁵⁶ This notion had become corrupted in the nineteenth century through the malign influence of Thomas Malthus and his followers. Malthus had resurrected the old Hobbesian conception of human nature, writing as though human beings were nothing more than a bundle of appetites and impulses, and insisting that a capitalist order should be understood as a brute struggle for survival and dominance. Malthus thereby evacuated capitalism of the moral substance that had been integral to the Anglo-Scottish tradition.

Kristol believed that a similar transformation had simultaneously taken place in the American political sphere. In a 1969 address to the Organization of American Historians, he argued that during the early nineteenth century radical democrats like George Bancroft and George Sidney Camp had replaced the Founders' aristocratic sensibilities with a new "religion of democracy."⁵⁷ According to those original principles, enshrined in the *Federalist Papers*, democracy was a curb against tyranny, not a panacea for every kind of social ill or political

⁵⁵ On the importance of the Anglo-American Enlightenment concept to neoliberal thought, see Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 100-110.

⁵⁶ Kristol, "Adam Smith and the Spirit of Capitalism," 276.

⁵⁷ Irving Kristol, "American Historians and the Democratic Idea," in *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, 100-101. Originally published in Kristol, *On the Democratic Idea in America*.

crisis. Yet the Jacksonians had elevated democracy into a kind of religious faith, whereby the aggregated tastes of “the common man” would always and everywhere generate political wisdom. The resulting riot of democracy in politics and economics, what Kristol called “the transcendental-populist religion of democracy,” introduced a rot that ate the Anglo-Scottish tradition from within.⁵⁸ The religion of democracy erased Americans’ ability to see themselves in a critical light. Imagining all behaviors and beliefs to be created equal, Americans could not sense their growing moral corruption.

Real democratic capitalism, in Kristol’s view, had thus been a remarkably short-lived affair. Americans had since lived off its moral capital, which, in the 1960s, finally ran out. The result had been the nihilism of the counterculture. In previous eras, Kristol repeated, drugs, pornography, and subversive ideas *existed*, certainly, but their circulation among the population at large was almost always limited. Previously, libertinism was a risky activity, only to be indulged in secretly and occasionally, and hopefully only by those with the ability to put it in perspective. This was an under-the-counter society, where if one possessed a sufficiently “serious” desire to read a bit of Rabelais or D. H. Lawrence, one could do so “in the library reading room, under the librarian’s skeptical eye.”⁵⁹ With the triumph of the sixties, Kristol argued, obscenity and pornography had become commonplaces, not censored but celebrated.

Given these circumstances, Kristol argued, “the moral authority of tradition, and some public support for this authority, seems to be needed.”⁶⁰ The conclusion that the state should step in to check the growth of a permissive society would seem to run contrary to Kristol’s assertion

⁵⁸ Irving Kristol, “Urban Civilization and Discontents,” in *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, 64. Originally published in *Commentary*, July, 1970. The paper is a revised version of Kristol’s inaugural lecture at NYU.

⁵⁹ Kristol, “Pornography, Obscenity, and the Case for Censorship,” 52.

⁶⁰ Kristol, *Two Cheers for Capitalism*, xi.

that the great defect of socialism and the New Class was their addiction to “social engineering.” His account of the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment’s vision of modernity, however, rested on an ideal of self-government, namely “the willingness of people to allow their baser selves to be governed by their better selves.”⁶¹ Most Americans’ refusal to take seriously their responsibility for self-government therefore justified a certain amount of heavy-handedness on the part of officialdom concerning morals and manners. “There is no inherent right to self-government,” Kristol asserted, “if it means that such government is vicious, mean, squalid and debased.”⁶²

Virtue Politics and the Liberal State

It should be clear, by this point, that Kristol’s Anglo-Scottish idea is hardly a seamless philosophical garment. Rather, it represents the intermingling of several traditions of thought that Kristol found congenial. The first and most obvious is Burkean conservatism, a perspective that Kristol’s biographer Joseph Bronitsky attributes to the influence of Himmelfarb, though Kristol clearly had contact with other sources of such ideas.⁶³ The Anglo-conservative philosophical distinction between “British Empiricism” and “Continental Rationalism” is an old one, and the larger set of self-aggrandizing prejudices that characterize Anglophone culture as essentially hostile to the sorts of abstractions that haunt mainland Europe is even older. Throughout his writings Kristol was liable to fall into a High-Church Burkeanism, alternately decrying the “enthusiasms” and the “dogmatic certainties” of intellectuals.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Kristol, “Urban Civilization and Discontents,” 58.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶³ Bronitsky, “Brooklyn Burkeans.”

⁶⁴ To a limited degree, this rhetorical mode also complements Kristol’s enthusiasm for empirical social science, the supposed ability of non-ideological experts to lift the curtain on the world as it is in itself, de-legitimizing left-wing reform in the process.

It would be a mistake, in my view, to identify the Anglo-Scottish idea as merely a continuation of Kristol's earlier cultural conservatism. In particular, the Burkean rhetoric grinds uncomfortably against Kristol's identification of the Anglo-Scottish tradition as a species of Enlightenment. Much of English conservative thought centers on the idea that Enlightenment "rationalism" and its "artificial" solutions for political problems are the antithesis of good government, and that the aim of modern conservatism is to slow or thwart the Enlightenment's philosophical hubris. And, indeed, young Irving Kristol seems to have seen matters in precisely these terms. In a 1952 review of the Israeli historian J. R. Talmon's *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, Kristol wrote approvingly of the author's distinction between the moderation and pragmatism of Anglophone political practice and the redemptive fantasies of the French Revolution. Yet he balked at Talmon's suggestion that Anglophone democracy was as much a child of the Enlightenment as Soviet totalitarianism, writing,

Is it really correct to locate the origin of both these streams in the 18th-century Enlightenment? Is the vigor of democratic government in the Anglo-Saxon world really to be attributed simply to a different turning of the same mood and ideology that is represented by Robespierre? After all, Edmund Burke was no liberal or democrat as Rousseau or Jefferson understood these terms. Yet it is the Burkian [*sic*] idea of politics—as a human activity *bounded* by ethical *commandments*, in contrast to the distinctively modern conception of it as an activity aiming at the *realization*, here and now, of ethical *ideals*—which is at the core of Anglo-American practice. And this idea itself flows from a pre-Enlightenment attitude toward man and his place in the cosmos. Perhaps if we wish to reinvigorate responsible political thinking today, we shall have to go to sources more deep than the Enlightenment and its adoration of human innocence, its impatience with human limitation, its lust for redemption.⁶⁵

If this may be considered representative of a stage of Kristol's ideological development, it would appear that the Anglo-Scottish idea entailed a departure from, or at least significant modification of, the Burkean style Kristol found so appealing.

⁶⁵ Irving Kristol, "Two Varieties of Democracy" *Commentary*, January 1952, 290. Emphasis in original.

Kristol's encounter with Leo Strauss in the 1950s transformed his understanding of the history of political thought.⁶⁶ Straussian tics are evident everywhere in Kristol's vocabulary: his distinction between modern "ideology" and Aristotelian "political philosophy," his description of governments as "regimes," his insistence that the great thinkers of the past understand us better than we do ourselves. Here again, however, there is little room for a rehabilitation of the Enlightenment. For Strauss, the game was already up by the time the *philosophes* arrived on the scene. Machiavelli's departure from "classical natural right," in Strauss' mind, initiated a modern decline into nihilism and relativism. This appears to have been Kristol's view as well, at least for a time: In a 1961 essay, Kristol speaks of a "democratic enlightenment" tradition that takes *The Prince's* rejection of conventional morality and *Discourses'* strident republicanism as precursors to the overthrow of the culture of the Old Regime. Machiavelli, Kristol argued in impeccable Straussian fashion, initiated a "profanation of politics" of which the Enlightenment formed merely a chapter.⁶⁷

Strauss's students appear to have had a more direct influence than Strauss himself on Kristol's Anglo-Scottish idea. Strauss's vehement attacks on liberalism attracted a number of young conservative thinkers, but many of them had difficulty accepting the idea that the United States was itself the product of degenerate political philosophy. The result was a gradual split that began in the sixties and deepened after Strauss's death in 1972.⁶⁸ Platonic or "East Coast" Straussians, such as Allan Bloom, stressed Strauss's condemnation of modern political thought

⁶⁶ Kristol, *Neoconservatism*, 6.

⁶⁷ Irving Kristol, "Machiavelli and the Profanation of Politics," in *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, 131-33. Originally published in *The Logic of Personal Knowledge: Essays to Michael Polanyi on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Paul Ignatus (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).

⁶⁸ The split is described well in Catherine Zuckert and Michael P. Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 197-259. The Zuckerts stand out among Straussians for their ability to acknowledge the possibility of reasonable disagreement.

as essentially nihilistic and therefore inferior to classical and medieval philosophy.⁶⁹ Aristotelian or “West Coast” Straussians, notably Harry Jaffa and Martin Diamond (the latter a close friend of Kristol’s), argued that, by virtue of the Founders’ peculiar genius and the mixed mode of government they installed as the American constitution, the United States slipped free of modern nihilism and resurrected classical modes of political philosophy and practice.⁷⁰ From a certain angle and in a certain light, it is easy to see the Anglo-Scottish idea as a particular gloss on Aristotelian Straussianism.

The idea that the American Republic might carry some peculiarly redemptive properties was no monopoly of the right during the 1970s. As Daniel Rodgers has shown, during that decade, a slew of historians unearthed what appeared to be a distinctively American tradition of republican political thought and proceeded to use that synthesis to reinterpret much of the United States’ political and ideological history.⁷¹ Kristol was well aware of this turn in the scholarship. In his essay, “The American Revolution as a Successful Revolution,” Kristol attributed the newfound ability to appreciate the “intellectual dimensions of the American revolution” to the discoveries of Caroline Robbins, Gordon Wood, Edmund Morgan, and Bernard Bailyn.⁷² This, in

⁶⁹ See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

⁷⁰ See Martin Diamond, “Democracy and the *Federalist*: A Reconsideration of the Framers’ Intent,” *The American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (March 1959): 52-68 and Harry Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959). Jaffa reflects on the split, with a response by Pangle, in Harry Jaffa, *Crisis of the Strauss Divided: Essays on Leo Strauss and Straussianism, East and West* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012). Jaffa has long been active in right-wing politics, famously authoring Barry Goldwater’s “extremism in the defense of liberty” line in 1964. Zuckert and Zuckert, *Truth about Leo Strauss*, 197.

⁷¹ The key works of the republican revival are Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1967); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); and Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (New York: Norton, 1972). The classic overview of the republican revival is Daniel Rodgers, “Republicanism: The Career of a Concept,” *Journal of American History* 79 (1992), 11-38.

⁷² Kristol, “American Revolution as a Successful Revolution,” 80-81.

turn, suggests a slightly sticky relationship between Neoconservatives like Kristol and the New Left, for republicanism's "career as a concept" was part of a larger cultural phenomenon: the Left's hunt for a homegrown, humane radicalism that could navigate between the vices of liberal individualism and communist authoritarianism.⁷³ Prefiguring the republican turn in historiography, Hannah Arendt and others argued that anyone in search of a robust philosophy that reached beyond the dualities of Cold War rhetoric could do no better than to turn to Greek *Poleis*.⁷⁴ Civic republicanism, its proponents felt, could at once claim deep roots in Western political thought and exhibit a concern for the common good that liberalism supposedly lacked. Liberal states discouraged political participation, sapping their citizenry's capacity for self-government. Liberalism, republicans argued, could not pursue real political greatness and instead settled for the management of competing interest groups. Kristol agreed that a merely "managerial democracy" was too low an ambition for the United States, adding, "I cannot help but feel that there is something ridiculous about being this kind of democrat, and I must further confess to having a sneaking sympathy for those of our young radicals who also find it ridiculous."⁷⁵

Of course, the match between Kristol and the republican synthesis is far from perfect. Quite clearly, most of the historians and political philosophers who sought to recuperate the republican tradition of the *Poleis* or early America in the late 1960s and 1970s had little interest in rehabilitating capitalism. In their view, capitalism had infected and deformed republican government. Resuscitating classical forms of political consciousness meant transcending the

⁷³ See Richard H. King, "Old Problems/New Departures: American Political Thought since 1960," *The History Teacher* 24, no. 1 (November 1990): 99-112.

⁷⁴ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Originally published in 1958.

⁷⁵ Kristol, "Pornography, Obscenity, and the Case for Censorship," 51.

crass selfishness of America's consumer society. Yet, like Kristol, they thought that the United States had originated in a body of philosophy that obsessed over the necessity of an energetic and participatory public life, and that the loss of that philosophy had eroded the American public spirit and explained the country's inability to meet its political problems.⁷⁶

These affinities with the republican project, particularly the shared preoccupation with active citizenship and positive liberty, highlight how integral was the Anglo-Scottish idea to the neoconservative project itself, that is, Kristol's self-appointed mission to inject American conservatism with a greater degree of ideological self-consciousness. "It is characteristic of the Right," Kristol wrote in 1984, "that it neither convincingly claims ideological authority nor even feels the need to make such a claim. And in the modern world, a non-ideological politics is a politics disarmed."⁷⁷ It is important to point out how far this is from the anti-modernist sentiments Kristol expressed in 1952 and 1961. He now suggested that the "pragmatic," pre-modern conception of conservatism as merely prudent government is unsuited to the modern age. Conservatism must cultivate itself as a rival form of progressivism. Like the civic republicanism of the New Left, Kristol intended his Neoconservatism to be an alternative to the moral anemia of the liberal welfare state.

But Kristol's Neoconservatism represents more than the right wing of postwar virtue politics. Indeed, a prominent feature of Kristol's intellectual trajectory was a certain lack of philosophical coherence. He experimented with Trotskyism, Neo-orthodoxy, Aristotelianism, and civic republicanism; sometimes he self-fashioned as a stern moralist scolding technocrats for

⁷⁶ Rebecca Klatch and Kevin Mattson draw similar conclusions about the ideological affinities of the New Left and the New Right. See Rebecca Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Kevin Mattson, *Rebels All: A Short History of the Conservative Mind in Postwar America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press: 2008).

⁷⁷ Kristol, *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, 1.

their social scientific hubris. On other occasions, he played the tough-minded policy wonk, upbraiding radicals for misunderstanding the fine details of foreign policy or marginal tax rates. For a man who always wrote with great moral self-assurance, Kristol had a difficult time making sense of his own critical project. The economist Amartya Sen, reviewing *Reflections of a Neoconservative* in the *New York Review of Books* in 1984, snickered at Kristol's selective embrace of American culture, his cherry-picked history of economics, and his inability to develop a consistent definition of Neoconservatism. Kristol's thought, according to Sen, was an "ideological crossword puzzle."⁷⁸ At the same time, as Joseph Bronitsky points out, we also find threads of continuity that run through Kristol's career: his suspicion of bureaucracy, his affection for British conservatism, his deep dislike of all things bohemian.⁷⁹ We might argue, then, that Kristol's career as a critic illustrates the fundamental difficulty facing independent conservatives in the postwar United States. Would-be conservative intellectuals found themselves pulled in a number of different directions, and it was not until the 1980s that they developed an ideological synthesis capable of overcoming the contradictions of their own thought.

Democratic Capitalism as Therapeutic Philosophy

It is easy to be misled by Kristol's oft-quoted description of a Neoconservative as a liberal that has been "mugged by reality."⁸⁰ Such violent law-and-order visions abounded in the culture of the Conservative Movement, serving as legitimations for numerous intellectuals' right turns during the seventies and eighties. Yet Kristol's outlook was never as morbid as his

⁷⁸ Amartya Sen, "Neopersuasion," *New York Review of Books*, March 1, 1984, 31. Sen's review is a case study in not taking the right-wing intelligentsia seriously enough.

⁷⁹ Bronitsky, "The Real Irving Kristol," *The National Interest*, August 25, 2015. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-real-irving-kristol-13681>.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Irwin M. Stelzer, ed. *The Neocon Reader* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 46.

language sometimes suggested. His philosophy of democratic capitalism ultimately aimed to be a happy one, that is, happy in a distinctly classical sense. The social philosophy of capitalism, as Kristol developed it across the 1970s and 1980s, was at its core a frank acknowledgment of the limits of social and political reform. This diminishing of expectations was a feature of all Tory Socialist social criticism, but rarely had it been depicted as such a cheerful option.⁸¹ This was aided by the fact that, for all of his talk of circumscribing our desires, Kristol's expectations for a well-functioning capitalist economy were extraordinarily high. His writing in this period brimmed with giddy proclamations about the promises of supply-side economics: Kristol predicted that economic growth would abolish poverty in the long run. The stubborn presence of inequality in the United States should cause little consternation, he claimed, because within several generations "the old rich will be superseded by the new rich."⁸² The world may be incapable of substantial reform, in Kristol's view, but it would also appear not all that desperately in need of it. In an address on the "theology of democratic capitalism" to a group of clergy in 1978, Kristol emphasized that religion's social purpose was not, as the Left supposed, to accommodate the underclass to an unjust social order, but to convince people that the world is basically good.⁸³

This sanctification of everyday life under capitalism constitutes the evolutionary endpoint of Kristol's Neoconservatism. To take on the bourgeois ethos meant not only turning one's back on rebellion and utopia, but also disciplining one's life according to the practice of commercial

⁸¹ One might point out that the ability to depict the most severe aspects of right-wing ideology as a happy surrender to a benign reality was also one of the most significant aspects of Ronald Reagan's self-fashioning as a statesman. See Gary Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (New York: Penguin, 1988).

⁸² Kristol, "Adam Smith and the Spirit of Capitalism," 172.

⁸³ Irving Kristol, "Christianity, Judaism, and Socialism," in *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, 315-26. Originally published as "The Spiritual Roots of Capitalism and Socialism," in *Capitalism and Socialism: A Theological Inquiry*, ed. Michael Novak (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1979), 1-14.

society's humdrum virtues. In adopting that moral discipline—the self-restraint that is the life-blood of democratic capitalism—ordinary people could find a kind of peace that only comes from living in conformity with the real boundaries of human life: “Just as it is ideas that alienate us from our world, so it is ideas that can make us at home in the world—which can permit us to see the world as a ‘homely’ place, where the practice of ordinary virtues in the course of our ordinary lives can indeed fulfill our potential as human beings.”⁸⁴ Imposing these limits on life is a happy discipline—what Peter Viereck once described as “self-expression through self-restraint”—more liberating than utopian dreams of social improvement or transcendentalist schemes for personal transfiguration.⁸⁵

Other neoconservative intellectuals have continued to develop the Anglo-Scottish idea as the ideological foundation of a distinctively conservative modernity. In 2005, Gertrude Himmelfarb expanded her husband's thesis into her *Roads to Modernity*, differentiating a totalitarian French Enlightenment from the moderate British and American versions.⁸⁶ Conservative columnist David Brooks similarly sought to popularize the distinction between Anglo-Scottish and French Enlightenments, devoting a column to the subject in 2010 and incorporating the idea into his book *The Social Animal* in 2011.⁸⁷ The sensibilities underlying the Anglo-Scottish formulation, however, have gained purchase far beyond the ranks of self-identified Neoconservatives. If it seemed plausible in 1976 that freeing markets and empowering

⁸⁴ Kristol, “Utopianism, Ancient and Modern,” in *Two Cheers for Capitalism*, 198. Originally published in *Imprimus* (April 1973).

⁸⁵ Quoted in George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America, Since 1945* (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998), 59.

⁸⁶ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York: Random House, 2004).

⁸⁷ David Brooks, “Two Theories of Change” *New York Times*, May 24 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/25/opinion/25brooks.html>; Brooks, *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement* (New York: Random House, 2011), 234-45.

employers could solve social problems that the postwar welfare state could not, subsequent crises in American capitalism have not dampened that assumption. The tendency to attribute market crises not to defects in capitalism itself, but rather to the failure of individuals to behave like the rational utility-maximizers of neoclassical economics, has spread throughout American political culture. From Bill Clinton's Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (1996), to Cass Sunstein's *Nudge* (2008), to the widespread attempt to blame the financial crash of 2008 on Americans' lack of thriftiness, both the idea that the chief problem of late capitalism is not markets themselves but rather the slipshod character of American morality and also the corresponding claim that the power of the state should be deployed to shape Americans into more rational capitalist subjects have now become a dubious kind of wisdom shared by much of the political class.

It is also in this sense that Kristol's critical style breaks decisively with the midcentury liberalism canvassed in chapter 2. It is sometimes suggested that "postwar" or "Cold War" liberalism was really nothing more than nascent Neoconservatism. This seems true enough when one attends to certain intellectual biographies, Kristol's in particular. Whether there is some necessary connection between the "hard-headed" criticism of the 1940s and the "hard-headed" criticism of the 1970s is another matter altogether. As I argued previously, when Niebuhr and his acolytes attacked Enlightenment optimism, the necessary backdrop of their argument was the collapse of bourgeois civilization during the 1930s and 1940s. The "reality" on which their arguments relied was one where politics tended toward entropy, where the human impulse to destructively compete with one another always overwhelmed the desire for stability. In the old pessimist view, this was the fundamental and ineradicable feature of political life. For all of Kristol's anxiety about the ill-repair of American institutions and the decline of republican

morality, his Neoconservatism (particularly in its later iterations) quite explicitly denied that pessimistic conclusion. To Kristol, the universe was a basically good place. It contained hardships, certainly, but real political evil arose from the angry refusal to accept the world as it is, from the impatient and ungrateful desire to reform a world that is imperfect but means us well.

In this sense, we ought to understand the Anglo-Scottish idea as a kind of therapeutic philosophy, that is, a form of ideological work directed at massaging the tensions between Kristol's earlier, Straussian-inflected anti-modernism and his later embrace of the New Right. In Kristol's ultimate formulation, bourgeois society rested on a complementary relationship between a freewheeling capitalist economy and sober, republican self-government. This synthesis of old and new allowed Kristol to embrace a utopian vision of supply-side economics while simultaneously becoming ever more fixated on the supposed decline of American values. It also meant that, by the end of his career, Kristol's polemical voice had become nearly indistinguishable from those of other right-wing culture warriors. In his late essays, he complained about political correctness, argued that schoolteachers should treat evolution as an "hypothesis" rather than an "established scientific truth," and suggested that many AIDS victims had no one to blame but themselves.⁸⁸ Kristol had hoped to convert the Republican Party to his brand of conservatism. In the end, he became far more like his allies on the New Right than they became like him.

⁸⁸ Irving Kristol, "Room for Darwin and the Bible," *New York Times*, September 30, 1986, A35; Kristol, "Tragedy of Multiculturalism," in *Neoconservatism*, 53; Kristol, "AIDS and False Innocence," in *Neoconservatism*, 63-66.

Conclusion: The End of the New Deal and the Meaning of Neoconservatism

The neoconservative conversion narrative has long been part of the story historians tell about the fall of the New Deal order. It is perhaps time to reexamine the nature and significance of that transformation, and to accordingly revisit some of our assumptions about the relationship of philosophy to government between the 1930s and the 1980s. And it is here that Kristol's groping for a political language in which to house his conservative sensibilities is particularly instructive. We have been generally content to describe the political philosophy undergirding the ragbag of midcentury social policy simply as "liberalism" or maybe as "Keynesianism." Similarly, most of the excellent literature on the American Right still focuses primarily on the Conservative Movement, treating the circulation of conservative ideas in the 1950s as the green shoots of the Reagan Revolution.⁸⁹ These tendencies overlook the fact that many midcentury thinkers, both inside and outside the liberal establishment, depicted the New Deal as a triumph of conservatism. As we saw in chapter 2, both Arthur Schlesinger and Richard Hofstadter at times claimed that liberals were now the "real" conservatives, since they wished to use the considerable power of the national state to preserve good social order.⁹⁰ Peter Viereck and Clinton Rossiter, whom no one outside of William Buckley would have mistaken for liberals, also saw the New Deal as an agent of conservatism—FDR's collection of "revolution preventing reforms," as Viereck once described it.⁹¹

⁸⁹ See, for example, Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities throughout American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Bruce Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Nation Books, 2009); David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁹⁰ Schlesinger, *Vital Center*, 25; Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 42-43.

⁹¹ Viereck, *Shame and Glory of the Intellectuals*, 314.

Further, recent scholarship on the midcentury United States has emphasized the fundamentally conservative character of social policy during the years of the New Deal Order. Historians studying the relationship between gender and American state-building, for instance, have demonstrated that the patriarchal family found financial and moral support in programs including the GI Bill, employer-provided health insurance, and Social Security. In similar fashion, Ira Katznelson, Thomas Sugrue, and others have pointed out that New Deal social legislation often ignored and sometimes actively thwarted the attempts of black Americans and other minorities to carve out a better life for themselves.⁹² As Jennifer Mittelstadt summarized it recently, “it was precisely the exclusion of blacks and Mexicans, and the imaging of women as dependent wives, that allowed for the creation of a New Deal welfare state for white male breadwinners in regularized industrial and union jobs. The architecture of protection for white men was built in part on the backs of those who were denied full economic and social citizenship.”⁹³

Some of this exclusion was intentional, some the result of compromise and devolution, some simply the unforeseen and unintended consequences that accompany all social legislation. Nonetheless, it now seems undeniable that the American welfare state in the middle of the twentieth century primarily secured the lives and livelihoods of white working- and middle-class families headed by male breadwinners. This unflattering picture of the American postwar order makes Kristol’s positions of the 1960s and early 1970s look less like a drift rightward than the simple articulation of midcentury social policy’s conservative underbelly. In his polemics against

⁹² See Canaday, *Straight State*; Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity*; Cott, *Public Vows*; Self, *All in the Family*; MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough*; Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White*; Katznelson, *Fear Itself*; Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*.

⁹³ Jennifer Mittelstadt, “Reimagining the Welfare State,” *Jacobin*, July 23, 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/07/fdr-social-security-gi-bill/>.

the New Left, Black Power, feminism, and the counterculture, Kristol appears to have been defending precisely the moralistic and exclusive conception of social citizenship that the midcentury welfare state often produced.

This is not to deny that some of the politics characteristic of the midcentury years, such as steeply progressive taxation, regulation of the financial sector, and civil rights legislation pushed in genuinely social democratic or social-liberal directions, in the sense that we understand those terms. If we assume that this adds up to a kind of “social democratic moment” or a “liberal consensus,” however, the fact that American social policy often functioned to produce a narrow form of social citizenship will necessarily appear to us as a “contradiction” or a “limitation.” We will find ourselves forced to conclude that midcentury politics hypocritically “fell short” of social-democratic inclusion. By the same token, our analytical questions will become snared in the same teleological trap. Why, we will ask, did midcentury America fail to realize a more egalitarian conception of social citizenship?

If we think of the New Deal Order not as a defective center-left polity, but rather as a peculiar kind of center-right polity, then the nature of this puzzle changes considerably. Instead of asking why the supposedly liberal midcentury years fell so profoundly short of their own egalitarian aspirations, we might ask: Why did such a conservative order stubbornly continue to describe itself as liberal? Why did this conservative welfare state fail to produce a substantive and coherent intellectual formation to defend it on its own terms? Many of the other North Atlantic democracies turned out precisely such formations in the postwar years: Christian Democracy in Germany and Italy and, to a lesser extent, One-Nation Conservatism in Great Britain. These center-right parties, we are discovering, played an important role in shaping

Western European welfare states, European integration, and perhaps even the international legal framework of human rights.⁹⁴

In the United States, by contrast, conservative ideas and the New Deal's breadwinner model of social welfare seem to have largely passed each other in the night, never coalescing into a unified philosophy of government. When such a form of "strong state" welfare conservatism did appear at the end of the 1960s, it proved remarkably feeble in maintaining its intellectual and ideological independence. Rapidly absorbed into the conservative movement, it became little more than a prudish, disciplinarian wing of neoliberalism. We can field a number of possible explanations as to why this occurred. We should not underestimate the disgust that many neoconservative thinkers experienced at the antics of the counterculture, or their condescending reaction to feminism and the Civil Rights Movement. We certainly cannot ignore the crass material reality that the New Right offered an obvious and well-remunerated home for conservative thinkers of all stripes.⁹⁵ Another, less obvious, answer may lie in the growing literature on American state building to which I alluded earlier, particularly in what Suzanne Mettler describes as the "submerged" nature of US social policy.⁹⁶ Much of the American welfare state lies hidden away in publicly subsidized private enterprises or the arcane complexities of the tax code. As a result, even those conservative thinkers who are well-disposed to some kind of welfare state tend to develop what we might call a "Tocquevillian blind-spot."

⁹⁴ See Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

⁹⁵ As Seymour Martin Lipset once observed, Neoconservatives finally came to see themselves as conservatives at precisely the moment when Movement Conservatism was waiting in the wings to receive them with lucrative fellowships, speaking engagements, and writing contracts. Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 76.

⁹⁶ Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). See also Jacob Hacker, *The Divided Welfare State: The Battle over Public and Private Social Benefits in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

That is, they chronically overestimate the role of civil society and chronically underestimate the importance of state sponsorship in constructing the conservative models of social citizenship they desire. They consequently come to believe, as did Kristol, that the crumbling of the breadwinner model is the result of a decline in “values,” rather than the steady erosion of the social benefits attached to it.

None of this is to suggest that the New Deal political order could have averted collapse if only Irving Kristol or other Neoconservatives had identified themselves as American-style Christian Democrats. Nor is it, I should emphasize, to minimize or explain away the exclusionary practices of midcentury social policy. What I do mean to suggest is twofold: First, that the submerged nature of the American welfare state may help us explain why the precise ideological character of the Neoconservative Movement has proved so elusive to contemporaries and historians alike. Lacking an appreciation of the connection between conservative models of social citizenship and the interventionist state that had grown up haphazardly between the 1930s and 1950s, Neoconservatives searched in the dark for an appropriate means of connecting their moral vision with a distinctive political program. Second, if it is correct to suggest that, in certain respects, the New Deal Order represented the ascendancy of a particular kind of conservatism in the United States, then Irving Kristol’s role in delegitimizing it takes on a profound irony. Kristol wanted what all critical intellectuals want: to achieve notoriety and make a living, while shaping the manners and mores of the world in which he lived. Kristol and the Neoconservatives certainly achieved that aim, while in the process helping to destroy the conservative order they imagined themselves defending.

CHAPTER IV

THE LOST PROMISE OF COMMUNITARIANISM

During the 1980s, America's professional political philosophers became temporarily consumed with a controversy that came to be called the "liberal-communitarian debate." Dozens of books and articles were written on the topic. Conferences were held and edited volumes collected. Revolving around a seemingly straightforward question—can philosophical liberalism generate an adequate conception of community life?—the conflict between liberals and communitarians eventually claimed a space in almost every introductory textbook and reference work on political thought. It also reached an unusual level of intensity. While most participants conducted themselves in the understated viciousness of academic argument, things occasionally threatened to get out of hand. Alongside the standard allegations of sloppiness and lack of erudition, there were attacks on the legitimacy of the modern age, warnings about the return of eugenics, talk of witch-burnings, and even the occasional accusation of crypto-fascism. Indeed, if one looked carefully, it seemed as though the argument might have been about actual politics rather than academic political philosophy.

More significant than your average scholarly knife fight, the communitarian-liberal debate was a site where American establishment intellectuals tried to resolve the principal challenge of center-left politics after the 1960s. The cultural revolutions of the 1960s and the concomitant collapse of Anglo-Protestant cultural hegemony generated a novel and agonizing set of problems for any potential center-left vision. It was, of course, possible to interpret the sixties as a great emancipation—of African Americans, of women, of human sexuality. But the sixties

also seemed, at least to some, to have gleefully ushered into existence a dark world of drugs, crime, lurid sex, and moral permissiveness. To make matters still more complicated, the working-class whites upon which the old order of the 1950s had depended now seemed united in their loathing for the transformation of American manners and morals. The rank and file that had helped to make the New Deal now appeared to march under the banner of political reaction. Attempts to square these post-sixties legacies of cultural emancipation, moral fragmentation, and the alienation of the working class resided at the heart of center-left debates in the 1980s, and the philosophical argument over the rightful demands of the community upon the individual became a major theater in those struggles.

In this chapter, I recuperate some of the dimensions of the communitarian phenomenon and locate them in the longer trajectory of the Tory Socialist story I have been telling. I characterize communitarianism as the last major attempt of American social critics to devise a viable centrist alternative to liberalism during the twentieth century. Like realism and Neoconservatism before it, communitarianism attacked liberalism's eighteenth-century philosophical foundations, insisting that the demands of twentieth-century political life had rendered the Enlightenment's liberal vision dangerously outmoded. Also like its predecessors, communitarianism failed. It failed not only to create a viable third way political discourse, but also to resist absorption into a growing neoliberal consensus. Still attached to critiques of midcentury liberalism, communitarian thinkers failed to generate an adequate theory of the state's role in center-left politics. As a consequence, their critical imagination proved vulnerable to the same fantasies of post-welfare state voluntarism that plagued Neoconservatives like Irving Kristol. Paying attention to communitarianism as an event in American intellectual history can thus give us a better sense of the tumultuous character of cultural politics in the 1980s, as well as

the long history of the critical posture that came to dominate American public life in the 1990s, namely the proclaimed need to “move beyond left and right.”

This chapter is broken into three parts, each of which discusses a different dimension of the communitarian phenomenon. It first offers a genealogy of the communitarian enterprise, particularly the so-called “communitarian critique of liberalism.” I locate this critique in the history of the New Left and argue that it is best understood not only in terms of a school of technical philosophy, but also as a broader turn in critical sensibility that I call Socialist Communitarianism. Second, it examines how the challenge of communitarian ideas contributed to sharpening a post 1960s liberal identity, arguing that liberals understood the demand for a thickened communal life as an expression of the 1980s conservative backlash, particularly the sudden rise of the Moral Majority. Finally, this chapter explains how communitarianism became a language of Clintonite Neoliberals—the so-called “New Communitarianism”—during the 1990s. I ultimately argue that communitarianism is best understood as a meditation on the viability of the American Left after the chastening experiences of the 1960s, and especially whether a future center-left – particularly one composed of mellowing veterans of the sixties - would require the renegotiation of relations between egalitarian political economy and emancipatory cultural politics.

A brief note on terminology: As in previous chapters, I direct much of my effort here to breaking apart the conceptual vocabulary we have inherited for talking about a particular school of thought—in this case, communitarianism—and replacing it with one that is more analytically useful. Therefore I divide communitarianism into two distinct, though interrelated bodies of ideas. I call the first Socialist Communitarianism, as it melded a socialist critique of American liberal society with an appeal to purportedly “traditional” folkways and worldviews. I refer to the

second as the New Communitarianism, a term drawn from the writings of sociologist Amitai Etzioni and his associates.¹ Closely tied to efforts to renew the Democratic Party's electoral viability, and far less focused on the cultural dysfunctions of capitalism than the Socialist Communitarians, New Communitarians located the problems of late twentieth century American society in the populace's decaying powers of self-government. While pulling in different directions, Socialist Communitarianism and New Communitarianism overlapped not only temporally, but also in terms of their critical language and their membership.

The Failure of Liberation

Discussions of the communitarian phenomenon has come to be dominated by what we might call the canonical account, that is, an account focused on the internal exchanges between professional philosophers and political theorists. Through various packagings and repackagings, advocates and critics of communitarianism alike came to characterize it as a school of moral and political philosophy crystallized in the thought of the original "communitarian critics of liberalism": philosophers Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, and political theorists Michael Walzer and Michael Sandel.² Yet, according to its observers, communitarianism did not

¹ Amitai Etzioni, *New Communitarian Thinking: Persons, Virtues, Institutions, and Communities* (University Press of Virginia, 1995). Etzioni, according to William Galston, "took communitarianism out of the academy and brought it to the attention of political leaders and citizens. Using practical examples and prose accessible to non-specialist citizens, he showed what it might mean to take a public philosophy of rights and responsibilities seriously." William Galston, "Congratulatory Message" *The Responsive Community* 9, no 1 (Winter 1998-99): 8.

² The three most frequently cited works of the communitarians were Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1980); and Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Though he would most fully explicate his ideas in his *Sources of the Self*, Taylor's contribution was usually identified as his essay, "Atomism," which appears in Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 187-210. For overviews that take a canonical/disciplinary approach to communitarianism, see Robert B. Thigpen and Lyle A. Downing, "Liberalism and the Communitarian Critique," *American Journal of Political Science* 31, no. 3 (1987): 637-55; Patrick Neal and David Paris, "Liberalism and the Communitarian Critique: A Guide for the Perplexed," *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 23, no. 3 (1990): 419-39; Will Kymlicka, "Liberalism and Communitarianism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (1988): 181-203; Amy Gutmann, "Communitarian Critics of Liberalism," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1985): 308-22; Allen Buchanan,

represent an entirely novel formation, as it also possessed deeper, if somewhat obscure historical roots. On some accounts, it originated in Ferdinand Tönnies's distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. In others, it grew from Marx's early writings on alienation or Hegel's critique of Kant. Still others stressed Burke's organicism and Rousseau's worries about luxury and over-civilization. Looking back on the debate in 2005, the philosopher Thomas Wren wrote that, "the liberal–communitarian debate, which took its present form in the early 1980s, can be traced back to the beginning of the modern age."³ These varying genealogies appeared to suggest that the longing for community was liberal society's permanent traveling companion, the inevitable refrain of moderns gradually discovering the hidden costs of their newfound freedoms. Even some of the principal representatives of communitarianism embraced this timeless conception. As Walzer put it, "the communitarian critique of liberalism is like the pleating of trousers, transient but certain to return."⁴

While the communitarian lament supposedly had arisen with the onset of modernity, commentators traced the contemporary communitarian phenomenon to a reaction to the liberal political philosophy of Ronald Dworkin, Bruce Ackerman, and especially John Rawls.⁵ The 1970s had seen the return of abstract, normative theorizing about politics, in particular the question of whether a more egalitarian, redistributive version of liberalism could be justified

"Assessing the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," *Ethics* 99, no. 4 (July 1989): 852-82. It is worth noting here the importance of Canadians to communitarian discourse, though a thorough investigation lies outside the scope of this chapter. Canada, like the United States, struggled in the 1980s and 1990s to generate a satisfactory account of itself as a multicultural society, hence the interest of professional philosophers in defining the philosophical parameters of community.

³ Thomas Wren, "The Liberal-Communitarian Debate," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Management*, vol. 2, *Business Ethics*, ed. Cary Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

⁴ Michael Walzer, "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," *Political Theory* 18, no. 1 (1990): 6.

⁵ The three works most associated with "Neo-Kantian" liberalism are Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); and John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

philosophically. Answering that question, especially as formulated in Rawls's 1971 classic *A Theory of Justice*, set the professional agenda for political philosophy in the decades that followed. I shall have occasion to discuss Rawls at greater length further on, but suffice it to say that, in the canonical account, the communitarian critique aimed chiefly to discredit and displace the agenda that Rawls inspired.

The communitarians attacked liberalism on two related fronts. In the realm of moral philosophy, critics indicted liberalism's impoverished conception of the human personality, which Michael Sandel labeled the "unencumbered self."⁶ Liberal political theory allegedly took as its starting point a vision of individuals decontextualized from any particular time and place. It supposed that a person could somehow assume an Archimedean viewpoint from which it would be possible to determine the purposes and moral goods most appropriate to pursue. The liberal conception of selfhood, the communitarians argued, was almost totally false. "The free individual of the West," Taylor declared, "is only what he is by virtue of the whole society and civilization which brought him into being and which nourishes him."⁷ That is, human selves are constituted by long-standing cultural practices, and moral reasoning only makes sense when situated within such practices. "What the good life is for a fifth-century Athenian General will not be the same as what it was for a medieval nun or a seventeenth-century farmer," observed MacIntyre. "I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my

⁶ Michael J. Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self," *Political Theory* 12, no. 1 (1984).

⁷ Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 206.

moral starting point.”⁸ As a consequence, the unencumbered self of liberal theory was, in Sandel’s words, a “person wholly without character and without moral depth.”⁹

The communitarians also disparaged the liberal conception of politics, specifically what they called its ideal of state neutrality. According to the communitarians, the liberal theory of justice required that the state refuse to endorse any particular vision of the good life. Sandel characterized liberals as believing that “what makes the just society just is not the *telos* or purpose or end at which it aims, but precisely its refusal to choose in advance among competing purposes and ends.”¹⁰ For the communitarians, however, this vision of a public authority that remains agnostic about the good life was a sham, a means of disguising the favored norms of one group—liberals—as the product of universal reason. “[The liberal] requirement of disinterestedness,” declared MacIntyre, “in fact covertly presupposes one particular partisan type of account of justice, that of liberal individualism, which it is later used to justify, so that its apparent neutrality is no more than an appearance.”¹¹

This canonical sketch of communitarianism is not necessarily misleading, but it is sorely limited. Like most attempts to render philosophical quarrels as internal professional disputes, it misses a bigger picture. The academic broadsides against Rawls and philosophical liberalism were in fact a part of a larger development that transpired within American social criticism during the 1980s. The line of argument that professional philosophers came to call communitarianism was but one academic register of a much broader collection of critical

⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 205.

⁹ Sandel, “Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹¹ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1988), 3-4.

sensibilities better understood as Socialist Communitarianism.¹² This critical formation, which spread beyond philosophy and beyond the academy, sought to combine some variety of leftist politics with a cultural program focused on the recovery of “tradition.” In addition to the recognized figures of communitarian philosophy, the ranks of the Socialist Communitarian social critics included Christopher Lasch, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Elizabeth Fox and Eugene Genovese, Wendell Berry, Wilson Carey McWilliams, Robert Bellah, and Jackson Lears, among others.¹³

The appropriate place to begin an analysis of this broader sense of communitarianism as a variety of Tory Socialism is not the dawn of modernity or the resurgence of political philosophy in the 1970s, but rather the social criticism and political mobilizations of the 1950s and early 1960s. The older Socialist Communitarians—Lasch, Macintyre, Walzer, and McWilliams—began their careers as critics of the postwar order. For the most part, they belonged to what is sometimes called the “first New Left.” Unlike the later New Left, they did not see the world primarily through the lens of anti-colonialism. They were enmeshed in the milieu of dissident socialism that produced magazines like *Dissent*, *New Left Review*, and to a lesser extent, *Studies*

¹² Here I am borrowing Wilfred McClay’s term, though not his precise meaning. See Wilfred M. McClay, *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). Ronald Beiner’s term, “Left-Wing Conservatism,” is closer to what I intend, but more unwieldy. It is worth noting that Beiner is a fine and sympathetic guide to the whole communitarian phenomenon. See Ronald Beiner, *Philosophy in a Time of Lost Spirit: Essays on Contemporary Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 139-50.

¹³ In addition to the canonical pieces cited above (see note 2), works that exemplify the Socialist Communitarian outlook include Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York: Norton, 1984); Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991); Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: Norton, 1995); Wilson Cary McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Power Trips and Other Journeys: Essays in Feminism as Civic Discourse* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Eugene D. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 1992). Three figures who are often grouped with the communitarians, but whom I do not discuss here are Jeffrey Stout, Richard Rorty, and Roberto Unger. Stout and Rorty, despite their critiques of conventional liberalism, clearly remain in the liberal camp. Unger’s thought, by contrast, is closer to the New Social Movements than Socialist Communitarianism. Their inclusion in the communitarian canon, I would argue, has mainly to do with communitarianism serving as a convenient catchall label for critics of liberalism. I have also, for similar reasons, not included feminist criticisms (with the exception of Elshtain) that emerged contemporaneously with the communitarian phenomenon.

on the Left.¹⁴ They attacked the vapidness of liberal society, the Cold War's "cult of complexity," and the dark McCarthyist strains supposedly coursing beneath it. At the same time, they had no great affection for the Soviet Union. Few of the thinkers who later became communitarians were ever members of the Communist Party.¹⁵ The 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary and Khrushchev's Secret Speech sat alongside the Suez Crisis and the Red Scare as indictments of the global postwar establishment. Early New Leftists demanded a third way between Western welfare capitalism and the USSR's authoritarian socialism, and they drew inspiration from the African American movement for civil rights as well as the Eastern Bloc revolts against Stalinism.¹⁶

These thinkers, like Kristol and the Neoconservatives, experienced the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies as a moment of ideological clarity. As various languages of anti-colonialism and counter-cultural radicalism became the predominant ideologies of the later

¹⁴ MacIntyre was an early contributor to *The New Reasoner* and, according to Paul Blackledge, may have influenced E. P. Thompson. See Paul Blackledge, "Freedom, Desire, and Revolution: Alasdair MacIntyre's Early Marxist Ethics," *History of Political Thought* 26, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 696-720; Blackledge, "Morality and Revolution: Ethical Debates on the British New Left," *Critique* 35, no. 2 (August 2007): 211-28. Along with Stuart Hall and Raphael Samuel, Taylor founded *New Left Review* and also organized anti-nuclear campaigns at Oxford. See Marc Caldwell, "Charles Taylor and the Pre-History of British Cultural Studies," *Critical Arts* 23, no. 3 (November 2009). Walzer worked at *Dissent* under Irving Howe before completing his graduate studies at Harvard in 1969. Sandel, who did not enter university until 1972, studied under Taylor at Oxford. Most other socialist communitarian critics came from similar generational backgrounds, namely being either Depression babies (Lasch, McWilliams) who joined the New Left in the late fifties and early sixties, or their students (Lears, Dionne) who were old enough to appreciate the fallout from the sixties but too young to participate directly. There are a few outliers, such as Gary Wills and Michael Harrington, who were also interested in the concept of Tradition as a resource for the Left, but came at the issue from different directions and with somewhat different results than the thinkers examined here.

¹⁵ MacIntyre was a member of the British Communist Party for a brief period in the 1950s. He later claimed this was the result of the influence of classicist George Thomson. Eugene Genovese joined the party when he was fifteen and was later expelled.

¹⁶ On the early British and American New Left, see Brick, *Transcending Capitalism*, 200-12; John Patrick Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 222-31; Stuart Hall, "Life and Times of the First New Left," *New Left Review*, 2, no. 61 (February 2010): 177-96; Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 88-120; Kevin Mattson, *Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism, 1945-1970* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); Pells, *Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*, esp. chap. 4 and 6; Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), esp. chap. 3.

New Left, many of the thinkers raised on socialist humanism found themselves alienated from the movement they felt they had helped create. They would, characteristically, insist that this alienation stemmed from the “excesses” of the counter-culture and would-be revolutionaries. More accurate is to say that many members of the early New Left rapidly discovered their affection for the postwar world just as that world came apart at the end of the sixties. Older than the “1968 generation,” many early New Leftists had already started families and established careers by the end of the sixties.¹⁷ As they ceded influence to their younger counterparts, they found themselves on the defensive. In 1969, Genovese and Lasch fended off what they thought was a radical coup at the American Historical Association’s annual meeting.¹⁸ Walzer struggled to distinguish his opposition to the Vietnam War from other radicals’ condemnations of Israel’s Six-Day War as a similar instance of Western imperialism.¹⁹ John Schaar, who as a faculty member in UC Berkeley’s political science department had participated in the Free Speech Movement, came to believe that the New Left’s lack of patriotism had cut it off from the rest of the country and prevented it from realizing its political ambitions.²⁰ Even as they sometimes (and somewhat implausibly) avowed their continued political radicalism, they increasingly saw themselves as cultural conservatives, concerned with, as Lasch put it, “the disintegration of values, the alarming spread of alienation and nihilism.”²¹

¹⁷ For a readable but slightly condescending view of the “68 generation,” see Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the 1968 Generation* (New York: Norton, 1996).

¹⁸ For the revolt at the AHA, see Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 434-38.

¹⁹ Michael Walzer and Martin Peretz, “Israel is Not Vietnam,” *Ramparts* 6, no. 1 (July 1967): 11-14.

²⁰ John Schaar, “The Case for Patriotism,” *American Review* 6 (May 1973): 59-99. For Schaar’s time in the FSM, see Sheldon Wolin and John Schaar, *The Berkeley Rebellion and Beyond: Essays on Politics and Education in the Technological Society* (New York: Vintage, 1970).

²¹ Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Vintage, 1967), 309.

The recoil from cultural radicalism was not only a matter of felt experience. It also grew naturally from the preoccupations of the socialist humanist thought that these disillusioned radicals inherited. English socialists such as E. P. Thompson, Richard Hoggart, and Raymond Williams had argued that one of the greatest deficits of orthodox Marxism was its impoverished conception of culture.²² Marxist theory, they contended, tended to ignore the lives and worldviews of the actual people who made up the working class. A less reductive form of social analysis would treat social classes as something more than the mere puppets of historical materialism. In Williams's famous phrase, culture had to be understood as a "whole way of life."²³ Of course, many of the social and intellectual movements that emerged from the 1960s idealized the "authenticity" of lower-class or outsider culture, a preoccupation that often led into third worldism, cultural appropriation, or psychotherapeutic conceptions of politics.²⁴ The Socialist Communitarian critics, however, reached a conclusion similar to the one that Karl Polanyi made in *The Great Transformation*, namely that socialism and cultural conservatism shared significant conceptual machinery.²⁵ This arose from the observation that the closer one looked at the politics of machine-smashing artisans, peasants in revolt, or trade unionists on strike, the more apparent it became that their radicalism had to be understood as a defense of tradition against the forces of modernization. As Lasch described it in an essay on the Populist

²² See Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, The New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), chap. 3.

²³ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1959* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).

²⁴ On the importance of the authenticity concept to the protest movements of the 1960s, see Douglas Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

²⁵ Incidentally, MacIntyre cites Polanyi as an influence, calling *The Great Transformation* "the single most illuminating account of the inception of institutionalized modernity." MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 211. See also MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222. Peter McMylor discusses the relationship between MacIntyre's philosophical history and Polanyi's sociology in *Alasdair MacIntyre: Critic of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1994), chap. 3.

movement, “[They] did not mindlessly reject machinery or seek to revive the preindustrial order, but neither did they accept the destruction of their way of life as a foregone conclusion, preordained by the march of historical progress.”²⁶

Importantly, not all of these folkways could be reconciled with the image of a forward-thinking revolutionary or bourgeois reformer. Workers, it turned out, were often patriarchal, jingoistic, racist, and superstitious. They loved to drink themselves stupid and gamble away their wages on blood sports. They tortured animals and beat their children. Further, as Walzer pointed out, identifying radical political projects with the process of modernization and rationalization involved an elementary mistake of historical interpretation.²⁷ When authorities arrived to put down servile insurrections, they often invoked the need for rationality and progress. The Church of England wanted to end to the irrational enthusiasm of proto-communist religious radicals in the 1660s. The Progressives of the early twentieth century sought to stamp out gambling, prostitution, and alcoholism. The United States aimed to modernize and democratize the authoritarian and backward peasant societies of Southeast Asia. In the larger frame of modern history, the establishment spoke the language of liberation, and radicals the language of tradition.

Different Socialist Communitarians found their preferred language of tradition in different places. Some looked to civic humanism or classical republicanism, which conveniently had deep roots in the United States’ founding era.²⁸ McWilliams claimed to have discovered a “second voice” in American political thought rooted in Christianity and best expressed in African American culture. MacIntyre eventually settled on Thomas Aquinas by way of Aristotle.

²⁶ Christopher Lasch, “Democracy and the Crisis of Confidence,” *democracy* 1, no. 1 (January 1981): 36.

²⁷ Michael Walzer, *Radical Principles: Reflections of an Unreconstructed Democrat* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 189-201.

²⁸ See Rodgers, “Republicanism.”

By the end of the eighties, Lasch identified himself as a populist. Regardless of where one found it, however, the theoretical synthesis of some variety of “preindustrial morality” with the spirit of dissident socialism demanded a philosophical outlook distinctly out of step with the antinomian impulses that swept through the protest movements of the sixties. If it was truly the case that tradition and socialism made up one seamless garment, then advancing the cause of ordinary people in the face of capitalism meant setting oneself in opposition to the cultural avant-garde. The Left had to reject taboo smashing, a practice more properly associated with liberalism and capitalism. Instead, one had to become a kind of conservative, in particular, a kind of protectionist. If there was a social or cultural good that one wished to thrive—be it meaningful work, great literature, the breadwinner family, revealed religion, medical care, or natural wilderness—one had to shield it from exposure to the market.²⁹

This protectionist interpretation allowed Socialist Communitarians to claim that the post-sixties era of conservative ascendance and never-ending culture war represented not the demise of liberalism but rather its apotheosis. “In many ways,” Sandel declared, “we in the eighties stand near the completion of a liberal project that has run its course from the New Deal through the Great Society and into the present.”³⁰ The counterculture that upended bourgeois society, according to McWilliams, represented “the underside of liberalism rather than an alternative to it.”³¹ Even the triumph of the Right could be attributed to the success of liberal philosophy. Sandel argued that reactionary populism was the product of liberalism’s uprooting of American

²⁹ In 2012 Sandel would explicitly invoke a protectionist framework for understanding his politics. See Michael Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012). Even the legendarily un-programmatic and anti-political MacIntyre recommended a form of protection for tradition, namely a monastic retreat where intellectuals might protect the tradition of the virtues from being lost entirely. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 244-45.

³⁰ Sandel, “Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” 92.

³¹ McWilliams, *Idea of Fraternity in America*, 620.

ways of life: “Intolerance flourishes most where forms of life are dislocated, roots unsettled, traditions undone.”³² Liberal societies thus would never be capable of repairing their incoherence, because the only philosophical language available to them caused the incoherence in the first place. Lacking shared values of any significance, inhabitants of a liberal society could only either pursue their own indulgent projects of self-invention or engage in ceaseless cultural warfare with one another. In MacIntyre’s view, this underlying incoherence gave contemporary moral disputes over subjects such as military intervention, abortion, and income inequality their “interminable character.”³³

For the Socialist Communitarians, a successful future Left would have to reject the doctrine of liberation and instead acknowledge the necessity of “limits.” Since it was the liberal determination to annul arbitrary limitations that produced moral anarchy in culture and economics alike, a replacement philosophy would have to combine a politics of solidarity with a morality of restraint. The success of any future expansion of the welfare state, Walzer wrote in 1979, would necessarily involve “the mutual acceptance of limits,” and thus “may well depend upon everyone’s restraint.”³⁴ The era of AIDS required an “understanding of sexuality,” according to Jean Bethke Elshtain, “that is generous in its approach to diverse forms of sexual expression but that insists, simultaneously, on an ethic of limits.”³⁵ Both political parties having embraced the mantra of economic growth and cultural liberation, Lasch declared, meant that limits had become “the forbidden topic” in American political discourse.³⁶ But what did limits

³² Michael Sandel, Introduction to *Liberalism and its Critics*, ed. Sandel (New York: New York University Press), 17.

³³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 6.

³⁴ Walzer, *Radical Principles*, 298.

³⁵ Jean Bethke Elshtain, “What’s the Matter with Sex Today?” *Tikkun*, March/April 1988, 41.

³⁶ Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 169.

mean in terms of practical politics? According to Sandel, it would likely involve enhancing the prerogatives of a community to police the morality of its members, for example, its ability to prohibit the sale of pornography or make it difficult to obtain a divorce. By the same token, Sandel argued, a morality of restraint would also enhance the ability of a community to defend itself against the powerful. In his view, the same prerogatives that allowed for morals-policing would allow communities to regulate businesses' ability to chase cheap labor and low corporate taxes.³⁷

The emphasis on protection as the appropriate paradigm for a viable left politics suggests another way to interpret the obsession with Rawlsian liberalism in academic communitarian philosophy. Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, first published in 1971, is rightly regarded as a turning point in American political thought, though perhaps not in quite the way it is often imagined.³⁸ Discussions of *Theory* usually assume that normative political philosophy temporarily went out of business in the years after the Second World War. Peter Laslett famously declared in 1956, "for the moment, anyway, political philosophy is dead."³⁹ From this perspective, Rawls single-handedly revived the tradition of grand normative theorizing about politics. "*A Theory of Justice*," Brian Barry argued, "is the watershed that divides the past from the present."⁴⁰

Recent studies of Rawls, however, have challenged this capsule history of professional political philosophy. As Ian Shapiro points out, *Theory* was not a radical departure for Rawls, regardless of the effect it had on the wider profession.⁴¹ Rawls had been working on the book's

³⁷ Michael Sandel, "Morality and the Liberal Ideal," *The New Republic*, May 7, 1984, 17.

³⁸ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*.

³⁹ Quoted in Philip Pettit, "The Contribution of Analytical Philosophy," in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, vol. 2, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Goodwin, Philip Pettit, Thomas Pogge (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 6.

⁴⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴¹ Ian Shapiro, *Political Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 5-6.

core ideas and publishing them in various venues since the mid 1950s. According to Walzer, who was Rawls's colleague at Harvard, drafts of *Theory's* chapters had circulated in the university's Philosophy and Government departments during the sixties.⁴² In David Reidy's view, the central concerns of *Theory* can be traced in Rawls's thought all the way back to the 1930s, and even into his recently-discovered undergraduate thesis.⁴³

A Theory of Justice, then, was a summative and synthetic effort rather than a new beginning for Rawls.⁴⁴ Although we still await a comprehensive biography, the outlines of Rawls's intellectual development during the postwar years are now readily visible. As an ethicist, he sought a naturalistic account of morality. Shaken by his experiences as an infantryman in the Second World War, Rawls abandoned his plans to enter the Episcopal priesthood and, according to a much later recollection, drifted from religious belief altogether.⁴⁵ During the following decades, as P. Mackenzie Bok describes, Rawls and several other professional ethicists undertook a project to articulate an objective and universal account of morality that drew upon their Protestant backgrounds, but did not rely upon the truth of revealed

⁴² Jeffrey Williams, "Criticism and Connection: An Interview with Michael Walzer," *symplike* 20, nos. 1-2 (2012): 380.

⁴³ David A. Reidy, "From Philosophical Theology to Democratic Theory: Early Postcards from an Intellectual Journey," *A Companion to Rawls*, ed. Jon Mandle and David A. Reidy (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), 9-30.

⁴⁴ This is arguably both part of the reason why *Theory of Justice*, apart from its relatively brief excursus on civil disobedience, seems so oddly disengaged from the struggles of the 1960s, and also why it seemed so useless to veterans of the New Left. It was engaging an earlier generation of controversies about the nature of the New Deal State, albeit in an analytical language far removed from the more highly publicized quarrels of midcentury (see chapter 2). One can only pity poor Rawls on this point. He appears, increasingly, as the consummate scholar dragged repeatedly into debates in which he himself had little stake.

⁴⁵ For Rawls's account of his drift from Protestantism into Protestant-inflected naturalism, see John Rawls, "On My Religion," in *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 259-70.

religion.⁴⁶ As a political philosopher, Rawls desired a similarly foundationalist account of the modern liberal state. As he argued many years later, a *modus vivendi* could not be enough. In order for a community to sustain itself across time, it required “stability for the right reasons.”⁴⁷ Such stability entailed that the various community members not seek ways to escape from a tenuous social truce and advance their own interests. Social peace required philosophical commitment, as well as self-interest, and Rawls aimed to discover the possible grounds for such a commitment. As Reidy writes, “Rawls sought for a polity of free and equal citizens a political self-understanding animated by a big intuitive idea capable of underwriting genuine public trust among them, reliably drawing their enduring allegiance and contributing to their self-realization as persons in community. His goal was a big intuitive idea with universal reach. *A Theory of Justice* is a giant first step toward expressing this idea.”⁴⁸

Unlike Dewey, who located the making of modern liberalism in the momentous transformation of material circumstances brought about by industrialization, Rawls located welfarist arguments within the logics of liberalism itself.⁴⁹ Indeed, this was arguably the whole point of Rawls’s exertions: to demonstrate that the modern democratic welfare state could be understood as a product of liberal theory, properly construed, rather than as an abridgment or revision of liberal principles. One could proceed using the same minimal reasoning that undergirded arguments in neoclassical economics, while nonetheless producing far more

⁴⁶ P. Mackenzie Bok, “To the Mountaintop Again: The Early Rawls and Post-Protestant Ethics in Postwar America,” *Modern Intellectual History* (August 2015). It is worth noting that Bok downplays Rawls’s own account of his intellectual development.

⁴⁷ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xviii.

⁴⁸ Reidy, “From Philosophical Theology to Democratic Theory,” 10.

⁴⁹ Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*. See also introduction, chap. 1 and 2.

democratic and egalitarian results.⁵⁰ *Theory*'s most enduring philosophical devices, the original position and the veil of ignorance, constituted an idealized conception of the liberal open society, a demonstration of how properly-regulated discursive practices could reveal truths about our own philosophical commitments that would otherwise remain hidden or unappreciated.⁵¹ Rawls wanted to demonstrate that, once all the perverse incentives to unfairly favor one's own interests over others' were removed, a truly rational actor would choose to live in a roughly equal society. In a sense, Rawls returned to the classical liberal assumption that arbitrariness was the primary hindrance to the good society, while eliminating the modern liberal worry that liberty stood in tension with equality. That Rawls would have drawn the ire of Socialist Communitarians thus seems inevitable. Rawls and other liberals identified attachment to cultural particularities as a factor that interfered with effective moral and political thinking, while for Socialist Communitarians such particularities constituted the very substance of moral and political reason. Rawls's thought experiment dramatized, in grand fashion, the errors that they thought they saw at work in liberal reform efforts more generally.

Given these observations, how might we make sense of the "communitarian critique of liberalism"? First, like many thinkers on the Left and Right, the Socialist Communitarians saw themselves as resisting a particular kind of forced modernization. The opposition to a bourgeois conversion project constituted what we might call the populist dimension of communitarianism. It was a defense of ordinary people and the ways in which they organized their existence, against both the capitalism that deformed their lives in the name of efficiency and also what Lasch labeled the "forces of organized virtue," which sought to transform them into bourgeois

⁵⁰ Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 182-85.

⁵¹ The Original Position and the Veil of Ignorance are complicated and highly nuanced concepts, and I do not wish to suggest otherwise. For an accessible overview of the relevant issues See Jon Mandle, "The Choice from The Original Position" in *Companion to Rawls*, ed. Mandle and Reidy, 128-44.

subjects.⁵² Socialist Communitarians found this bourgeois conversion project at work in various places, in feminist demands for no-fault divorce and legal abortion, in Progressive schemes to discipline lower-class pleasure and leisure. Above all, however, they traced it to the Enlightenment. They owed their conception of eighteenth-century thought perhaps most directly to the formulations of the Frankfurt School and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'s quip that the end result of the process of Enlightenment was desolation. Nevertheless, their critique of the Enlightenment had its own unique character, best expressed in MacIntyre's formulation of the "Enlightenment Project."⁵³ The thinkers of the eighteenth century aspired, MacIntyre claimed, "to provide for debate in the public realm standards and methods of rational justification by which alternative courses of action in every sphere of life could be adjudged just or unjust, rational or irrational, enlightened or unenlightened. So it was hoped, reason would displace authority and tradition."⁵⁴ Subsequent social and intellectual movements inherited this Enlightenment Project, its dream of rationalizing and organizing modern society, of saving ordinary people from themselves by compelling them to adopt the values and life-ways of social reformers.

In this view, contemporary liberal reform movements also inherited the Enlightenment's failures. "The provision of an ideal of rational justification," concluded MacIntyre, has "proved impossible to obtain."⁵⁵ With the old ways smashed to pieces and the new ways proving fruitless, the result was a culture of moral confusion and incoherence. Gone were the vibrant selves that

⁵² Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, 169.

⁵³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. For other indictments of the Enlightenment that draw on MacIntyre, see Sandel, "Procedural Republic"; Lasch, *Minimal Self*; Lasch, *True and Only Heaven*.

⁵⁴ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

organically grew out of traditional culture and relationships. They could not be sustained once liberals had destroyed the provincial contexts that had produced them. In their place arose thin caricatures of the moral life in which lonely individuals chased after happiness conceived in terms of money, physical health, and freedom from any meaningful moral constraint. Walzer painted a particularly bleak picture of the end of the liberatory project: “I imagine a human being thoroughly divorced, freed of parents, spouse and children, watching pornographic performances in some dark theater, joining (it may be his only membership) this or that odd cult, which he will leave in a month or two for another still odder.”⁵⁶

Liberalism Besieged

During the 1980s, conservative political strategists inside the Republican Party pushed hard to redefine and de-legitimize liberalism in the public mind. They sought to convince Americans that liberalism meant little more than a blithe moral permissiveness and a desire to mindlessly and heedlessly expand the welfare state.⁵⁷ By the end of the decade, their effort appeared to have produced significant results: The number of Americans who described themselves to pollsters as “liberal” dropped by half.⁵⁸ The contest for the presidency had become distinctly uncompetitive and everywhere one looked liberalism seemed to have become a dirty word. Indeed, at the 1988 Republican National Convention, Ronald Reagan treated it as precisely that: “The masquerade is over. It’s time to talk issues; to use the dreaded L-word; to say the

⁵⁶ Walzer, *Radical Principles*, 6. Walzer is parodying a series of judicial decisions of the 1970s.

⁵⁷ Nancy Rosenblum’s introduction to the collection of essays in *Liberalism and the Moral Life* cites the 1988 election as a motivation for producing the book. Nancy Rosenblum, Introduction to *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy Rosenblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 1-2.

⁵⁸ Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 42.

policies of our opposition and the congressional leadership of his party are liberal, liberal, liberal.”⁵⁹

In some ways, things were not quite as bad for liberals as many of them imagined. Liberalism and even a few varieties of leftism, we are discovering, retained some vitality during the 1980s. The Democrats controlled the House of Representatives throughout Reagan’s presidency. Some of the largest protests of the century occurred in the 1980s, and the environmentalist, nuclear-freeze, gay rights, and feminist movements made substantial if less than electrifying gains throughout the decade. More generally, even as Americans found the idea of liberalism increasingly distasteful, they nevertheless remained resolutely attached to social programs like Medicare and Social Security. Though they rejected normative arguments on behalf of such wide-ranging programs of social benefit, they would not tolerate the Right’s occasional attempts to get rid of them.⁶⁰

Regardless of whether one believes that liberalism endured or faltered in the 1980s, two things are clear. First, liberalism, both as a political philosophy and as a tradition of American political practice, was under siege during the Reagan years. Second, a key strategy of Movement Conservatives seeking long-term political realignment was to scramble the conventional associations of liberalism in the public mind. This, in turn, helps explain the nature of the response to communitarianism during that decade and the one that followed. As philosophers and social critics rushed to the aid of “liberalism,” they were not only responding to a quarrel over

⁵⁹ Quoted in E. J. Dionne, “The Republicans in New Orleans: Reagan Promises All Out Drive for Bush Victory,” *The New York Times*, August 15, 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/15/us/the-republicans-in-new-orleans-reagan-promises-an-all-out-drive-for-bush-victory.html>.

⁶⁰ On the durability of liberal and left-wing politics during the 1980s, see David T. Courtwright, *No Right Turn: Conservative Politics in a Liberal America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Michael S. Foley, *Front Porch Politics: The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and 1980s* (New York: Macmillan, 2013); Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, chap. 6.

moral and political philosophy, but also to the larger anti-liberal moment brought about by the triumph of the New Right. In so doing, they developed a sharper and in some cases more pugnacious sense of their own ideological commitments. As one defender of liberalism put it, “liberalism’s severest critics . . . [made] an important contribution to the self understanding, not to mention the self-confidence, of liberals themselves.”⁶¹ Although they too were veterans of sixties protest movements, these newly self-confident liberals generally comprised a slightly younger cohort than the Socialist Communitarians. The Rawlsian revival marked the liberal philosophy of thinkers like Amy Gutmann, Stephen Holmes, Don Herzog, Stephen Macedo and Ronald Dworkin, but so too did the cultural politics of the sixties, especially the waves of cultural liberation and the crucial role that the Courts had played in securing new rights for women and minorities.⁶²

A common complaint among the defenders of liberalism was that communitarians were bad sociologists and bad historians, and that their poor understanding of social dynamics led them to espouse a sentimental and naïve conception of community. Philosopher Ronald Dworkin attacked Walzer’s *Spheres of Justice* in the *New York Review of Books*, claiming that an appeal to “shared understandings” could never resolve persistent moral conflict. The communitarian vision amounted to nothing but a hazy abstraction of church picnics and Fourth of July parades: “Walzer offers no comprehensive description of what life in such a society would be like, of who would have what share of the different types of resources he discusses.”⁶³ Real communities were characterized not by broad consensus on fundamental issues, Dworkin believed, but by

⁶¹ Stephen Holmes, *Anatomy of Anti-Liberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 264.

⁶² Indeed, a notable feature of liberalism’s new philosophical defenders was how often they were housed in law schools.

⁶³ Ronald Dworkin, “To Each His Own,” *New York Review of Books*, April 18, 1983, 4.

interminable conflict. “The very fact that we debate about what justice requires,” he wrote, “shows that we have no conventions of the necessary sort.”⁶⁴ The only way to resolve such conflicts was to step outside our cultural specificity, as Rawls had done, and reflect on our conflicts in terms of general moral principles. This was, as the philosopher Stuart Hampshire observed, the only natural reaction to ongoing cultural conflict. When one reached a point of seemingly intractable disagreement, one moved to a higher order of abstraction in order to see the problem more clearly. Denying the legitimacy of philosophical abstraction amounted to removing the tools necessary to advance beyond the most elementary of moral judgments.⁶⁵

A second set of rejoinders pointed to a certain incoherence in communitarian thought: the various components of the canonical communitarian critique did not necessarily get along with one another. On the one hand, communitarians complained that liberal societies lacked sufficient cultural connections to be genuine communities. Inhabited by lonely, atomized individuals, it was not clear that they qualified as communities at all. On the other, communitarians also complained that the liberal claim to stand above the ideological fray was disingenuous. Liberalism itself constituted a particular vision of the good life and a liberal state could not help but promote it. These two propositions, many liberals claimed, could not both be true. Either liberal societies were less atomistic than communitarians assumed, or liberal theory was not covertly imposing a liberal package of values under the guise of neutrality.⁶⁶

Logical objections to communitarianism, however, generally took a backseat to arguments grounded in philosophical histories of liberalism. Of particular importance in this

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Stuart Hampshire, “Liberalism: The New Twist,” *New York Review of Books*, August 12, 1993.

⁶⁶ Holmes, *Anatomy of Anti-liberalism*, 141, 186; Patrick and Paris, “Liberalism and the Communitarian Critique,” 422-25. In a 1990 article, Walzer argued that this was a fatal flaw in conventional communitarian arguments, though he did not believe it applied to his own ideas. Walzer, “Communitarian Critique of Liberalism,” 9-11.

regard was the minimalist formulation propagated by the political theorist Judith Shklar, what she called “The Liberalism of Fear.” In that essay, as well as in her book *Ordinary Vices*, Shklar argued that liberalism had become hopelessly distorted by decades of abuse. Political actors and theorists alike had expanded its meaning to cover all manner of diverse and contradictory political projects such that it was now a meaningless, “all purpose word.”⁶⁷ Shklar recommended returning to liberalism’s historical roots. Liberalism, she argued, had emerged as a strategy for dealing with religious division in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. The core of the liberal ethos was its antipathy toward cruelty, and its paradigmatic social practice was therefore religious toleration. Indeed, all of liberalism’s characteristic concerns could be traced back to this effort to achieve social peace in the face of significant conflict. Shklar’s concept subsequently worked its way into Rawls’s *Political Liberalism* in 1991. Rawls revised his earlier position, arguing that “reformation” rather than “enlightenment” concerns underpinned liberal practice. His proposed version of liberalism was, he now insisted, “political, and not metaphysical.”⁶⁸

Situating liberalism’s historical origins in the post-Reformation era was part of a larger effort to reimagine it as a means for coping with modern pluralism.⁶⁹ Instead of looking to established patterns of tradition, liberalism generated its own norms, which were uniquely suited

⁶⁷ Judith Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, 21-28; Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁶⁸ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 10. Rawls first presented the “political, not metaphysical” formulation of his philosophy in Rawls, “Justice as Fairness, Political Not Metaphysical,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 223-51. He wrote to Shklar in 1984 to congratulate her on the success of *Ordinary Vices*, commenting that the book presented “a distinctive form of liberalism—historically rooted and wise for that reason.” Rawls to Shklar, 9/21/1984, John Rawls Papers, Harvard University, Box 41, Folder 15.

⁶⁹ The historical relocation of liberalism to the age of religious wars had deep roots in longstanding English patterns of argument regarding the history of religious liberty, and it was a hardly less dubious maneuver than the communitarians’ nostalgic recreation of life in medieval villages or Greek Poleis. As social historians of toleration repeatedly pointed out in the following decade, the actual practice of toleration in the early modern period was undertaken usually by princes and neighbors acting out of pragmatic, non-theorized concerns. In many cases, the simple urge to get on with life overwhelmed the urge to create a confessional paradise. If liberalism had been born as a theory of toleration, then liberals were rather late to the game.

to managing a fractious multi-cultural nation. Historian James Kloppenberg and philosopher Stephen Macedo, for example, argued that virtue had always been a central concept in liberal ideology. In Kloppenberg's view, the mistake was to follow logic-chopping philosophers in assuming that utilitarianism, Kantianism, and "the virtues" constituted incompatible traditions. The history of American liberalism proved otherwise, as liberal thinkers freely wove together all three traditions into an eclectic response to the problems of modern politics. For Macedo, liberal commitments such as tolerance, open-mindedness, and fairness were not merely elements of a procedural framework for adjudicating conflict, but rather constituted their own uniquely modern vision of the good life.⁷⁰ There was, these liberals seemed to admit, no such thing as liberal "neutrality." Liberalism did not hold that every proposition about how to live and what to believe was equally valuable. Liberals promoted a specific vision of modern morality and a particular way of organizing democratic politics. Indeed, on these accounts, liberalism presented itself as precisely the kind of tradition that communitarians claimed needed protection: a unique set of philosophical claims and cultural practices rooted in shared historical experiences.

The communitarian demand for a thickened community life, liberals insisted, carried dangers of its own. Liberals claimed that the idealization of common culture led communitarians to ignore the fact that actual attempts to build political projects around community were almost invariably narrow-minded and exclusionary; frequently they were bigoted and reactionary.

Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, Louis Menand compared Lasch's anti-liberalism in *The True and Only Heaven* to George Wallace's resistance to desegregation in Alabama.

"Wallace was as successful a populist as the postwar era produced," and his liberal adversaries

⁷⁰ James T. Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Robert Kennedy and Nicholas Katzenbach treated him as an “inconvenient road hazard, a man, in their calculus, of no moral account whatsoever.” This juxtaposition, in Menand’s view, illustrated the irony of leftists lining up alongside *Volkisch* populists to oppose effete liberal snobs: “There is something slightly chilling about the confrontation, as there is when you watch any ancient and deeply rooted thing smoothly and expertly obliterated by the forces of ‘progress.’ But Kennedy and Katzenbach were right, and Wallace was wrong.”⁷¹

The law professor and philosopher Stephen Holmes pursued the communitarians most forcefully in his 1993 book *The Anatomy of Anti-Liberalism*. For Holmes, MacIntyre and Lasch in particular belonged to a long tradition of anti-liberal thought that included figures like Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, and Leo Strauss. While there were obvious differences between these thinkers, their writing shared a distinctive set of traits: “The discourse of ‘crisis’ and moral impoverishment, the pathogenetic approach to modernity, the tracing of Marxism and liberalism to a common root, the assumption that disobedient philosophers are at fault, and the veiled promise of salvation are common to them all.”⁷² In the postwar era, Holmes contended, much effort had been put into obscuring the between anti-liberal philosophy and right-wing political movements and shedding anti-liberalism’s jingoistic features. The result was that contemporary “anti-liberals talk endlessly about rootedness and tradition, lamenting the deep lack of historical consciousness of modern times, but they nonchalantly disregard their own intellectual descent.”⁷³ Communitarianism, in Holmes’s view, was a strain of right-wing thought that could not bring

⁷¹ Louis Menand, *American Studies* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002), 220.

⁷² Holmes, *Anatomy of Anti-Liberalism*, xiii.

⁷³ Stephen Holmes, “The Permanent Structure of Anti-Liberalism,” in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, 228.

itself to admit its own reactionary character: “They apparently want to rehabilitate fascist rhetoric without fascist connotations.”⁷⁴

There is something to be said for the liberal counter-charges against the communitarian critique. Communitarianism, both in the narrow canonical sense as well as in the broader pattern of Socialist Communitarian criticism, certainly failed to appreciate the degree to which “local communities” are not necessarily places “in which the holders of power are immediately accountable to their neighbors.”⁷⁵ After all, the preference for localism among American conservatives was predicated precisely on the comparative ease with which local governments could be the instruments of elites. Further, the thick community life for which communitarians longed, at least in its American iteration, was at least partially the product of segregation, immigration restriction, and other policies designed to ensure the dominance of the Anglo-Protestant majority. As Menand pointed out, Southern history in particular stood as a rebuke to the idealization of American provincialism or “traditional” social relationships. More generally, as Holmes noted, in their condemnations of “rootless cosmopolitanism,” Communitarians were experimenting with some of the most toxic materials in twentieth century political discourse. One has to be careful in handling such things, and communitarians were not always careful. Though they sometimes went out of their way to demonstrate their awareness of the darker side of community life, this rarely extended beyond rote acknowledgement.⁷⁶ The question of how

⁷⁴ Ibid., 228.

⁷⁵ Christopher Lasch, “Conservatism against Itself,” *First Things*, April 1990, 19.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Lasch’s preface to the *True and Only Heaven*: “I have no intention of minimizing the narrowness and provincialism of lower-middle-class culture; nor do I deny that it has produced racism, nativism, anti-intellectualism, and all the other evils so often cited by liberal critics. But liberals have lost sight of what is valuable in lower middle class culture in their eagerness to condemn what is objectionable. Their attack on ‘Middle America,’ which eventually gave rise to a counter-attack against liberalism—the main ingredient in the rise of the new right—has blinded them to the positive features of petty-bourgeois culture: its moral realism, its understanding that everything has its price, its respect for limits, its skepticism about progress.” Lasch, *True and Only Heaven*, 17.

one could extract the positives from tradition without also embracing reactionary politics was a problem that went largely un-theorized and unexplained. As a consequence, it often seemed as though communitarians, as Gutmann wrote, “want us to live in Salem, but don’t want us to believe in Witches.”⁷⁷

At the same time, the problem with this crypto-reactionary accusation—one that liberals would repeat in the 1990s about “postmodernism” (with marginally more justification)—was that it misread the nature of the New Right and the Reagan Revolution. The liberal reaction to communitarian philosophy tended to reduce Movement Conservatism to right-wing evangelical Christianity. Liberals often compared communitarian ideas with the religious authoritarianism of the Moral Majority. “The common good of the Moral Majority,” Gutmann argued, “commands them not to tolerate homosexuals. The enforcement of liberal rights, not the absence of settled community, stands between the Moral Majority and the contemporary equivalent of witch hunting.”⁷⁸ The Canadian political philosopher Will Kymlicka conceded that “many communitarians undoubtedly dislike the Moral Majority’s view of the common good.” Despite their qualms, however, “the problem of the exclusion of historically marginalized groups is endemic to the communitarian project.”⁷⁹

Yet most of the Socialist Communitarian thinkers canvassed in part one never found a home in the Conservative Movement.⁸⁰ As we saw in chapter 3, the conceptual machinery that

⁷⁷ Gutmann, “Communitarian Critics of Liberalism,” 319.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁷⁹ Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 87. In the 1990s, the paradigmatic example of community building gone wrong would move from the Moral Majority to the break-up of Yugoslavia. Writing in the aftermath of the Bosnian Wars, Holmes hoped that now that the dangers of “recrudescent fundamentalisms and tribalisms” had made themselves terrifyingly clear, contemporary communitarians would eventually give up their uncritical endorsement of anti-liberal ideas. See Holmes, *Anatomy of Anti-Liberalism*, 2

⁸⁰ Some notable exceptions in this regard are Jean Bethke Elstain, Eugene Genovese, and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese.

enabled Neoconservative critics like Irving Kristol to join forces with the New Right operated primarily through a rehabilitation of capitalism, not an embrace of traditionalism. The early Neoconservatives had always been cultural mandarins. They successfully made their home with Movement Conservatism only insofar as they were able to devise a satisfactory solution for what Daniel Bell described as the “cultural contradictions of capitalism.”⁸¹ That is, in order for the Neoconservatives to become the house intellectuals of the New Right, they had to be able to demonstrate to their own satisfaction that markets did not pose an existential threat to bourgeois morality. Bell and Glazer ultimately could not make such a reconciliation and thus remained largely aloof from Movement Conservatism. Kristol and Michael Novak could, so they set to work at creating an intellectually respectable gloss for the Reagan Revolution.

To their credit, most of the Socialist Communitarians never reached a rapprochement with market society. Since they never accepted the benevolence of capitalism, they would never knit their traditionalism into the politics of the New Right.⁸² Certainly conservatives often made overtures to Socialist Communitarians. Yet in almost every instance, the Right’s invitations were rebuffed. As Lasch’s biographer Eric Miller points out, for example, Lasch always expressed contempt for the neoconservative project, and identified early on the precise variety of ideological weaseling that allowed such thinkers to call simultaneously for controls on immorality and unfettered license for capital. In 1989, Lasch attended a conference organized by the theologian Richard Neuhaus, and determined very quickly that his own politics bore only a superficial resemblance to Neoconservatism. “Neoconservatives of this stamp are a lot more interested in capitalism than cultural conservatism,” Lasch wrote to Dale Vree, editor of the *New*

⁸¹ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

⁸² It is worth pointing out here that that research into the nature of the conservative movement in the United States did not begin in earnest until the mid-1990s. On the discovery of conservatism as a serious topic, see Alan Brinkley, “The Problem of American Conservatism,” *American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (April 1994): 409-29.

Oxford Review. “The latter interests them only insofar as hedonism and moral disorder are thought to undermine productivity.”⁸³

The Pathologies of Everyday Life

Socialist Communitarians like Lasch and MacIntyre attacked the liberal equation of reform with rationalization, as well as the debilitating effects of disordered selves on democracy. That is, they combined a populist critique of modernization with a mandarin critique of mass culture. While there is no necessary contradiction between these positions, it matters how one prioritizes them. Was the primary problem facing late-modern societies that the descendants of the Enlightenment had wrecked the foundations of moral reason and exposed humanity to the relentless marketization of their lives? Or was it that mass culture, consumerism, and hedonism had poisoned American democracy by eroding the hardy selves of the Republican past? Again, both could be true, but it was nevertheless the case that in the late 1980s and early 1990s Socialist Communitarianism’s mass culture critique swallowed up its populism, leaving open the possibility of the whole enterprise morphing into an ideological formation scarcely distinguishable from Neoconservatism.

How did this occur? Socialist Communitarianism originated as a reassessment of the New Left’s cultural politics, but over the course of the 1980s, its characteristic ideas and patterns or argument became entangled with a parallel set of efforts to revive the fortunes of the post McGovern Democratic Party. In particular, for many political analysts and social scientists, the tension between traditional community and libertine individualism seemed an excellent device for analyzing the white working-class demographic that had gradually exited the Democratic

⁸³ Erik Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time: A Life of Christopher Lasch* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 316.

Party after the 1960s and cost it one national election after another. The white working class, according to these “New Communitarian” thinkers, had been alienated by the rise of McGovernism within the Democratic Party as well as the Democrats’ endorsement of the minority rights revolution. This group was hawkish on foreign policy, traditionalist in culture, and fearful of rising crime. Although working-class whites were ill-served by the economic policies of the Republicans, they were drawn to endorse a politics that they saw as protecting their values and ways of life. Creating a winning strategy for the Democratic Party therefore meant crafting a new party image that could lure back the Reagan Democrats.⁸⁴

“Communitarianism” thus became a kind of synonym for the political effort to move “beyond right and left,” a willingness to pragmatically adopt positions from across the political spectrum in order to garner support from conservative working class whites. This process of reinvention dovetailed with the emergence of the Democratic Leadership Council in the early 1980s.⁸⁵ Largely the invention of Midwestern and Southern Congressman who found life increasingly difficult in their conservative home districts, the DLC gained considerable influence following Reagan’s rout of Walter Mondale in 1984. By the end of the decade, the DLC had evolved into a major faction within the Democratic Party. Headed by Bill Clinton, the DLC’s explicit aim was to capture the party and reposition its ideological center sufficiently rightward

⁸⁴ E. J. Dionne, who had been Walzer’s student at Harvard in the early seventies, provides the clearest account of the “white working class” thesis. See Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics*. This problem, of course, had been a staple of American political analysis since Kevin Phillips published his *Emerging Republican Majority* in 1969. See Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁸⁵ We lack a satisfactory, extended account of the formation of the DLC and the New Democrat sensibility. Two works that deal with the subject are Al From and Alice McKeon, *The New Democrats and the Return to Power* (New York: Macmillan, 2013); and Kenneth Baer, *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000). McKeon and From’s book is a typical insider’s account, self-congratulatory and utterly uncritical. *Reinventing Democrats* is better, considerably so, but it remains too sympathetic to understand the costs involved in the New Democrats move to the “middle.”

such that it could more effectively compete for the votes of Reagan Democrats. The language of communitarianism proved instrumental in articulating that new image.

A leading philosophical voice in the formulation of this “New Communitarianism” was the philosopher and policy wonk William Galston.⁸⁶ After serving as a Marine Corps Officer during the Vietnam War, Galston had trained at the University of Chicago under the great East Coast Straussian philosopher Alan Bloom, writing a dissertation on Immanuel Kant.⁸⁷ During the 1980s, Galston participated in the liberal-communitarian debate, an engagement that would culminate with his 1991 book *Liberal Purposes*.⁸⁸ Along with the sociologist Amitai Etzioni, Galston would found the *Responsive Community*, a journal dedicated to promoting communitarian ideas.⁸⁹ Unlike other thinkers enamored of communitarian philosophy, Galston never rejected the liberal label. Rather, riffing on Shklar’s “liberalism of fear,” Galston argued that there were in fact two traditions of liberalism, one descended from the Reformation and the other from the Enlightenment.⁹⁰ Enlightenment liberals, he claimed, wanted to promote

⁸⁶ The Miller Center’s Oral History Project of the Clinton Administration provides a rich resource for details about Galston’s career and the influence of the DLC faction on Presidential politics. Miller Center, “Interview with William Galston,” University of Virginia (April 22-23, 2004), <http://millercenter.org/oralhistory/interview/william-galston>.

⁸⁷ William Galston, *Kant and the Problem of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

⁸⁸ William Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtue, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁸⁹ Etzioni described the formation of the New Communitarian movement in his 1995 book, *The Spirit of Community*: “In 1990, a group of fifteen ethicists, social philosophers, and social scientists met in Washington D.C. at the invitation of the author and his colleague, William Galston. As we explored matters that afflict our society, we expressed our distaste for the polarization of debate and the ‘sound bite’ public life, the effects of teledemocracy. We were troubled by pressures to be labeled either conservative or liberal, pro-life or pro-choice, for or against the death penalty. . . . More deeply, we were troubled by the finding that many Americans are reluctant to accept responsibilities. . . . We adopted the name *Communitarian* to emphasize that the time had come to attend to our responsibilities to the conditions and elements we all share, to the community.” Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1993), 14-15.

⁹⁰ Galston, “Two Concepts of Liberalism,” *Ethics* 105, no. 3 (April, 1995), 516-34.

individual autonomy at the expense of tradition and community. By contrast, Reformation liberals desired an institutional life that could defuse conflicts in a diverse society.

While he developed this tradition of Reformation liberalism, Galston was also working as a political operator affiliated with the DLC, a relationship that would eventually land him a role in the first Clinton Administration as a domestic policy advisor.⁹¹ In 1989, Galston penned a white paper, “The Politics of Evasion,” with Ellen Kamarck from the Council’s Progressive Policy Institute.⁹² Galston and Kamarck explained that the regular routing of the Democratic Party in presidential elections stemmed from the unwillingness of Democrats to adapt to the Reagan Era. “The Politics of Evasion” identified several persistent delusions that, in the authors’ view, hindered electoral success. “The myth of liberal fundamentalism” held that Democrats merely needed to recommit themselves to the ideals of the New Deal era. The “myth of mobilization” argued that the only real advantage Republicans enjoyed was their ability to get voters to the polls. The “myth of congressional bastion” assumed that, since Democrats still controlled congress, no major realignment could actually be occurring. According to Galston and Kamarck, election data from the 1980s demonstrated that none of this could be true. In reality, the Democratic Party was slipping into irrelevance as a result of abandoning its “liberal governing coalition” of “white working class voters and minorities [and] a smattering of professionals and reformers” in favor of one “dominated by minority groups and white elites.”⁹³

⁹¹ Though he claims he was never formally affiliated: “I’ve always been an unpaid fellow traveler, never been an official of the DLC.” Miller Center, “Interview with William Galston.”

⁹² William Galston and Ellen Kamarck, “The Politics of Evasion: Democrats and the Presidency,” *Progressive Policy Institute* (September 1989).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 4. Galston and Kamarck were vague about whether adaptation meant the embrace of conservative economic policy. “The Politics of Evasion” contained no mention of how the Democratic Party, for example, ought to approach unions or national health care. It did lament Gary Hart’s “demonization” for suggesting “untraditional means” for achieving traditional party ends. Regardless, the alleged coddling of the poor, which was very much at the forefront of “Evasion,” could hardly be described as a non-economic issue.

It is easy to discern in Galston's work certain points of affinity between this New Democratic centrism and the Socialist Communitarian social criticism generated by thinkers like Lasch and Walzer. The bourgeois conversion project of the Enlightenment could with some creativity be construed as equivalent to the "elitism" of "liberal fundamentalists." Without much difficulty, the "common culture" invoked by Socialist Communitarians might be regarded as a rough synonym for the "cultural mainstream" from which Democratic Party policies had supposedly departed. The increasingly unpopular "tax and spend" welfare state might be imagined as a morally vacuous procedural republic protecting individual rights rather than advancing common ideals. Appeasing the demands of the white working-class demographic and seeking to build a new national majority around them, then, could be regarded as the practical politics extending from the communitarian critique. This interpretation, however, required a subtle but wholesale transformation of the communitarian enterprise. The early Socialist Communitarians imagined themselves as synthesizing a left-wing politics with cultural conservatism. The New Communitarians, by contrast, wanted to recapture the allegiance of the Reagan Democrats by abandoning the Left's political economy almost entirely.

Arguably, some of this ambiguity was the fault of the Socialist Communitarians themselves, who often indulged in liberal bashing at the expense of clarifying their own outlook. The respect for "limits," which functioned as a mantra for thinkers like Lasch and Sandel, gradually loosened from any meaningful critical moorings, becoming a free-floating criticism available to anyone who wished to claim that some reform effort or another had "gone too far." In particular, it proved an effective rhetorical device for diminishing the accomplishments of the so-called rights revolution. For New Communitarians such as Etzioni and the jurist Mary Ann Glendon, the universe of American "rights talk" had expanded to the point of absurdity. Since

the 1960s, they argued, Americans had gradually accustomed themselves to discussing everything from the environment to tobacco control to abortion in terms of newly discovered or newly acquired rights. In the process they had lost any sense of distinction between personal preferences and moral imperatives, as well as any notion that eventually new responsibilities would have to emerge from this landscape of boundless personal freedom.⁹⁴

Still more problematic were the vestigial remains in Socialist Communitarianism of the 1960s' worst idea: participatory democracy. The hostility of the New Left to the central state apparatus had always skirted the edge of a deeply naïve libertarianism and, with the exception of Walzer, few Socialist Communitarians ever wrestled meaningfully with the possibility that leftists had to be statist. Instead they clung to ideals of local governance, civil society, and associational life rooted in the tradition of republican civic engagement. The future still involved chaining up Leviathan and returning his functions to the localities, a project that, in their view, required the development of a far more demanding conception of citizenship. This vision of devolution was entirely consistent with the goals of Reaganite Neoconservatism. Indeed, some of the earlier manifestations of this connection between civic renewal and devolution were present in the American Enterprise Institute's 1977 project on "Mediating Structures."⁹⁵ Pioneered by the Reaganite thinkers Peter Berger, Richard Neuhaus, and Michael Novak, the Mediating Structures project explicitly aimed at weakening the central state and transferring its powers onto local institutions including families, churches, neighborhoods, and voluntary associations.

The greatest difficulty of all lay in the ease with which Socialist Communitarian complaints could be translated into a straightforward anti-hedonism. The New Communitarian

⁹⁴ Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: Macmillan, 1991); Etzioni, *Spirit of Community*, chap. 6 and 7.

⁹⁵ Peter L. Berger and Richard Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1977).

movement never entirely jettisoned the early Socialist Communitarian critique of capitalism; in particular, Etzioni tried to foreground his criticisms of the market. Yet it also concentrated its fire on the spread of heedless individualism, the retreat into private life, and the decline of the virtues necessary for a healthy democracy. Like the turn to associational life, this strategy had direct parallels in neoconservative social criticism. It resonated especially in the work of James Q. Wilson, criminologist and inventor of the “broken windows” theory of community policing. In an essay for Kristol’s magazine *The Public Interest* in 1985, Wilson argued that, “over the last two decades, the nation has come face to face with problems that do not seem to respond, or respond enough, to changes in incentives.” Such efforts failed “because the people we wish to change do not have the right ‘tastes’ or discount the future too heavily. To put it plainly, they lack character.”⁹⁶ Individuals had run amok and the community had a right to protect itself from their irresponsibility. As the New Communitarianism oriented itself towards policy relevance, its emphasis simultaneously shifted almost entirely to the realm of moral behavior and to a neoconservative critique of hedonism. “The health of liberal polities,” Galston argued, “is intertwined in complex ways with the practice of what I [call] liberal virtues.”⁹⁷ He thus echoed Wilson’s claim that “in the long run, the public interest depends upon private virtue.”² For New Communitarians and Neoconservatives alike, the chief questions of public policy were why Americans did not currently want the right things and how they might be persuaded or gently coerced to desire better ends for themselves.

⁹⁶ James Q. Wilson, “The Rediscovery of Character: Private Virtue and Public Policy,” *The Public Interest* (Fall 1985): 5.

⁹⁷ Galston, *Liberal Purposes*, 232.

Nowhere was this shift towards anti-hedonism more important than in discussions of race, poverty, and crime during the 1980s and 1990s.⁹⁸ Across the political spectrum, commentators embraced an analysis that ascribed rising crime rates to the existence of a pathological black underclass that was incapable of controlling its baser appetites. According to the social Darwinist Charles Murray, for example, poor African Americans lacked the values necessary to successfully hold a job, build functional families, or obey the law. This licensed new regimes of surveillance, social control, and harsh penalties for those convicted of even minor crimes.⁹⁹ Somewhat surprisingly, these conclusions found some resonance in the African American community. The relatively small but vocal movement of “black conservatives,” led by economists Glenn Loury and Walter Williams, argued that African Americans now faced a greater threat from their rejection of bourgeois values than from persistent white racism.¹⁰⁰ Even some prominent black social critics on the Left embraced this vision. In his bestselling 1993 work *Race Matters*, for example, Cornel West attributed the problems of the inner city to a growing culture of “black nihilism.”¹⁰¹ West, too, invoked the language of a center that could escape the dogmas of liberalism and conservatism alike. According to West, while conservatives focused too much on black values, a group he labeled “liberal structuralists” mistakenly downplayed the role of values altogether. They “overlook the nihilistic threat,” West wrote,

⁹⁸ As Matthew Frye-Jacobson points out, from Patrick Moynihan onward, neoconservative “mediating structures” discourse has used romantic narratives of white ethnic immigrant communities engaged in self-help and mutual aid as a means of underlining the supposed pathologies of the black ghetto. Matthew Frye-Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic: Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 201.

⁹⁹ Charles A. Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

¹⁰⁰ On the Black Conservative phenomenon of the 1980s and 1990s, see Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 281-302.

¹⁰¹ Stephen Steinberg discusses West’s role as the “left wing” of the neoconservative backlash in Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001) 126-130.

“They hesitate to talk honestly about culture, the realm of meanings and values, because doing so seems to lend itself too readily to conservative conclusions in the narrow way that Americans discuss race.”¹⁰²

As the New Communitarian vocabulary became a key element of Clinton-era moralizing, many of the original Socialist Communitarians tried to distance themselves from the movement. MacIntyre declared flatly, “I am not a communitarian. I do not believe in ideals or forms of community as a nostrum for contemporary social ills. I give my political loyalty to no program.”¹⁰³ Walzer described his politics as “liberal socialism” in the tradition of the Italian thinker Carlo Roselli, albeit with the caveat that he wanted to develop a political theory that prized “particularist and local” values, as well as those of a “global and internationalist” character.¹⁰⁴ Taylor likened his outlook to Wilhelm von Humboldt, whom he saw as combining a “communitarian or holist ontology” with a liberal “respect for individual rights.”¹⁰⁵ When assessing the communitarian-liberal debate in 1998, Sandel also hesitated to include himself in the former camp.¹⁰⁶ In his preface to the second edition of *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Sandel noted that he did “not always find [himself] on the communitarian side” of the debate.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰²Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 20.

¹⁰³ Giovanna Borradori, *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 151.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, “Criticism and Connection,” 380.

¹⁰⁵ Ruth Abbey, “Communitarianism, Taylor-Made: An Interview with Charles Taylor,” *The Australian Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (Autumn 1996): 3.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ix.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

By the mid 1990s, with his intellectual star in ascent, he began identifying himself as a “republican.”¹⁰⁸

The original Socialist Communitarians ran fast and far from the communitarian label by the turn of the century, but the damage nonetheless had been done. The New Communitarianism had become deeply entangled with the DLC’s strategy of triangulation; in the process, the Socialist Communitarian critique of liberalism and capitalism had lost its critical, populist edge almost entirely. After two decades of extravagant complaints about liberals and progressives and feminists and the Enlightenment, communitarianism had become little more than a critique of the lives of ordinary people and an argument for shrinking the welfare state.

Conclusion: Communitarianism and the Common Life

Socialist Communitarianism presented itself in the 1980s as a left-wing politics appropriate to a society whose common culture had collapsed. Without saying as much, it was a socialism designed for a society in which cultural division had become as significant as class division, and where politics had become an extension of this “cultural civil war.” At its best, then, communitarianism was a meditation on the relationship between anti-modernism, populism, and the future of the Left. It arguably aspired to import the British “Culture and Society” tradition of socialist thought into the United States. This effort failed, and given the ease with which the language of communitarianism translated itself into Neoconservatism, that failure seems almost foreordained. It is still worth asking, however, why that failure occurred. It is undoubtedly true, as the Socialist Communitarians believed, that the United States’ “common culture” collapsed at the end of the 1960s. Yet, at as the communitarians’ liberal opponents

¹⁰⁸ Michael Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America’s Search for A Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996)

argued, it is also true that describing this culture as “common” obscures the fact that it was less voluntary than imposed. The legal difficulties of obtaining a divorce, the de facto Christian character of public schooling, the overwhelmingly WASP-ish complexion of the leadership class; these and many other aspects of the “common” culture were impositions of the Anglo-Protestant majority’s folkways and consciousness upon the population at large. And this, of course, is to say nothing of the crucial role played by racial segregation and immigration restriction in the construction of what Andrew Hartman calls “normative America.”¹⁰⁹ In part, an engineered homogeneity provided the material basis for the relative social peace that reigned between the end of the Second World War and the mid-1960s. The slow breakdown of the coercive assimilation apparatus in the decades that followed eroded the material basis for any kind of nationwide cultural uniformity.¹¹⁰

So we can depict the decline and fall of the common culture as the collapse of a particular regime of disciplinary power. Not much to cry over, it would seem. Just as these coercive means for creating a common culture dissipated, however, so too did a set of structures designed to make participation in that culture attractive. As Colin Gordon, Jefferson Cowie, and others have argued, between the 1930s and 1970s a panoply of redistributive policies created a floor of social security for the American working and middle classes unprecedented before or since. Marginal tax rates reduced economic inequality to all-time lows. The minimum wage came close to supplying a basic standard of living. Labor law actually constrained the ability of management to

¹⁰⁹ As Hartman writes, “in the postwar years—nearly two decades between the end of World War II and the assassination of John F. Kennedy—a cluster of powerful conservative norms set the parameters of American culture. These cultural standards are best described by the phrase ‘normative America. . . . Normative Americans prized hard work, personal responsibility, individual merit, delayed gratification, social mobility, and other values that middle-class whites recognized as their own. Normative Americans lived according to stringent sexual expectations [and] strict gender roles. Normative Americans believed their nation was the best in human history.” Hartman, *War for the Soul of America*, 5.

¹¹⁰ Cowie, *Great Exception*; Colin Gordon, *Growing Apart: A Political History of American Inequality* (Institute for Policy Studies, 2013), <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/growing-apart-a-political-history-of-american-inequality/index>.

set unfavorable terms of employment. Thus, when Hartman writes that, “during the 1950s, an unprecedented number of Americans got in line—or aspired to get in line” with the vision of “normative America,” it is at least partially attributable to the fact that, for a time, it paid handsomely to do so.¹¹¹ In the 1970s, all this began to change. Large businesses’ hunt for cheap labor and favorable tax regimes led them first out of northern cities, and then out of the United States altogether. The decline in union membership and the proliferation of new categories of employment that were ineligible for labor protections slowly strangled the labor movement.

The point is not to yearn for the salad days of the New Deal Order. The point is rather that the communitarian assessment of the United States’ deficiencies in the wake of the sixties involved a basic error of reasoning, an error eerily similar to the one made by Neoconservatives like Irving Kristol. In a collection of Lasch’s essays released after his death in 1994, the historian Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn wrote that all of her father’s scholarship and social criticism had revolved around his attempt to defend some substantial notion of the common life:

Characterized by cooperation and competition toward a shared end, the common life (often an extension of family life) springs from voluntary gatherings in which the lines of work, play, community organizing, socializing, and other purposes tend to cross. Fostering spontaneity, invention, and self-reliance, this arena transcends purely intimate contacts but steers clear of any source of external power, turning instead to its own set of rules and standards of fairness, excellence, and common sense, forged from experience and tradition. The common life not only nurtures the individual responsibility and courage demanded for democracy but provides the kind of life that is worth living in the first place.¹¹²

Despite Lasch’s reticence about calling himself a communitarian, this is a fair expression of the communitarian ideal. It contains much that is admirable. It also contains much that liberal thinkers such as Amy Gutmann and Stephen Holmes would sneer at. After all, they had some

¹¹¹ Hartman, *War for the Soul of America*, 5.

¹¹² Christopher Lasch and Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn, *Women, Feminism, and the Common Life* (New York: Norton, 1997), xiii.

sense, as we do now, of all the ugly bullying that historically went into creating such a common life. But they would neglect, as did the communitarians themselves, the crucial role that the central state's social-protective policies played in shaping shared social experience.

In other words, Lasch-Quinn's invocations of voluntariness, spontaneity, and freedom from external power obscure completely the degree to which the common life of the midcentury decades was *planned*. The historical scholarship on both the disciplinary and the social-protective aspects of the New Deal Order—much of which was readily available in the 1980s and 1990s—reveals the barrenness of the organic languages that Socialist Communitarians and New Communitarians used to describe associational life in the absence of state interference. All the communitarian handwringing about the poverty of American moral discourse, the thinness of American selfhood, and the chaos with which Americans conducted their lives amounted to so much sound and fury in the absence of a large and active welfare state.

This, in turn, points to the truly damning difficulty that plagued the entire communitarian enterprise: In its efforts to transcend the supposedly inadequate categories of postwar politics, Socialist Communitarian criticism ultimately abandoned the philosophical moorings necessary to make sense of the actual moment in which it found itself. Communitarianism's great undoing was its ambition to be socialism without the state, a maneuver that left it vulnerable to incorporation into the late-twentieth-century neoliberal synthesis. The United States in the 1980s did not require an ideological formation "beyond left and right" or a mode of criticism aimed at diminishing both the state and the market. Already roiling with anti-statism, the country needed a Left closer to the old Labor and Social Democratic parties of Europe, parties that did a far better

job of melding “tradition” and “solidarity” than the Communitarians ever did.¹¹³ Insofar as they rejected the modern central state and its vast redistributive powers as the primary means for securing the “whole way of life” for ordinary people, the communitarians failed to realize that kind of Left, and likely helped prevent it from ever coming into being.

¹¹³ See Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 360-90. I hasten to add that in saying that the United States needed a Labor Party vision, I do not mean to imply that such a vision could have triumphed over the looming neoliberal consensus.

CHAPTER V

ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECTS: NEO-ENLIGHTENMENT LIBERALISM IN THE 1990S

On July 27, 2011, *Arkansas-Democrat Gazette* columnist Gene Lyons gave a grim assessment of the first American debt-ceiling crisis. With the August 2 deadline looming, negotiations between the President and Republican congressional leaders had repeatedly broken down and it appeared as though inertia had taken over. According to Lyons, the American public could grasp neither the complexities of debt finance nor the gravity of national default and thus remained strangely apathetic to the whole situation. Republican congressmen inhabited a “metaphysical netherworld” where ideological imperatives trumped the national interest. Things were so bad, Lyons lamented, and “the President of the United States felt he needed to deliver a prime-time speech essentially defending the post-Enlightenment values of reason, evidence and compromise against an obscurantist movement more like a religious cult than a political party.”¹

Lyons’ despairing depiction of early twenty-first century American political culture is instructive, particularly his invocation of “Enlightenment values.” Lyons is certainly not alone in attaching the fate of contemporary politics to the legacy of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. In the last decade, a range of thinkers have come to frame both American and global conflicts as struggles between the Enlightenment and its opponents. Historians and philosophers ranging from Jonathan Israel to Susan Neiman to Anthony Pagden have declared

¹ Gene Lyons, “Let’s Just Call Them the Deadbeat Party,” *Salon*, July 27, 2011, http://www.salon.com/news/politics/war_room/2011/07/27/lyons_deadbeat/index.html.

the need for intellectuals to take a stand for the Enlightenment.² Journalists including Susan Jacoby and polemicists such as Richard Dawkins and Ayaan Hirsi Ali regularly invoke “Enlightenment Values” as the only hope for an age of unreason in which religious fundamentalists, right wing nativists, and irrationalists of all stripes operate uncontested in the public sphere. Even former Vice President Al Gore, in his 2007 book *The Assault on Reason*, argued that the very idea of modern self-government depends on the Enlightenment's “marketplace of ideas.”³

How ought we to make sense of this turn in intellectual self-fashioning? Why did the Enlightenment become such a touchstone of political rhetoric, and what have been the consequences? In this chapter, I provide a framework for making sense of this peculiar phenomenon in the history of American political ideas, which I call Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism. Focusing on the 1990s, when the “Enlightenment Values” trope became a staple of political discourse, I argue that Neo-Enlightenment rhetoric has to be understood in the context of a broader re-imagining of center-left politics in an era when they seemed to have gone into eclipse. Centrist intellectuals in the late eighties and early nineties sought to develop an

² Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from the Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment: And Why It Still Matters* (New York: Random House, 2013); Susan Neiman, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-up Idealists* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2008), 20. Neiman relies heavily on Israel's historical account. For other recent philosophical attempts to recuperate the Enlightenment for progressive purposes, see Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); A. C. Grayling, *Towards The Light: The Story of the Struggles for Liberty and Rights That Made the Modern West* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008); Grayling, *Liberty in the Age of Terror: A Defence of Civil Society and Enlightenment Values* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009); Tzvetan Todorov, *In Defence of the Enlightenment* (London: Atlantic Books, 2009); Robert B. Loudon, *The World We Want: How and Why the Ideals of the Enlightenment Still Elude Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³ Albert Gore, *The Assault on Reason* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 12.

ideological vision that could provide an alternative to both the Right's free market nationalism and a postmodern "identity politics" that they believed had rendered the Left ineffective and unappealing. In the course of these efforts, Neo-Enlightenment Liberals effected a subtle change in the texture of centrist ideology itself. As the preceding chapters have shown, since the 1920s, American centrists had experimented with melding center-left politics with a variety of post-Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment ideas. In the 1990s, however, imagining themselves as a rational redoubt in a world overtaken by various forms of unreason, center-left intellectuals wholeheartedly re-embraced an identification of reform with rationalization, effectively ending their century-long dalliance with Toryism and pessimism. By the turn of the new century, the ideology of center-left establishment intellectuals had more in common with libertarianism, Reaganism, and the old Left than it did with the Tory Socialist experiments of midcentury.

We might be tempted to see Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism as primarily the effect of post-9/11 cultural politics, when American public commentators felt strangely compelled to determine definitively whether or not "religion poisons everything." The specter of radical Islam has certainly lent itself to recklessly imagining contemporary politics as a confrontation between reactionary religion and liberal secularism. Yet the gloomy and vituperative post-9/11 political scene is only part of the story. The struggle over the relationship between center-left politics and the eighteenth-century Age of Reason began not in the midst of George W. Bush's War on Terror, but rather during the "culture wars" of the previous two decades. Between the late eighties and the late nineties, a number of prominent intellectuals attributed the decline of American political discourse generally, and the fortunes of American reform politics in particular, to a flight from the ideals of the Enlightenment.⁴

⁴ The most prominent Neo-Enlightenment Liberals included Todd Gitlin, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Martha Nussbaum, Michael Lind, David Bromwich, Katha Pollitt, Ernest Gellner, Paul Berman, Lewis Lapham, Thomas Nagel, John

There were differences, and considerable ones, among the authors whom I am grouping together as Neo-Enlightenment Liberals. This was not a single ideology, but rather a loose assemblage of philosophical sensibilities, historical narratives, and rhetorical postures. To paraphrase J. G. A. Pocock, it was a language, not a program. Some of it was sophisticated and erudite, some clumsy and glib. Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism had no clear institutional home, though its most prominent proponents were academics, and it found its expression most often in liberal weeklies such as *The New Republic* and in the remaining bastions of middle-class literary radicalism, *The New York Review of Books* and *Dissent*. Yet we should not allow its relative looseness as an ideology to obscure the interrelatedness of its parts or the presence of an animating spirit. Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism constituted a sense of the age, what Carl Becker called a “climate of opinion.”⁵ Alternatively, and at a slightly lower level of abstraction, we might describe it as a genre of literature. The details and characters of Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism differed from text to text, but the basic plot, narrative motifs, and dramatic tensions remained the same.

At the core of Neo-Enlightenment rhetoric stood a tragic story about a two-hundred-year-old rationalist progressive tradition and its betrayal by what Neo-Enlightenment Liberals derisively labeled “the Academic Left,” shorthand for “postmodernism” and “identity politics.” Regarding Enlightenment ideals such as reason, progress, and the common good with deep suspicion, this Academic Left had allegedly promoted a cultural fragmentation that rendered

Searle, Daniel Farber, Wendy Kaminer, Barbara Epstein, David Hollinger, Morris Berman, Robert Hughes, Edward O. Wilson, Michael Tomasky, Russell Jacoby, Alan Sokal, and John Patrick Diggins. I have omitted those thinkers whose primary reference point in invoking the Enlightenment is an extra-American context. Connor Cruise O’Brien’s *On the Eve of the Millennium* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), for example, also sounds the alarm on the decline of the Enlightenment, but his chief reference point is Ireland and his chief villain revanchist Catholic orthodoxy.

⁵ Becker, *Heavenly City*, 1-32.

meaningful emancipatory politics impossible. Further, by denigrating the ideals of the Age of Reason, the Academic Left itself descended into a sinister Counter-Enlightenment tradition of irrationalism and reactionary politics. Resurrecting progressive politics in America, the Neo-Enlightenment Liberals argued, entailed a re-dedication of liberalism to its Enlightenment origins.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. In part one, I detail the philosophical history propagated by Neo-Enlightenment Liberals. This history depicted the rise of an Enlightenment tradition of liberalism, egalitarianism, and science, and its displacement by an “Academic Left” in the late twentieth century. Part two explores the Neo-Enlightenment critique of postmodernism and identity politics, a critique that accused the Academic Left of disabling emancipatory politics, peddling pseudo-philosophical nonsense, and legitimating reactionary ideas. In part three, I assess the two most important interpretations of the sudden prominence of Enlightenment discourse at the turn of the century, arguing that Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism should be seen as neither a mere strategic effort at re-branding, nor as a symptom of liberalism’s rightward political drift. It was, rather, a symptom of centrist intellectuals growing comfort with the once-discredited politics of modernization and rationalization. Finally, in the conclusion, I offer a tentative hypothesis as to the significance of Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism for post-9/11 intellectual life. Throughout, I emphasize the rhetorical structures and arguments of Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism, rather than seeking to establish how accurately its proponents represented the views of the so-called Academic Left, or whether Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism adequately understood the predicament of left-wing politics in the United States at the end of the twentieth century.⁶

⁶ For a brief statement of my own views on the “Academic Left,” which is better understood as lower-case critical theory, see the introduction to this dissertation.

The Rise and Fall of the Enlightenment Tradition

According to Neo-Enlightenment Liberals, the Age of Reason transmitted three great universalist traditions to modernity. The first was liberal democracy, and especially the civic nationalism epitomized by the founding documents of the United States.⁷ The second was the radical egalitarianism of “the Left” generally and of Marxism in particular. Neo-Enlightenment critics thought that the Left and liberalism, despite their sometimes antagonistic relationship, had marched through modern history dreaming similar universalist dreams. Both imagined a political identity—based on either liberty or equality—that could rise above the baggage of blood and history. “Whether the common bond was inalienable rights, reason, man’s creative nature, or membership in the working class,” wrote sociologist and former SDS President Todd Gitlin in his *Twilight of Common Dreams*, “the premise was that human capacities were the foundation of an improvable society.”⁸

In addition to its political legacies, Neo-Enlightenment thinkers argued that the eighteenth century had generated its own characteristic epistemological tradition, centered on natural science, which the philosopher John Searle labeled “the Enlightenment Vision.”⁹ From

⁷ For Arthur Schlesinger, Gunnar Myrdal’s “American Creed” provided the best exposition of these liberal democratic values. Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: Norton, 1998), 23-44. Schlesinger’s enthusiasm for Myrdal’s formulation is particularly interesting, given the *Vital Center*’s polemic against Enlightenment optimism, of which Myrdal was a prominent proponent. *Disuniting* notably omits any mention of the Enlightenment, but his description of the American Creed is indistinguishable from other Neo-Enlightenment Liberals’ description of Enlightenment Values, and Schlesinger celebrates it unreservedly.

⁸ Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995), 85.

⁹ John Searle, *Mind, Language and Society: Philosophy in the Real World* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 1-6.

this perspective, the Enlightenment’s scientific epistemology rested upon two interrelated assumptions. First, it posited a particular relationship between human minds and the world outside of them. The *philosophes* tended to deny that any single individual or society could access the “real world” in an unmediated fashion. The limitations of culture and biology meant that any particular account of the world and its contents would always be tentative and incomplete. Second, Enlightenment thinkers argued that the impossibility of immediate access to reality did not license despair or skepticism about the possibility of knowledge as such. Since invariant natural laws governed the workings of the world, they believed that human beings could gradually come to understand the universe in its entirety by employing the rigorously self-correcting methods of the natural sciences. That is, representations of the world, when disciplined by scientific scrutiny, could become more accurate over time. There were right answers to the biggest questions of human life and a properly rational approach could discover them, eventually, so long as it investigated reality without expectation that its ancient prejudices be vindicated.¹⁰ Having discovered the answers to such questions, humankind could use them to gradually force an unhappy and unintelligent social order to become more pleasant, humane, and rational.

Democracy, the Left, and Science—these were the three great Enlightenment traditions, united by their shared commitments to commonality, intelligibility, and improvability, which Neo-Enlightenment Liberals sought to revive. During the twentieth-century, neo-Enlightenment thinkers argued, all three of these traditions had come to grief. First, a number of developments in psychology, philosophy, and science called into doubt the Enlightenment’s epistemological

¹⁰ This description of Enlightenment epistemology chiefly follows Searle’s account, which is the most detailed among the Neo-Enlightenment Liberals, and of course reflects Searle’s background in analytic philosophy. While they do not diverge significantly in substance, other accounts tend to be more schematic, such as Gitlin’s assertion that the scientific culture born of the Enlightenment “requires a perspective different from all other perspectives: a commitment to truth seeking above all else.” Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 205.

assumptions. The development of relativity theory and quantum physics challenged the picture of a law-abiding, deterministic natural universe.¹¹ At the very largest and very smallest scales, the world seemed a much stranger place than conventional Newtonian physics allowed. Freud's "discovery" of the unconscious, as well as research into non-Western value systems by cultural anthropologists, including Franz Boas and his students, suggested that Western "rationality" was a suspect and perhaps too-parochial instrument for grasping reality. Consequently, by the middle of the twentieth century, a much less flattering picture of scientific thought and practice had emerged, epitomized in Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. In Kuhn's estimation, science proceeded not by the orderly accretion of rationally acquired knowledge, but by radical and not always well-evidenced revolutions in worldview.¹²

According to Neo-Enlightenment rhetoric, the two great political legacies of the Enlightenment similarly came under fire in the twentieth century. Marxism had had its moment in America, particularly during the upsurge of worker-militancy in the 1930s, when Earl Browder famously declared communism to be "twentieth century Americanism." In the aftermath of the Second World War, however, a coalition of conservatives and liberals worked together to squelch dissent and purge communists from American public life. Yet, as debilitating as the Second Red Scare had been for American Marxism, ultimately a series of disillusionments with the Soviet Union itself discredited communism as a viable emancipatory tradition for American leftists. The Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, the Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Khrushchev's revelations about the Gulag system gradually

¹¹ Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society*, 2-4.

¹² Virtually all histories of the Enlightenment tradition identify Kuhn as a major figure in the decline of rationality's reputation. See Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society*; David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 61; Paul Gross and Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 139; Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 212-13, 276n3.

made the USSR's "actually existing socialism" known for what it was: a militarized, imperial police state.¹³ In the eyes of Neo-Enlightenment commentators, liberalism had also stumbled in the face of its internal contradictions. Bloody western expansion and dalliances with overseas empire, campaigns against immigration and for forced assimilation, the stultifying conformity of politics and consumer culture, and the scandal of racial apartheid all spoke to a series of unresolved tensions at the heart of the theory and practice of American democracy.¹⁴

These trials, according to the Neo-Enlightenment Liberals, damaged but did not destroy the Enlightenment tradition. The authoritarianism of the Soviet Union stood as a rebuke to Marxism, but liberal democratic theory still seemed capable of redemption. Indeed, Neo-Enlightenment Liberals believed that a new universalist consensus arose in the West in the wake of the Second World War. The Nazis had definitively discredited the race idea, bringing the West's long and disgusting romance with eugenics to an end.¹⁵ The United Nations' declaration of human rights and the development of international laws covering "crimes against humanity" affirmed a universalist conception of human beings as a moral category.¹⁶ To the Neo-Enlightenment mind, the civil rights activism of the postwar years also bespoke the growing power of universalist moral language. Even the radical critiques of midcentury liberal democracy that would form the basis of the early New Left in some way affirmed the Enlightenment tradition's continued vitality, according to Neo-Enlightenment Liberals. As much as independent critics like David Riesman, Irving Howe, and C. Wright Mills lacerated the United States for its

¹³ On the slow disillusionment with Marxism, see Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 94; Gross and Levitt, *Higher Superstition*, 28-29; Diggins, *Rise and Fall of the American Left*, 175-87.

¹⁴ On the contradictions between liberal democratic rhetoric and American practice, see Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 39-67; Michael Tomasky, *Left for Dead: The Life, Death, and Possible Resurrection of Progressive Politics in America* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 74-82; Schlesinger, *Disuniting America*, 23-43.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁶ Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 55.

shortcomings and stupidities, they nonetheless operated as what Michael Walzer would call “connected” critics.¹⁷ That is, they were radicals working from within the liberal democratic tradition, whether or not they always understood themselves as such. Even the Port Huron Statement, while depicting a nation desperately in need of radical transformation, used language redolent with the aspirations and ideals of Enlightenment universalism: “In a revival of the Enlightenment language of Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” wrote Gitlin, “SDS spoke self-consciously, with no sense of immodesty, about the entire human condition.”¹⁸

For the Neo-Enlightenment critics, only in the crucible of the late 1960s did things begin to go truly awry.¹⁹ On the one hand, the war in Vietnam undermined the faith of young leftists first in liberal political leadership and then in American democracy as a whole. On the other hand, the rise of Black Nationalism challenged the very notion that Americans shared a core identity at all. The New Social Movements that emerged from the wreckage of the late sixties and early seventies reflected this deep sense of disillusionment. Neo-Enlightenment Liberals lamented that activists working on behalf of African Americans, women, and other minorities aimed not at the realization of universal aspirations of democracy or justice, but rather the defense and advancement of their own particular communities. Imagining their activism as a kind of anti-imperial struggle, the New Social Movements saw the entirety of Western thought and culture—the Enlightenment included—as a tool of their oppression. They believed that the literary canon served to exclude and silence minority voices, that the scientific method surreptitiously assumed Western white male subjectivity as its model of autonomous rationality,

¹⁷ Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Re-edited versions of the essays in which Gitlin treats Riesman, Howe, and Mills as inheritors of the Enlightenment tradition are collected in Todd Gitlin, *The Intellectuals and the Flag* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 97.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 67-73; Diggins, *Rise and Fall of the American Left*, 218-76.

and that the language of American republicanism overtly and covertly denied personhood to non-whites and women. The resulting package of ideas, Neo-Enlightenment thinkers concluded, broke radically with the entire tradition of emancipatory politics in the West.

The appearance in the US of a new philosophical style, commonly called “postmodernism,” caused further consternation among Neo-Enlightenment critics. A protean designation, “postmodernism” collapsed a dizzying variety of philosophical traditions—structuralism, poststructuralism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and Western Marxism—into a single amorphous entity defined less by a shared body of doctrine than a general set of anti-foundationalist sensibilities, European origins, an intensely difficult and elusive prose style, and most importantly, a hostility to the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment.²⁰ Philosopher and self-styled historian of ideas Michel Foucault charged that Enlightenment rationality, while promising liberation from traditional prejudice and superstition, instead introduced novel regimes of social control that gradually squeezed to death any possibility of self-creation. Jacques Derrida, father of deconstruction, claimed that the autonomous individual that resided at the center of modern thought was itself a fiction constituted by language. Critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued that the Enlightenment’s “instrumental rationality” had led directly to Auschwitz and environmental

²⁰ For Neo-Enlightenment summaries of the main features of postmodernism, see E. O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 40-44; Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 63-64; John Searle, “Rationality and Realism: What is at Stake?,” *Daedalus* 122, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 56; Paul Kurtz, *Toward a New Enlightenment: The Philosophy of Paul Kurtz*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and Timothy Madigan (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 3-5; Neil Postman, *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century: How the Past Can Improve our Future* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 78; Daniel A. Farber and Suzanna Sherry, *Beyond All Reason: The Radical Assault on Truth in American Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23-26; Tomasky, *Left for Dead*, 21-22. Very occasionally, Neo-Enlightenment thinkers lumped communitarian philosophy into this trend. Jonathan Israel, in particular, appears hard-pressed to distinguish postmodernism from communitarianism. See Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 806-8.

catastrophe.²¹ Though these figures engaged in diverse projects, their shared aversion to the Enlightenment allowed critics and supporters alike to depict them as engaged in a single program, one that entailed a vigorous and united assault on the intellectual traditions of the eighteenth century.

The Neo-Enlightenment thinkers believed that the marriage of the New Social Movements' identity politics and European postmodernism gave birth to the Academic Left, a hodgepodge of Afrocentrists like Leonard Jeffries, Third Wave Feminists like Judith Butler, and critical legal theorists like Richard Delgado.²² Thwarted in its efforts to transform American society and increasingly cynical about the potential of conventional politics to achieve anything in that direction, the Academic Left burrowed its way into the American university system. In this view, once established in departments of literature, history, and "the studies," the Academic Left took up a project of unmasking, dissecting, and subverting the entire cultural apparatus that prevented meaningful social transformation. This counter-hegemonic project, so the Neo-Enlightenment thinkers felt, resulted in the Academic Left occupying itself with arcane matters of cultural politics, instead of fighting for democracy and equality at the polling booth and in the work place. The flexible, multi-form tradition of rationalist progressivism had cracked under the weight of a contingent set of events in the sixties and seventies; by the end of the century it had

²¹ As Hollinger notes, the great irony of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* prominence in latter twentieth-century American debates over the Enlightenment is that Adorno and Horkheimer's text is very much a midcentury document. Its assimilation into post-sixties attacks on the Enlightenment arises from its translation into English in 1972. David Hollinger, "The Enlightenment and the Genealogy of Cultural Conflict in the United States," in *What's Left of Enlightenment: A Postmodern Question*, ed. Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hanns Reill (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 14. François Cusset makes a similar point regarding the American importation of "French Theory." Most of the major figures in "postmodernism" made their names in France during the late sixties and were engaged in a very different set of arguments than those with which they are associated in the United States. See Cusset, *French Theory*.

²² For definitions of the Academic Left, see Tomasky, *Left for Dead*, 40-41; Gross and Levitt, *Higher Superstition*, 9-10; Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 146-47; Diggins, *Rise and Fall of the American Left*, 279-306.

given way to a new kind of Left, housed primarily in the academy and concerned primarily with the reformation of culture.

The Temptations of Postmodernism

If the first component of Neo-Enlightenment discourse was a philosophical history of how the Academic Left came to displace the unified Enlightenment tradition, the second distinctive element was a critique of the Academic Left's capacity to serve as a legitimate vehicle for emancipatory politics. Their principal charge was incoherence. Neo-Enlightenment thinkers contended that the entire intellectual framework of the Academic Left was a sham, or as the physicist Alan Sokal put it, "fashionable nonsense."²³ At the most fundamental level, Neo-Enlightenment Liberals argued, the Academic Left's worldview could not actually be *lived*. Insofar as statements such as "nothing is knowable" or "everything is subjective" must apply to those statements themselves, they are either false or meaningless. As Nagel put it, "the denial of objective truth on the ground that all systems of belief are determined by social forces is self-refuting if we take it seriously, since it appeals to a sociological or historical claim that would not establish the conclusion unless it were objectively correct."²⁴

Sokal made this point forcefully in 1996 when he submitted an article to the journal *Social Text*, "Transgressing The Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity."²⁵ The article, ostensibly a dismantling of the imperialistic sensibilities of

²³ Jean Bricmont and Alan Sokal, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998).

²⁴ Thomas Nagel, "The Sleep of Reason," *The New Republic*, October 12, 1998, 36.

²⁵ Alan D. Sokal, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," *Social Text* 46/47 (April 1996): 217-52. Sokal revealed his prank in Sokal, "A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies," *Lingua Franca* (May-June 1996), <http://linguafranca.mirror.theinfo.org/9605/sokal.html>.

modern physics, displayed all the worst hallmarks of postmodern writing: Sokal jumbled together an assortment of factoids from scientific journals and tangled quotations from prominent poststructuralist philosophers. The article also contained, however, a collection of what Sokal later described as “absurdities and non-sequiturs.”²⁶ That is, “Transgressing the Boundaries” intentionally misrepresented basic facts of contemporary physics and *Social Text*’s editors, for one reason or another, allowed the essay to slip by.²⁷ The upshot of Sokal’s “delicious hoax,” as philosopher Thomas Nagel described it in the *New Republic*, was that postmodernism was so vacuous that its very practitioners could not tell their own work from someone satirizing it.²⁸ “The comedy of the Sokal incident,” wrote feminist critic Katha Pollitt, “is that even the postmodernists don’t really understand each other’s writing and move from one familiar name or notion to the next like a frog jumping across a murky pond by way of lily pads.”²⁹

The comedy of Sokal’s hoax aside, such arguments went well beyond the claim that Academic Leftists wrote badly or that nobody knew what exactly they meant. Rather, according to Neo-Enlightenment Liberals, the prevalence of nonsense-talk disguised a deeper vein of philosophical bad faith. In this view, Academic Leftists did not consistently press their commitment to relativism to its logical conclusion. Despite their radically skeptical personae as philosophers, postmodern thinkers did not live their non-textual lives as though human imaginations constructed material reality. “Anyone who believes that the laws of physics are

²⁶ Sokal, *Fashionable Nonsense*, 3-4.

²⁷ The standard explanation for the inclusion of “Transgressing” is that the editors of *Social Text* were themselves too besotted by postmodernism to notice the silliness of the enterprise. Michael Bérubé, however, has argued that Sokal took advantage of the system of peer review and that the editors were guilty of little more than trusting in the good will of their contributors. Michael Bérubé, *Rhetorical Occasions: Essays on Humans and the Humanities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 15-34.

²⁸ Nagel, “Sleep of Reason,” 32.

²⁹ As quoted in Sokal, *Fashionable Nonsense*, 207.

mere social conventions,” Sokal wrote, “is invited to try transgressing those conventions from the windows of my apartment. I live on the twenty-first floor.”³⁰ Invitations to commit suicide notwithstanding, the point was that the Academic Left was profoundly insincere and inconsistent in its relativism. “Beneath the smoky ‘instability’ of postmodernism,” quipped Gitlin, “virtually everyone claims to be telling it like it is.”³¹

Neo-Enlightenment Liberals thus saw the Academic Left’s relativism as less a deep commitment than an argumentative stratagem, pressed when useful (in attacking science or Western culture) and abandoned when problematic (in not falling out of windows or stepping into traffic). But what purpose did this selective relativism serve? Many Neo-Enlightenment critics insisted that vulgar, mercenary intentions underlay the Academic Left’s supposedly radical skepticism. Searle, who famously labeled Derrida a charlatan, charged that the Academic Left’s attacks on science and rationality reflected a desire to displace the sciences’ position as the master discourse of contemporary intellectual life. “The deep motivation for the denial of realism is not this or that argument, but a will to power, a desire for control, and a deep and abiding resentment. This resentment has a long history, and in the late twentieth century it has been augmented by a resentment and hatred of the natural sciences.”³² Scientists Paul Gross and Norman Levitt agreed, claiming that “humanists and sociologists alike take a certain pleasure in the notion that the mighty principality of the exact sciences, with its arsenal of laboratories and observatories, its inexhaustible sources of funding, its imagined stentorian voice in public policy, its intimidating intellectual mystique, is now put on the bench for demystification.”³³ Like the

³⁰ Ibid., 269n3.

³¹ Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 202.

³² Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society*, 32-33.

³³ Gross and Levitt, *Higher Superstition*, 238.

conservative attack on the “New Class,” discussed in chapter 3, the Neo-Enlightenment perspective cast the Academic Left as engaged in a class struggle, one superficially concerned with lofty issues of truth and right, but ultimately resolving in questions of prestige and power.

Other critics, such as Gitlin and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., argued that the Academic Left’s relativism functioned as a kind of therapy. Postmodernism’s dismantling of Western rationalism, they noted, went hand-in-hand with the construction of clumsy histories that aimed at “empowering” minorities. The Academic Left’s version of reform meant writing historical narratives that treated Europe as a periphery, constructing literary canons that privileged the work of women and minorities, and hypothesizing epistemologies that emphasized multiple forms of intelligence and “ways of knowing” the world. According to the Neo-Enlightenment thinkers, this re-imagining quite consciously sacrificed accuracy for the sake of therapy. Stories claiming that Athens stole its philosophical culture from Egypt or that the Iroquois Confederation inspired the American Constitution may have gotten their facts wrong, but they served to make the underprivileged feel good. Schlesinger sarcastically remarked that, in the view of academic curriculum reformers, “children from non-white minorities, so long persuaded of their inferiority by the white hegemony, need the support and inspiration that identification with role models of the same color will give them.”³⁴

Additionally, Neo-Enlightenment Liberals held that the cultural politics of the Academic Left blended seamlessly with the high-tech, vapid consumer culture of late capitalism. The “valueless universe” promoted by postmodern philosophy meshed well with the “new world of microchip technology,” wrote the cultural critic Morris Berman.³⁵ “The thrill of new

³⁴ Schlesinger, *Disuniting America*, 65.

³⁵ Morris Berman, *The Twilight of American Culture* (New York: Norton, 2000), 50.

technologies” and “the all-consuming blankness of generation X,” according to Gitlin, served as stand-ins for a “deep belief in the whole human project.”³⁶ Identity politics’ tonic of self-esteem and postmodernism’s disjointed aesthetic sense fed the desire for instant gratification in the same manner as shopping malls or MTV. Neo-Enlightenment Liberals saw these as commodities that the Academic Left sold to a generation of Americans suffering from a short attention span, an addiction to gadgetry, and a weak sense of self.

The Academic Left’s substitution of therapeutic radicalism for real politics, Neo-Enlightenment Liberals argued, came at a heavy price.³⁷ In particular, they insisted that if ordinary Americans came to identify left-wing politics with Judith Butler or Leonard Jeffries, they would find it easier to shift their worldview rightward. Academic Leftists’ mushy relativism and bohemian obscurantism, Sokal claimed, “tends to discredit the entire left” by making progressive politics appear ridiculous, pretentious, and utopian. “The right,” he added, “does not pass up the opportunity to exploit this connection demagogically.”³⁸ According to the art critic Robert Hughes, the Academic Left’s “PC claptrap” offered conservative critics “a delicious array of cheap shots.”³⁹ It was, Hughes sneered, “a godsend to the right.” Gross and Levitt lamented that “for the first time in American history, right-wing theorists seem on the point of establishing themselves on the ethical and philosophical high ground, thanks to the postmodern contortions of

³⁶ Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 86.

³⁷ I borrow the term “therapeutic radicalism” from Alan Brinkley’s essay on the New Left. Alan Brinkley, “The Therapeutic Radicalism of the New Left,” in *Liberalism and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 222-36.

³⁸ Sokal, *Fashionable Nonsense*, 208.

³⁹ Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 24.

the left.”⁴⁰ Rush Limbaugh and Patrick Buchanan had little to offer ordinary Americans, but they could still prevail over the absurdities of Afrocentrism or deconstruction.

As Neo-Enlightenment Liberals saw it, with no coherent story to tell about how the world worked or where it was going, the Academic Left had relinquished any ability to speak to Americans outside of the academy. It could tantalize women and minorities with visions of empowerment and righteousness, but not much more than that. In particular, it had abandoned economic inequality in the name of “narrow” issues of identity. Neo-Enlightenment Liberals insisted that working- and middle-class Americans still potentially could be united through a political platform of economic security—of “class”—but the Academic Left eschewed such possibilities, instead alienating the “working-class whites” with whom they should have been making common cause. The American Right suffered from no such disadvantage: Peddling religion, family values, and nationalist redemption to the working class, according to the political journalist Michael Tomasky, the Right had stolen “the language of community and aspiration” that had traditionally belonged to the Left.⁴¹

Finally, by some accounts, the Academic Left constituted a wing of the reaction itself. As a simple matter of logic, the Neo-Enlightenment Liberals argued, the wrecking ball of postmodernism could prove just as useful to the Right as to the Left. In a critique of Judith Butler written for the *New Republic*, philosopher Martha Nussbaum recounted the experience of teaching Foucault to law students, noting one “perceptive libertarian student” who wondered why Foucault’s anti-authoritarianism could not be deployed “to resist the tax structure, or the anti-discrimination laws, or perhaps even to join the militias.” What prevented students seeking

⁴⁰ Gross and Levitt, *Higher Superstition*, 88.

⁴¹ Tomasky, *Left for Dead*, 7.

to evade the university's attempts to police their classroom and campus behavior from engaging "in the subversive performances of making fun of feminist remarks in class, or ripping down the posters of the lesbian and gay law students' association?" Such acts, Nussbaum observed, "are parodic and subversive. Why, then, aren't they daring and good?"⁴² In a similar vein, legal scholars Daniel Farber and Suzanna Sherry argued that postmodern skepticism could be used to cast doubt on the reality of the Holocaust, or used to bolster the plausibility of creationism.⁴³ There was nothing inherent in postmodernism itself that could push cultural politics in progressive directions.

Neo-Enlightenment thinkers regarded the congeniality of postmodernism to reactionary politics as no coincidence. In their view, postmodernism represented the latest iteration of a long and sinister tradition of Counter-Enlightenment thought. Like the Academic Left, vitalistic counter-revolutionary thinkers like Edmund Burke, Joseph de Maistre, the German Romantics, and Friedrich Nietzsche had held that the eighteenth-century *philosophes'* cold rationalism

⁴² Martha Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler," *The New Republic*, February 22, 1999, 37-45. Nussbaum presents an interesting case. In 1986, she published *The Fragility of Goodness*, in which she argued that contemporary moral philosophy's preoccupation with Kant had rendered it unable to make sense of the role of luck in moral life and the ultimately tragic character of our ethical aspirations. As a corrective, Nussbaum recommended an increased attention to Greek philosophy and tragedy, which better account for central importance of the ethical disasters brought about by chance. By coincidence, Nussbaum's book came to be grouped by some as an all-out attack on modern thought in general and on analytic moral philosophy in particular, akin to MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. In the second edition of *Fragility*, Nussbaum took pains to distance herself from MacIntyre's position: "I wish to distance myself from appeals to the Greeks that urge the rejection of systematic theorizing in ethics and of the Enlightenment goal of a social life grounded in reason. Such alternatives were simply not on the table fifteen years ago, and those who would label as 'antitheory' my position, which aims not to reject Enlightenment ideas but to appropriate the Greeks as allies of an expanded version of Enlightenment liberalism, are simply mistaken." Martha Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xvi.

⁴³ Farber and Sherry, *Beyond All Reason*, 5, 12. As regards creationism, one of the more curious features of this line of argument is that it tends to focus on the relatively few instances in which creationists have deployed "postmodern" arguments to call into question the possibility of knowledge, while ignoring the much more prevalent strategy of depicting creationism as a scientific theory in legitimate competition with evolutionary biology. As Ronald Numbers has shown, this has been the general tenor of creationist rhetoric since the 1970s. See Numbers, *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). Of course, this tends to undermine the notion that it is the departure from a scientific worldview alone that makes one embrace reactionary politics.

suppressed imagination and passion, thereby preventing individuals and peoples alike from achieving anything approaching true greatness.⁴⁴ They had done so not in the name of emancipating the marginalized and the oppressed, but to glorify communities of blood and history. For Neo-Enlightenment critics, the result was predictable: Heidegger, the central figure in much postmodern theory, had been an ardent anti-Semite and supporter of the Nazi regime.⁴⁵ Paul de Man, professor of literature at Yale and prominent deconstructionist, was revealed in 1986 to have collaborated with Nazi occupiers in Belgium, contributing several anti-Semitic articles to a pro-Nazi newspaper.⁴⁶ The philosophical rejection of rationality, Neo-Enlightenment thinkers claimed, had historically gone hand in hand with the rise of the most destructive forms of right-wing nationalism.

Indeed, according to many Neo-Enlightenment Liberals, the philosophy of anti-rationalism *necessarily* led to violence. By this logic, whether or not postmodern leftists realized it, absent the requirement of providing rational justifications for one's positions, disagreements could be decided only through force. Democratic conversation gave way, historian John Patrick Diggins wrote, to "endless contexts of domination."⁴⁷ To the Neo-Enlightenment Liberals, the outbreak of ethnic cleansing in Southeastern Europe after 1989 vividly illustrated that the

⁴⁴ For attempts to place the Academic Left in a longer tradition of Counter-Enlightenment thought, see Tomasky, *Left for Dead*, 24; Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 84, 210-11; Gross and Levitt, *Higher Superstition*, 21-23; Postman, *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century*, 100-101.

⁴⁵ "When [Nietzsche and Heidegger] finished their brilliant critiques of traditional narratives," Postman asked, "what were they left with? Nietzsche spent his last ten years as a lunatic; Heidegger fell in love with Hitler. This is not a mistake the philosophes made." Ibid., 106.

⁴⁶ For discussions of the Heidegger and De Man incidents see Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 210-11 and Gross and Levitt, *Higher Superstition*, 76-77. The general point, as philosopher Paul Kurtz put it, was to deny that there was any way to construe Heideggerian philosophy apart from Heidegger's enthusiasm for the Nazi regime. "How should we interpret the writings of a great philosopher, if not by examining in part the consequences of his philosophy in ethical and social practice, given the fact that his writings reflect not simply ontological or ethical pronouncements throughout? How shall we view his rejection of the ethics of humanism?" Kurtz, *Toward a New Enlightenment*, 5.

⁴⁷ Diggins, *Rise and Fall of the American Left*, 373.

denigration of reason invariably led to the irrationalist celebration of blood, power, and violence. The universalizing communist project, despite its multitude of crimes and corruptions, had served to temper ethnic antagonisms and forge common identities in the historically volatile Eastern Bloc. With its collapse, “ancient hatreds” had reasserted themselves as the central dynamic of post-communist politics and, just as earlier forms of nationalism had culminated in the violence of the mid-twentieth century, the return of irrational celebrations of tribalism had brought disaster. According to Tomasky, “solidarity based on race or ethnicity always produces war, factionalism, fundamentalism. This is as true in America as it is in Bosnia.”⁴⁸

The Academic Left had, in this view, exchanged the “rigors of cosmopolitanism” for the “fierce pleasures” of identity politics and postmodernism.⁴⁹ The Enlightenment tradition that had animated Western humanitarianism for two centuries had given way to a recrudescence of unreason, tribalism, nihilism, trash-culture, and growing inequality. This connection between philosophical foundations and humanitarianism—indeed, the dependence of the latter upon the former—became the central proposition of Neo-Enlightenment thought. A genuinely self-critical thinker had to accept some set of invariant philosophical foundations and thus become, however reluctantly, a proponent of “Enlightenment Values.” To do otherwise, to abandon “the world of non-words,” was to fall into the temptations of self-serving philosophical decadence, to

⁴⁸ Tomasky, *Left for Dead*, 16. In 2011, the filmmaker Errol Morris provided a compelling but somewhat lower-stakes dramatization of this supposedly necessary connection between irrationalism and violence in a series of essays published in the *New York Times*. Morris had briefly spent time as a graduate student working under Kuhn’s supervision. On Morris’ telling, his philosophy career came to an abrupt end when he visited Kuhn’s office and presented him with a series of insurmountable difficulties for Kuhn’s pre-postmodern outlook. Unable to generate a reasoned response, Kuhn allegedly hurled an ashtray at Morris’ head. “I call Kuhn’s reply ‘The Ashtray Argument.’ If someone says something you don’t like, you throw something at him. Preferably something large, heavy, and with sharp edges. Perhaps we were engaged in a debate on the nature of language, meaning and truth. But maybe we just wanted to kill each other.” Errol Morris, “The Ashtray: The Ultimatum (Part 1),” *New York Times*, March 11, 2011. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/06/the-ashtray-the-ultimatum-part-1/>.

⁴⁹ Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams* 148.

effectively short-circuit any hope for progressive change, and ultimately to join (or at least comfort) the counter-revolution.⁵⁰

More Failures of Nerve

How ought we to explain Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism? Since the 1990s, two basic lines of interpretation have emerged. On the one hand, contemporaries such as Martin Duberman, Robin Kelley, and Jesse Lemisch proposed that the Neo-Enlightenment critique was essentially a left-wing gloss on a popular conservative brand of cultural criticism.⁵¹ In the 1980s and 1990s, conservative critics such as Alan Bloom, Robert Bork, and Roger Kimball bemoaned the growth in America of “relativism” and the decay of a common culture.⁵² Similarly, Neo-Enlightenment Liberals diagnosed the Left’s ailments as resulting from fragmentation and relativism, and declared that things would be made right only when the Left set aside its particularism and rediscovered a transcendent set of values. Moreover, they insisted that this project of philosophical reconstruction was essentially an historical one. The Academic Left’s rejection of universal values was not only a philosophical mistake, but also an historical deviation from long-standing intellectual traditions. The solution for contemporary problems, they argued, lay in recovering a lost universalistic heritage from the past. Similarly, conservative culture warriors like Bloom and Kimball also assailed postmodernism and pointed their fingers at the sixties as the moment when everything had gone wrong. They too argued that the only

⁵⁰ Postman, *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century*, 80.

⁵¹ See Martin Duberman, “Bring Back the Enlightenment!” *The Nation*, July 1996, 27. See also Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 103-24.

⁵² See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics has Corrupted Higher Education* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990); Robert Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: Regan Books, 1996).

remedy for America's cultural malaise was moral reformation—a task accomplished through the recovery of forgotten virtues from the past. While such conservatives were generally unlikely to call for a return to Enlightenment Values, their central discursive tropes—Western civilization, natural law, the founders, classicism—nonetheless invoked the Age of Reason in ways that foreshadowed Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism. Perhaps the Neo-Enlightenment thinkers were, as Lemisch put it, “the Angry White Men of the Left.”⁵³

In a more charitable interpretation, historian Douglas Rossinow has argued that the dust-up was less about “ultimate values” than political strategy and liberal frustration.⁵⁴ In Rossinow's view, Neo-Enlightenment thinkers were principally concerned that post-modernism and identity politics had alienated the Left from the rest of the country. Overheated rhetoric aside, the call for a return to rationalism was motivated simply by a desire to make left-of-center ideas win again. There is much to be said for this interpretation. Some conservatives certainly saw the Neo-Enlightenment movement as liberal political strategy. In 1998, a reviewer for *Commentary* argued that, while it was nice to see liberals and leftists appreciating patriotism once again, their intentions were obviously mercenary.⁵⁵ Reviewing Tomasky's *Left for Dead* in *The Public Interest*, conservative political commentator David Brooks noted that, although “it's fun to read these self-flagellatory exercises,” the “class-not-race” wing of American liberalism could never triumph over identity politics and postmodernism: “Once you've given up on the idea of fixed

⁵³ Jessie Lemisch, “Angry White Men of the Left,” *New Politics* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 97-104.

⁵⁴ Douglas Rossinow, *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 256. Eric Alterman and Kevin Mattson, in their history of modern liberalism, make a similar claim. Alterman and Mattson, *The Cause: The Fight for American Liberalism from Franklin Roosevelt to Barack Obama* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 349-60.

⁵⁵ John Fonte, “A Patriotic Left,” *Commentary*, September 1998, 44-45.

meanings and normal categories (like male and female), you can't suddenly turn back and embrace Thomas Paine."⁵⁶

Further, considerable evidence for a strategic interpretation can be found in the writings of Neo-Enlightenment Liberals themselves, who continually insisted that identity politics could never serve as the basis for a resuscitation of left-wing politics. "The left has been marching on the English Department," Gitlin quipped, "while the right has been occupying the White House."⁵⁷ Indeed, Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism began to flourish during the ever right-tilting Clinton presidency, and in particular following the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, the first such takeover in nearly forty years.⁵⁸ On the global scene, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states seemed to suggest, as Margaret Thatcher put it, that there was no alternative to free market democracy. Without question, the early 1990s represented a high-water mark of sorts for the American (and global) right. It makes sense, then, to see Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism as the left-wing equivalent of Clinton's strategy of triangulation. Neo-Enlightenment Liberals sought a new identity for an "independent left" that could resist the neoliberal drift while refusing the supposedly dead-end politics of the New Social Movements.⁵⁹

Whatever their virtues, both of these interpretations have important limitations. First, it is easy to overstate the purely tactical dimension of Neo-Enlightenment thought. We could scarcely deny that in post-sixties America center-leftists had a great deal of trouble assembling winning

⁵⁶ David Brooks, "Class Politics versus Identity Politics," *Public Interest* 125 (1996): 117.

⁵⁷ Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 127. This formulation is repeated often. Diggins attributes it to Irving Howe: "As Irving Howe wryly noted, the task of the deconstructionist is to change not the world but the English department. All power to the professors!" Diggins, *Rise and Fall of the American Left*, 356.

⁵⁸ Tomasky explicitly cites the congressional takeover as his motivation for writing *Left for Dead*. Tomasky, *Left for Dead*, 1-8.

⁵⁹ It is telling, in this respect, how much the more politically minded Neo-Enlightenment Liberals looked to the independent leftists of the postwar years, such as Irving Howe and I. F. Stone.

national coalitions, and that they engaged in a series of “rebranding” efforts during the 1990s to increase their relevance.⁶⁰ Yet it is also clear that Neo-Enlightenment Liberals conflated political fragmentation with their sense that American cultural and philosophical life had fractured and declined. As we have seen, Neo-Enlightenment discourse asserted not only that the politics of the Academic Left were incapable of winning elections, but also that they were incapable of producing viable emancipatory visions. In their view, identity politics and postmodernism alienated potential constituencies, but they were also bad politics in the much deeper sense that they were vapid and reactionary. Neo-Enlightenment thought was about “ultimate values,” or at the very least about the juncture where ultimate values and political strategy intersected.

Second, one can certainly squint one’s eyes and see a resemblance between the Neo-Enlightenment thinkers and culture warriors like Robert Bork and Alan Bloom. The dispute with the Academic Left was indisputably a turf war for control of the universities, and Neo-Enlightenment thinkers often found themselves playing the “conservative” when it came to teaching the literary canon or emphasizing the possibilities of American democracy. Still, the differences between conservative culture warriors and Neo-Enlightenment Liberals loom larger than their similarities. In particular, though both sets of critics recommended looking to the past as a solution for the present, they envisioned the processes of recovery quite differently. In the imaginations of Bork and Kimball, the canon and the Constitution expressed “absolute” and “timeless” values whose meaning Americans could access without mediation, values from which post-sixties America had departed and to which it had to return. Their sense of historical recovery indicted any attempts to update, modify or amend the wisdom of the past. Neo-

⁶⁰ It was during the 1990s that liberals began adopting the name “progressive.” As Rossinow notes, both Clintonite liberals seeking to distance themselves from the labor movement and the welfare state, as well as left-liberals disdainful of Democratic Party establishment’s drift rightward adopted the name. Rossinow, *Visions of Progress*, 257.

Enlightenment Liberals, by contrast, thought that the amenability of eighteenth-century universalism to change, its abilities to become inclusive of new concerns and to address itself to radically changed circumstances, formed the core of its appeal. It was not, as Bork or Bloom insisted, that our forebears saw us more clearly than we saw ourselves, but that we understood the radical import of their ideas even better than they did.⁶¹

This approach to the Enlightenment allowed Neo-Enlightenment Liberals to embrace the eighteenth century while refusing its naiveté and its ugliness. “We cannot possibly stage a simple revival of the Enlightenment,” Morris Berman wrote, “because if we know the power of that worldview, we also know its limits.”⁶² If it were true that the Enlightenment advocated the naïve rationalism of Descartes, the Neo-Enlightenment thinkers argued, then it would make sense to abandon it. If defending the Enlightenment meant defending Jefferson’s white supremacy, then obviously no one ought to bother doing so. But Enlightenment Values, they insisted, stood apart from any single flesh-and-blood representative of the Age of Reason. Enlightenment thinkers’ own ideas condemned their hypocrisy: “Yes, Jefferson had slaves,” noted media critic Neil Postman, “but he knew that he shouldn’t have slaves.”⁶³ Enlightenment Values were part of an historical process rather than a static package of ideas; they were an unfolding conversation in which the true meaning of universal principles became apparent gradually over time. “The

⁶¹ The difference here is roughly analogous to contemporaneous debates over “originalist” versus “living” interpretations of the US Constitution. The two best accounts of the debate are Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 221-55, and Sehat, *Jefferson Rule*, chap. 7.

⁶² Berman, *Twilight of American Culture*, 176. Berman suggests a rather bleak strategy of cultural preservation—his term is the “new monasticism”—in the face of the rising tide of unreason.

⁶³ Postman, *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century*, 19.

Enlightenment is intrinsically incomplete,” according to Gitlin, “indeed, intrinsically incapable of being completed.”⁶⁴

The Declaration of Independence’s career as a revolutionary document exemplified this sense of Enlightenment Values as “self-correcting.” Most of the authors of the Declaration, of course, were slaveholders and ardent defenders of white supremacy, and they never intended that women should participate in political life, regarding them as incapable of manly self-government. According to Neo-Enlightenment thinkers, however, the universalistic language of the Declaration quickly slipped free of the prejudices of its authors. The “Enlightenment abstractions implanted in the nation’s political charters,” as David Hollinger described them, possessed their own inner logic of emancipation.⁶⁵ In other words, there was nothing in the Declaration’s emancipatory rhetoric that required one to retain Jefferson’s staunch white supremacy; the Declaration’s overt commitment to universal equality ran directly contrary to it. This fact allowed abolitionists, black and white, to appropriate the Declaration’s language to justify the overthrow of the slave order it had originally underwritten. Women, too, had deployed its promises to pursue equal rights in the public sphere, as had revolutionaries battling European and American imperialism.⁶⁶ Whatever the dubious circumstances surrounding its genesis, the

⁶⁴ Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 216. There is a quite striking parallel in this conception of Enlightenment ideas as a gradual, but always deferred, convergence on the truth and classical Peircean conceptions of truth. See Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 177-200, and Robert Westbrook, *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 21-51.

⁶⁵ Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 90.

⁶⁶ See Diggins, *Rise and Fall of the American Left*, 324, 374, and Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 43, 48, 96. Gordon Wood summed up this position well in the introduction to his *Radicalism of the American Revolution*: “To focus, as we are today apt to do, on what the Revolution did not accomplish—highlighting and lamenting its failure to abolish slavery and change fundamentally the lot of women—is to miss the great significance of what it did accomplish; indeed, the Revolution made possible the anti-slavery and women’s rights movements of the nineteenth century and in fact all of our current egalitarian thinking.” Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 7. By the end of the 1990s, a number of historians influenced by whiteness studies, most notably Matthew Frye Jacobson and Gary Gerstle, had profoundly complicated the notion that the more lamentable moments of US history stemmed merely from a divergence of American theory and practice. See Gerstle, *American*

Declaration's potential as a revolutionary document clearly transcended them. "The founding fathers left at least half the species out of account," Gitlin wrote, "yet the logic of their language implied the eventual defeat of their prejudices."⁶⁷

The Neo-Enlightenment critics, then, were neither searching for a new political brand nor succumbing to the natural conservatism of middle age. Rather, they saw in the Enlightenment a political philosophy of successive revelation. In their history of the Enlightenment tradition, the struggles of the socially marginalized operated as the primary motor of political progress. At the same time, Neo-Enlightenment Liberals saw modern history as the struggle to "live up to" the high ideals proclaimed in the eighteenth century. Voltaire and Jefferson articulated a modern, emancipatory language, but it had been left up to others to figure out its real meaning and implications. Enlightenment Values were less a fixed program than a method, not at all dissimilar from the "scientific method," of engaging reality. Political reform, like scientific practice, was a communal enterprise that depended upon its practitioners committing themselves to openness and criticism. For Neo-Enlightenment critics, the great sin of the Academic Left was that, in rejecting Enlightenment Values, it had thrown a wrench in the motor of progress.

Even if we cannot easily assimilate Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism to a broader conservative backlash, we can nevertheless find affinities with other intellectual formations. First, and however paradoxically, this species of thought inherited much of the Tory Socialist critical style. Neo-Enlightenment Liberals presented themselves as the defenders of *tradition*—not only longstanding Western humanism, but also a shorter-lived, mushy left-liberalism—which

Crucible; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Macmillan, 2001); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁶⁷ Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 88. Consider also Hughes' contention that "the moral and intellectual conviction that inspired Toussaint L'Ouverture to focus on the grievances of the Haitian slaves and lead them to freedom came from his reading of Rousseau and Mirabeau." Hughes, *Culture of Complaint*, 150.

they set up as the alternative to neoliberal Clintonism and New Social Movement Radicalism. They looked to the early New Left for a model of critical social thought. They depicted their enemies on the Academic Left as a New Class hunting for prestige and power, and as alien (French!) hucksters peddling political fantasies. They variously conjured Niebuhr's political realism, Kristol's anti-radicalism, and Lasch's Neo-Traditionalism, but all in the name of defending the Enlightenment from its enemies.

Second, Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism had many parallels on the libertarian right. In the mid-1980s, the British Institute for Economic Affairs published a collection of essays entitled *The New Right Enlightenment*.⁶⁸ "Heralded" by F. A. Hayek, *New Right Enlightenment* featured essays by twenty young libertarian philosophers that linked the rise of Thatcher and Reagan to the return of Enlightenment Values. The welfare state, in their view, had been the great abrogation of the Enlightenment, a retreat from the eighteenth century's heroic conception of humankind's moral and intellectual self-sufficiency. In 1994, the libertarian philosopher Christina Hoff Sommers published *Who Stole Feminism*, in which she argued that 1960s radicals had hijacked the issue of women's equality from its origins in Enlightenment philosophy.⁶⁹ No longer committed to "Enlightenment Principles of individual justice," Sommers argued, contemporary feminists now saw themselves as engaged in a "gender war" against the patriarchy.⁷⁰ The connection between the Age of Reason and free-market philosophy ran particularly strong among libertarians of a Randian cast. Ayn Rand herself, as well as her chosen

⁶⁸ Arthur Seldon and John Burton, *The "New Right" Enlightenment: The Spectre That Haunts the Left: Essays by Young Writers* (London: Economic and Literary Books, 1985). See also David Graham and P. F. Clarke, *The New Enlightenment: The Rebirth of Liberalism* (London: Pan Macmillan, 1986).

⁶⁹ Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

successor, Leonard Peikoff, identified her Objectivist philosophy as the only legitimate descendent of Enlightenment thought.⁷¹ In their typically idiosyncratic fashion, Rand and Peikoff identified the end of the Enlightenment with Immanuel Kant. The philosopher of Königsberg had dared to suggest that human beings could not access reality as it is in itself, and with that assertion the Counter-Enlightenment and the West's long descent into irrationality had begun. When the Objectivist Atlas Society held its annual conference in 1999, it boasted the theme "The Real Culture Wars: The Enlightenment and its Enemies." The upshot of the conference, according to *Reason Magazine*, was that an alliance had formed between "traditionalists" and "postmodernists" to trash the legacy of the Enlightenment.⁷²

Third, a similar form of self-fashioning played out among the few remaining members of the old left in the 1980s and 1990s. The great unreconstructed-Stalinist historian Eric Hobsbawm insisted in the *New Left Review* that resisting the waves of nationalism sweeping over post-communist Europe necessitated taking a stand for Reason. "One of the few things that stands between us and an accelerated descent into darkness is the set of values inherited from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment," Hobsbawm asserted.⁷³ In his 1994 *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, the anarchist philosopher Murray Bookchin attacked the therapeutic culture of contemporary

⁷¹ For Ayn Rand's curious philosophy of history, see the collection of essays Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs it?*, ed. Leonard Peikoff (New York: Signet, 1984). See also Leonard Peikoff, *Ominous Parallels: The End of Freedom in America* (New York: Meridian, 1982). It ought to be noted here that despite the obvious connections between her Objectivism and other forms of libertarianism, Rand did not consider herself a libertarian, and regarded them as "a monstrous, disgusting bunch of people." This was likely due to the fact that the notoriously self-obsessed Rand saw the libertarian movement as usurping her rightful spotlight. See Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 266-72.

⁷² Walter Olson, "Reasonable Doubts: Dark Bedfellows," *Reason Magazine*, January 1999, 58-60. The Atlas Society (formerly the Objectivist Center and the Institute for Objectivist Studies) is an organization of breakaway Objectivists led by David Kelley. According to Jennifer Burns, Kelley and Peikoff had a falling-out in the late eighties when the former suggested that Rand's ideas did not comprise a "closed-system." Burns, *Goddess of the Market*, 281.

⁷³ Eric Hobsbawm, "Barbarism: A User's Guide," *New Left Review* 206 (July-August 1994), 43.

“eco-mystics” that had abandoned the Enlightenment in the name of “lifestyle anarchism.”⁷⁴ As early as 1992, the radical magazine *Z Papers* held a special issue on postmodernism and science in which Noam Chomsky, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Michael Albert lambasted postmodernism as antithetical to transformative social change.⁷⁵ According to Chomsky, many would-be radicals were retreating from the “hopelessness and despair” of contemporary politics into “academic cults” and “the latest lunacies of Paris culture.”⁷⁶

The resemblance between Neo-Enlightenment Liberals, libertarians, and certain sectors of the Left is telling. Like Neo-Enlightenment Liberals, these thinkers of the Right and Left constructed a vision of recent cultural history in which the principal threat to progress was a familiar “failure of nerve.”⁷⁷ The Enlightenment, they believed, had provided an opportunity to press forward into the future without dogma or superstition, but a world without the comforts of premodern thought had proven impossible for most people to bear. Modernity kept talking, but moderns had ceased to listen. This sensibility, which envisions the intellectual as a rationalist candle in the dark, should by this point feel thoroughly familiar. It appears in the reaction of liberal progressives to Reinhold Niebuhr and philosophical pessimism (chapter 2), again in Irving Kristol’s critique of the welfare state (chapter 3), and again in the liberal counter-attack against communitarian philosophy (chapter 4). It imagines the core of illiberal thought and politics as a lack of rational self-government, a failure of nerve, an intellectual soul out of joint. As we have seen, many modern liberals have remained attracted to this ideal, in spite of its

⁷⁴ Murray Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity: A Defense of the Human Spirit Against Antihumanism, Misanthropy, Mysticism, and Primitivism* (New York: Cassell, 1995).

⁷⁵ Most of *Z*’s forums on postmodernism and science are reproduced at <https://zcomm.org/science-wars/>. Unfortunately, the original issues of *Z Papers* are virtually unobtainable, so the exact accuracy of the reproductions is impossible to determine.

⁷⁶ As quoted in Sokal, *Fashionable Nonsense*, 201-2.

⁷⁷ See Weldon, “The Humanist Enterprise from John Dewey to Carl Sagan.”

connections to the bourgeois-capitalist civilization that collapsed between 1914 and 1945. They have sought to escape this difficulty through the deployment of mitigating concepts—the scientific method, the failure of nerve, American Creed, democratic capitalism, etc.—that could allow them to adopt the heroic persona while refusing the historical baggage that accompanied it.

This, in turn, tells us a great deal about the historical function of the “Academic Left” as a concept. It enabled middle-aged New Leftists like Neil Postman and Todd Gitlin to defend the universities that they criticized in their youth (and their positions of privilege within these institutions), or to hitch their stars to the once-hated Democratic Party. It made it possible for aging New Deal liberals like Arthur Schlesinger to quietly abandon the emphasis on “the irrational” that had been so central to *The Vital Center*. It allowed analytic philosophers and science popularizers to minimize the impact of Thomas Kuhn by treating him as a preamble to *Social Text*. Altogether, it gave liberal intellectuals a tool to rationalize their hostility to the ideas and rhetoric of the New Social Movements and to smooth over the difficulties of casting themselves as latter-day Bertrand Russells. The existence of a purportedly irrational Left, one that sabotaged effective politics and exhibited disturbingly reactionary tendencies, made it considerably easier to self-consciously reassume the mantle of science, progress, and reason.

Conclusion: The Return of Bourgeois Radicalism

This puts us in a position to make sense of the proliferation of Neo-Enlightenment discourse with which I began, for this particular self-concept turned out to be distinctly well suited to the dark years of the early twenty-first century. Especially following the massacres of 9/11, dividing the world between the beleaguered descendants of the Enlightenment and a rising tide of irrationalism and “relativism” seemed to many a reasonable explanation for a new and

frightening age. It continued to be used as a hammer to beat the “Academic Left” in the name of the “real” left, as evidenced by the 2002 publication of *The Seduction of Unreason*, yet another intellectual exposé detailing various connections between postmodernism and fascism.⁷⁸ At the same time, however, Neo-Enlightenment rhetoric’s partisan character became increasingly confused. In 2007, for example, the far-right journalist Jonah Goldberg advanced the same claim as an attack on liberalism *per se*. According to Goldberg, “Any instrumental or pragmatic gains you get from rejecting the Enlightenment still amount to taking a sledgehammer to the soapbox you’re standing on. Without the standards of the Enlightenment, we are in a Nietzschean world where power decides important questions rather than reason. This is exactly how the left appears to want it.”⁷⁹

Some of the most prominent intellectual supporters of the war on terror also appropriated the language of Neo-Enlightenment Liberalism, and Neoconservatives and liberals alike have declared that an “Islamic Enlightenment” is the only long term prophylactic against global terrorism.⁸⁰ The New Atheist movement that arose in the midst of the war on terror also took up Neo-Enlightenment rhetoric. Christopher Hitchens, in the closing chapters of his *God is Not*

⁷⁸ Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁷⁹ Jonah Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 282. In 2009, Doubleday re-released Goldberg's book, with the title amended to read “Politics of Change” instead of “Politics of Meaning.”

⁸⁰ Thomas Friedman first floated the idea that the Middle East was in need of Western-style Enlightenment in the *New York Times* in December 2001. It should be noted that Friedman does not claim the term as his own, but instead deploys his characteristic “man on the street” mode of relating what appear to be his own opinions. His essay is reprinted in Friedman, *Longitudes and Attitudes*, 90-91. Much of this, of course, is a reworking of Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis. See Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

Great (2007), envisioned a “New Enlightenment” that might purge the influence of religion from Western societies.⁸¹ “This Enlightenment,” Hitchens argued,

will not need to depend, like its predecessors, on the heroic breakthroughs of a few gifted and exceptionally courageous people. It is within the compass of the average person. The study of literature and poetry, both for its own sake and for the eternal ethical questions with which it deals, can now easily depose the scrutiny of sacred texts that have been found to be corrupt and confected. The pursuit of unfettered scientific inquiry, and the availability of new findings to masses of people by easy electronic means will revolutionize our concepts of research and development. Very importantly, the divorce between the sexual life and fear, and the sexual life and disease, and the sexual life and tyranny, can now at last be attempted, on the sole condition that we banish all religions from the discourse.⁸²

Similarly, in *Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011), libertarian linguist Stephen Pinker cast his eyes over a thousand years of human history and claimed to have discovered a marked decline in the human propensity to violence. The reason, he argued, was the development and gradual extension of Enlightenment Values.⁸³

In this picture, the last three decades appear as an extended period of subtle cultural realignment, where a growing Neo-Enlightenment sensibility draws together certain species of liberal, neoconservative, socialist, and libertarian thought. Invocations of the Enlightenment, it would seem, increasingly represent demands for a “recovery of nerve” that can quite easily be given either a right- or a left-wing gloss. “Irrationalism” can connote Islamic or Christian fundamentalists, multiculturalists, defenders of the welfare state, Foucauldian postmodernists, or all of the above. The point appears to be not our reverence or lack thereof for a pantheon of eighteenth-century figures and texts, but rather the feeling that a Promethean sense of self and an

⁸¹ Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007). See also Hitchens, *Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man: Books that Changed the World* (New York: Grove Press, 2006).

⁸² Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 283.

⁸³ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011).

appropriately progressive account of modern history must underlie any workable formulation of democratic politics.

This ought to give us pause. It has become natural to discuss the notion of “neoliberalism” largely in terms of the penetration of market concepts into non-economic areas of life. While I would not dispute that that is a central aspect of neoliberal philosophy, the 1990s battle over the Enlightenment’s legacy in modern history and the diverse character of the “pro-Enlightenment” camp suggests a rather thicker cultural phenomenon. Todd Gitlin and the editors of *Reason Magazine* have little in common with one another, but they share a vision of politics that divides the world into the friends and enemies of modernity, and an account of recent history in which the project of dragging the West into a better future, of freeing it from superstition and tribalism has become imperiled by a fashionable turn towards irrationality. Another way to think of the neoliberal era, then, is in terms of the forceful return of an unapologetic politics of modernization. After a century of bad conscience, it would seem, bourgeois liberalism has finally gotten over its failure of nerve.

The long-term political consequences of this cultural shift remain to be seen. The US’s disastrous engagement in Iraq and the long unwinding of its initial success in Afghanistan ended the short romance of center-left intellectuals with the latest version of Wilsonianism, and the financial crisis of 2008 made it fashionable once again to speak forcefully of economic inequality. Whether such shocks will or even can significantly dampen elite enthusiasm for modernization projects is debatable. What is clear, at least to me, is that as historians try to make sense of the travails of American politics and culture since the 1960s, they ought not to take at face value the repeated attempts to pin the end of the New Deal Order on an abandonment of the Enlightenment. No one will deny that coalition building in post-sixties America—a country

marked by the continual invention of new forms of national and transnational consciousness—has been a complicated proposition. That so many critics at the turn of the century came to see those complexities not as political or organizational problems, but rather as the result of moral or epistemic deficiencies—a decline of Enlightenment Values—says less about the country’s actual cultural conditions than it does about liberal thinkers’ transforming sense of themselves.

EPILOGUE

OUR IRREPRESSIBLE OPTIMISM

Though it is Marxists who are most often accused of being singularly dependent upon a particular vision of history, all significant intellectual activity involves predictions about the future. Every philosophical and political program's claim on our moral imagination depends in some way upon a series of descriptive assertions about how the world is arranged and how that arrangement works. Though there may be no way to derive *ought* from *is*, a political and moral worldview's success hinges in part on its ability to gain our trust, to square our moral judgments with our perceptions, to organize and make sense of our social situation. Yet this dependence upon accurate description means that even the most successful accounts of the world of politics must eventually pass through a period in which their predictions do not come true. These are the testing times for a body of ideas, the moments when its adherents must get creative and explain the failure of their commitments to meet the basic requirement of explaining the world in which we find ourselves. If they cannot successfully shepherd their worldview through that moment, then it will have begun the long process of ceasing to be a live hypothesis about how we ought to regard our world and organize our community.

The twentieth century was such a critical period for American liberalism. The crisis of reason struck at the core of liberal belief, namely the faith in what Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes described as "the free market in ideas." Just as laissez-faire political economy failed to produce the meritocratic society that it predicted would appear after aristocratic privilege had been abolished, liberalism more generally struggled to explain how unreason continued to

flourish even after its artificial advantages were removed. The ensuing years of philosophical vulnerability brought no shortage of competitors for liberal ideas in the United States, though historians have largely focused on radicals of the Left and what we have come to call the Conservative Movement. In this dissertation, I have tried to uncover another alternative, Tory Socialism, which has gone largely unnoticed in the historical literature. Though it did not usher in a major social movement like the New Left or the Moral Majority, Tory Socialism circulated in the imagination of American intellectuals who saw themselves as centrists, yet could not bring themselves to wholly endorse liberalism in either its “Hooverian” or “Deweyan” modes. Though they showed considerable variation, all Tory Socialist writers engaged with the suspicion that liberalism’s claims about how the world worked were simply not true.

They expressed this suspicion, as we have seen, by attacking the Enlightenment. The eighteenth-century Age of Reason invariably served for Tory Socialist intellectuals as a stand-in for the metaphysical commitments of liberalism. As many historians have sought to remind us, those attacks were mostly inaccurate and unfair to Voltaire, Diderot, and other Enlightenment thinkers. These objections, however, miss the point. The American liberal “civic religion of progress” may or may not have its roots in the eighteenth century. I believe it does, but even if it does not, the Tory Socialist distortions of eighteenth century thought are nevertheless better understood as forms of ideological work than as honest attempts at intellectual history. These thinkers aimed not at uncovering the past but at uncoupling the new political order emerging in the United States from liberal philosophy. They challenged American political thought and social criticism principally by asking whether the politics we colloquially identify as liberal must necessarily be founded upon a cultural program of science, secularity, progress, and modernization.

The Tory Socialist challenge to liberalism is now over. This is not because the crisis of reason that afflicted the liberal worldview has passed, but rather because the conditions that animated the distinctive form of Tory Socialist protest are gone. The first wave of Tory Socialist writing emerged from the crisis of the global Depression and the Second World War, when the specter of instability produced a unique spirit of self-interrogation among establishment intellectuals. The second wave came as a result of the collapse of the postwar world, the erosion of New Deal structures of social protection and of Anglo-Protestant cultural hegemony. The intellectuals who made up that second wave, on the Right and the Left, each had a foot in both the pre- and post-sixties world and were thus in a unique position to measure those two worlds against one another. Put another way, Tory Socialist thought relied to a great degree on historical and personal memory: the memory of the global catastrophe, of intellectuals' own social mobility, of the seemingly placid years before the 1960s. As writers with such memories passed from the scene, the synthesis of Counter-Enlightenment ideas and left-wing politics became less and less intelligible.

Though the Tory Socialist experiment is dead, some of its arguments and rhetorical motifs continue to appear. Contemporary critics and statesmen like to invoke Reinhold Niebuhr when they want to go to war and Christopher Lasch when they want to complain about popular culture, but the invocation is fragmentary and non-committal. Neoconservatism remains an active formation on the Right, but the last time an avowed Neoconservative wrote anything even slightly heterodox is rapidly fading from memory. We still hear echoes of Tory Socialist rhetoric not because the project of generating a center-left conservatism remains viable, but because contemporary culture has a remarkable capacity to chop a philosophy into its component parts—particularly those parts that lend themselves to sloganeering—which are then to be used or

discarded as we see fit. We can thus enjoy the warm, narcotizing experience of invoking “reality” or adverting our world-weariness without fear of any broader commitment. We can deploy elements of the Tory Socialist vocabulary today, the “Progressive” vocabulary tomorrow, and classical liberalism the day after that. Our philosophical eclecticism frees us from intellectual responsibility.

So, if Tory Socialism is over, what verdict on it might we render? Why did it fail to produce a viable alternative to liberal political thought and social criticism? Why is there so little Tory Socialism in the United States? First and foremost, while Tory Socialism produced a great deal of incisive commentary on moral and political failings in the United States, it lacked a properly bureaucratic imagination. That is, the vast majority of intellectuals who tried to ground American democracy in Counter-Enlightenment ideas failed to develop alongside their moralism an appreciation of the role of political structures in the creation of social reality. Though the evidence has long been available that state interference alone can create the conditions of stability and security necessary for modern civilized life, Tory Socialist critics could never make themselves comfortable with such a state-centric conception of politics. This hesitancy was less pronounced among the philosophical pessimists and the anxious liberals that crowded around them during the 1940s and 1950s; it then found expression primarily as a fetishization of political practice over theory. In its later communitarian and neoconservative iterations, the Tory Socialist ambivalence toward the state transformed into an overt hostility, and celebrations of political experiment gave way to fantasies of voluntarism. In both cases, however, the refusal to think the state badly hindered the ability of Tory Socialist writers to articulate a program distinct from those on offer from other kinds of centrists.

In addition to exhibiting this meager structural imagination, the writers examined here also had a very limited ability to speak meaningfully to what we would call issues of subaltern identity, a deficiency that served them poorly in a restless, multinational empire such as the United States. Tory Socialist writers had very little to say on matters of race, gender, or sexuality, and what they did have to say landed somewhere between gradualist counsels of patience and reactionary apoplexy. I have often been teased that I am writing an extended study of the thought of middle-aged, frightened, white men. True, but had I tried to make the study more inclusive or representative of the American population as a whole, it would have obscured something important about my subject, namely that the combination of Counter-Enlightenment rhetoric and center-left political economy does not seem to have appealed especially to women or minority thinkers. The obvious explanation is that a rhetoric that characterizes tradition as a moral good and emancipation as reckless and hubristic tends to hold different meanings depending upon one's socio-cultural position. A less obvious and more speculative hypothesis is that the combination of political centrism and cultural pessimism represents a form of experimentation generally reserved for higher caste members of society. As James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates both discovered, it is difficult for African American social critics to express pessimism about the United States' capacity to overcome its legacy of apartheid, without in the process having the label of radical or nihilist forced on them. Only high caste intellectuals like Niebuhr or Lasch can be both disenchanted with the culture's core dogmas and revered members of the establishment.

All that said, there is still reason for us to take seriously the various attempts to displace "the Enlightenment" in twentieth-century American centrist thought. Tory Socialist writers of the first generation appreciated, in a way that we do not, the overriding importance of security in the

conduct of democratic politics. Conventional American liberalism, conservatism, and radicalism tend to fixate on questions of *justice*. They argue, for example, about whether using tax revenue to pay for an extensive welfare provision is the right thing to do. For Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, and other liberal pessimists, those questions had to be assessed alongside questions about preserving the social order through time. Even in their moments of greatest critical laziness, when they were dragging their heels on civil rights or equating the power of labor unions with the power of the corporations that wanted to break them, the generation of pessimistic intellectuals that dominated in the immediate postwar years remained unblinkingly aware of the fragility of civilized life. They took seriously the proposition that the world was a strange, violent, ugly place, and that functional politics were the only alternative to lawlessness and social breakdown. Their fear of the past may have led them to support anticommunist witch-hunts and imperial misadventures, but it also fed their enthusiasm for the welfare state and their demand for competent leadership.

Likewise, Communitarians and Neoconservatives understood that civil religion is a form of social security, and that a social world in unrelenting flux will eventually produce the same sorts of instability as are generated by material insecurity. While it never occurred to most of the later Tory Socialist writers that civil religions require more than exhortation or discipline for their legitimacy, their criticism of the post-1960s world nevertheless points to a possibility that we would rather not face: that at the end point of the open society is not a new and broadly-accepted body of social values ready to replace the outmoded traditions of the past, but rather incessant and increasingly bitter cultural warfare. While few would want to embrace Kristol's notion of a state-sanctioned "bourgeois ethos" that excludes and bullies other ways of life, or even the hazy "ethic of limits" promoted by communitarians, it is now clear that we cannot

endlessly defer the creation of some new kind of “moral establishment,” to borrow David Sehat’s unsettling term for the era of Anglo-Protestant dominance.¹

Nothing evinces the death of the Tory Socialist project more clearly than the power and pervasiveness of Neo-Enlightenment rhetoric. Once plagued by worries about its theories of politics and progress, liberalism has largely returned to form. Our elites think so little of security or stability that the preferred hurrah-word of our moment is “disruption.” Even our radicals, decrying “crony capitalism” on the Right and “privilege” on the Left, are merely variations on a liberal theme. Many of our younger radicals appear to believe that the key to transformative social change is the elimination of prejudice and arbitrary power, and that belief in itself is a testament to liberalism’s enduring hold on the American imagination. Sadly, the most serious competitor for liberal ideas, at least for the time being, is Movement Conservatives’ revanchist nationalism, which can always feed off the alienation and fury generated by the chronic instability of unapologetically open societies.

And this, of course, provides the grim moral of the Tory Socialist experiments in American intellectual history. Tory Socialist writers may have been elitists, imperialists, and prudes, but they brought a concern for the value of stability and responsible leadership that is otherwise notably lacking in contemporary American political thought and social criticism. Carl Becker expressed it best when he noted that, if you do not provide ordinary Americans with one form of collectivism, eventually they will force another upon you.² They will have security one way or another, whether they “deserve” it or not. The failure of Tory Socialist efforts to make this recognition a permanent feature of American centrist thought is an indictment of American

¹ David Sehat, *Myth of American Religious Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011).

² Becker, *How New Will the Better World Be?*, 163.

elite culture more generally. The only thing that has ever been able to convince American elites to recognize Becker's point was the experience of a catastrophic global crisis that ultimately took the lives of over sixty million people. The visceral fear of another disaster motivated elites to rethink whether the world worked the way they once believed it did, and whether in any future order the needs and desires of ordinary people would have to trump the imperatives of progress and enlightenment. The men and women who experienced that moment of clarity are all dead, and they failed to pass on their sense of the precariousness of civilized life. Our optimism has returned, and we find ourselves once again the agents of modernity and reason. Consequently, we shall in all probability repeat the disasters of the early twentieth century, because we have failed to reproduce the moral knowledge in elites that is necessary to avert them.

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