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Critical Book Review of Conservatism in America

By Paul Gottfried

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Paul Gottfried is one of the leading conservative thinkers of today. Since the 1980s, Gottfried has become an academic historian and the main opponent of American conservatism from the viewpoint of someone inside the movement. He later established organisations which reflected these criticisms. At the back of the New Right, Gottfried joined the conservative cause and the neoconservatives and protestant evangelists were gaining momentum. His two biggest contributions to the conservatism – if I can restrict him to that amount – are his reintroduction of historicism as a feasible solution to conservatism, and his deep criticism of conservatism, which starts with his book *The Search for Historical Meaning* in 1986: Hegel and the American Right after the war.

Paul Edward Gottfried has published a recent book on American conservatism, which delves into the role of sense in the conservative movement since the Second World War. Gottfried identifies the novel as partially autobiographical in the introduction and claims that it is a manifestation of his emotional fight to recognise American contemporary rights (p. xi). A refugee of the Conservative Movement in the United States, Gottfried is carefully navigated through historical populism to illustrate both the cultural rift of former American conservatisms and the European conservatism of important figures such as Edmund Burke (p. xii). He says that "the merger of anti-communist and pro-market sentiments with a "Liberal" pedigree has contributed to "the establishment of a false basis for a revolution" (p. xiv). Six chapters and a



conclusion accompany his presentation and weave a powerful statement based upon a thorough interpretation of conservative current philosophy and a close examination of the historicity of conservative values.

This book states that the US conservative cause should not have strong origins, since it now appears. In the 1950s it was first invented by journalists and letters who reacted to the early Cold War and tried to provide a rallying platform for similar critics of communism in the world. The ensuing movement has inflated the continuity of its ideals whilst its radical anti-Communism, inculcated by its adherents, has undermined its ability to debate on an internal basis and to regularly silence opposition. At least part of their movement was brought to power by burying an old anti-welfare state right, which actually enjoyed a social following, centred in a tiny city in America. The newcomers often played down the merits of the replaced; the neo-conservators, who took over the libertarians from the older generation in the 1980s, often rejected their heirs. One of the main achievements of the revolution was to reinvent its own history. The popularity of this updated history is that even the opponents of the revolution are now willing to consider it.

The core point is and persists immediately after World War II that there has been a value oriented conservatism in the United States which has weakened its relationship with substantive conservatism concurrently and inherently while still shifting this contemporary "conservatism" to the left. The first part of this argument, at least for social and political



historians, is straightforward and maybe clear. It doesn't sound far-fetched to say that Abraham Lincoln's or Taft's conservatism differs significantly from George W. Bush's conservatism.

The idea that the neoconservatives who helped Bush get elected is more socially pragmatic than conventional conservatism, on the other hand, should be taken with caution. Ann Coulter and Rush Limbaugh, two well-known conservatives, barely appear on liberals' wish lists. Gottfried, on the other hand, makes a compelling case for the co-opting of certain elements of the 1960s mainstream social justice platform. One of the most strong manifestations of recent "right-wing politics" is the campaign of neoconservatives to recast Martin Luther King, Jr. as a fundamental moral figure who promoted communism and rejected affirmative action (p. 136). Apart from the absence of objective authenticity about King's representation, Gottfried seems to be thinking more about the superficial nature of building a democratic party on such precarious foundations. As a building stone for a progressive revolution, he explains value conservatism as having a "structural flaw" in his presentation (p.xiv). Nonetheless, he acknowledges that, as 'bad' as it might be in terms of becoming a meaningful political group, it retains considerable mainstream popularity, which he credits in part to the media's liberalisation of conservatism.

Whether or not this actually happens, the involvement of the media in the development of a fictional and highly marketable populism is an issue to be further examined. Although Gottfried made many references to the liberalisation of globalisation in the media, which was



partly exemplified by the inclusion of well-known neo-confessional television heads on cable news, you can only wonder what other factors are at play. Is conservatism yet another product to be purchased, distributed and processed in a hyper-capitalist environment, though packaged properly? If so, these neo-conservatives may be geniuses to send messages in their absence of a clear articulation of conservative history.

Indeed, an investigation of the American 'left' revolution may be done in almost the same context as Gottfried in his enquiry into political right. Perhaps the real political irony that this strategy can reveal is that the two-party American system has developed into right-wing media and left-wing media, with a myth that overlooks the past of democracy, and as Richard Nixon learned during his first presidency television debate in 1960. If Burke and Locke cannot recognise American populism, the prevalence of the "Don't Vot" post-water sticker could be perplexed by American populism (often false accused as communism by the extreme right). It encourages them to apply in a politically predominantly media-cantered arena.

Perhaps one of the book's key strengths is the exhaustive use of Gottfried's quotations to prove that contemporary populism is not associated with tradition. He is fluent in discussions of classical conservative texts and contemporary conservatism such that, after World War II, he can clearly distinguish American conservatism from other possible true conservatisms. He mentions the Reagan Revolution of the 1980's as a central popularist and it appears that conservatives have been able to demolish some elements of the current welfare state created by



democratic governments and, even more importantly, to remove some government programmes, such as education and transportation. But it didn't happen. Gottfried concludes that the supposed Reagan demonstrators seized power rather than decreasing government size and scope. Although it's obviously not a conservative thing to do, the 'worth of permanence' of conservative media figures and activists since the war helped to establish a new conservative agenda, which ironically no longer matters.

Gottfried describes the transition to populism at the end of the 20th century by suggesting "our politicians don't obey limited government values in the 50s" (p. 143). He also says that since the 1964 presidential election loss of Barry Goldwater, "no presidential contender has essentially challenged welfare programmes or arguments" (p. 148). Gottfried, on the other hand, reflected the liberalisation of conservatism in the widespread adoption of the welfare policy (although incremental reforms), and in the co-optation of some parts of the social justice platform of the Democratic group. Neo-cons may refer Mr. Lincoln to abolish slavery and therefore overlook Goldwater's underlying liberalism in the 1964 New Deal and Law on Civil Rights.

While the book sometimes reads like St. Thomas of Aquino's rhetorical style in Summa Theologica, he appears to want to foresee and react to any potential reservations about his requests, his views might be less defensive than they assumed. In the shattering of the axis of Gottfried, it seems clear that the conventional vulnerable position of the pro-civil rights is



offered to conservative behaviour by self-identified media and think-tank conservatives, while it is dismissive of the proliferation of the big government as though its own worldview of government is no longer lawful. Although neo-conservative movements in the USA have contributed to populism that is not just incompatible with limited government and fiscal discipline, neo-value conservatism has also achieved several achievements.

The scholars of contemporary American conservatism face a difficult task in this regard. Assess the success of the campaign to see who it applied, and why it is distinct from attempting to sort out its lack of historic or even scholarly validity. In an effort to challenge the neo-conservative agenda for consistency, honesty and meaning, Gottfried is strong about the right. His activities along these lines provide an important glimpse into the moral integrity of media-oriented movements. However, superficiality cannot be associated with left-leaning. Notwithstanding how 'liberalistic' the right is in the wake of Goldwater's derailment, the surge in value populism has generated stringently intolerant discourse, which many leftist viewers consider to be resolutely conservative.

While Gottfried concentrates on conservative right's larger political growth, a variety of other contemporary US conservatism scholars have based their attention on the grassroots aspect of the movement. Lisa McGirr, for example, investigates conservative politics in Orange County in California in the 1960s. McGirr like Gottfried sees an absence of the previous Goldwater Conservatives that have been refashioned as the sides of the wider movement in the



Suburban Warriors, as marginalised libertarians, or free nuts: the origin of the new American right. She is more worried about how this modern ideology has driven people out of their cosy suburban homes in fear of the devastation of the world by the Liberals. All of this contributed to social conservatives taking legislative action, including class worship, high school studies, reproductive education, tolerance, equality in the UN, porn, and feminism. Democracy. Civil intervention. Democracy. One might argue that the conservative mass' opiate in McGirr's thesis was Gottfried's proclaimed merit conservatism as a fine base for a radical rebellion. However, in order to further analyse modern American conservatism, a dialogue on the subject needs to be opened. I hope this will lead to a more complex view of the arguably biggest political and social development in America since the 1960s. In summary, Gottfried's book is enthusiastic, well researched, thoughtful and contentious and contributes substantially to the ever more conservative tradition.



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