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# Toward Green Conservatism

A Book Review by Mark Wegierski

BEYOND THE NEW RIGHT:  
MARKETS, GOVERNMENT AND  
THE COMMON ENVIRONMENT

By John Gray

London and New York: Routledge  
195 pages, \$34.50

John Gray, a professor at Jesus College, Oxford, has long been identified with the conventional, pro-capitalist, Anglo-American rightwing — for example, by being a regular contributor to *National Review*, and to various free-market think-tanks in Britain. In this book, particularly in its last section, "An agenda for Green conservatism", he breaks decisively with the heritage of Hayek, Nozick, and ultimately, Adam Smith and Locke. (Despite their comparative earliness, Locke's writings imply, according to theorists like Fukuyama, "accumulation without end.") This book is the capstone of a systematic examination and critique of the various forms of liberal political theory (which extend from the right-wing liberalism or libertarianism of Nozick to the Left-liberalism of Rawls, Ronald Dworkin and their successors), begun with *Liberalisms* (1989) and *Post-Liberalism* (1993). It is one of those rare books that is intensely scholarly while also engaging forthrightly and directly with some critical aspects of the period of late modernity in which we live.

The "New Right" under examination in this book is neither the populist American New Right of Richard Viguerie, nor the eclectic, anticapitalist and cultural European New Right of Alain de Benoist, but rather the neo-liberal (i.e. neo-capitalist), classical liberal, libertarian, and neoconservative tendency that rose to prominence in Britain and America under the auspices of Thatcher and Reagan, centered on the exaltation of the market, market-solutions, and unlimited economic growth as the panacea for the deep-rooted crises of these societies.

The book is divided into an introduction, four long essays, notes, and an index. It has generated a fair amount of commentary, including a review in *The Economist* (August 14, 1993, p. 87), and a cover-article in *National Review*, "Growth Without End, Amen?" by Fred Charles Iklé (March 7, 1994, pp. 36-44), which echoed its central arguments, and explicitly referred to the book in support of them.

The concluding essay stands at some variance with the preceding three, which had been published earlier in other fora. In "Limited government: a

positive agenda" (pp. 1-45) while the libertarian minimal state is criticized, some of the solutions offered seem distinctly libertarian: the possible privatization of the provision of money-supply (as suggested by Hayek); the elimination of taxes on corporations; and the lowering of taxation to a flat tax of 15 percent, plus a comprehensive VAT of 15 percent. In "A Conservative Disposition: Individualism, the Free Market and the Common Life" (pp. 46-65), unrestricted free-market dogma is trenchantly attacked. In "The Moral Foundations of Market Institutions" (p. 66-123) stress is put on the moral and social *context* that makes the market possible, implying the necessity of a truly "enabling welfare state" (as opposed to the welfare state in its contemporary incarnations). The "social market economy" enunciated by the post-World War II Freiburg School in West Germany is seen as a possible positive model — while libertarianism, egalitarianism, market socialism, and the socialist command-economy are rejected.

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However, it is the fourth section (pp. 124-177) that is certainly revolutionary. It attempts to identify a possible convergence of truly conservative and truly ecological thought:

*Green theory is an invaluable corrective of the Whiggish, anthropocentric, technological optimism by which all the modernist political religions are animated and which has, in the form of neo-liberalism, even infected most of what passes today as conservatism (p. 177).*

*My argument has been that there are many natural affinities between conservative philosophy and Green thought...Conservatives must learn from Green thought that the promise of open-ended global growth...is delusive; instead they must turn their attention to the sources of legitimacy by which social institutions could be sustained in a stationary-state economy. In repudiating...neo-liberalism, conservatives are merely returning to an older*

*and sounder Tory tradition, which perceived the illusoriness of the sovereign, autonomous chooser of liberal theory, and so insisted on the primacy of the common life. The importance of Green thought for conservatives today is that it recalls them to their historic task of giving shelter to communities and reproducing them across the generations - in a context of finite resources which dictates stability, not growth, as the pre-eminent conservative value (p. 173).*

The "stationary-state" is advocated as an alternative to the ceaseless inflammation of the desire for perpetual economic growth. John Stuart Mill's passages in support of a stationary-state economy are quoted (pp. 140-142) — an inspired piece of scholarship, citing the well-known epigone to contrary ends. The necessity of a worldwide immigration and population control policy is stressed. In energy policy, Gray argues for a rejection of the nuclear taboo common among Greens, while in agriculture he points out the destructive processes of "agricultural industry" as probably one of the greatest threats to the biosphere. He very sensibly argues for policies that would enhance and preserve the patterns of traditional rural agriculture in the Third World, rejecting a model that tries to mimic the processes of Western industrialization. In urban and transport policy areas, Gray inveighs against the car, calling for transport alternatives. He also calls for very strong planning controls in urban centres, that will try to keep these places liveable.

Gray also cites the remarkable and surprisingly tough-minded Green theorist (who, for example, does not unqualifiedly oppose nuclear power) James Lovelock (*The Ages of Gaia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 212), in a passage which is a fitting riposte to some of those squishy-soft hippie Greens:

*Gaia, as I see her, is no doting mother, tolerant of misdemeanours, nor is she some fragile and delicate damsel in danger from brutal mankind. She is stern and tough, always keeping the world warm and comfortable for those who obey the rules, but ruthless in her destruction of those who transgress. Her unconscious goal is a planet fit for life. If humans stand in the way of this, we shall be eliminated with as little pity as would be shown by the micro-brain of an intercontinental ballistic missile in full flight to its target (p. 173).*

Gray argues it would be far preferable to take the strong, necessarily authoritarian measures to curb humanity's population growth and hypertrophic consumption before the homeostatic defenses of the natural world actually kick in.

Throughout the book, Gray is particularly critical of the United States as embodying all the worst

aspects of a future he would seek to avoid. He frequently refers to the collapse of American urban life. He makes the particularly cutting observation:

*...the decline of the United States into a sort of chronic, low-intensity ethnic civil war, a proto-Lebanon held together only by a dwindling capital of legalism, called into question the Enlightenment project of citizenship grounded in universal principles and excluding the contingencies of historical identity (p. ix).*

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