

The Death of a Patriotic Left

Book Review by Mark Wegierski

Professor Paul Edward Gottfried, who teaches at Elizabethtown College, Pennsylvania, is one of the leading American “paleoconservative” theorists – and, indeed, has been credited with coining the term. The central idea of most of his earlier books, such as *After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State* (Princeton University Press, 1999) and *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt* (University of Missouri Press, 2002), is that there has now arisen in Western societies, a “managerial-therapeutic regime” – which combines the soulless economic conservatism of big business with the distribution of resources to “politically-correct” interest groups, with coercive “therapy” for recalcitrants. Gottfried has argued that “the regime” has subverted the more authentic meanings of both the Left and the Right.

In *The Strange Death of Marxism*, he examines the political transformation from old-style Communist Parties to the “post-Marxist” Left. He offers critical summaries of the thought of such figures as Louis Althusser and the various members of the Frankfurt School, such as Theodore Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Jurgen Habermas. Looking at the French and Italian Communist parties, Gottfried notes that while their political rhetoric often embraced questionable notions about the Soviet Union, the social profile of their membership was extremely conservative. As far as the Frankfurt School, Prof. Gottfried does note the

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unusual interpretation which Paul Piccone, the editor of *Telos*, a scholarly journal of eclectic social and cultural philosophy, gives to those theorists, as actually being critics of the managerial-therapeutic regime. However, Gottfried tends to see them as originators of some of the most pernicious ideas underlying the current-day system, especially the theory of the so-called “authoritarian personality.” At its sharpest, Gottfried argues, this theory endeavors to categorize social outlooks deemed politically incorrect as “psychological aberrations” requiring semi-coercive “therapy” – if it is discovered in an individual – and of the mass indoctrination of society through mass media and mass education to combat them at the collective level. It lays the groundwork for “soft totalitarianism.”

Where Gottfried significantly differs from most conventional current-day conservatives is his identification of America as the main originator of this “soft totalitarianism.” According to Gottfried, it initially got underway in Europe with the “re-education” of Germany in the aftermath of World War II – where, he argues, traditionalist conservatism and nationalism was just as severely dealt with as Nazism. Indeed, conservative anti-Nazis were seen as suspect by the American authorities, whereas many former Nazis who eagerly adopted “liberal democracy” were embraced by the Americans. Gottfried points out the surprising Nazi past of some of today’s leading theorists of the politically-correct German Left.

Gottfried argues that trends such as multiculturalism, feminism, and gay rights, had indeed emerged in the United States earlier than in Europe, and that today, the differences between the American and EU “regimes” are minimal. He also points to the

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largely similar, globalization visions of both American democracy-boosters such as Francis Fukuyama, and of the typical left-wingers in Europe, who claim to be critics of globalization.

Following the arguments of Christopher Lasch, Gottfried expresses praise for the old-style socialist working-class-based parties. “The working class consciousness that had marked the socialist past, and was connected sociologically to profoundly conservative attitudes, has ceased to count” (144).

However, it may be possible that Prof. Gottfried’s picture of the Left is overdrawn in the case of some European countries. Is the entire Left today really so abjectly self-hating in regard to their own nationality, and so contemptuous of family life and religion? Does a belief in social justice for working people necessarily entail the adoption of the current-day agenda of multiculturalism and “alternative lifestyles”?

Prof. Gottfried argues that the pre-1960s Left in such countries as Canada, Britain, and the United States, would have found most of the concerns of the post-Sixties’ Left of little importance or in fact repugnant. Indeed, while ferociously fighting for its vision of social justice and equality for the working majority, it usually considered notions of family, nation, and religion as a “pre-political” part of human existence, which it had no desire to alter. Some of the leading figures of this patriotic, pro-family Left may include William Morris, Jack London, George Orwell, Christopher Lasch, and the Canadian political theorist Eugene Forsey.

It may be noted that the trend in many current-day Western societies is to adopt both social liberalism and economic conservatism (the latter usually called “neoliberalism” in Europe). For example, the Liberal government in Canada in the 1990s carried out such austerity measures against the broad mass of the Canadian public as: not rescinding the Goods and Services Tax (the Canadian equivalent of a VAT), as they had explicitly promised to do; massively cutting the benefits available under Unemployment Insurance; massively increasing the contributions required for the Canada Pension Plan; and introducing drawbacks on the Old Age Pension and Old Age tax-exemption. The Liberal government has tended to cut those benefits available to the broad mass of the population as a whole – while at the same, increasing funding to

special-interest groups – whether business cronies or “rainbow-coalition” members. At the same time, it has maintained one of the highest levels of immigration of any country today.

Prof. Gottfried unfortunately does not devote too much attention to the role of technology, mass-media, consumerism, and pop-culture in ushering in our near-dystopic age. Indeed, the “lived cultural reality” for many people in Western societies is American pop-culture, which tends to amplify socially-liberal, consumerist/consumptionist, and antinomian attitudes, especially among the young. Gottfried could have identified some of the varied resistance to hypermodernity not only in old-fashioned social democracy, but also in such tendencies as ecology and neo-mysticism (typified by such figures as C.G. Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Ken Wilber).

It is also important to consider that for most people in Western societies today, the mark of the regime’s success is that it offers very high levels of affluence and prosperity. This is far different from the situation in East-Central Europe, where it could be argued that the post-Communist transition has engendered widespread and deepening pauperization of large sectors of the populace. It is not often considered that it is only in a very homogenous society that such huge disparities of wealth and poverty can be maintained without some kind of violent situation arising. One dreads to imagine what would happen in Canada were there to be a major economic downturn. All the heterogeneous groups that have arrived in Canada in the last thirty years or so, would be at each other’s – and the fading majority’s – throats. It could easily develop into events similar to those seen in France recently.

The central point to be made is that Soviet Communism, despite its various radical and murderous elements, may have indeed been surpassed by today’s post-Western left-liberalism in its sheer destructive-ness and antinomianism toward more traditional societies. It could be argued that, in the end, it is hard to imagine anything more corrosive and destructive to Western society than policies of aggressive multiculturalism and mass, dissimilar immigration; and of antinomian and deconstructive art, ideas, attitudes and lifestyles. It is the abject, self-hating extremes of white Westerners, and the extreme

social liberalism of current-day society – as well as the triumph of economic conservatism – which many of the old-fashioned social democrats would find repugnant. ■