John Gray's Political Philosophy

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John Gray is one of England's most prominent and controversial political philosophers. This stature is in some ways remarkable, not because it is unsought, but because it is sought in ways that might backfire on him. His writing is often dense and more difficult than necessary; he seems to be signaling readers that he will be making few concessions to them. Gray mentions his obligations to Norman Cohn and Isaiah Berlin, but there are distinguished and deservedly admired figures in the history of political and economic ideas—A.O. Lovejoy, Ernst Cassirer, Jacob Viner, Lionel Robbins among them—whom Gray must have read but whose influences on him are left unclarified. Gray does not hesitate to generalize, to describe in the most extravagant terms, to praise and blame with confidence; and he relies in great measure on his readers to indulge if not enjoy these rhetorical excesses. Gray is most recognized for the speed with which he has changed his position. He has been by turns a conventional liberal (defending J. S. Mill), a pluralistic liberal (developing Isaiah Berlin's position), an antiliberal, a traditional conservative, an opponent of traditional conservatism, an economic conservative, an opponent of economic, Thatcherite conservatism, a Green conservative, an opponent of all varieties of socialism, whether Marxism, academic neo-Marxism, or social democracy, an environmentalist, and an environmentalist skeptic (Fawcett 444-45).

Despite these shifting allegiances, Gray has remained steadfast in two beliefs. He has rejected Marx's plan for a workers' state on the grounds that Marx had no proof that all work in a socialist state would be enjoyable and no proof that workers could sit down and rationally decide how much and how their factory would produce. Gray's second steady belief, his disdain for John Rawls's contract theory, deserves comment.

Gray rejects Rawls's method of "reflective equilibrium" which proposes a dialog between moral sentiments and rational contract principles, and instead he insists on a "naturalism" that accepts and begins with political life as it is (Gray, "Reply," 232). The very project of discovering a contract agreed upon by all parties strikes Gray as a misguided attempt to eliminate actual politics from political life. Rawls insisted that what was right had to be defined and enacted before what was good could be defined, while Gray insists that the good is prior to the right. Rawls inherited from the leaders of the Enlightenment the belief in universal principles that Gray rejects as dangerous simplification (Fawcett 444-45; Berlin 38-40).

Judith Sklar's political theory, labelled the "liberalism of fear," and her lack of enthusiasm for Rawls should have appealed to Gray, but he is not looking for allies (Moyn, 3-8, 54-61).

By "naturalism" Gray means the search for the most basic facts about human nature and the identification of the most basic elements required for "human flourishing"—sure that in both these searches we can reach objective truth (Gray, "Reply" 232). But Gray has another, rather contradictory, aim, and that is to reduce the part politics plays in every person's life and to direct us to more meaningful and rewarding activities. Although it is true that political debate can harden divisions, it is also true that few candidates can go before a democratic electorate with the promise to do as little as possible (Gray, *Gray's Anatomy* 16). How can Gray answer those who believe that low voter turnout, and civic ignorance, bad manners and violent behavior are already too large a part of contemporary politics and political engagement too small a part of life (Levitsky and Ziblatt)?

Although withdrawing from politics may reward some individuals and have a minor impact on politics, if millions of citizens were to withdraw, it is hard to believe that politics would be as productive or more productive than at present. Strangely, Gray forgets Chicago economist George Stigler's warning "things can always get worse."

Gray forcefully criticizes his colleagues in political philosophy for failing to develop a critical perspective (Gray, *Gray's Anatomy* 92-93, 141). Few philosophers admit to the collapse of political thinking which is so evident to Gray. Political thinking he asserts has simply failed to keep up with the facts. English party platforms as well as philosophers' works lack realism. Social democracy, which is the Labour Party ideal, promises to deliver continuous full employment by means of government management of the economy. But full employment cannot be delivered and preserving the commitment to it has meant more and more costly programs to address unemployment, programs whose continual expansion the electorate will not support. Social democracy is thus empirically a failure. The alternative theory of faith in free markets (called by Gray, Thatcherism, or neo-liberalism), which had become the Conservative Party ideal, also failed to fit the facts. With new jobs, new skills, new markets, new products, and new facts there is at the same time a destruction of traditional jobs, skills, markets, products, and facts that is inevitably disorienting

and painful. Unlimited competition actually destroyed the middle-class stable employment that was the social ideal of Thatcherism. Because neither version of British politics and political philosophy fits the facts, Gray recommends a commitment to political compromise and commitment to local administration and local variation in government programs.

Gray suggests that there may be a third, new political culture whose members are ambitious professionals for whom either major party is just a means to advance. Tony Blair is the prime example of the party leader without connection to his party's sentiment, a Labour leader uninterested in working class culture. But Gray does not explain how such cynical party membership can be a culture, a part of one's identity. It may not be reading too much into Gray to find the fear that in parliamentary elections in which voters are untethered by class or subculture, the results can swing wildly and bring inexperienced figures to high offices.

Gray suggests that significant political philosophy must be coherent and rooted in a robust political culture. Gray wants to revive the connection between political philosophy and political culture by reviving (or creating) a political culture. Reviving a vanished culture—nostalgia—is one theoretical means that seems to attract Gray. A second possibility, which Gray developed in more detail, is creating a new culture rooted in evolutionary humility about the human species. But Gray cannot define a political culture that would specifically connect to his political philosophy of prudent and tolerant compromising. And his survey of subcultures is incomplete. Missing from Gray's list of political cultures is white nationalism and its leading figure in the 1960s, Enoch Powell.

In more recent works, Gray has shifted his focus from British political life to human nature and political psychology and has become notably pessimistic. Gray's picture of the violence and intolerance of all political societies, contemporary as well as ancient, makes his case for modus vivendi look irrelevant. Gray insists on the continuing extent of war and violence. In particular he rejects Steven Pinker's argument for the long-term decline of war fatalities. And beyond the numbers, there is the fact of innate violence. Gray believes humans "seek death for themselves, and inflict it on others, in order to secure meaning in their lives or vent their rage at its absence" (Gray, *New Leviathans* 15).

One might expect Gray to describe how powerful governments provide the meaningful lives their citizens crave, but he does not do so, at least not directly. Gray's interest seems to be explaining the inevitable decline of liberal government.

The 21ˢᵗ century is marked according to Gray by the transformation of states into leviathans (states whose governments have unlimited power). Today's powerful governments protect their citizens not so much from foreign and domestic violence as from social chaos and lack of meaning in their lives. Such an objective requires much wider powers than Hobbes imagined for Leviathan. The power of the state grows because groups now ask their governments not for freedom but for protection from rivals or opponents. Prioritizing safety over personal freedom constitutes the end of liberalism. "Humans are" he tells us in an earlier work, "weapon-making animals with an unquenchable fondness for killing (Gray, *Straw Dogs* 10 and *Soul* 80-94, 161).

Moderation, or modus vivendi as Gray terms it, evidently will not fit the new reality of Russian and Chinese state capitalism. Hence Gray's newest work, *The New Leviathans*. It is not an easy work to evaluate. It repeats Gray's attacks on liberalism, introduces new criticism of illiberal Western thought, and returns to familiar works such as *Heart of Darkness* and *Darkness at Noon* without providing any new interpretations. But Chapter Two is valuable for a dozen very powerful thumbnail biographies of artists or writers (often troubled or eccentric) who were persecuted by Stalin or Hitler. Their lives are the evidence of the pain and distorted political life that persisted after the end of Fascist and Communist autocracy. The use of a dozen examples is better than the use of a single example, but it is still an evasion of the need to quantify and weigh evidence. Still this method allows us to see Gray has a thesis, the human toll of totalitarianism prevents successor revolutionary regimes from making rapid progress once they take power.

The defeats of Communism and Nazism seemed to show Hobbes's assertion that only unlimited central governments could provide lasting peace was wrong. Limited and liberal government worked, and the number of liberal democracies increased. But after the fall of Soviet Communism, the liberal trend reversed, and central governments grew stronger. Gray knows where he wants to put the blame—he blames the people whose desire for safety and welfare fuels their demand for strong government. But leaders as well as followers are to blame; governing elites accumulate more power so they can transform their subjects; the rulers want to be "engineers of souls" (Gray, *New Leviathans* 6-8). Persons who seek political power are often driven by the need to transform people to fit the social blue-prints they embrace. Gray makes sure that readers understand his implication that political correctness in Western societies belongs in the same category as Putin's and Xi's autocracy (Gray, *New Leviathans* 5-7; Desmet 122).

Gray identifies three types of totalitarian states; in chronological order they are "old-fashioned tyrannies," the 20ᵗʰ century ideological states of Soviet Russia, Fascist Germany, and Maoist China and then the current "neo-totalitarian states" (Gray, *New Leviathans* 19). Gray

does not pursue this chronology but proposes an important turning point with the decline of the Soviet system and China's conversion to capitalism. These events provided an opening in the West for the delusion that a world-wide conversion to capitalism would soon occur. This myth of globalization rested on two alleged explanations—Friedrich Hayek's thesis of the evolutionary superiority of capitalism and Francis Fukuyama's thesis of a Hegelian and rational succession of ideals. Gray considers these ludicrous (Gray, *New Leviathans* 19 and *Hayek on Liberty* 41-53, 72-78, 144-54). There is no single, final destination for all societies, but there is a contemporary development. "The seeming triumph of liberalism and the free market was not an evolutionary trend, but a political experiment, which has run its course. The result has been to empower regimes in which market forces are instruments of the state. Instead of China becoming more like the West, the West has become more like China. In both, the ruling economic system is a version of "state capitalism" (Gray, *New Leviathans* 23; Luce 89-100, 120-22; Bregman 2, 13, 110-11).

Gray alleges that the Cheka (Lenin's secret police) "was explicitly founded to create a new kind of society" (Gray, *New Leviathans* 28). This is too vague to be very helpful; it is as likely that Lenin created the Cheka to cement his own rule and eliminate all his opponents. Gray recognizes that Russia fits no category; it is singular because its history of totalitarianism is more violent and continuous than in any other European nation and because it bears no comparison to non-European nations. Russia constitutes a category of one (Gray, *New Leviathans* 38-41).

China, it turns out, is also a category of one. Gray uses the term "surveillance society" to characterize contemporary China but also describes Xi's rule as in effect a singular experiment in combining dynamic technology in the economy with despotism in the political system (Gray, *New Leviathans* 48-49).

Chapter 2 of *The New Leviathans* proposes a comparison between life under Lenin and Stalin and life in those contemporary Western nations that have been "captured by a hyperbolic version of liberalism" (Gray, *New Leviathans* 57 and *Feline Philosophy* 95). Gray believes the two types of societies have "real similarities" though in fact he provides only one point of similarity, the existence in both of "an intelligentsia that attacked the society that nurtured them" (Gray, *New Leviathans* 57; Brinton 39-49). Having presented his thesis, Gray ignores it and provides a brief biography of the Russian reactionary writer Konstantin Leontiev (1831-1891). Eccentric, often impoverished, an Orthodox monk in his last years, Leontiev was discovered by Gray after Vladimir Putin's reference to Leontiev in a 2013 speech (Gray, *New Leviathans* 57-61). In any case, Gray found in Leon-

tiev a description of "a pathology of liberal civilization," specifically the process by which the liberal enthusiasm for individualism results in conformity and the loss of diversity; when everyone tries to be different—which is impossible—everyone turns out alike (Gray, *New Leviathans* 62). Here Gray seems to rely on Tocqueville, Talmon, and Berlin but does not improve on their accounts of the "uniformity of diversity" thesis.

Survivors of a terrorist regime are either complicit in its crimes or psychologically hollow (and cannot recognize themselves). Either way, they cannot participate in normal politics. Those who can participate in normal politics believe they are architects of universal progress and become the victims of their hubris.

As Gray sees the future, autocracy will persist, and liberalism will decline. The future of autocracy is clear:

- More capitalism in Russia and China does not mean more freedom—state control of the economy will increase.
- If political revolution occurs, much of autocracy will survive in the new regime.
- Russia and China will grow in power; the US will decline in power.
- Autocrats who are willing to punish their opponents will find plenty of subordinates willing to do the dirty work because sadism is a powerful motive in many persons.
- The urge to persecute minorities is strong in the majority and autocrats can indulge it as needed to preserve their power.
- The age of liberal democracy is ending (Friedrich 37-39).

In a world with kleptocracies and dangerously nationalist autocracies, democracies will need stronger resources than attachment to modus vivendi (Gray, *New Leviathans* 3-5, 15, 37-39, 47). But Gray cannot identify these resources and does not pursue his brief references to localism. Gray can and perhaps will do better; at least he provides a distinct challenge to his colleagues. We may feel it imprudent to announce yet again the demise of liberalism, but Gray forces political thinkers to consider what in liberalism ought to be saved (Gray, *Soul* 41, 83, 110-43, and *Black Mass* 14).

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