

*Philip Green*

## Neo-Cons and the Counter-Enlightenment

by  
Philip Green

---

---

**M**y remarks are going to be a variation on Louis Hartz's *Liberal Tradition in America*, still to my mind the basic text on political culture in the United States, though it needs a lot of amendment, some of which I will offer here. If the pre-modern culture of Europe was the *Ancien Regime*, then modern culture, starting with the Enlightenment, or the 17th Century Revolution in England, comes as a rebellion against it. So in Germany after World War I, for example, both the socialist Liebknecht and the liberal Max Weber, running for the presidency as a Liberal, had roughly the same attitude toward conservative Catholicism in Germany: it was an accomplice of the class enemy, or it was the cultural enemy, depending on which of them you asked.

If Hartz is right about the United States, though, and an egalitarian liberal individualism is its foundation (as Tocqueville, of course, said long before Hartz), then in one of its forms at least rebellion quite logically comes as a version of anti-modern conservatism. (I'm talking about mass rebellion here, not the arcane rebellion of post-structuralist academics). And since the political institutions of liberalism are virtually unchallengeable—and have not really been challenged by the new conservatism—this comes mostly as a rebellion in the realm of culture. This is the real counter-culture; it renders comprehensible such factoids as that in the U.S. roughly eighty percent or more of respondents call themselves regular church-goers, whereas in Britain the comparable figure is below ten percent. One doesn't imagine that you could have anywhere in U.S. an experience comparable to the one I had walking through the old quarter in Amsterdam, where one abandoned church was a center for avant-garde art, and across the street from it were naked hookers in a storefront window.

So what I want to do to begin is describe this counter-Enlightenment, for that is what it is, with one pregnant addition. It certainly hasn't replaced classical American liberalism, but it contends for power with it; and now it has welded together its own anti-modernism with a political strategy

imported by ex-Trotskyite and ex-Leninist intellectual savants. Together they now look not just to struggle with liberalism but to wipe it out—along with, of course, all variants to the Left of liberalism. This is where my theme of counter-Enlightenment meets the more specific theme of “neo-conservative strategies.”

AT THE ROOT OF NEO-CONSERVATISM IS THE NAKED POWER approach to politics, heralded by the ex-Trotskyite James Burnham in his influential book *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom*, shortly after WWII. Burnham and his followers at first produced a political theory and eventually a political practice of what are, supposedly, competing elitisms: the conservative elitism of say Mosca, Michels, and Pareto against the radical elitism of Lenin, Gramsci, Marcuse, Althusser *et al.* In either case, the so-called “people” are, according to this theory’s proponents, necessarily excluded from any real say in political life. The theory became practice especially in the work and activism of Irving Kristol, the godfather of neo-conservatism, who in the 1970s in an influential essay—perhaps the most influential essay written in the 20th century United States—addressed corporate leaders and foundation heads on the necessity of taking steps to defend capitalism against the Left by explicitly funding right-wing theorizing and activism. Note that in Kristol’s politics, as in all neo-conservative political theory, “the people” existed only to be manipulated, by someone or other; this assumption has become the ideological underpinning of all neo-conservative activity since.

Most especially, from the standpoint that there is nothing to politics but the clash of elites, the denial by liberals that they are a controlling elite at all is itself inflammatory, and fuels the biggest lie of the late 20th century, the lie that undergirds contemporary neo-conservatism and pseudo-populism both: the lie of “liberal control of the media.” From the neo-conservative standpoint, there must be some political elite in control of any important institution, and since they know *they* are not in control of network television or the national prestige newspapers, it must be liberals who are. What has happened now—the disaster that has happened—has been the conjunction of this political theory of naked elite power, with the counter-Enlightenment: the anti-modern, ideological fanaticism of the religious right.

To return now to the more traditional counter-Enlightenment, I’m going to contrast its cognitive map with that of liberal Enlightenment. The latter needs no elaboration by me, it’s the former that requires description. The

basis of this anti-modernism is a peculiar religiosity that can be described as follows: religion and science are not complementary (as with the modernized wing of the Catholic Church) but competitive; they describe the same phenomena, but science and reason get it wrong. This is only the beginning, though. This religiosity is not transcendental or abstract, but immanent, and its immanent truths (based on Biblical literalism) are not only empirical but more fundamentally are moral. Moreover, the two kinds of truth are not incommensurable, as ordinary philosophy has it, but are as one. There is no fact-value problem. Evil, therefore, in the religious sense—the most profound religious sense—consists of *error*. Evil is not mundane or institutional, as with Hannah Arendt, nor does it have historical causes, as with Erich Fromm on Nazism, nor is it one possible outcome of profound neurosis, as with Freud, nor is it an inexplicable mystery, as with many Christian theologians. Evil is religious error.

But if evil consists of error then conversely, and this is the crucial step in today's mass irrationalism, *error is evil*. To take an obvious contrast, Left critics have always worried about the social corruption of science, or the possibility of its being put to destructive uses, but this is an auto-critique on their part (think of J. Robert Oppenheimer on the H-bomb) which has as a goal the perfection or at least improvement of science and reason, not their destruction. Contrarily, where religion and other forms of knowledge are competitive, but only the former can define good and evil, then mistaken science or analysis or opinion of any kind—i.e., that which deviates from biblical literalism and moral rightness—becomes evil in and of itself; not just imperialistic, as post-structuralist critiques would have it, but *evil*.

The most important outcome of this position is that what the psychologist Anatol Rapoport called the confrontational style of debate (as we've been seeing in the Democratic primary, for example) is replaced by the confrontational style of the Fight. The method of debate is to acknowledge one's opponent's position in the strongest light so as to perfect one's own (this is Mill in *On Liberty*, of course). By contrast, the method of the Fight is simply to wipe out one's opponent, figuratively or often, literally.

In the context of a Fight, rational discussion is fruitless because there is no dialogue; from the standpoint of those engaged in it, the Fight is essentially one-sided. For example, the long run-up to the abolition of welfare by the Clinton administration consisted of years of dueling studies,

hypothesizations, and so forth, about incentives, the poverty trap, the state of public opinion, etc. Some were better and some were worse methodologically, but they were all in the same ballpark (see Sanford Schram's critique, *Words on Welfare*, for an account of this debate). And of course the ballpark they were in was constructed in the 18th century by Jeremy Bentham, the father of welfare economics. Later amendments of his sometimes-nutty empiricism by more sociologically oriented critics such as Marx and Durkheim do not challenge the basis of his anti-religious modernism: that issues of policy can be discussed reasonably, by looking at the data. But this is not the way spokespersons for the ruling party in the U.S., which articulates both the neo-conservative and the counter-Enlightenment positions, approach issues now.

Two things are different at this moment in time. First, though all politicians lie, the current administration is historically unique in that its lies consist of proposing policies and legislative acts that secretly have the opposite intention from their announced goals in that ideological coherence and favors for friends are their only purpose. Therefore, they can't be analyzed as to their validity or accomplishment; I don't know of any other historical case of this kind. Second, and perhaps worse, careful and reputable scientific studies that contradict arguments made by the Bush administration or its supporters are simply suppressed or falsified: reasoned discussion is suppressed in deference to ideological correctness. (All of this documented in Eric Alterman and Mark Green's new book *The Book on Bush: How George W. Misleads America*). What is fascinating, perhaps startling, and certainly horrific, is that in the face of this assertive irrationalism, this know-nothingism, the neo-conservative right, that is, the intellectual right, has either fallen silent or joined the bandwagon. None of them speaks out against this Americanized version of Lysenkoism, or Aryan science. In the naked power struggle that these new Machiavellians call politics, any lie is better than none, and if the struggle is between good and evil, any lie is indeed absolutely necessary. We can think of no better example than Valerie Plame: what looks very much like treason is committed, by someone in the White House and by a stealth propagandist posing as a journalist, and no one in either wing of the conservative movement has a word of criticism to offer.

Here let me move back again to the religious counter-Enlightenment and speak of two current examples of contemporary irrationalism. The first is creationism. The importance of this phenomenon can hardly be over-emphasized. It sweeps throughout the blue states, where in many

communities overwhelming majorities reject biological science *tout court*; and even some of the red ones. The basis of creationism is either Biblical literalism or, worse, a wholly fraudulent “biology” known as Intelligent Design, masquerading as science in order to replace it. What this means is that an entire generation of Christian (as they call themselves) young people learns to value ideological lies over scientific investigation. The second example, of course, is the gay marriage hysteria. Here the materialism and rationalism of modern thought run entirely aground. What an economist would call perfect Pareto optimality—the apex of welfare economics, the pursuit of a happiness that harms no one and affects no one except those benefiting from it—is trumped by a thinking that the rationalist cannot even put a name to (except to denigrate it as, in Stuart Hall’s useful phrase, a moral panic). Every negative comment about gay marriage rests itself on the same foundation, that our civilization is “at stake.” No one is able to verbalize in the slightest how this might be so. Strengthening marriage symbolically apparently destroys it; more people undergoing the ritual of marriage apparently destroys it; two people affirming their commitment without benefit of a formal legal licensing process can be compared to looting, rioting, bestiality, and polyandry. I’m not sure whether to call this moral panic, intellectual degradation, moral madness, or simply evil let loose; but the result in any event is precisely that what cannot be verbalized, an ineffable something that has no content beyond its own appearance, surmounts and trumps the actual, the real, with its ineffability.

It is quite possible that, as various optimistic commentators have been saying, in the long run equality for gay persons is as unstoppable, in the formal legal sense at least, as it was for black persons in the formal legal sense; as it’s become a cliché to point out, not forty years ago every word that’s being said now about gay marriage was being said about interracial marriage. That moral panic, though—and even then it wasn’t nearly as publicly hysterical—at least had a semi-rational basis, in that a real social hierarchy from which millions of white people benefited was on the way to being really overthrown in its last legal bastion. Today the descent into irrationality has no material social basis at all, only an emotional basis, an obsessive ideology, a fanaticism, posing as religion, that represents what Mill called the most monstrous doctrine of all: that I am injured if you behave in a way that offends me, even if your action has no material impact on me at all. He was right about that monstrousness. The debasing of rational thought by millions of people, and beyond that the acquiescence in or encouragement of that debasing by educated and knowledgeable persons who know the difference between

*Philip Green*

hysteria and thought, chills the blood, and suggests that the lust for power has become unlimited. Together with the other aspects of the era I've mentioned, it bespeaks an urge to what I would call now proto-totalitarianism. It probably won't go further than that, because the material conditions are lacking, but the mere similarity is terrifying.

**Philip Green** is Formerly Sophia Smith Professor of Government at Smith College, now Visiting Professor of Political Science at the New School University Graduate Faculty, author of *Deadly Logic: The Theory of Nuclear Deterrence*; *Retrieving Democracy: In Search of Civic Equality*; *Equality and Democracy*; *Cracks in the Pedestal: Ideology and Gender in Hollywood*, and other books and articles; member, Editorial Board of *The Nation*.