

The New Criterion

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The gods of liberalism

by Finnegan Schick

Liberalism is and always has been poorly understood. This, at least, is the working premise of the literary historian James Simpson, whose new history of the English Reformation—suggestively titled *Permanent Revolution*—seeks to set the record straight on Puritans, popery, and predestination once and for all. A work neither entirely historical nor entirely literary, *Permanent Revolution* is principally about ideas—the underpinning forces of social upheaval. Like a weaver who first separates the various threads before drawing them intricately together, Simpson isolates each idea—free will, consciousness, sin, biblical truth—and holds it up for a brief moment before looping it into the complex pattern of his history. While perhaps not ideal as an introduction to early modern England, Simpson’s book will delight those who have acquired a taste for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Liberalism has recently come under much scrutiny, from Patrick Deneen’s *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018) to Edward Luce’s *Retreat of Western Liberalism* (2017). While these authors offer dire prognoses and foretell an illiberal future, Simpson looks back to the beginnings of what we now call liberalism. What he finds is no less extreme (and no less surprising) than what the doomsday pundits have been saying all along: beneath liberalism’s glossy exterior lie the sleeping serpents of violence, terror, irrationality, and groupthink. Any proponent of liberalism should, Simpson argues, first come to grips with liberalism’s difficult birth, for only by recognizing the more insidious sides of liberalism can we better safeguard against their abuses. This is ultimately a hopeful book, and those seeking liberalism’s death knell or swan song should look elsewhere.

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“I appeal to a phenomenon inherent in all true revolutions: that of permanent revolution,”

Simpson writes, and within his pages nothing escapes the gaping maw of revolution—a word originally drawn from astrology, in the sense of the turning of heavenly bodies. The only stable feature described in Simpson’s book is the principle of constant change, constant progress. The cost of this perpetual flux, as history reveals, is often the destruction of the old without anything lasting to replace it. Simpson portrays English revolutionaries as sailors who, unmooring their ships, cast off to unknown lands without a map or sextant to guide them.

The phrase “reforming the Reformation” returns throughout this work like some sinister dirge, a reminder of our own enslavement to the demands of modern Whiggism, as well as a warning to any reactionaries who would continue to believe that they are not also peddling their own forms of evangelical Puritanism. Reforming the Reformation is precisely what the Long Parliament did between 1641 and 1644 through a series of ordinances mandating the destruction of all religious imagery. The movement quickly “turn[ed] aggressively against its own achievements and its own forebears, if not its own fellows.”

Structurally, the book is a lesson in revolution; each part gives tripartite treatment to a particular theme (idols, scripture, theater, religion), and by the book’s end we find ourselves back where we began, looking liberalism in the face with a sense of having made no progress. This return to beginnings is, I take it, part of Simpson’s subtle critique of revolutions. The new world promised by the Reformation, writes Simpson, quoting Matthew Arnold, has been “powerless to be born.”

Simpson focuses on a handful of authors, poets, and preachers whose progression—from bloody revolutionaries to skeptical critics of reform and, finally, to advocates of liberalism and tolerance—is emblematic of the changes within English society at the time. Milton is a central player, as are Bunyan, Shakespeare, and Spenser, though it is in his treatment of Milton that Simpson’s insights are strongest.

England may have put to death more Roman Catholics (261) than any other European nation between 1580 and 1600, but it is the war of Protestants against Protestants that has left us with the most skeletons in the closet. How ironic that the fate of certain Protestants under the new Protestant regime was far worse than that of Catholics. The English turned against themselves, blaming their own feckless natures for the slowness of the reform. As a brazen new Puritanism swept England, the enemy of the True Church was not papists or nonbelievers, but fake Protestants. Despite Protestantism’s reputation today as anti-institutional, its earliest forms were “*arch*-institutional,” abolishing every material institution that, as Simpson puts it, “obstruct[s] the key power flow of the True, eternal, invisible Church of the elect.”

The view of the Reformation—its origins, its triumphs, and its mistakes—with which Simpson leaves us is a structure more complex and vast than we could have previously imagined. Simpson guides us through the Reformation like a monk carrying a candle through a dark and cavernous cathedral, revealing all the shattered glass and stonework smashed to bits by centuries of religious infighting. Yet if Simpson critiques religious fanaticism and violence, he also attempts to bring evangelism back into the conversation around liberalism. “Evangelical religion,” Simpson argues in one critical passage, “is a key expression of modernity”:

[A]s long as liberals do not understand this, they remain utterly bewildered by evangelical culture, dismissing it, with 180 degree inaccuracy, as “conservative.” It is unquestionably, and objectionably, illiberal and regressive, but it is also, as I say, by far the most powerful expression of early European revolutionary modernity, which is one of the reasons it remains powerful in the United States.

Simpson makes infrequent comparisons between the Reformation and our present age, but when he does his observations are provocative. America, the land of the free, is also the nation with the world’s highest gross per capita prison population. “Has Liberty become an idol,” Simpson asks, “demanding, as idols habitually do, human sacrifice?”

Classical liberalism is not without its gods, among them freedom and liberty. Milton, the great advocate of regicide, is also perhaps our language’s greatest critic of freedom, and the figure of Satan in *Paradise Lost* is the most terrible example of the consequences of unbridled liberty. For Simpson, all the contradictions of the time are embodied by Milton. If he was a champion of religious authority in his political prose, Milton escaped into poetry to recover a sense of plurality, of boundless human potentialities. In his poetry and in his 1644 anti-censorship tract *Areopagitica*, Milton, Simpson argues, “creates a distinctively modern notion of literary discourse as a new, sublime Scripture.”

Reading *Permanent Revolution* is like opening a medical encyclopedia and finding underneath the entry “modernity” every spiritual and societal malady you have ever felt. Simpson surely has our modern world in mind when he observes how “a culture that was fiercely hostile to works produced a work ethic” or how during revolutions men become isolated from their fellows. “Faced by an alien and severe judge”—the angry God in whose hands we sinners writhe—humans retreat inward, conscious for the first time of a deep and eradicable spiritual solitude.

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Sadly, Simpson offers only diagnoses, not cures. What little solace can be found in a book whose conclusion sketches liberalism's weaknesses, internal contradictions, and utterly misguided understanding of itself, lies in Simpson's historical reevaluation. This fresh view of the Reformation will—if Simpson has put his pieces together in the right order, and I think he has—liberate us (another Whig term, but you can't really escape them, can you?) from historical narratives that have prevailed in the West for over five hundred years.

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