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Notes & Comments: January 2022

The right targets

Conservatism may rarely announce itself in maxims, formulae or aims. Its essence is inarticulate, and its expression, when compelled, sceptical.
—Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism,* 1980

A large part of this issue of *The New Criterion* is devoted to a debate over the merits and limitations of what, for lack of a better term, has come to be called "common-good conservatism." I say "for lack of a better term" because the phrase does seem to load the dice. Surely any plausible alternative to "common-good conservatism" would also seek to foster the common good.

The occasion for the debate is the essay printed below by Kim R. Holmes, a prolific author and for many years a senior official at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C. Holmes describes and criticizes two strands of this new(ish) conservative impulse. One revolves around the claims of national sovereignty, which (critics contend) has been slighted by the regnant corporate globalism that has increasingly held sway in the corridors of power. The other, perhaps more recondite, strand urges a theologically based moral renewal. Edmund Burke is the intellectual patron saint of the former, Thomas Aquinas (and therefore Aristotle, "the Stagirite") of the latter. Both share an impatience with the philosophy of John Locke, which they reject as ethically "thin" and infected by a proto-libertarian "hedonism" and unacknowledged kinship with the dour philosophy of Hobbes.

I do not wish to intervene directly in this exchange. Holmes and his interlocutors—R. R. Reno, Josh Hammer, Ryan T. Anderson, Daniel J. Mahoney, Robert R. Reilly, Charles R. Kesler, and James Piereson—are able and articulate ambassadors of their ideas. Instead, I should like to step back to say a few words about the context and presuppositions of the debate: *on recule pour mieux sauter*.

By chance (if chance it was), just as I was sitting down to inscribe these remarks, I happened upon a recent interview with Norman Podhoretz, a doyen of conservative cultural criticism and the storied editor of *Commentary*. Speaking with *The Wall Street Journal*'s Barton Swaim, Podhoretz affirms two things that bear upon the debate we publish below. The first is that the "culture war" we have been hearing about for decades has not died down or petered out. On the contrary, it is raging with more virulence than ever. Invocations of 1858 and the advent of civil war may be exaggerated, Podhoretz grants. Nevertheless, "We're in a war, and it's a war to the death. Now they [the Left] actually admit it. They used to pretend. Not anymore."

Podhoretz's point is that the stakes in this culture war are high. The woke culture of the Left seeks to destroy not only America as we know it but also the political, moral, and economic foundations upon which it rests. The

conflagration is partly physical, as we saw and see on city streets throughout the country. It is also partly spiritual, as the most basic human realities and aspirations are deconstructed and politicized. When the criterion of merit and the ideal of disinterested judgment are rejected as white, patriarchal tools of oppression, or racial and sexual identity are elevated into sacrosanct shibboleths of election, we are cast into a vertiginous, all-consuming whirlpool of nihilistic self-engorgement.

Podhoretz's second point bears more directly on the intramural debate we publish below. The Left wants to win, Podhoretz told Swaim, but "I'm not sure anymore what our side wants. The Right, as I used to understand it, no longer exists. So you've got one very clear side, and one very muddled side." It was in an effort to illuminate, or rather to help clarify and dispel, that muddle that we undertook this debate.

A few observations: to begin, I believe that the parties to this debate have more in common with one another than may at first appear. They certainly have more in common with one another than they do with the apostles of woke identity politics.

But that is not the whole story or the only relevant opposition. Lurking behind the debate set forth below (though it is adumbrated by a few of the participants) is the opposition between new brands of conservatism and what has come to be called "Conservatism, Inc." The columnist Ross Douthat touched on one essential feature of that dispensation last month in *The New York Times*. In a column called "What the New Right Sees," he wrote that "The ossified Reaganism that the younger conservatives intend to supplant is locked into the world of 1980." That's putting it invidiously, of course, and Holmes responds to the charge in his concluding remarks.

But Conservatism, Inc. embraces more than a nostalgia for the battles and conservative triumphs of the 1980s. In my view, one of the most intellectually energetic essays of the last several years is "The Flight 93 Election," which appeared in early September 2016 in the *Claremont Review of Books*. Originally published under the pseudonym Publius Decius Mus (a figure described by Livy in his account of the Battle of Vesuvius, 340 B.C.), the piece was soon revealed to have been written by Michael Anton, a political philosopher who later served on the national security team in the Trump White House. The essay earned instant notoriety for its comparison of the 2016 election to the doomed United Flight 93 on 9/11. The contest between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, Anton said, was an existential battle for the soul of the country. Whatever Donald Trump's faults, his election, unlikely though it seemed at the time, represented the only chance for national survival.

That essay was celebrated or disparaged according to the political coloration of its readers. Indeed, it has emerged as a sort of ideological litmus test. The Left abominates it. So do the denizens of Conservatism, Inc. This is understandable. Anton was unsparing in his criticism of the conservative establishment's fecklessness. "[A]t root," he wrote, those conservatives are "keepers of the status quo. Oh, sure, they want some things to change. They want their pet ideas adopted—tax deductions for having more babies and the like. Many of them are even good ideas. But are any of them truly fundamental? Do they get to the heart of our problems?"

Those are among the questions that stand behind the debate we publish below. As are the points Anton makes in this litany:

> If conservatives are right about the importance of virtue, morality, religious faith, stability, character and so on in the individual; if they are right about sexual morality or what came to be termed "family values"; if they are right about the importance of education to inculcate good character and to teach the fundamentals that have defined knowledge in the West for millennia; if they are right about societal norms and public order; if they are right about the centrality of initiative, enterprise, industry, and thrift to a sound economy and a healthy society; if they are right about the soul-sapping effects of paternalistic Big Government and its

> cannibalization of civil society and religious institutions; if they are right about the necessity of a strong defense and prudent statesmanship in the international sphere—if they are right about the importance of all this to national health and even survival, then they must believe—mustn't they?—that we are headed off a cliff.

Actions speak louder than words. It seems to me that Anton was quite right when he went on to observe that it was "obvious that conservatives don't believe any such thing, that they feel no such sense of urgency, of an immediate necessity to change course and avoid the cliff."

I have noticed that both admirers and critics of Anton's essay say that it "helped get Trump elected." I think that is completely wrong. It made a deep impression on the eighty-seven (or 187) people who engaged with it. What got Trump elected in 2016 were the sixty-three million people who responded to his agenda and voted for him. This is not to take anything away from Anton's essay. I think it is a brilliant piece of work. But it was not part of the metabolism of retail politics.

That brings me to the controversy about Locke and Burke. As Charles R. Kesler and James Piereson both point out, there is an element of anachronism about the claim that the founders were (or should have been) more attentive to Burke than Locke. I am an avid admirer of Edmund Burke. But the relevant writings of Burke—especially his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*—appeared years after the American Revolution and the framing of the Constitution. So introducing Burke into the economy of the American founding would be a Borgesian gambit akin to asking about Wordsworth's influence on Milton.

As for Locke, I am puzzled by efforts to extirpate him from the American founding. I do not believe that what's wrong with America can be laid at his doorstep. Below, Kesler cites a recent scholar who reports that Locke was an avid reader of Hobbes and habitually had *Leviathan* on his table at home. But Locke read and was influenced by many thinkers, Straussian-approved ones like Machiavelli as well as such Christian apologists as Pascal. As for Locke's being a libertarian atheist, I think that there is at least as much evidence against as for that claim. In "The appropriation of Locke" (*The New Criterion* of October 2021), Joseph Loconte quoted the Locke scholar John Dunn to make the case. "Locke's entire intellectual enterprise," he wrote, "depended upon 'the axiomatic centrality of the purposes of God.' . . . Scholars debate Locke's orthodoxy," he continued, "but there is little doubt that he maintained a lifelong belief in the divine authority of the Bible, in Jesus as the Messiah, in the hope of eternal life, and in a final judgment." In any event, although Locke and Hobbes begin from similar assumptions about human nature, one was an advocate of absolute monarchy, the other of a form of republicanism in which power was divided. There is a reason that Jefferson borrowed the language of Locke, not Hobbes, in the Declaration of Independence.

One concluding observation: this debate revolves largely around the proper meaning and vocation of conservatism. That is essentially a theoretical question. The existential pressure behind that question, however, is eminently practical. It involves not only the fate of conservatism but, more graphically, the failure of liberalism. Our basic problem, that is to say, is not so much a poverty of understanding as a paralysis of will. The real problem conservatives face is not in formulating sophisticated principles but in effectively confronting the juggernaut of progressive usurpation. For decades we have been living with the one-way ratchet of liberal imposition. The harvest is a situation in which conservatives are considered legitimate only when they embrace progressive aims. Conservatives, in other words, have conspired in their own eclipse. Meanwhile, the true sources of value—not government but the family, the churches, and our educational institutions—have been twisted out of all recognition. The answer to this tyranny lies not in the framing of better arguments but in the deployment of a more efficacious politics.

—Roger Kimball

Western civilization at the crossroads: V

The birth, benefits & burden of Western citizenship

by Victor Davis Hanson

What happens to a society when the pernicious ideas of an elite filter down to the masses, and the proverbial people sense the foundations of their own citizenship crumbling? When crime spikes, infrastructure erodes, airliners lack fuel to reach their destinations, borders become irrelevant, tribalism returns, and Americans lose confidence in their own elections and the wisdom of their Constitution, the most likely ultimate cause of such apparent systems collapse can be traced to an erosion of citizenship.

The assault on American citizenship

The current American national malaise and dread of collective decline display a variety of symptoms. One is a sense that the middle class is weakening. Another is that America's southern border is becoming meaningless. Citizens also fear that woke identity politics are fueling a recrudescent precivilizational tribalism that threatens to endanger their lives and unwind the nation.

More formally, a vast and growing body of unelected functionaries now exercises more power over citizens than do elected officials. Credentialed elites across the professions are actively seeking to enfeeble or discard significant elements of the Constitution and the accompanying customs and traditions of nearly two and a half centuries. Self-described overseers wish to subordinate national interests and sovereignty to a higher globalist cultural allegiance and authority. All these diverse challenges still share a common denominator in the systematic destruction of what used to be called American citizenship.

Take the middle class, the traditional linchpin of consensual government. Until recently, middle-class Americans had suffered from decades of stagnant incomes, even as the country at large was affluent as never before. Middle-class and poor students now owe $1.7 trillion in aggregate college debt. That staggering sum is an indictment of the pernicious marriage of federal government subsidies of and guarantees to higher education. That nexus has indentured an entire generation without providing them in return the civic education and common skills and knowledge so necessary for active and vigilant citizenship. And most observers concede that these unfortunate debts simply cannot be paid back by those who incurred them.

The percentage of Americans owning homes—the modern equivalent of the founding ideal of land-owning and empowered citizens—is again declining. The average net worth of Americans at retirement is also plunging. About 40 percent of American adults can only make minimum payments on their mounting credit-card debt. Such stagnation occurs at the moment the federal government is borrowing trillions of dollars for the greatest array of redistributive entitlements in its history.

All these statistics have consequences for the nation as a whole. The ages at which Americans marry, have their first child, or buy a home have risen to new highs. American fertility rates

reach new modern lows. The native-born population of the United States shrinks and ages. In circular fashion, once middle-class viability erodes, an ever-expanding government is asked to subsidize Americans in vain attempts to provide some of the entitlements that citizens once confidently earned themselves.

The result is the very government-induced dependency about which the nineteenth-century Americanophile Alexis de Tocqueville once warned: an ennui of prolonged adolescence replacing the pride and dynamism of the self-reliant citizen. From the time of Aristotle, political scientists have warned that consensual government cannot endure without the majority of the population transcending the dependency, volatility, and subservience of the poor, while also circumscribing the reach of an entitled, self-interested, and often disdainful elite. In a reductionist sense, the middle-class citizens, unlike the aristocracy and plutocracy, do not seek to win profitable government concessions. And unlike the poor, they do not depend on state redistributions.

Equally important for democracy is a sense of place, a common landscape in which American citizens are free and feel secure to craft their own culture and protect their laws and customs—without constant foreign threats, demographic pressures, and migratory challenges. What is true of America is true globally: Western civilization is at the crossroads. Without demarcated and fixed borders, citizenship becomes impossible. It devolves into a slew of contradictory and warring castes of alien residents, guest workers, and migrating tribes, each demanding the privileges of the legal citizen while claiming exemptions from his responsibilities. Citizenship's values become diluted when no one knows precisely where the frontier ends or begins, and thus whether a particular farm, hamlet, or town is or is not protected by and responsible for a consensual government. A cacophony of languages confuses national allegiances, and overtaxed social services are the inevitable result when millions migrate across an open border and compound their first illegal act with a second of residing in a foreign country without permission.

An estimated twenty million foreign residents currently remain in the United States illegally. Over the present fiscal year, nearly two million foreign nationals are forecast to enter the United States without legal authorization. Most will likely cross the wide-open southern border unvaccinated and untested for COVID-19, while Americans are warned that their government may go door-to-door to roust them out for inoculations. Yet without borders, we return to the scenarios of the Dark Ages of tribal migrations, when entire shadow populations vied with citizens for claims on the land, without any desire to acquire the language, customs, and traditions of their hosts.

America's once-successful melting-pot approach to integrating, assimilating, and intermarrying legal immigrants has not been so much replaced by a "salad-bowl" alternative of primary allegiance to separate identities as it has been by sheer chaos. Millions of immigrants vote with their feet for better lives in the United States. Yet their American hosts increasingly have little idea why that is so, and none about how these migrants might rapidly become fellow citizens. The current faddish term of the moment—"woke"—is simply a new word for the ancient idea of tribalism, of destroying a citizenry's common affinities and primary loyalties to a consensual government and replacing them with elemental kin ties and prejudices based on superficial appearances, shared languages, or religious zealotries.

Such tribalism—the incendiary stuff of ancient empires, as well as the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Rwanda—supersedes mere hyphenated names and identity politics. Race, not class, is considered the more immutable demarcation and therefore becomes a desirable and useful divide.

Certainly, the civil rights–era dream of Martin Luther King, Jr.—our character, not the color of our skin, is what matters—is increasingly challenged by a new reactionary wokist creed that to fight bad discrimination, one must embrace good discrimination. Or to put it another way, to curb racial obsessions, one must first become obsessed with racial differences. Few reflect that a large multiracial democracy is history's rare, fragile, and volatile artifact, or that until recently

America was about the only nation in history that had even tried such an ambitious project.

The diminution of the middle class, the porousness of our borders, and the proliferation of the dangerous idea that race is essential, not incidental, to who we are—all these occur almost innately. It is as if America itself is reverting to a premodern, precivilizational region, or a territory of peasants and residents, rather than a modern, industrial nation of empowered citizens whom the free world relies upon.

Yet, simultaneously, there are more deliberate and coordinated efforts of elites to curb or replace citizenship. Call them the postmodern bookends to our premodern forces of civic erosion. The unelected bureaucrats at the state and local levels now number in the millions. Recent scandals, controversies, and incompetencies within the alphabet soup of federal bureaucracies—at the CDC, NIH, IRS, DOJ, DOD, FBI, and CIA—share one common feature. Unelected but powerful federal employees often have infringed upon the rights of citizens to be free from government surveillance, from government hounding, from government warping of their private tax information, from government appropriation of constitutional freedoms, from bureaucratic alterations in their elections, and from infringement of their constitutional protections.

All these challenges to democracy are not new but a part of all historical governments. They were even common during the vast growth of the ancient Athenian bureaucracy, in the various governments residing at Versailles, and in both the czarist and Soviet Kremlin. Yet consensual societies, by their very equality-minded social and economic ambitions, are the most prone to creating an always growing bureaucratic state of "helpers." All democracies and republics eventually suffer the appropriation of power by the unelected in the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government. When one functionary has the combined power to make laws through edicts, then to adjudicate whether they are legitimate, and finally to enforce them with the power of the state, then there is no longer a free and consensual government.

Aside from the insidious unelected bureaucrats, there are more systematic and deliberate revolutionaries who seek to alter citizenship as envisioned by the founders. These are often supposedly the nation's best and brightest legal minds, social activists, and elected officials. Yet the revolutionary progressives breezily talk of ending the 233-year-old Electoral College, the 180-year-old Senate filibuster, the 150-year-old nine-justice Supreme Court, and the sixty-year tradition of a fifty-state union—all revolutionary changes predicated on the hope of a vice president breaking a fifty–fifty tie in the Senate. These are merely the first agendas of those who also now question why senators are not proportionally elected as are those congresspeople in the House of Representatives and state legislatures, or why Supreme Court justices are not subject to periodic referenda as is true of many state appeals-court justices, or why ranked-choice voting is not used uniformly in federal elections as it was recently, for example, in the Democratic Party primaries for the New York mayoral race.

Common to all these multifaceted attacks on the way America has been governed is the leftist idea that our customs and laws never had any legitimacy, whether constitutional or legislative, given they did not result in an equality of result. Rather they supposedly reflect an endemic failure of government to ensure "equity"—the radical egalitarian idea of mandated equivalence that overrides all individual differences in ability, talent, energy, luck, and character.

The First Amendment has long been under assault by social-media monopolies and on campuses. Various schools of "critical legal theory" now argue that law enforcement, arrest, and prosecution should be selectively predicated on social, economic, and racial criteria rather than on legal statutes. When mayors, governors, and police chiefs cannot stop the mounting epidemic of inner-city violence, they blame the Second Amendment. Yet illegal, unregistered, and often stolen handguns or edged weapons—not so-called assault weapons—account for over ninety percent of all murders. On campus, constitutionally protected due process of those accused is se-

lectively applied, depending on the political nature of the charge. Crying "hate speech" or "sexual assault" so often results in the suspension of all constitutional guardrails, as campus administrators vie to signal their rightousness as judge, jury, and punisher. In some sense, progressives now fear and loathe the First Amendment as much as they traditionally despised the Second.

There are other elite challenges to American citizenship. No nation has a longer history of uniquely stable constitutional government than the United States, not the ancient civilization of China, not Russia, not one in Europe. Yet economic globalization is now often conflated with envisioned global political harmonization, as if the natural expansion of quasi-free-market capitalism ensured the worldwide adoption of constitutional governments and thus like-minded national tesserae in a one-world mosaic.

Our current Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, invited a so-called "racism expert" from the often-illiberal United Nations to audit America's allegedly spotty record on race and equity. International commercial accords are predicated not on symmetry, but persist in operating under the sclerotic assumptions that unfair free trade with America was necessary for nations to reboot a stagnant postwar world. Global and Westernized elites at Davos currently talk of a future "Great Reset" in which nations adopt top-down reforms of their economies, determine their energy use according to transnational norms, and adopt global guidelines on everything from corporate governance to reparatory diversity policies.

Civic education, ancient American customs, and popular shared traditions are rejected as toxic because they are not perfect. Few acknowledge that the glue that held together an otherwise chaotic, unruly, and once-tribal America was composed of shared national and religious holidays, our collective respect for American icons, emblems, and traditions, and the appreciation of the reasons why most immigrants head for the United States while few Americans leave for homes elsewhere.

In sum, without a popular allegiance to a viable middle class, a defined and shared space with secure borders, and a common identity of being an American that transcends our particular tribes, there can be no citizenship. Nor can citizenship survive if our elites entrust its maintenance and protection to the millions who are unelected and unaudited but often invisible and powerful. Citizenship also will disappear if a few seek to alter the Constitution or change time-tried customs and traditions for ephemeral political advantage. And the American idea of governance and its ancient traditions will fade if forcibly synchronized with global trends.

Strangely, Americans often assume that their inheritance as citizens—entitling them to vote and hold office, to enjoy free expression, and to have freedoms protected by a 233-year-old Constitution—is commonplace, both now and in the past. Yet citizenship in a consensual society is not even the global norm today. Only about half the world's individual nations even claim to be constitutional republics or democracies. And citizens were even rarer in the past.

The origins of Western citizenship

Civilization—as distinct from citizens and citizenship—began prominently seven thousand years ago with the birth of settled, urban, and stratified populations in the Near East and Mesopotamia. Intensive, irrigated agriculture allowed surpluses of labor and capital to be diverted to building cities, forming organized militaries, and establishing laws. Two millennia later, even more complex civilizations birthed still more sophisticated cultures in India, China, the Nile Valley of Egypt, on Crete, and throughout the Aegean. All these cultures mastered monumental temple-building, sophisticated record-keeping, and highly developed art.

Yet none of the first civilized dynasties and monarchies had any notion of citizenship, at least as we might now describe it. Subjects, peasants, and serfs could not vote on the laws they were subject to. Nor could they elect their own officials or audit their rulers. Free speech and autonomous courts, judges, and juries simply did not exist. The ability to craft

monumental cities depended mostly on the coercive organization of labor and farming.

There is striking engineering brilliance evident in the pyramids at Giza (*ca*. 2600 B.C.), the Cretan palaces at Knossos and Phaistos (*ca*. 1600 B.C.), and the tholos tombs at Mycenae (*ca*. 1400 B.C.). But these centrally planned civilizations were largely organized from the palace by monarchs and theocrats. Even among those who were not legally defined as slaves, there was little idea that those who farmed or fought for a Mycenaean king, Egyptian pharaoh, or Cretan lord had any say over how, when, or why. Writing, as in the law code of Hammurabi (*ca* 1750 B.C.) or the Linear B inventories from Mycenae (*ca*. 1450 B.C.), was mostly confined to administrative edicts and the inscribed *res gestae* of the rulers. It is salutary to study these early preclassical civilizations, as well as those in China and India, and marvel at their scientific progress and their development of written scripts, but none of them evolved into what we would now call a constitutional or consensual system.

Note that Western citizenship rarely had much, if anything, to do with race. Elsewhere to the north and west, poverty and tribalism predominated among Germanic and Gallic tribes. Most of present-day Europe was then sparsely populated, the haunts of warring tribes from the Atlantic to modern-day Ukraine. Descriptions of such "white" peoples in Caesar's *Gallic Wars* and Tacitus's *Germania*, while sometimes romantically condescending, are mostly Roman ethnocentric deprecations of tribal savagery beyond the Alps, Danube, and Rhine. "Freedom" (*Freiheit*) is a word of Germanic origin that originally reflected a natural wildness rather than the ability to retain liberties within a complex and often urban environment. Migrating tribal peoples could do as they pleased only because of an often-empty countryside—and not due to the later impulse of *libertas* in classical citizens to be free from the overreach of a ubiquitous state. Civilization's more difficult task, then, was to define and protect a citizen's rights within a stationary, literate, and complex society.

Citizenship proper, however, arrived late in history, and at first only among a small number of people in the isolated valleys of rugged Greece. After the final collapse of the Mycenaean Greek palatial civilizations in the twelfth century B.C., and the gradual ascendence out of the four centuries of the subsequent depopulated Greek Dark Ages, something quite strange in history appeared in eighth-century Greece. A novel idea of a more decentralized and consensual civilization emerged among some 1,500 small Greek city-states or poleis. Despite periodic dalliances with authoritarianism, the tyrants, strongmen, aristocrats, and monarchs in these communities were increasingly forced to share governance with a broader emerging land-owning class.

Why such a singular and unprecedented change? We are not sure. But population growth; increased emphases on intensively farmed grains, grapes, and olives; the rise of armored infantrymen or hoplites; and the well-protected and isolated valleys blessed with a Mediterranean climate all seemed to combine and become force multipliers of a growing agrarian middle group.

These emerging citizens were intent on protecting their newfound private property from confiscation and curbing burdensome taxes. The reality that residents could congregate most of the year outdoors in good weather facilitated frequent mass assemblies of most of the voting population, in a way impossible, for example, in northern Europe.

Unlike the subjects and serfs of prior dynasties, the city-states invented the idea that at least half the residents who owned small farms had the unique right to say what they wished. They won the privilege to elect their own officials and to vote on their taxes, budgets, and when to go to war. Their equal seats in outdoor assemblies were mirror images of their slots in the infantry phalanx. Both reflected the agrarian grid of small farms outside of town. The city-state ethos reflected natural equality rather than a top-down enforced equity.

This new economic autonomy fostered political independence. City-states of stationary peoples insisted on demarcated borders—often marked by formal boundary stones in addition to natural rivers and mountain ranges. Inside

them, unique laws, customs, and traditions united the citizenry of the particular polis for generations. Borders made Thebans distinct from their Athenian neighbors, and both from the vale of the Spartans. Borders encouraged civic solidarity and security. Ancient familial loyalties slowly atrophied once a defined space had united disparate tribes. The Greeks relegated their pre-city-state past to vestigial chauvinistic myths and replaced such clannish bonds by shared fealty to constitutional states.

Statesmen were wary of popular pushbacks if they changed civic rules for temporary advantage. Unelected officials were necessary, but when they grew too numerous and intrusive were blasted by comic dramatists and rhetoricians. No one comes off worse in Aristophanes' comedies than the lifelong politician or busybody bureaucrat. Enlightened Socratic philosophers of the more sophisticated and wealthy city-states talked of Greeks grandly as "citizens of the world" ("cosmopolitans") well beyond the Aegean. But rarely were these dreamers given the reins of government to reify their sketchy utopianism. Philosopher kings remained the stuff of Plato's utopianism.

By the late sixth and early fifth century, the result was a spate of monumental temple building, an expansion of the Panhellenic Games, the canonization of epic and lyric poetry, the emergence of natural philosophy, and the beginnings of drama, history, and sophisticated scientific inquiry. The fragile Hellenic achievement of citizenship was brilliantly defended and enhanced at the battles of Marathon, Salamis, and Plataea, in the face of the successive invasions of the overwhelming forces of the transcontinental Persian Empire. It turned out that citizens who could determine their own fate could also fight more effectively than those who could not.

In such a diverse geography as Greece there were, of course, exceptions to the city-state model—as there are today with nations outside the West. The large, rich plains of Thessaly and Macedonia clung to Dark Age horse cultures of monarchy and hereditary aristocracies rather than pursuing intensive homestead farming.

Sparta solved the dilemma of its growing population and finite land by conquering the fertile plains of nearby Messenia and much of Laconia—and reducing their populations to serfdom to produce food under coercion. Sparta's atypical but vaunted infantry largely grew out of an internal police force necessary to monitor a large population of restive helot serfs and indentured food producers. And the more the crack security forces of Sparta scoured the southern Peloponnese to put down internal unrest, the more they were away from home—and the more the legendary but tenuous Spartan fertility was endangered.

Soon, however, there arose concerns over combining consensual government with free markets and private property—paradoxes all too familiar to us moderns. Century-long political debates arose in the abstract among the philosophers such as Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle and often led to civic strife, graphically recorded by the historians Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon.

Challenges to early Western citizenship

How, citizens argued, can a society retain the ideal of equality when natural differences in individual talent and industry, bad luck, or varying degrees of health all work against equality of result? Was freedom then always at war with an unnatural equality of result that required undue state force to sustain it? Was it then better to have the citizens roughly equal in perpetuity but equally less prosperous and less free?

As broad-based oligarchies began in many regions to evolve into democracies, where property qualifications eroded, more radical assemblies became untethered from past customs and constitutional parameters. Plato joked that the vote at Athens would eventually be extended to the animals of the polis who could logically complain that otherwise they were, unfairly, less equal than others.

When officials are elected, and laws and policies are made by majority votes, the Greeks wondered, who are the adults in the room that remind hoi polloi to save money for the future? Can anyone ever remind democratic voters that there is no paternal abstract "they" to take responsibility other than themselves?

And when a democratic people without constitutional guardrails votes to do what it wishes on any given day—enslave or kill the Melians, send a democratic fleet to attack democratic Syracuse, or execute the admirals at Arginusae recently responsible for a stunning naval victory—is that a reflection of popular will or mob frenzy?

Citizens of democracies damned landed oligarchies as inevitably corrupted by rich insiders, with too many outsiders left out of power. Landed traditionalists in turn retorted that those unstable democracies pandered to the appetites of a supposedly ignorant mob and were capable of anything—and everything—at any time. Rome eventually felt it could solve these Hellenic dilemmas by fashioning a compromise, a representative republic of elected officials who would craft laws rather than allow mercurial citizens to vote directly on policies. The Roman Republic borrowed freely from the more conservative Spartan and Cretan constitutions in establishing checks and balances among what we call now the legislative, judicial, and executive branches.

As Romans studied the supposed abuses of Athenian democracy, they became energized to check the popular abuse of power. They settled on two consuls rather than one yearly chief executive and allowed tribunes of the "people" to exercise "veto" power over the wealthy and aristocratic Roman Senate. Most importantly, Rome initially saw that their system naturally required material prosperity and broad security to enable the time-consuming chores of self-governance. Early on Romans mastered the challenges of creating networks in all types of weather, leading to brilliantly engineered roads, aqueducts, and drainage canals to bring in clean water and dispose of sewage, as well as urban police and fire departments, and laws conducive to commerce. The material success of the Romans and the longevity of both their republic and empire had a profound effect on later generations of statesmen in the West, who more often emulated the pragmaticism of Roman governance than the volatility of the radically democratic Athenian model. The American founders assumed likewise that consensual government could not exist without a prosperous citizenry that in turn requires the sanctity of private property and the opportunity offered by a free-market economy.

Other contradictions of earlier Greek citizenship posed similar dilemmas for republican Romans. Who could be a citizen? Did citizenship require one to look Roman, to be native-born, or to speak Latin? The Romans eventually concluded that the Greek city-states had become ossified and static, never developing into a Panhellenic nation, because they lacked the mechanisms to incorporate and assimilate talented resident aliens, who often were more industrious than natives. Romans learned to be more inclusive by assimilating non-Romans and then non-Italians as citizens. By the third century A.D., Roman emperors and those in the ruling classes were occasionally not even native Latin speakers.

Rome had transformed the idea of citizenship into more of a creed of common values and traditions than a requirement of similar ethnicity and appearance. *Civis romanus sum*, "I am a Roman citizen," as Cicero pointed out in the waning republic, soon became a badge of honor and a guarantee of privilege throughout the Mediterranean. Citizenship, not just the look of being Italian, was what gained respect and concessions. And yet, as the empire grew and aged, and non-Romans wished for the protections of Roman citizenship without its responsibilities, the population regressed to regionalism, sectarianism, and ultimately tribalism. What had once brought success unwound and in opposite fashion ensured decline.

Unlike other imperial efforts, originally Roman culture and civilization had spread in ways that superseded its deadly legions. Romanity initially sought to assimilate and integrate conquered Gauls, Spaniards, North Africans, Asians, and eastern Europeans, who acknowledged that their newfound privileges of clean water and sanitation, the legal rights of habeas corpus, and protections from tribal violence were at least no worse than their own indigenous alternatives.

Yet more paradoxes arose as the Roman Republic transmogrified into world government. Within an integrated intracontinental

economy, Romans reached unprecedented levels of affluence. But how then were citizens to retain their ancient agrarian virtues and respect for materially poorer past generations, central to republican government, when material paradise seemed in reach on earth?

Free markets had not just accommodated the burdens of consensual government but unfortunately spawned a pernicious *luxus*—what today we might call luxury to the point of decadence. Read Petronius's brilliant first-century A.D. satirical novel *The Satyricon* to sense how the spiritual descendants of once-hardy rural Italians had fallen into gluttony, sexual debauchery, ennui, and sloth on the Bay of Naples. Roman *luxus* is presented as the catalyst of decline in the late-republican and early imperial literature of Catullus, Tacitus, and Suetonius, as well. The eventual answers to this dilemma of the deleterious dividends from an efficient global economy and stable governance were sometimes thought to be found in imported religious sects, most prominently a radically new Christian idea of the Sermon-on-the-Mount virtues of abstinence and poverty—or at least the idea of not fully indulging the appetites when to do so was both legal and materially easy.

Slavery was endemic to all ancient societies and exists in hushed pockets today in areas in Africa and Asia. The Islamic world enslaved as many Africans as did Westerners, who throughout the Mediterranean and eastern Europe were themselves often enslaved by Islamic Ottoman armies and Mediterranean pirates and buccaneers. Prior Greek debates over chattel slavey and its contradictions for a supposedly consensual society of free citizens were *never* resolved, at least in the sense of a singular Western end to what was universal throughout the world.

In the Western Roman Empire, the insidious and pernicious system of slavery persisted against occasional criticism, perhaps because it was never fully identified with race rather than with the endemic misfortunes of war or birth, and, equally, because the idea of leisure was seen as a necessary requisite of participatory government and civic education. That is, there was no state investment in the pseudoscience of racial superiority and thus, paradoxically, no embarrassment when slaves so often proved smarter and more industrious than their masters and thus more deserving of citizenship. Meanwhile, enslavement for some was self-servingly defined as necessary for the enhancement of freedom for others. Roman slave owners might shrug that they kept slaves because they had the power and desire to do so—and needed no supporting dogmas of either their own ethnic superiority or of natural servile inferiority. When anyone in theory could become a slave, slavery then became an equal-opportunity hazard. And by the same token, a potter in Athens who frequented the ecclesiae and law courts did so on the assurance that his slave was busy at work.

Throughout classical antiquity, there was a constant class war between the haves and have-nots, resulting frequently in horrifically violent revolutions. But the idea that government was created by citizens and thus could be adapted to enhance the opportunities of the oppressed, and the notion that free markets and private property made those inside the boundaries of a city-state or republic more prosperous than those outside, tended for a thousand years to prevent civilizational suicide.

The rebirth of citizenship

Given all these successes, why then did this classical experiment with citizenship come to an end in the West with the deterioration of Rome, though it persisted in various strains in the East at Constantinople?

The decline and extinction of the classical world is a long story. But the answer that later Western political thinkers such as Machiavelli, Locke, Montesquieu, Gibbon, and perhaps our own founders, took from the end of classical antiquity was that it is never easy for citizens to govern themselves unless they are well-informed, civically involved, unified, and prepared to fight enemies abroad while at home working to preserve ancestral values and shared traditions.

It is not sustainable to create a vibrant free market unless the winners share some of their

largesse through private civic investment, philanthropy, and liturgies—and conduct themselves outwardly in spirit as if they were still of the middle class. It is not easy for such consensual governments to defend themselves when a cacophony of voices seeks to borrow and spend now, rather than to invest and save for later crises—whether Athens's fourth-century B.C. fight over shorting military expenditures while swelling the Theoric Fund that subsidized public entertainment and festivals, or America's accrual of nearly $30 trillion in debt at a time of spiraling entitlements and waning defense readiness. Declining fertility, a debased currency, a politically weaponized military, an ignorant and indifferent citizenry, and resurgent tribalism were often cited by Roman contemporaries as the catalysts of Western decline once the ancient virtues were forgotten. Affluence, then, as the Roman poet Catullus warned, could be a greater threat to consensual governance than poverty.

So, citizenship was for a time mostly lost after the end of classical antiquity. The ensuing poverty, insecurity, and depopulation of the European Dark Ages conspired to make it nearly impossible to resurrect. Yet centuries after Rome, empowered citizens gradually reappeared sporadically in medieval Britain, Renaissance Italy, the western and northern Europe of the Enlightenment, and among the colonies of North America—always amid more numerous tribal, autocratic, and dynastic enemies.

The American founders knew well the classical origins of their experiment with a constitutional republic—and its long, episodic, and checkered history—which served them well in their own revolutionary era. They worried about existential challenges all around. The rich too often felt they were wealthy because of superior breeding or divine blessings, and thus deserved exemptions found under monarchies and hereditary dynasties. Meanwhile, tribalists insisted that natural affinities lie first with those whom they looked most like. Clerks and scribes assumed that their intimacy with the gears and levels of government should give them the right to ignore the will of the people.

Too many abstract moralists whined that since constitutional government proved not perfect, it was simply no good. Theocrats lectured that the divine should rule on Earth as well as in Heaven, while utopians felt their superior systems of governance could be stretched thin across the globe. The West has suffered all such challenges to citizenship during Hellenistic and Roman imperial times, the post-Roman Dark Ages, the Inquisition, the Napoleonic Wars, the two global conflagrations of the world wars, the carnage of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, and an often-chaotic current world.

Almost alone, the new American Constitution sought ways to ensure that the small property–owning, commonsensical classes remained the bulwark of the new nation. In emulation of the success of the classical world, Americans built into their new system of governance innate ways to change and question the status quo, in the singular Western tradition of self-criticism and reexamination.

For all the subsequent dislocations of the vast frontier expansion, the Industrial Revolution, the Civil War, two World Wars, the Great Depression, the suffrage and civil rights movements, and the cultural revolutions of the 1960s, America did not just endure, but became the freest, wealthiest, and most powerful nation in the history of civilization. Key to that miracle were the resiliency of American citizens and the rights and responsibilities entailed in that citizenship.

Americans are correctly confident people that enjoy the oldest continuous democracy on the planet, one that is the foundation for the wealthiest, most free, and most secure nation in history. But with such power and privilege ought to come not just responsibilities, but humility and some anxiety over the fact that our experiment is *not* the normal custom of the current world and never was in the past.

The enemies of citizenship are usually more numerous than its friends. And no democracy or republic survives if its participants come to believe that it always will, without need of collective sacrifice, tolerance of dissent, constant reinvestment in the middle classes—and knowledge and forbearance of their own past.

The fallacies of the common good

by Kim R. Holmes

Anyone observing the evolution of conservative thought over the past few years could not have escaped a growing trend. Politicians, intellectuals, and think-tankers are questioning traditional American conservatism's commitment to limited government, individual natural rights, and economic freedom. They are talking up the virtues of the common good in ways that call into question their commitments to liberty and freedom.

The philosophical questioning of the principles of the American founding is coming from two different factions within the Right. One involves the national conservatives. The other is from philosophers who wish to resurrect the moral organizing principles of natural law. Both reject the idea of "intrinsic" rights that is traditionally associated with the founding.

The fact that these critiques arise from the American Right is significant. American progressivism has long questioned the founding and tried to revise it to suit its purposes. Now it appears members of the Right are doing the same thing. Why? And what are the implications, not only for conservatism but for the American nation?

"Common-good conservatism: a debate" is a symposium organized by *The New Criterion* centered on this essay by Kim R. Holmes. The respondents are Ryan T. Anderson, Josh Hammer, Charles R. Kesler, Daniel J. Mahoney, James Piereson, Robert R. Reilly, and R. R. Reno, followed by concluding remarks from Mr. Holmes.

Of the two common-good schools of thought, the national conservatives are the more prominent. Intellectuals such as Yoram Hazony and Josh Hammer have developed a theory of American conservatism that is inspired by Edmund Burke. What is novel is not the reference to Burke *per se*—the conflict between Burke and John Locke has long been part of the debate on whether the founding was liberal or conservative. Rather, it is the linking of the Burkean argument to the tradition of nationalism that is new. Like Burke, the national conservatives believe a nation's identity and government should be organized around its unique history, culture, and customs. Like modern nationalists, they believe national sovereignty is justified by the particular rights of peoples—all peoples in their unique ways—rather than by the universalist claims of legitimacy that often attend democratic institutions.

One of the most thorough expositions of the national-conservative viewpoint is found in an essay by Josh Hammer published in the *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy.* Hammer criticizes the doctrine of constitutional originalism and posits instead what he calls "common-good originalism." His main conclusion is that the American founders were not really Lockean believers in intrinsic rights, but Burkeans who saw rights as instrumental or as means to an end. As he says:

> It seems, rather, that the founders who drafted the Constitution viewed the protection of natural

> rights and the expansion of individual liberty less as intrinsic ends, and more as a means by which citizens could pursue a common good.

He operates under the assumption that

> "conservatism," as opposed to classical liberalism or libertarianism, is wary of "reason"-based claims of rationalist abstraction and is more empirically rooted in the historical customs, norms, and traditions of distinct communities, tribes, and nations.

For that reason, conservatism "rightly understood" is "more open to wielding state power" and, when need be, willing to "enforce our order" or even to "reward friends and punish enemies (within the confines of the rule of law)."

Hammer is a fellow at The Edmund Burke Foundation, whose chairman is Hazony, one of the key founders of the national-conservative movement. By choosing Burke as their inspiration, Hammer and Hazony apparently wish to avoid associating their philosophy with the identarian nationalism of the far Right. Regardless of that intention, the national conservatives do share nationalism's historical penchant for wanting to organize a strong state around a common organic culture, an idea developed into modern nationalism by the German philosophers Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Johann Gottfried Herder. By focusing on Burke, the national conservatives do avoid the extremes of blood-and-soil nationalism found in the identitarian movement, but by consciously choosing the term "nationalism," they also invite scrutiny of their ideas based on that association.

The main problem with Hammer's interpretation of the founding is that it is profoundly ahistorical. Put simply, the founders were not Burkeans. Yes, they welcomed Burke's support for the American Revolution from his British Whig perspective, but it was John Locke who moved them philosophically more than Edmund Burke. Secondly, the founders shared Locke's notion of natural rights being grounded in the universal claims of natural law. That is why Jefferson and the other founders believed rights were "unalienable." That is why they were "equal." Such rights were universal, and not particular to a certain people or custom—as they would have to be if they were Burkean or nationalistic. In fact, while Burke believed in the existence of natural rights, he did not particularly care for the abstract nature of, and the *a priori* reasoning behind, rights as envisioned by the American framers. In the end, he believed that both rights and state power should be limited to prevent tyranny, but he did not believe rights were intrinsic.

To conclude that the founders were not Lockean, as Hammer does, requires that we ignore the historical record. When the Declaration of Independence used Thomas Jefferson's formulation of "unalienable" rights, which clearly implies that they are intrinsic as Locke understood them to be, he was not merely expressing his own opinion. He was advancing an idea that was approved unanimously (with only New York abstaining, largely for commercial reasons) by the Second Continental Congress. What is more, it was most likely John Adams, not Jefferson, who came up with the word "unalienable" instead of "inalienable." Of all the founders, Adams was one of the most conservative, but even he embraced the notion of "unalienable" rights.

It was not only Jefferson and Adams who thought this way. When James Madison said that conscience was "the most sacred of all property," he was stating clearly that the civil government has a duty to protect the conscience of individuals. It was not up to the government to define what the limits of that conscience should be. As Adams reminds us, "A Constitution of Government once changed from Freedom, can never be restored. Liberty, once lost, is lost Forever." He makes plain the fact that establishing liberty was a primary purpose of the new government. While it is true that Adams and Washington believed that America's civil freedom could not flourish without religion, they saw those restraints operating largely in civil society, not from the fiats of government. They did not believe that religion should be established by the government.

The confusion that can be caused by ignoring this history may be seen in Hammer's forced reinterpretation of the Preamble of the Constitution. Hammer concedes that the phrase "secure the Blessings of Liberty" in the Preamble comes close to the idea of intrinsic rights, but he asserts that "even here 'Liberty' is an instrumental means through which to attain the sole true substantive goal, the appurtenant 'Blessings' thereof."

This conclusion is illogical. If liberty is only "instrumental"—a mere means to an end—then why are the "Blessings thereof" understood as proceeding from liberty? Liberty clearly precedes the "blessings thereof." That fact would appear to make liberty a great deal more "intrinsic" than its offshoots. Once you read in all the other evidence from the founders' understanding of natural rights and liberty, the conclusion is inescapable. They believed that justice and the general welfare were not possible without liberty. It is the blessings that are contingent and dependent on liberty, and not the other way around.

The founders did have a strong notion of the common good, but they did not seek to reify it in government or to enforce it top-down on the social order. Indeed, the "more perfect Union" mentioned in the Preamble was a reference not to some idealized, powerfully unified state, but merely to a central government stronger than the almost fatally weak one established by the Articles of Confederation. It was a practical consideration, not a philosophical one: to revise Hammer's formulation, an "instrumental" goal to ensure that the "Blessings of Liberty" would be more secure than they had been during the revolution. Whatever this union was, it certainly was not understood as a kind of Hegelian nation-state or the constitutional monarchy that Burke would ideally imagine.

Neither did the founders believe something they would have had to believe if they were truly nationalists, namely, that the ultimate legitimacy of the new constitutional government was determined solely in reference to its citizens. When Jefferson spoke of an "Empire of Liberty" being created in America, he understood that this new country would be an inspiration and example for others. The founders clearly believed they were striking a blow for liberty on behalf of everyone around the world, which is the opposite attitude from that of a nationalist.

It is true that America inherited many things from the British, especially customs and attitudes about the law. It is not true, however, that the founders were trying to replicate a British organic order that could have been imagined by Edmund Burke, who after all was a monarchist. Moreover, we should remember that the founders were living at a time that preceded the age of modern nationalism, which did not begin until the French Revolution. The modern versions of this creed, especially its blood-and-soil varieties, would have been foreign to them.

The other line of criticism of the intrinsic-rights philosophy of the founding comes from the opposite point of view, namely, from philosophers of natural law who, unlike nationalists, do believe in universalism. Contemporary thinkers such as Pierre Manent, Ryan T. Anderson, O. Carter Snead, Patrick J. Deneen, and Adrian Vermeule agree with the nationalists that the philosophy of intrinsic rights is wrongheaded, but they do so for entirely different reasons. They reject natural-rights philosophy because they believe it is at odds with the tenets, as they understand them, of natural law. They look for inspiration to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, not Edmund Burke. Following in the footsteps of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, some of these philosophers reject not only the idea of American exceptionalism, but the whole notion of the nation-state as well, advocating instead for the establishment of a universal imperial polity existing in harmony with religion.

The founders very much believed in natural law. But theirs was a particular interpretation born in the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment. It was influenced by the Protestant tradition of individual conscience, which was understood as an intrinsic right; it was not driven by the interpretations of natural law associated with Catholic social doctrines. Rather, it was the view of natural law and natural

rights developed mainly by John Locke but also by other thinkers such as Montesquieu and, yes, even Thomas Hobbes. For Locke in particular, man possessed natural rights in the pre-state of nature, and civil government was formed to protect them.

While the founders were aware of and even admired Aristotle, there is no evidence that they consciously modeled the American Constitution on any of his ideas or premises. They certainly did not use Aquinas as a model. The reasons for this are not hard to fathom. Aristotle did not believe that all people possessed the same natural rights for all times. Rather, believing that natural rights arose from the notion of justice, he posited that the polis must be structured in a way that prefers the rights of certain people over others. Aristotle in fact believed in a natural aristocracy that had the right to "rule" over others. Nothing could be more different from the proposition that "all men are created equal."

As for Aquinas, most of the founders believed in divine law, as he did, which in some cases they equated with natural law, and they surely were sympathetic to Aquinas's general notion that the master principle of natural law should be to do good and avoid evil. But they would have had little use for some of his other ideas, which would have seemed to them outdated and even tyrannical. His belief in the death penalty for "impenitent" heretics, for example, would have offended their belief in religious liberty. And while both Aristotle and Aquinas's qualified support for slavery could have been used to endorse the American institution of slavery, there is no evidence that it was. In fact, Madison and others, slaveholders themselves, embarrassingly tried to keep philosophical claims about slavery out of the constitutional debate.

A shared theme among most of the new natural-law advocates of the common good is that John Locke is a serious problem. In their zeal to knock Locke off his pedestal as an intellectual father of the American Revolution, some of them go to great lengths to make him something he isn't. To their minds, Locke was Hobbesian. He was an atheist, a "hedonist." He is portrayed as a proto-libertarian who believes in the tyranny of the "atomistic" individual imposing his personal desires and wants on the rest of the people.

Such interpretations of Locke have been repeatedly debunked by scholars, and yet they are again today front and center in certain circles of conservatism. They are historically incorrect and in some cases are a willful distortion of his thought. Far from being Hobbesian, Locke posited his philosophy of natural rights as counter to Hobbes's dystopian view. Locke's philosophy of tolerance was based on a fear of Hobbes's philosophy of religious absolutism. Moreover, as Joseph Loconte made amply clear in these pages ("The appropriation of Locke," October 2021), Locke was a devout Christian who very much believed in divine law and, hence, in the natural law that was derived from it. Trying to read the ideas of John Rawls or Ronald Dworkin, two key neoliberal philosophers, back into Locke's seventeenth-century concerns about religion and philosophy is ahistorical; it is the common error of "presentism" made by philosophers who bypass the historical record with their own preferred ideas.

Which brings me back to the founding. The founders very much had a notion of the common good, but it was not the one of Aristotle or Aquinas. Taking Locke's view, Jefferson for example described the justice of natural rights in this way: "rightful liberty is unobstructed action according to our will within limits drawn around by the equal rights of others." In so doing, Jefferson was echoing one of the most widely accepted offshoots of natural law—namely, the Golden Rule, which says to treat others as you would like others to treat you. The principle embraces the implicit equality not only of individuals but also of justice in the sense that all people should be treated equally before the law. Individual rights were indeed limited, but not by a means test of whether they served a predetermined common good or religious doctrine as decided by the aristocracy of the polis. Rather, rights were limited by whether they violated the rights of others, which the founders assumed would be a sufficient limit on liberties to guarantee the

common good. It is true that in Jefferson's hands such ideas are interpreted in Enlightenment terms, but this does not mean that he was a "hedonist" with no conception of the common good at all.

Put simply, according to the founders, you cannot have real justice without liberty. If you force people to believe what their conscience, religious or otherwise, impels them not to believe, you are not only exercising a tyranny over them, but you are also weakening the moral legitimacy of the actions they are forced to make. Embodied in each individual choice is the moral content of freedom, which Jefferson and the founders understood perfectly.

It should be clear by now that the questioning of the traditional view of the founding has a larger purpose. It is to undermine and ultimately overturn traditional American conservatism. Specifically in the crosshairs are the ideas of individual rights, civil liberties, limited government, constitutional originalism, judicial restraint, and economic freedom. These are the ideas that have defined American conservatism since the time of William F. Buckley Jr. and Ronald Reagan.

The challengers of traditional American conservatism pursue common intellectual projects despite their different philosophical roots. One is to define the traditional conservatism of limited government and liberty as a species of libertarianism. The second is to treat American progressivism as a kind of radical libertarianism.

It is simply incorrect that traditional conservatives are libertarians. Conservatives of the mold cast by William F. Buckley Jr. and Ronald Reagan are social conservatives who also believe in the liberty of individual rights. Like the founders, they look to the social cohesiveness and discipline provided by religion and morality in civil society to restrain the potential extremes of political liberty that are always a risk in a free society. It is certainly true that today the balance between liberty and order has broken down in America. But the answer advanced by traditional conservatives is not to throttle freedom or individual rights by government, but to rebuild the broken structures and institutions of civil society and religion that once limited the extremes of liberalism, but which today are in some cases their primary enablers.

Nor is it true that postmodern progressivism is a species of libertarianism. Radical libertarians and progressives agree on the LGBTQ movement and other social issues, but this is an alliance of convenience, not of conviction based on a shared philosophy of government. Do common-good conservatives really think radical libertarians, some of whom think that even national parks should be privatized, want to see the same all-powerful collectivist state imagined by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders? Put simply, progressives are collectivists while libertarians are individualists.

The philosophical mistake here is concluding that modern progressivism is really all about preserving absolute rights. It is not. The only rights progressives believe in are the ones they make up to suit their agenda of social justice. All other rights, especially natural ones, are to be trampled into the dust. Human beings are not all "atoms" or individuals with equally intrinsic rights, but unequal cogs in a hierarchy of social-justice groupings, to be managed by the state. Rights may be expressed individually, but they are enforced as a matter of group justice. Rights are not equal at all but reserved for special groups based on race, gender, and sexual preference. If you speak out against one of these preferred rights groups, you lose your rights to speak. Nothing could be further from the truth than to claim that progressives believe in everyone's equal right to speak, believe, or simply be anything they want.

How did this malformed viewpoint come about? It is largely the result of a philosophical war conservatives have been waging for decades with John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, and other neoliberal philosophers. But here is the problem: Rawls and Dworkin failed. The liberalism we have today is not the neo-liberalism they had in mind. Yes, their ideas about secular relativism prevail, but their brand of neo-liberalism has been overtaken by events and absorbed into a new collectivist ideology of identity politics.

As I argued in my book *The Closing of the Liberal Mind* (2016), the postmodern progressivism of today owes its ideology not to the neoliberalism of Rawls, but to cultural Marxism, radical Freudianism, existentialism, deconstructionism, and critical legal and race theories. These are all intellectual projects of the neo-Marxist Left, not the Lockean Right. In other words, the intellectual forefathers of radical identity politics and critical theories are not John Rawls or Ronald Dworkin, but Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Antonio Gramsci, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Derek Bell, Richard Delgado, Duncan Kennedy, and Catherine MacKinnon, among others.

Why the tendency among common-good thinkers to overlook this intellectual history? Because it suits their philosophical and political projects. Doing so implicates traditional conservatives as sellouts. At the same time, it preserves the big-state solution required by their conception of the common good. Beating up on neo-Marxist collectivists would necessarily raise the specter of state tyranny, and this is something they apparently do not want to talk about. This attitude explains why some of the common-good ideologists are so vitriolic in their denunciations of other conservatives. The traditionalist's stand against collectivism and statism are as much an ideological threat to their project as the radical expressiveness of the far Left is.

Which brings me to the Catholic integralists, the most militant of the new natural-law advocates. Believing that "rendering [to] God true worship is essential to [the] common good" and that "political authority therefore has the duty of recognizing and promoting true religion," the integralists include the Cistercian Edmund Waldstein (quoted here), Patrick J. Deneen (Notre Dame), Gladden Pappin (University of Dallas), and Adrian Vermeule (Harvard). The movement enjoys the support of the editors of the magazine *First Things*, and, while most common-good ideologists don't go as far as they do with their arguments, the integralists are given rather wide berth in the movement.

Two of the most active members of the movement are Deneen and Vermeule. Both are critical of the founding's "liberalism," but it is Deneen who has written the most on the founding itself. Deneen makes no attempt to pretend that the founders have been misunderstood. Rather, he simply argues—correctly—that they did view natural rights as intrinsic. But for him that is precisely the problem. According to Deneen, the fatal flaw of America is that liberalism was baked into its constitutional order, and because of that, it must now be overturned to institute a better order after the common good.

Deneen at least has the virtue of consistency. Unlike critics who pretend that traditional American conservatives have misunderstood the framers of the Constitution, Deneen freely admits the founders were Lockean. He disapproves of Locke as much as the nationalists do, but he and the others don't care to save the founders from this charge by pretending they are something they are not.

Deneen's challenge to the founding must be understood against a historical backdrop. He is directly challenging the consensus among Catholics that they should make their peace with the American established order. Largely as a result of the work of the Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray, most American Catholics had put aside their qualms about the separation of church and state and made their peace with America's founding. Murray insisted that Catholics could embrace religious freedom as practiced in the United States without forfeiting the Catholic Church's claim to be the one true church.

Deneen and other objectors to the founding are challenging the Murray consensus. Michael Baxter, for example, a DePaul University professor writing in *America: The Jesuit Review* in 2013, argued that Murray's "Catholic version of American exceptionalism blinded him to the danger of Catholics being absorbed into U.S. political culture." As a result, "Murray got the story of American Catholics wrong. The United States is not unique among modern states." The implication is the American order is fundamentally flawed. Baxter even goes so far as to hope that

"providence will bless us with a revolution" to change this order.

It is unusual for an American who claims to be a conservative to challenge the founding, to be sure. But it is not unusual at all for a progressive to do it. Surely the motives and philosophies of Catholics and progressives are different, but it must be noted that the integralists are plowing ground already well tilled by American progressives. For example, in *Nature's God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic* (2014), the philosopher Matthew Stewart argued that the founders were indeed the radicals Deneen imagines them to be. They were atheistic deists who channeled the more radical elements of the Enlightenment into the American Constitution.

The question arises: why are the integralists so eager to agree with a progressive interpretation of the founding?

Because it serves the larger purpose of establishing the statist ideology required, in their views, by a common-good philosophy. It is no accident that Adrian Vermeule co-wrote a book, *Law and Leviathan: Redeeming the Administrative State* (2020), with the progressive Cass Sunstein. Even though they share different political philosophies, both Vermeule and Sunstein want to see the administrative state "redeemed" by an emphasis on the "morality" of administrative law. They may disagree on specific social doctrines, but they appear to agree that individual rights should not stand in the way of the state administering a public "morality" as they see it.

What could go wrong? A political order that treats public morality as an administrative matter is fraught with dangers. Such a system will practically guarantee that government bureaucrats and judges become powers unto themselves in deciding matters of rights and morality. It would only enhance the insularity of federal bureaucracies and courts that already routinely ignore the law and the will of elected officials. Pushed to extremes, it would create a "Leviathan" state that tramples on people's natural rights. Once you give up on inalienable rights and turn morality into an administrative legal matter interpreted by elites, you have left democracy and an independent civil society behind.

I don't believe that most of the advocates of the common good today are ready for such extremism. The authoritarianism may be logically implicit in some of their ideas, but it is not inevitable. Most believers in the common-good ideology are merely looking for a muscular response to the successes of progressivism. This is understandable. But their mistake is resurrecting, creating, and tolerating illiberal views that will backfire on conservatives. These views will not only embolden an already powerful central government to intrude on their rights, but also aid and abet the war on traditional American culture waged now for decades by progressive elites.

Put simply, the more successful the current common-good movement is, the more it will erode one of the key pillars of American conservative thought: the idea of liberty. The biggest danger is not that America will evolve into national or imperial socialism, but that statist arguments from conservatives will end up reinforcing similar arguments made by progressives. Politics would devolve into a bidding war on which side, the Right or the Left, can buy the most votes with government handouts, win the most battles in the courts over defending "their" version of free speech, control the courts and administrative elites, or get to define what industrial and administrative policies mean. In that battle, I would put my money on the political masters of collectivism, the progressives, because that is their *raison d'être*.

Because of which, therefore, I pose this question to conservatives: if traditional conservatism dies, who will stand up to the extreme Left who will surely use state power to come for your rights and liberties? You may not be able to count on the common-good ideologists, because many of them are as skeptical of freedom and rights as the progressives are. Moreover, the common-good movement appears to bear no particular philosophical grudge against the idea of collectivism *per se*. *Quo vadis* then, conservatives?

Policies are not principles
by R. R. Reno

Liberty is at stake! Our constitutional system is under attack! Kim R. Holmes fears that barbarians are at the gates, poised to plunder the holy city of conservatism. The peril does not come from progressive hordes. Holmes argues that national conservatism, common-good conservatism, and other new movements fly false flags. They seek "to undermine and ultimately overturn traditional American conservatism."

By his account, core conservative principles are at stake: "individual rights, civil liberties, limited government, constitutional originalism, judicial restraint, and economic freedom." I agree. But I find Holmes unconvincing. He's wrong about how the American culture of freedom needs to be defended in the third decade of the twenty-first century.

Consider the principle of limited government. The American founders recognized that government must be pinioned; otherwise, it gorges on power and becomes a Leviathan. Drawing on Montesquieu, James Madison successfully urged a constitution that ensures the "separation of powers" so that competition between the branches of government would hold each in check.

The design was ingenious. But Madison knew that limited government requires a self-governing people capable of bringing order to their lives, families, and communities. Such people do not need minute administration of their affairs by remote bureaucrats. Indeed, they resent and resist governmental usurpation of their decisions, duties, and responsibilities. And the founders were not so naive as to imagine that men are automatically self-governing. It was for this reason that George Washington and others in the founding generation urged the promotion of religion, the most effective engine of moral uplift in society.

Aristotle observed that a stalwart middle class provides another important guard against tyranny. Unlike the rich, who often grasp for ever-greater power, middling citizens do not seek to rule. But unlike the poor, who lack the resources or self-esteem to resist tyranny, the middle class will not be pushed around. Thomas Jefferson echoed Aristotle when he hymned the virtues of the "yeoman farmer," whom he regarded as the ideal citizen and the foundation of a free society. In the twentieth century, the middle-class homeowner superseded Jefferson's quasi-mythic figure. He resists the blandishments of the welfare state and its soul-sapping trap of dependency—and he refuses to be cowed by the great and the good.

Thus, if we wish to rescue limited government, which is so important for the sustaining of our freedom, we must consider its three buttresses: separation of powers, moral education, and a wide and prosperous middle class. Are they functioning well? And if not, what must be done to restore and renew them?

These are complex questions and, *pace* Holmes, they cannot be answered by stomping our feet and insisting upon "conservative principles." Indeed, it is an irresponsible conservative who is satisfied with ritual incantations of "limited government," "individual

rights," and "economic freedom." Politics runs on practical action, which means cultivating prudent political judgments about what policies and platforms will best defend (and restore) limited government.

So, let us set aside abstractions such as "traditional conservatism" and talk about reality. Our system of government is out of kilter. The administrative state, housed in the executive branch and enabled by the legislature, has become superordinate. Therefore, we must ponder strategies of redress. A conservative might ask: how can we restore balance between the legislative, judicial, and executive branches so that our well-designed system of government can function properly?

Such a conservative—what we might call a "responsible conservative"—might dial up Philip Hamburger at Columbia Law School, who has argued for an aggressive legal strategy to set up Supreme Court decisions that will rule a great deal of the administrative state unconstitutional. That seems good. But note that so-called "principled conservatives" are sure to deride Hamburger's agenda as "judicial activism" and "adopting the methods of the Left." To my mind, this indicates that our problem rests with "principled conservatives," not those entertaining new avenues of political action for the twenty-first century.

The second buttress of limited government is also in trouble. Only a person who has plucked out his eyes can fail to see that the moral culture of the United States has weakened significantly. Religious affiliation is down; family breakdown has accelerated. Pornography is widespread; marriage is increasingly rare. Drug addiction, underemployment, social isolation, children out of wedlock—there is always ruin in a nation, but we seems to have a great deal more these days.

A responsible conservative is committed to individual rights, to be sure. But he is not foolish enough to believe that the parchment promises of our Constitution can long endure in a society careening toward moral collapse. Benjamin Franklin issued a warning very relevant to our time: "Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters."

Thus a responsible conservative is not complacent about the status quo. He ponders critics of liberalism like Patrick J. Deneen. He reads Hadley Arkes and sees that our judicial philosophy needs to draw on moral sources. He dips into arcane debates about Catholic integralism and participates in mainstream discussions of the need for a revived nationalism.

The "principled conservative" is sure to hector the responsible conservative for wanting to "legislate morality" and "impose" his conception of the common good. But the responsible conservative is wise to this charge. Every legislative act is informed by a vision of the common good. The justices who ruled school prayer unconstitutional had a definite view of the common good: the best society is one in which people are as free as possible from state-sponsored encouragement to be religious (or married, or a parent, or a patriot). The responsible conservative rejects this view. He knows that encouragement is not coercion. He recognizes that after a long season of libertarian-inflected cultural policy, America needs the opposite.

The responsible conservative does not aim to repeal the First Amendment. He cherishes our American traditions, which owe a great debt to Locke and other liberal thinkers. But he recognizes that our times call for a restoration of moral authority, not its neglect, and certainly not its further diminution. He supports tax-credit schemes that subsidize scholarship programs that help lower-income kids attend religious schools. He huddles with legal scholars to develop a plan for overturning the libertarian Supreme Court rulings that make it nearly impossible to regulate pornography and prohibit even the most anodyne ecumenical prayers in public schools. The same responsible conservative is open to creative suggestions about how to promote marriage and curtail divorce.

None of these efforts is motivated by a desire to transform American into a "collectivist" enterprise. Nor does the responsible conservative wish to discard our American traditions of personal freedom. To the contrary, he hopes

to renew our culture of freedom, which cannot endure in a morally disordered society.

When considering the weal of America's middle class, the responsible conservative cannot help but blanch. The last generation has seen catastrophic declines that imperil the future of limited government. He knows in his bones that if these declines are not reversed, cries for "socialism" and other tyrannies will gain strength.

The last decade has seen vigorous debates about why the American middle class has declined. Some blame high levels of immigration. Others point to post–Cold War globalization, which set the stage for American companies to shut down factories at home and open new ones in low-wage countries. Still others say that Reagan-era tax cuts encouraged a rapacious capitalism indifferent to the common good. And there are arguments that identify as the culprit technology and the way it has shifted rewards away from physical labor and toward "knowledge work."

The responsible conservative knows that economists are untrustworthy sages. For every argument, there is a counter-argument. For every theory, there is a counter-theory. As a result, he seeks modest proposals. He entertains policies that direct our free-market economy toward middle-class prosperity. He considers proposals for rejiggering the safety net so that it encourages the virtues of self-government rather than dependency.

This might lead the responsible conservative to read Oren Cass, who argues that we must develop an industrial policy, shift funding away from higher education and toward vocational education, and offer wage subsidies to those at the bottom of the employment ladder. This makes "principled conservatives" nervous. Cass does not promote tax cuts as the cure-all—a heresy and rejection of Reagan-era conservatism! But the responsible conservative is not deterred. He honors the heroes of post-war conservatism, but knows that it is not 1980.

The responsible conservative affirms the law of supply and demand. He has a clear view of the role incentives and disincentives play in motivating economic choices. So he entertains proposals to raise tariffs on imported goods, knowing that this will stimulate investment in domestic production. He listens carefully as his more radical friends speculate about the need to implement a tax on Amazon and other large e-commerce companies so that Main Street shops can gain a competitive advantage, allowing them and other small and mid-sized businesses to thrive. For the same reason, he's sympathetic to renewed anti-trust enforcement and the rejection of Robert Bork's emphasis on consumer prices as the test for large combinations. The responsible conservative knows that concentrations of economic power pose great threats to a free society. And he may even entertain thoughts about revisiting the legislation in the 1990s that established today's intellectual-property protections and liberalized financial regulation.

The mere mention of these ideas outrages the "principled conservative." He derides them as "economic planning" and uses of "state power" that are no different, in principle, from progressive policies. The responsible conservative smiles. He knows that the construction of the global economic system, so favored by free-market advocates and "principled conservatives," required a massive exercise of state power. It took many years, reams of regulations, and thousands of bureaucrats to design and implement institutions like the World Trade Organization, a textbook case of neoliberal economic planning

And the responsible conservative knows that every tax scheme since Hammurabi has been formulated with an eye toward who will pay and who will profit. Broadly understood, the Reagan years borrowed from the future in order to lower top marginal rates, so as to unshackle the creative energies of the most productive members of the Baby Boomer generation, who were in that decade coming into their prime. It was a good policy and bore much good fruit. In the same spirit—the spirit of any version of "traditional conservatism" that is not paralyzed by nostalgia or a victim of its own propaganda—the practical conservative aims to adjust tax policy toward the end of rebuilding America's middle class, which means making

prospects for median-educated, median-skilled Americans more lucrative.

Holmes fears for the future of America. "Who," Holmes asks, "will stand up to the extreme Left who will surely use state power to come after your rights and liberties?" He seems to think that the only reliable guardians of freedom are those "philosophically" opposed to "collectivism." Mark me down as skeptical.

The extreme Left will be defeated if and only if conservatives gain state power and use it to defend freedom. This defense must be concrete. And it must be informed by sober thought about how and why our country is now vulnerable to the revolutionary utopianism we once imagined buried with the Soviet Union.

I'm increasingly convinced that "traditional conservatism" bears responsibility for our parlous situation. By deriding notions such as the common good, it has promoted an anti-government outlook. During the Reagan era, this had good results, because there was a great deal of creative energy locked up by post-war economic controls and onerous tax policies. But over the longer term, such an outlook has done great harm. It conceded the field to the Left. As one wag put it, "conservatives hold office; liberals govern."

The rights and liberties guaranteed by the Constitution limit (correctly) the aims and scope of governance. But they cannot inform and shape a conservative governing philosophy. Patrick J. Deneen, Yoram Hazony, Adrian Vermeule, Hadley Arkes, and others are searching for substantive foundations for conservative governance. We should applaud their efforts, even as we register our disagreements. For we are not going to renew the crucial supports for a free society—separation of powers, a vibrant moral culture, and a prosperous middle class—by reissuing *The Road to Serfdom* and funding seminars on the perils of collectivism. Those tasks are political, which means they will require responsible use of state power. It's long past time for conservatives to govern.

Yesterday's man, yesterday's conservatism

by Josh Hammer

Many of The Heritage Foundation's erstwhile most promising intellects—Matthew Spalding, David Azerrad, Arthur Milikh, and Ryan T. Anderson among them—have notably departed Conservatism, Inc.'s flagship think tank over the past few years. Kim R. Holmes's essay provides a clue as to why. Holmes is yesterday's man, dutifully reciting yesterday's talking points, in defense of yesterday's conservatism.

Holmes's neoliberal-inspired "fusionist" conservatism, forged out of the fires of the early post-war period, was perhaps sufficient at the time President Ronald Reagan surmised "the most terrifying words" in the English language to be, "I'm from the government, and I'm here to help." But the Right's preeminent foe is no longer "Big Government" run amok; now, it is the metastasis of woke ideology, practiced on high by an arrogant ruling-class oligarchy champing at the bit to subjugate the "deplorables." The spread of woke ideology and the ruling-class oligarchy for which that ideology is a conduit, in turn, is abetted by the rise of a new socio-corporate "private"-sector tyranny adept at wielding and weaponizing the most sophisticated communications networks ever known to man.

The particular conservatism required as both a necessary short-term counterpunch and a longer-term restorative vehicle, at this late hour of our ailing republic, is a more robust, muscular, and fundamentally masculine species of the broader conservative genus: national conservatism. And common-good originalism, a peculiar focus of Holmes's intense ire, should be viewed in context as the jurisprudential component of the broader national conservatism project. That project, and common-good originalism in particular, merits defense against Holmes's attacks.

Holmes's reading of founding-era American history is tendentious, to say the least. In his essay, he accuses national conservatives of retconning American history to suit our nefarious purposes. He seems to question the notion that the pursuit of a genuinely common good, existing above and beyond the securing of negative liberty or the mere aggregation of individual preferences, might have had any salience with the founding generation. His absolutist Enlightenment liberal interpretation of the founding, furthermore, leads him implausibly to condemn the idea that "the unique experiences of history, culture, and customs of a nation" remain—or even ever were—relevant or meaningful in American political thought. For Holmes, the undisputed *sine qua non* of the American founding was the political thought of the paradigmatic Enlightenment liberal John Locke.

This view of the founding has been repeatedly debunked. In a 2020 *Claremont Review of Books* review of the libertarian fundamentalist C. Bradley Thompson's 2019 book, *America's Revolutionary Mind*, Brian A. Smith, *Law & Liberty*'s managing editor, delivered a powerful blow against those who depict America as a sort of monolithic Lockean thought experiment. Thompson's arguments closely mirror Holmes's own, and they are wrong. America

was of course founded as a predominantly Christian nation, and Locke's specific role in founding-era political thought can only be understood in that context. "Whereas Thompson asserts that Lockean influence *made* the American mind, we would do better to state that a largely Christian people *adopted* Locke's ideas without feeling compelled to do so in terms of Locke's system," Smith wrote in his *CRB* review. "Thompson sees Locke everywhere but fails to grasp that many colonists read the *Second Treatise* eclectically, in a manner compatible with the conventional Biblical story about the nature of government," Smith goes on. And there were many, of course, who were simply not exposed to, or not at all influenced by, Locke's thought.

As for Holmes's notion that the "history, culture, and customs" of a nation are not indispensable for maintaining that nation, one need only consult John Jay's *Federalist* 2, one of the seminal entries in the series:

> Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs, and who, by their joint counsels, arms, and efforts, fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war, have nobly established general liberty and independence.

Jay, one of the most profoundly conservative founders, echoed here Edmund Burke's famous conception of a people as a "partnership of generations dead, living, and yet unborn." Indeed, for an entire swath of notable founders, among them not merely Jay but also George Washington, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton, the U.S. Constitution of 1787 was readily understood as intellectually downstream from its conservative English constitution forebear, rather than as a radical, "rationalist" break from the past.

Holmes takes issue with the idea that individual liberty might have been anything other than the preeminent and immediate, perhaps even exclusive, object of the founders' affections. He is again mistaken. James Madison, a moderate liberal himself, pronounced in *Federalist* 51: "Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society." He added, in language yet again derived from the language of government "end[s]" and Aristotelian teleology, in *Federalist* 57: "The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society." It is no accident that the Constitution's Preamble, which we can understand as an emphatic teleological statement and a pronounced *ratio legis* ("reason of the law"), enumerates the substantive government ends of "establish[ing] Justice" and "promot[ing] the general Welfare" before it asserts the end of "secur[ing] the Blessings of Liberty."

The founding generation was also fully comfortable with a robust inheritance of the common law of defamation (the misbegotten *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* Supreme Court case of 1964 was not yet a faint twinkle in the Enlightenment liberal's eye), a culture of "free speech" much more pragmatic than dogmatic, the criminalization of blasphemy, and the legal proscription of all sorts of hedonistic debauchery. They were perfectly comfortable circumscribing idiosyncratic notions of individual "liberty," especially when that liberty veered into libertinism. They would have readily intuited Aristotle's admonition that "a state exists for the sake of a good life, and not for the sake of life only." Washington himself presciently warned in 1783 that "arbitrary power is most easily established on the ruins of Liberty abused to licentiousness." Public religiosity, and public Christianity in particular, were the norm; the First Amendment's Establishment Clause was meant to be but a mere federalist provision. The American founding was emphatically *not* libertarian liberalism.

The teleology of the Preamble, and the intellectually heterodox melting pot that was the American founding more generally, thus militates in favor of a more intellectually nuanced approach to the art of politics than that which libertarians or Enlightenment liberals may fa-

vor. Consider again the "common good," whose discernment and pursuit was, for Madison, the "aim of every political constitution." The acts of discernment and pursuit here necessarily entail what modern lawyers might deem a multi-factor balancing test of sorts. As Anderson wrote in *First Things* last year after Amazon banned his book on transgenderism: "The common good is multifaceted. Promoting liberty as the highest good—libertarianism—improperly downplays other important facets. We want laws that take into account all the relevant factors."

Common-good originalism, as I have formulated it, asserts that Madison's "aim of every political constitution," the common good itself, ought to guide legal and judicial expositors. Those expositors, in other words, ought to reject the siren song of purely historicist legal positivism and instead put an unapologetic interpretive thumb on the scale on the side of the telos of the American regime. The central claim of common-good originalism is that substantive justice and the common good, such as the statesmanship of President Abraham Lincoln and Chief Justice John Marshall's nationalist Necessary and Proper Clause jurisprudence in 1819's *McCulloch v. Maryland*, better represent the American constitutional order's telos than do rote appeals to for proceduralism and libertine-inspired epistemic relativism, such as Stephen Douglas's hollow pleas for "popular sovereignty" and the "Mystery Passage" of 1992's *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. Common-good originalism posits that when there is a reasonably close interpretive question, the interpretation substantively consistent with the constitutional order's overarching telos must prevail.

Arguments against common-good originalism tend to depict it as imprudent or ahistorical, or otherwise reject it by means of rebutting common-good originalism's underlying claim that Antonin Scalia–style positivist originalism is morally empty. Most recently, in an unsurprisingly erudite speech held unsurprisingly at The Heritage Foundation, Chief Judge William H. Pryor, Jr., of the U.S. Court of Appeals of the Eleventh Circuit condemned "living common-goodism," by which he appears to have meant an amalgamation of sorts of common-good originalism, the Harvard Law School professor Adrian Vermeule's initial trailblazing proposal of "common-good constitutionalism," and the independent "Better Originalism" manifesto co-written by me and three others for the Claremont Institute's *American Mind* journal.

But, in lumping together such distinct strands of thought, the normally fastidious Pryor sloppily blurred the lines, thus doing a disservice to the broader debate. Common-good originalism remains a strand of originalist thought and, at any level of judging (including the Supreme Court), would necessarily be more moderate than Vermeule's common-good constitutionalism, which is methodologically Dworkinian and thus wholly untethered to original meaning or original intent. And for lower-court federal judges bound by "vertical" *stare decisis*, the most that common-good originalism could plausibly suggest outside of constitutional cases of first impression would be counseling against the dubious extension of Supreme Court precedent in ways redounding against the common good, and in favor of extending Supreme Court precedent in ways redounding to the common good.

For lower-court judges, we can think of this as a "common-good-maximization principle": defer to the substantive common good and background principles of our common-law inheritance rather than rely upon and further entrench flawed Supreme Court precedent. It is easy to think of recent notable lower-court cases where such an interpretive canon might have come in handy: The 2009 Ninth Circuit case *Kastl v. Maricopa County Community College District* and the 2011 Eleventh Circuit case *Glenn v. Brumby* come to mind.

More generally, with respect to the myriad criticisms thus far leveled against common-good originalism, it is difficult to understand what the critics find so reprehensible about the argument that, when in the realm of reasonable interpretive ambiguity that modern originalist scholars typically refer to as the "construction zone," the telos of the American constitutional order—and by extension, the teleology of mankind—ought to prevail. Some of the al-

ternative suggestions for how an expositor ought to act in such a circumstance, such as the argument that deference to a democratic majority should be the default rule, do not actually articulate a theory of constitutional interpretation *qua* interpretation so much as they do a theory of judicial *philosophy*. This is a tempting but unfortunate conflation.

It is important again to emphasize the connection between common-good originalism and national conservatism, which is more willing to prudentially wield state power to pursue a substantive vision of the good, and which soberly resists the illusion of a "values-neutral" public square or a "values-neutral" constitutional interpretive methodology. It is now obvious that even the *Fortune* 500 boardroom is the *antithesis* of "values-neutral," as the activist Christopher Rufo has done yeoman's work in helping to unveil. And concentrated woke corporate power is indeed now a greater threat to the American way of life than even concentrated government power, as Ashley Keller persuasively argued at the recent Federalist Society National Lawyers Convention.

Common-good originalism is a far more natural and suitable jurisprudential complement to the more muscular political economy and common-good capitalism now required by the cratering of the post-war neoliberal order, with all its attendant harms. Those harms include the emboldening of our Chinese archfoe, the offshoring of millions of jobs and shuttering of thousands of factories across the heartland, mass despondency and an unprecedented drug-overdose epidemic, and the engorgement of modern Silicon Valley robber baron monopolists that now wield more control over our day-to-day lives than do all levels of government combined.

Judges interpreting the Constitution, as well as political actors exercising their independent prerogatives to interpret the Constitution, must do so with this backdrop in mind. The telos of the American regime—characterized by substantive justice and the common good—is ill-served, at a time like this, by a political economy of absolutist *laissez-faire* capitalism for which Scalia-style positivist originalism, with its whiff of Jeffersonian "strict constructionism," is a natural government-minimizing interpretive corollary. But the common-good capitalism now needed to tame neoliberal excess and reconsolidate a fractured citizenry can only be served by a less rigid jurisprudential "garment" that can empower the state to act decisively, when need be, against neoliberal extravagance and in support of the common good. That "garment" is the nationalist, overtly common-good-oriented jurisprudence of Hamilton, Marshall, and Lincoln: common-good originalism.

Flawed history aside, the dogmatic Enlightenment liberal Holmes fails to grapple with these present seismic shifts, which now have the potential to realign American politics for a generation or more. That is perhaps to be expected from yesterday's man, dutifully reciting yesterday's talking points after a long stint at Conservatism, Inc.'s flagship think tank. Here's hoping The Heritage Foundation's new president, Kevin Roberts, has a shrewder understanding of what time it is in these late-stage United States.

The promise & peril of the political common good

by Ryan T. Anderson

Conservatives are once again debating the nature of the political common good. This is salutary, for no political community should ignore the actual common good, nor avoid the concept of the common good. The common good plays an essential role for thinkers as profound as Aristotle and Aquinas, and for the Western tradition ever since. For Aristotle, whether or not a regime governs for the common good is the decisive factor in determining whether a regime is just or not. For Aquinas, the very definition of law—"an ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and promulgated"—requires reference to the common good. Given the centrality of the common good, we might want to gain clarity about it.

Every community has a common good: a good that perfects that community as a community, giving its members reason(s) to cooperate in a variety of ways, a good that all of the members participate in and benefit from as common, not private. You can think of the common good of a family, those ends that make the family flourish not as a mere collection of individuals but precisely as a family and as members of a family. Likewise there's a common good of a school, a sports team, a religious community, a book club, a business, and every other human community. Human beings form communities in order to pursue certain common ends—the common good of that particular community. We form families to pursue domestic bliss, the generativity of spousal love, and generations of interpersonal connections. We form schools to pursue knowledge, businesses to serve customers while earning profits, churches to worship God and attain holiness.

So why do we form political communities? What is the end or good (you can use the terms interchangeably) that perfects the political community just as such? For some "state of nature," "social contract" thinkers, the political common good is merely about protecting the freedom to do what you want as long as it is consistent with a like freedom for others. The idea is that in a state of nature our liberty is insecure, so we form government to protect our liberty. Now, it is certainly true that government serves the common good of a political community by protecting the honorable liberties of its members, but why think that in a so-called state of nature only our liberty is insecure? So, too, is our flourishing in a vast range of its dimensions. Outside of a political community, both our rights and our goods, our liberty and our flourishing, are insecure. So if we form a social contract, why would it be only to protect human rights and not human goods? The social-contract theorists have never had a persuasive response. So even on their own terms, the social-contract theorists fail to justify a political concern focused solely on liberty rights.

Better, then, not to think in terms of a "state of nature" and "social contract," where political community is something artificial to human nature and human flourishing. Better to see that it is part of man's natural perfection to

live in political community. Man is a social and political animal. And membership in a political community is a perfection of man's nature. Indeed we can't fully flourish outside of political community. As John Finnis put it in the opening sentence of his magisterial *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (1980), "There are human goods that can be secured only through the institutions of human law, and requirements of practical reasonableness that only those institutions can satisfy." We form political community in order to perfect our nature to better pursue various human goods in a reasonable way. Apart from political communities—and its focal form of authority, law—we cannot reasonably attain our end.

That is, apart from living in a political community under the rule of law, our families won't flourish, our churches won't flourish, our businesses won't flourish, our schools won't flourish—we won't flourish. None of those institutions would achieve its common good outside of a functioning political order. Just look at how they fare in failed states. So, the political common good isn't some supergood above and beyond human flourishing as such; it's the various common conditions that allow for, promote, and facilitate the flourishing of the members of the political community and the various societies they form. These aren't an aggregation of private goods, but a set of shared institutions that allow everyone to flourish. The political community flourishes when the families, schools, churches, businesses, and institutions of civil society that compose the political community all flourish. And that means the state—which serves the political community—and her laws are all at the service of this end, which is the political common good.

This also means that the state necessarily must be limited. Human beings won't flourish, their families, schools, businesses, and churches won't flourish, if the state usurps their rightful authority and autonomy. Likewise, this means the state will have an important role in protecting liberty. Human beings won't flourish, their families, schools, businesses, and churches won't flourish, if they don't have a certain amount of space to freely author their own lives: not an unlimited amount, but an appropriate amount for reasonable self-constitution. Disagreements about this appropriate amount, like disagreements about the limits of rightful authority and autonomy, are what political debate is all about. Reducing politics on the one side to just protecting negative liberty, or on the other side to promoting collective statist actions, are two ways of going wrong. Conservativism is neither liberal nor libertarian. It seeks to promote the common good, which entails an appreciation for constitutive human goods and the appropriate freedom to pursue them.

Kim R. Holmes is suspicious of the common good, referring to it as "common-good ideology." He namechecks a variety of thinkers (myself included) and refers to us as "common-good ideologists." Holmes's fear is that the "common-good ideologists" are in favor of "collectivism" and "statism"—indeed they advance a "statist ideology" that entails the "state administering a public 'morality'" as it sees fit.

Most disconcerting for Holmes is that these "ideologists" are "questioning traditional American conservatism's commitment to limited government, individual natural rights, and economic freedom." He says they are doing so in ways that "call into question their commitments to liberty and freedom." The purpose of "common-good ideology," he claims, "is to undermine and ultimately overturn traditional American conservatism. Specifically in the crosshairs are the ideas of individual rights, civil liberties, limited government, constitutional originalism, judicial restraint, and economic freedom." He closes the essay with this dire warning: "If traditional conservatism dies, who will stand up to the extreme Left who will surely use state power to come for your rights and liberties? You may not be able to count on the common-good ideologists, because many of them are as skeptical of freedom and rights as the progressives are."

This is overstated and overheated.

A sound understanding of the common good, of human nature and human flourishing, is the best defense against the extreme Left and the best protection of authentic rights and lib-

erties. But it's a mistake to equate America with rights, freedom, and liberty without any mention of morality, virtue, and goodness. This is because rights, freedom, and liberty require morality, virtue, and goodness at both the conceptual and practical level—they're meaningless without them. Indeed, a younger generation of conservative thinkers is recognizing that Holmes's myopic conservative vision doesn't actually conserve what has always been best about America. Luckily, the nation's founders and the founders of the conservative movement made no such mistake. Regardless, a sound understanding of the common good, of human dignity and human flourishing, provides a stronger defense of freedom and rights than "the *a priori* reasoning behind" and the "abstract nature of" rights defended by Holmes. Freedom is, of course, essential to any community and the pursuit of any community's common good. But freedom just as such is merely instrumentally valuable—instrumental to our flourishing. We exercise our freedom rightly in pursuit of the good, wrongly in pursuit of evil. This, after all, was how the founders were able to distinguish liberty from license. Liberty was freedom exercised in pursuit of authentic human goods, governed by the natural moral law directing us to goodness, while license was the abuse of human freedom, seeking either perverse ends or pursuing good ends in evil ways. This is why we can speak of both the blessings of liberty and the abuses of liberty. Refusal to acknowledge such distinctions is entirely foreign to the American political tradition. The best defense of true liberty is a clear-eyed understanding of true human flourishing. Skepticism about the human good—and the common good—is no defense of liberty at all.

This, of course, requires us to distinguish rightful forms of liberty from base ones. Doing that entails some conception of human well-being and the role liberty plays in securing such well-being. Conservatives used to know this. In his 1983 classic, *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, George Will argued that "The most important four words in politics are 'up to a point.'" He went on to explain: "Are we in favor of free speech? Of course—up to a point. Are we for liberty, equality, military strength, industrial vigor, environmental protection, traffic safety? Up to a point." As his (non-exhaustive) list made clear, the political common good is multifaceted, and the various components should be considered—up to a point. And liberty is an aspect, but not the only aspect.

Those who support a sound conception of the common good will, for example, defend certain free-speech provisions, but only insofar as those provisions better protect our pursuit of the truth. This is why appeals to free speech historically did not, and today should not, protect obscenity, defamation, intimidation, extortion, or incitements to violence, to name just a few. Those verbal acts don't help us pursue truth, and thus need not be protected as valuable acts of speech. Likewise, we are in favor of the "freedom to marry," but that requires a sound understanding of what marriage is. An appeal to liberty or rights doesn't get us anywhere when it comes to clear thinking about the common good of marriage and family. For one final example, consider the claim of those who appeal to a "right" to physician-assisted suicide or the "freedom" to engage in such lethal acts. Is that a liberty the conservative movement should be embracing? Or would that undermine the common good of our medical profession and intergenerational obligations of solidarity? To answer that we'd need to know something about the nature and purpose of medicine and of the family and the various ways assisted suicide would be contrary to them.

Holmes doesn't seem to appreciate the wisdom of (the early) George Will. Far from embracing "up to a point" as the four most important words in politics, Holmes doesn't think rights have limits unless "they [have] violated the rights of others." But how do we determine the scope of these rights in the first place without some account of human flourishing and the common good? Does a woman's right to bodily autonomy violate the baby's right to life? Or does the baby's nonconsensual presence in a womb violate the woman's bodily autonomy? Does my right to go to the park naked violate your right to a decent moral ecology? Or does your right to

a decent moral ecology violate my right to let it all hang out? Who's to say, without some conception of what it means to be a human and to flourish as the type of creatures we are? Only with a sound conception of human flourishing can we answer that the unborn baby isn't an intruder in a mother's womb and that the streaker is exercising license not liberty. We see this most clearly, for example, in the case of transgenderism—without some understanding of human nature and flourishing, why isn't it a violation of the "rights" and "liberties" of citizens not to treat transgender people in accordance with their self-proclaimed "gender identity"? Just appealing to freedom and liberty and rights won't answer these questions.

The same is true of conscience rights. Yet Holmes writes that while "civil government has a duty to protect the conscience of individual," it "was not up to the government to define what the limits of that conscience should be." Really? Provided Holmes is speaking meaningfully about conscience rights not merely as the freedom to believe whatever one wants, but as the freedom to *act* according to one's conscience, then of course the government must set limits—that's what law is all about. If the government couldn't define the limits of conscience, then it couldn't make law. If we protect the conscience rights of a pro-life doctor, must we also protect the conscience rights of an abortionist? How about the conscience rights of parents who want to place their children on puberty-blocking drugs?

Much of the motivation for today's conservative thinkers is a response to oversimplifications from people like Holmes, who recast the conservative movement and American political tradition as concerned solely with "liberty and freedom," "rights and liberties." This in turn has sparked a backlash that downplays the importance of liberty and rights in the name of the common good. In reality we need—and America has historically embraced—both. And we need to understand the connections between the two, namely, that rights and liberties (like freedom of speech) are shaped by the human goods that they serve and protect (like truth and its pursuit).

Holmes writes that "the more successful the common-good movement is, the more it will erode one of the key pillars of American conservative thought: the idea of liberty." But this need not be the case. Liberty is, and ought to be, one of the key pillars of conservative thought. But it needs to be true liberty, and it needs to be just one of the key pillars, not the only pillar. That means the conservative movement will need to articulate the limits of various liberties. And doing that will require an understanding of human dignity and a conception of human flourishing, in addition to the role that the government plays in protecting human dignity and promoting human flourishing.

It simply won't do to argue, as Holmes does, that the government is only to protect "freedom" and "individual rights" while "civil society" and "religion" are to promote human goods. This is false both as a matter of sound philosophy of government and as a matter of the American political tradition. Holmes seeks to buttress his position, however, by casting the American founding as fundamentally Lockean and Locke as fundamentally about the protection of rights. On this, Holmes is once again the mirror image of the sort of conservative he attempts to critique. They both embrace an oversimplified historical narrative in which America equals Locke and Locke equals protection of rights; they only disagree on whether this is a good or a bad thing.

In reality, the founding was influenced by Locke, but not by Locke alone, and certainly not by the libertarian reading of Locke advanced today. The founders read Locke as a Christian thinker developing a tradition of political thought, and they weren't influenced only by Locke. The American founding was an amalgam of the classical tradition, the biblical tradition, the common-law tradition, the natural-law tradition, Protestant political thought, and Enlightenment rationality. Any attempt to reduce the founding and its influences to one tradition is doomed to failure. The founders read widely and were influenced by a variety of schools of thought.

Most importantly, the system of government they established was not concerned

merely with the protection of rights. This is particularly clear when one considers that the states enjoy the traditional common-law police powers to promote public health, safety, and morality. The states run schools, hospitals, and homeless shelters; they prohibit prostitution, narcotics, and obscenity; they offer curbside recycling and leaf removal and enforce various building codes and zoning laws. We have national days of prayer and thanksgiving and some states still have Sunday-closing blue laws. Government in America does, and always has done, much more than protect "rights" and "liberties." Our debates need to focus on whether any of these given items truly advances the authentic common good. Only a simplistic historical view that equates the Declaration of Independence with all of American political thought could fail to grasp this point.

Reading Holmes's essay left me disappointed that he had so clearly failed to understand what he sought to criticize. He certainly didn't provide readers with any sound conception of what the various thinkers he criticized actually think—or why they think it. For example, he sought to debunk the national-conservative project launched by Yoram Hazony, whom he repeatedly mentions but never quotes. Hazony published a good book, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (2018), which Holmes would have benefitted from engaging. There Hazony argues that a system of nations, rather than international organizations and global governance, will best serve the human goods at stake. His nationalism is opposed to internationalism. You wouldn't know that from Holmes's essay. Hazony seeks to influence political thinkers to consider what the national good is, rather than simply think in terms of instrumentalities—like rights and liberties—that might serve that good.

Likewise, in his section on Aristotelians, he doesn't quote a single Aristotelian. In fact, he doesn't quote anyone at all. He lumps together a diverse group of scholars—"Pierre Manent, Ryan T. Anderson, O. Carter Snead, Patrick J. Deneen, and Adrian Vermeule"—as if we all thought the same thing. If only he knew! He claims we all "reject natural-rights philosophy because [we] believe it is at odds with the tenets, as [we] understand them, of natural law." Yet he never explains what "natural-rights philosophy" even is, or how we reject it. He makes outlandish claims about what "some of these philosophers" believe, without ever specifying which ones or citing sources. He seems unaware that Locke's moral philosophy is in fact "hedonistic" in the philosophical sense—and that it's not a slur to acknowledge that, though it is a criticism. He refers to the Catholic integralists as "the most militant of the new natural-law advocates." But none of the people he identifies as integralists are new natural-law advocates—in fact all of them are critics of it, as is well known by anyone who is minimally informed about these debates.

One is left with the impression that Holmes simply hasn't done the reading and doesn't know what he's talking about. And after several pages of his denunciations of "common-good ideology" and "common-good ideologists," one begins to wonder who, exactly, is the one, to borrow Holmes's own accusation, "so vitriolic in [his] denunciations of other conservatives."

The demanding & delicate task of conservatism

by Daniel J. Mahoney

Kim R. Holmes has written a lively and provocative, if ultimately unconvincing, defense of what he calls "traditional conservatism." Just how "traditional" this conservatism really is remains open to question. His essay is best understood as a thoughtful and succinct encapsulation of the assumptions and analytic categories underlying mainstream intellectual and political conservatism for the last half century or so. It thus reflects both the real strengths and the considerable weaknesses of the old consensus. Holmes's challenges to national conservatism and to the conservative case for a politics centered around the common good are not without merit, even if he is too quick to dismiss what is legitimate in both notions. But the political philosophizing underlying Holmes's analysis is too hurried and facile, and his argument, as a whole, neglects to deal with crucial defects in the old consensus.

Unlike Holmes, I would begin by insisting that core notions of territorial democracy, humane national loyalty, and citizenship in a national as opposed to a global framework are under systematic assault today, as is our broader civic and civilizational inheritance. Holmes's defense of the old conservative consensus seems to take priority over a serious effort to come to terms with the unrelenting postnational or "globalist" assault on the preconditions of democratic self-government. The American framers could avoid undue theorizing about the national or territorial framework of republican self-government precisely because they could more or less take it for granted. But what they largely presupposed (e.g., the nation-state, the inherited moral capital of the ages, classical education, the biblical heritage of the West) must now be consciously affirmed by us if we are to stand up against the forces of repudiation and cultural and political destruction. To defend the founders' achievement today is to articulate self-consciously the larger framework of liberty implicit in their political philosophizing and constitution-making. Where they affirmed rights, we must more forthrightly remind free men and women of the responsibilities and obligations inherent in the exercise of their freedom. With Madison, we must defend the sacred character of conscience; at the same time, we must insist with John Henry Newman and C. S. Lewis that the exercise of conscience, so integral to moral life and human dignity rightly understood, is never to be confused with "self-will" or "the poison of subjectivism." Democracy entails both external limits—borders and boundaries for both passage and conduct that make for a community of citizens and not just residents or self-assertive rights-bearers—and internal limits that require self-limitation in accord with the moral law and the requirements of the civic common good.

Holmes largely passes over both the bounded and circumscribed nation (or "territorial democracy" as Orestes Brownson called it) as the precondition of government by consent and the responsible exercise of rights. Holmes's half–classically liberal public philosophizing does not deny these goods but assumes that

they can take care of themselves. Nobody in America really wants blood-and-soil nationalism, and Holmes is right to defend Burke-oriented national conservatives against the specious charge. My own view is that a vigorous, responsible, and morally serious defense of the nation in today's world ought to eschew the rhetoric of "nationalism" since too many people assume that nationalism is, by definition, a pathology at odds with self-restraint and respect for other peoples and nations. But conservatives everywhere rightly oppose what Alexandre Kojève called the "universal and homogenous state," believing it to be something that can only culminate in despotism and the destruction of the human soul. The two most profound theorists of humane national loyalty and of the nation as a political form conducive in principle to civilized liberty—the late, great Roger Scruton and the contemporary French political philosopher Pierre Manent—have never referred to themselves as nationalists. Theirs is a coherent and compelling political and philosophical defense of the nation as the indispensable precondition of civilized liberty. National conservatives and their critics could both learn from a defense of humane national loyalty that does not begin or end with a defense of nationalism.

Holmes is strongly invested in the defense of "intrinsic" rights, and properly so. No one should doubt that fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, so central to the life of reason and the exercise of self-government, are under frontal assault from censorious woke or progressive ideologues today. The freedom of religion, too, allows a free people to avoid both the subjugation of conscience and the moral and religious indifferentism that undermines the moral foundations of a free society. Such rights have intrinsic moral dignity and are central to the American understanding and practice of republican liberty. I'm also inclined to agree with Holmes that rights are, in important respects, ends in themselves and not merely instrumental to lower (i.e., material) or higher ends and purposes (i.e., virtue and the life of the soul). Americans have fought and died for liberty, risking their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to defend the great cause of freedom and human dignity.

Alas, Holmes makes Locke much more of a traditional figure than he really was. In his *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (1689), Locke ultimately subordinated moral duty to the great desideratum of comfortable self-preservation. He rejected the beneficence of nature and God's providential order and bet on "the rational and industrious" rather than the "quarrelsome and contentious." Like Thomas Hobbes, he denied the reality of intrinsic goods or a *summum bonum* and defined the moral life as an unending "flight from evil(s)." In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), he equally denied "innate" moral ideas and saw crimes and sins such as murder as "mixed modes" that were in effect artificially and linguistically constructed. His eminent student the third Earl of Shaftesbury suggested that his skeptical categories undermined the moral life, as did the American framer James Wilson in his *Lectures on Law* from the early 1790s. Locke's defense of "rational Christianity" was seen by many of his contemporaries as a barely concealed form of deism or Socinianism, or perhaps even private atheism. If his moral skepticism can lead to despotism and nihilism, Shaftesbury and Wilson wondered aloud whether Locke was, in the end, a true friend of human dignity.

Holmes is right to praise Father John Courtney Murray for his non-relativistic defense of religious freedom in a pluralistic society that still affirms a moral consensus deriving from sound tradition and the natural law. For his part, Murray loathed Locke for what he called his "rationalism, liberalism, and nominalism." For Murray, the inhabitants of the state of nature were "little gods" whose only aspiration was to preserve themselves. He did not believe the American founders were Lockeans since, in the end, they had a more elevated conception of human liberty and the moral obligations that inform it than Locke himself did. Alexander Hamilton was equally wary of the idea of a "state of nature" since it implied that justice and moral obligation were conventional in origin. Hamilton loathed Hobbes for denying "an intelligent superintending principle,

who is the governor, and will be the final judge of the universe" (see Hamilton's *The Farmer Refuted* from February 23, 1775). Holmes is too sanguine about Locke's allegedly natural-law convictions and thus of the essentially Lockean character of the American experiment. Murray thought Americans built a better country than Locke had sketched out and indeed "better than they knew." Their practice was significantly better than some of the Enlightenment theory that they had imbibed along the way.

Where Holmes goes wrong, and significantly so, is in his failure to confront what Pierre Manent and Roger Scruton both call "the ideology of human rights." A free society depends upon authoritative institutions whose *raison d'être* cannot be defined by the maximization of rights claims or the invention of ever new and often spurious rights. As Pierre Manent writes in *Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason* (2020), law can become a "slave to rights" when ill-considered rights claims undermine the defining and animating purposes of truly authoritative institutions. Thus an institution such as the Catholic Church must ordain women as priests, religious and secular progressives insist, and reject its age-old understanding of sexual morality to accommodate the rights of those who in no way share its self-understanding. Likewise, universities must restrict the search for truth to accommodate the therapeutic demands of those insisting on "safe spaces" or ideologues committed to the extirpation of our civilizational inheritance. And the armed forces must accommodate the felt needs of those suffering gender dysphoria, regardless of its effects on the cohesion of those troops as an integral fighting force.

Over time, the ideology of human rights overturns the rules at the heart of all authoritative institutions. Social engineering becomes the order of the day. Moral antinomianism trumps the autonomy of civil society in the name of the autonomous individual unbeholden to the common good. In this new dispensation, authority is everywhere confused with authoritarianism. At the same time, as the indiscriminate rights claims of the least thoughtful and moderate supersede all other intellectual, political, and moral considerations, ideological abstractions prevent political and moral deliberation from playing an active and salutary role in civil society. Unfortunately, Holmes is silent about this entire dynamic in which rights, divorced from a larger moral and civic context, disrupt the contents of life that true conservatism is obliged to protect. Invoking the intellectual authority of Locke and intrinsic rights does nothing to clarify the matter.

Holmes is right, in my view, that the Catholic integralists go much too far in severing the essential and necessary dialectic of truth, virtue, and liberty. Real and effective liberty is necessary in order to search for truth and to live a virtuous life that is not the product of coercion. A confessional state is hardly possible in our time and perhaps desirable in none. Religious liberty should not be confused with moral indifferentism or a relativism that denies that the human person is called to truth. But to defend the American political order and the fundamental liberties it upholds is not to be a "right liberal" (as the integralists rather snidely claim) who is committed to "liberal neutrality," that is to radical relativism about right and wrong. James Wilson was unquestionably correct: moral skepticism corrodes the society of free and morally responsible citizens and in the end paves the way toward despotism or, at least, civil war by other means.

One problem is that the integralists and a few of the national conservatives conflate the common good with an *a priori* imposition of an abstract idea on a static society. That is to miss the point altogether. Rather, the common good in a free society entails the constant effort to "put reasons and actions in common," in Aristotle's wonderfully suggestive words. It is an activity guided by free men and women who exercise practical reason at the service of the common good. It is perfectly compatible with debate and disputation, something more noble than the negotiation of competing rights and interests. Without being simply open or indeterminate, it must be informed by a reasonable moral consensus that rejects utopianism, angry moralism, and

a corrosive subjectivism or relativism. That delicate task demands calibrated judgment and a well-ordered soul, goods that the political community can encourage but which are first and foremost products of authentic liberal and religious education.

No one could reasonably deny that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was an eloquent and forceful critic of a liberalism shorn of sturdy moral foundations and a healthy sense of civic courage and moral self-limitation. People of a certain age remember the powerful challenge to Western complacency posed by his June 1978 Harvard Address. Yet in a little known 1974 speech on the strengths and weakness of the modern project (first published in English translation as "An Orbital Journey" in *National Review*, January 7, 2019), the great Russian writer and critic of totalitarianism argued that the Middle Ages "failed, in their time, to hold humanity's course; because the planting on Earth of the Kingdom of God was forcibly imposed, with essential personal rights being revoked in favor of the Whole." In reaction, modern man "dove—headlong and unbounded—into the Material." We found ourselves in a new era of "humanistic individualism, the construction of civilization based on the principle that man is the measure of all things, that man is above all." Neither reactionary liberalism nor integralism provides worthy solutions to the theologico-political problem. The task of balancing conflicting goods must be guided by tough-minded moderation, prudence, courage, and fidelity to the best that has been thought and said over the ages. In my view, the "traditional conservatism" that Kim R. Holmes defends needs to be rethought in light of pressing challenges and the need to make explicit all the tension-ridden goods at the heart of a free society still open to the tried-and-true verities of old. That demanding and delicate task is still ahead of us.

Common-sense conservatism
by Robert R. Reilly

For good reasons, Kim R. Holmes takes on the national conservatism and the Catholic integralism that are evident in parts of the American conservative movement, the former far more than the latter, which is why I will primarily focus on it. The primary force behind national conservatism as it exists on our shores seems to be Yoram Hazony and the Edmund Burke Foundation. It recently sponsored a three-day meeting in Florida with a large array of speakers, including integralists. It appeared to be a big tent–type gathering, brought together by a great shared revulsion at the various progressivist outrages visited upon our society.

I have listened to a lecture or two by Hazony and can understand his appeal in terms of the common sense he brings to many contemporary issues. I wish he had called his movement common-sense conservatism. It is basically common sense, for instance, that won Glenn Youngkin the governorship of Virginia in November. Hazony's emphasis on nationhood is also welcome. The dissolution of our southern borders and the general loss of the distinction between citizen and noncitizen greatly threaten the American nation. One must keep in mind that it is *only* within a nation that human rights can be observed, exercised, and protected. In reaction to the prospect of a universal state (the ultimate outcome of cosmopolitanism), it is a good and healthy thing to revive patriotism and to honor custom and tradition.

When one looks at what underlies Hazony's point of view and its specifically *national* aspect, however, problems arise, including but not limited to those detected by Holmes. A love of one's own can only take one so far. One naturally loves one's own, but is one's own always deserving of love? If this love lacks grounding beyond a bare attachment to one's own, how is it different from others' preference for *their* own? Strict nationalism fails to the extent that it does not take into account natural law and natural rights, which together condemn the universal state and expose its inherently tyrannical nature. In short, national conservatism hasn't established a proper foundation for what it is trying to do.

The thought of Edmund Burke, on which Hazony and others in this movement rely, cannot compensate for this lack. Harvey Mansfield states that Burke regarded the British "constitution as an inheritance, which means . . . not inherited from founders but as if it has come to us from no beginning." Burke appreciated the American founding insofar as it was an imitation of the British constitution, modified by local experience and circumstances. He did not acknowledge a "founding" or believe foundings were possible. This may be why the foremost sponsor of national conservatism here in the United States, the Edmund Burke Foundation, turns to him in order to understand America, rather than to the American founders. Burke's purported distaste for the Preamble in the Declaration of Independence can easily be understood by his denigration of "abstract rights" and "immutable principles," of which he says, "in proportion as they are metaphysically true, they are morally and politically false." So, he

concluded, "Nothing universal can be rationally affirmed on a moral or political subject." He once remarked, speaking of the British people above all, that men cherish their prejudices and, "to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices."

A few citations will illustrate how Burke's thought has been adapted to an American context. The Burke scholar Bruce P. Frohnen of the Catholic University of America writes:

> The real rights of man, as Burke eloquently argued in his writings on America, are rooted in history and tradition. Anyone who would talk a people out of their inherited rights in the name of some abstract notion—be it Parliamentary sovereignty, liberty, or equality—is an enemy to that life of ordered liberty and felicity to which Burke dedicated his life and career.

Ofir Haivry, a distinguished senior fellow at the Edmund Burke Foundation, spells out the contradiction:

> Burke's understanding [of good governance] is absolutely opposed to the now fashionable claims that the U.S. Constitution is based on abstract Lockean principles, epitomized by the Declaration of Independence. Burke never explicitly referred to the Declaration when discussing American constitutional ideas (if anything, in a speech from 1791 he seems to strongly censure its language).

That speech was Burke's résumé of the push for parliamentary representation in Canada, 1791, which Haivry quotes and explains:

> "A body of rights, commonly called the rights of man, imported from a neighboring country, had been lately set up by some persons in this, as paramount to all other rights. A principal article in this new code was 'That all men are by nature free, are equal in respect of rights, and continue so in society.'" It is not superfluous to note the similarity of Burke's formulation of these dangerous principles that he rejected, not only to the recent language of the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, but also to the American Declaration of Independence.

What appears to be missing here is any recognition that the "principal article" to which Burke objected considerably antedates the Enlightenment. It was an Italian Jesuit in the late sixteenth century, Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, who said "all men are born naturally free and equal." He was hardly alone in this view. His contemporary the Spanish Jesuit Francisco Suárez wrote that "in the nature of things all men are born free." Nor was this a sectarian view. In his *Discourses Concerning Government*, the Anglican Algernon Sidney exclaimed that "the school men could not lay more approved foundations than that man is naturally free."

In *The Virtue of Nationalism*, Hazony states:

> By a *nation*, I mean a number of tribes with a shared heritage, usually including a common language or religious traditions, and a past history of joining together against common enemies—characteristics that permit tribes so united to understand themselves as a community distinct from other such communities that are their neighbors. By a *national state*, I mean a nation whose disparate tribes have come together under a single standing government, independent of all other governments.

Note that he says that "tribes united in this way continue to exist after national independence." Membership is permanent. (It is exactly the revival of tribalism in the form of identity politics that is tearing America apart today and undermining equality before the law.) Try to understand the American founding in respect to what Hazony has said. You cannot, because its principles are anti-tribal precisely insofar as they are universal.

A tribe is a group of people related by blood who worship the same gods and whose ways are determined by the ways of their fathers. In the pre-philosophical world, the inability to distinguish the nature of things from man-made convention was at the basis of the tribal mentality. People deemed one another's actions to be right or proper to the extent that they conformed to the customary way things had been done before, and wrong to the extent that they differed. There was no standard other than "the ways of our fathers." One was only a tribal

member, with duties to one's tribal gods and ancestors and nothing beyond. Consequently, nothing could be right or wrong in and of itself. People who worshiped other gods and lived by different standards—members of other tribes or subjects of other empires—were simply of a different species, as it were. They had different "fathers" and different "ways." These differences were often not amenable to compromise, which is why war and enslavement were regular features of tribal life. We might call tribal adherents pre-Burke Burkeans. An appeal to "humanity" would not have been intelligible to them.

Wherever and so long as the tribal mentality prevails, constitutional order is difficult, maybe even impossible, to develop. In Saudi Arabia, King Salman explained why his country cannot consider democracy: "If Saudi Arabia adopts democracy, every tribe would be a party," and the country would be impossible to govern. The tribal mentality is obviously inimical to the principle of equality, which is at the foundation of constitutional rule. One cannot say that "all men are created equal" until one knows what man is, which requires, as well, knowledge of the differences between nature and convention, the human and the subhuman, and the human and the divine. These differentiations are essential to defining what is human.

In a lengthy article titled "What Is Conservatism?" Hazony and Haivry take exception with the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence and imply that it has some dangerous similarities to the French Revolution's *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*—an odd insinuation, as it is the Preamble that is most at odds with the French *Declaration*. They prefer what they call "historical empiricism," which "entails a skeptical standpoint with regard to the divine right of the rulers, the universal rights of man, or any other abstract, universal systems." Yet, as the historian Christopher Dawson pointed out, "The political rights of democracy presuppose the moral rights of humanity." In other words, there are no "rights of man" unless they are *universal*. This is why Lincoln referred to the Declaration of Independence's proposition that "all men are created equal" as "an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times." But Haivry and Hazony, like Burke, have a gripe against universals—which ultimately means against natural law. Natural law, as so eloquently articulated in the Preamble of the Declaration, is the most powerful argument against "the divine right of rulers," not historical empiricism. The latter seems to mean custom and, in this case, specifically British custom. But who is to say which customs are good and which are bad? Hazony and Haivry can say that they prefer British constitutionalism or that it is in accord with Mosaic Law. But they can't really say much more unless they admit a stronger case for natural law than their hero John Selden did, who shrank natural law to the confines of the Noahide Laws, the seven commandments given to mankind before Moses. Instead of calling for prudence in the application of universal truths, national conservatives promote a pragmatism that undermines such truths. But this raises the problem that, unless the grounds on which they prefer certain customs to others have some relation to natural law and can be made intelligible to all peoples, then their preference is simply one among many. As the Christian jurist Gratian wrote in 1140, "The natural law prevails over custom and legislation in dignity. Anything that is accepted by custom or included in legislation which is against natural law is to be considered null and void." The strength of the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence goes back to this principle.

It is self-defeating for a national-conservative movement to go outside the nation to understand the nation. It only makes sense if there is an "abstract truth" applicable to all men and all times—the very thing it shies away from. There is no doubt that British customs and the long experience of self-rule practiced in the American colonies were indispensable in making the American Republic possible. The general theory of national conservatism, however, seems to be that it is history and custom that rule absolutely. The problem is that history is the product of local accident and force. Its varying influence on the shape and character of any political order is precisely the problem that the American founding set out to address. As Alexander Hamilton famously said in *Federalist* 1: "It seems to have been reserved for the people of this country,

by their conduct and example, to decide the important question whether societies of man are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force." In the American founding, "reflection and choice" have so far prevailed. It was a victory for the primacy of reason over the primacy of force and accident.

National conservatism claims that each nation is historically distinct. The unique thing about America is that it was based on universal principles. As Harry V. Jaffa pointed out, this is the source of American exceptionalism. Why does national conservatism miss, if not outright deny, what is most distinctive about the United States? By failing to appreciate the universal core of the American founding, national conservatism ends up repudiating America—because of its conception of "history" as a substitute universal truth for natural law. Abhorring abstractions, it has nonetheless turned tradition into an absolute.

As for the other school Holmes addresses, the Catholic integralists, one problem is their complete lack of political realism. They seem to have been captured in amber and to have suddenly awakened to a bugle call. They wish to find themselves in a pre-Reformation Christendom. The scholar Michael Hanby, not himself integralist, provides this perceptive insight about what is best in them:

> Political power can be limited only by an authority higher than politics, and this limitation can become real only if it takes a living, public, and institutional form. This is the essential political insight of integralism. Only a society that acknowledges the authority of the Catholic Church, the custodian of divine truth, can avoid the endemic absolutism of the modern political project.

This helps explain the yearning for a lost Christendom. But as Hanby notes, the integralist project is politically impractical, and one ought to live by its insights only in the way Socrates inhabited his "city in speech."

Alas, most European Catholic countries are even more immersed in the modern political project than is the United States. The problem lies with the historical marriage of throne and altar. It so identified the Church with the state that those seeking political change were alienated from Catholicism. The more fundamental problem with the integralist approach is that it requires a Catholic populace. But what if there isn't one? The American founding relied on the disestablishment of theological differences so that, as a 1786 Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom put it, "our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions." As far as I know, the integralists have not adequately reckoned with the grave consequences of a reestablishment. They need to address the theological-political problem of how to live in comity in a religiously pluralistic society. Exchanging one absolutism for another will not do this.

Outside of the Catholic Church, are there no other means through which to recognize an authority higher than politics? Of course there are. Aristotle was clear that politics is not the highest thing because man is not the highest thing. Plato dramatically demonstrated the limits of the political by having Socrates show what an unlimited politics looks like in the philosophers' utopia of *The Republic*. And then there is the Declaration of Independence, which makes clear that the intrinsic, God-given natural rights of man may not be violated by the state, which is created to protect those rights.

The problem that both national conservatism and integralism try to address is the fragmentation of the common good. The scholar Christopher Wolfe accurately portrays our current predicament: "When it comes to a view of human nature and a view of the common good, there is no agreement in American public opinion due to the fragmented moral relativism of our culture." We have abandoned the natural law that has been the "one deeper idea that kept us together." His somber prediction is that "the various factions of America must agree about the general goals of public policy rooted in a common conception of morality, or we will have no union." Anyone wondering what is really tearing this country apart needs to read, and then reread, this sentence. What is required is neither national conservatism nor integralism, but a resuscitation of "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God."

The original strategy
by Charles R. Kesler

In his thoughtful essay, Kim R. Holmes comes to the defense of two causes dear to his heart: the American founding and the American conservative movement. He argues, rightly I think, that the two are somehow linked, and that, after decades of sustained criticism from the Left, both are now under sustained criticism for the first time from the Right, albeit a different Right from what he calls the "traditional" one descended from Bill Buckley and Ronald Reagan.

This new Right consists of two schools of thought, each organized, Holmes contends, around a philosophical mistake or fallacy. The national conservatives are guilty of the "Burkean fallacy." The second group, led by the Catholic integralists, are "philosophers of natural law," who take a dim view of natural rights American-style and so are guilty of the "Aristotelian fallacy." As opposed to these twin "fallacies of the common good," Holmes offers John Locke's account of "intrinsic" or individual natural rights, shared widely if not deeply (he hesitates on that) by the founders and traditional American conservatives.

The essay doesn't purport to be a philosophical defense of Locke, and the author is not an academic, perhaps fortunately for his readers. Nonetheless, he allows himself to be drawn into the roiling waters of controversy surrounding Locke's writings, and to pronounce that these new natural-law critics of America are wrong to believe Locke was a Hobbesian, an atheist, a hedonist, and (perhaps worst of all) a proto-libertarian. "Such interpretations of Locke have been repeatedly debunked by scholars" and are quite simply "historically incorrect" if not "willful distortions" of his thought, declares Holmes. These assurances would carry more weight if he had named the scholars he was invoking. For decades Leo Strauss and his followers maintained (with increasing variations) that Locke was a clandestine Hobbesian; the Cambridge (England) school of interpretation just as vigorously denied and ridiculed the possibility. It's probably the latter group (e.g., Peter Laslett) whom Holmes relies on as his "scholars."

He seems unaware of the latest twist, the discovery (see *The Journal of Modern History*, June 2021) by Felix Waldmann, a scholar at the University of Cambridge, of a previously unnoticed memoir in which a friend of Locke's from his schooldays at Oxford is said to have reported that Locke "almost always had the *Leviathan* by Hobbes on his table, and he recommended the reading of it to his friends." When a member of the Cambridge school admits new evidence that "Locke was a reader—an obsessive reader—of Hobbes's *Leviathan*," then Holmes may want to reconsider his choice of scholarly debunkers. At any rate, he may want to take a second look at the Straussians.

Whatever the significance of Locke's natural philosophy and epistemology, his political philosophy was admitted to be influential by John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and many others of the founding generation. To read Locke out of the founding, as some of the

national conservatives have attempted, is therefore unwise and self-defeating. Holmes is quite correct about that. There is, however, another way to consider Locke's influence, suggested by the founders' propensity to link him with Algernon Sidney (a famous British martyr to anti-Stuart republicanism) and with republican thinkers like Cicero and Milton. That is, the founders may have read Locke's writings, as practical statesmen will, with a primary view to their own people's safety and happiness, linked in this case with the republican cause, and with a certain appreciation, mixed with suspicion, of Locke's theoretical foibles. This was Harry V. Jaffa's suggestion, another scholar missing from Holmes's field of reference.

Yoram Hazony, the leader and convenor of the national conservatives in the United States, goes further by suggesting that not merely is Locke or "Enlightenment rationalism" to blame for America and American conservatism's problems, but also that "conservative rationalism has failed," too, by undermining American traditions in the name of Catholic natural law and Straussian philosophizing. Any "universals" are or can be damaging to a healthy nation, which is always a particular nation. Hazony, in his books and articles and now in the name of his foundation, brings in Edmund Burke as his spokesman for this argument, hence for nationalism.

Holmes calls him on this: "the American founders were not Burkeans." This is a simple truth, but it takes courage to say it. Even Burke was not a Burkean in 1776. What Hazony, and most American conservatives, laud Burke for and regard as his characteristic doctrines didn't emerge clearly until the French Revolution began in 1789 and his *Reflections* on it appeared in 1790. The national conservatives want to defend the American nation and hence its founders, but on imaginary or anachronistic grounds. They want to have their founding and eat it, too.

And there are deeper problems. The national-conservative movement's defense of particulars seems to fit uneasily with its being a general movement in favor of conservative nationalism. Is *every* nation with its customs worth conserving? *A fortiori*, equally worth conserving? If not, then there must be some standards above any particular nation and its customs by which to judge it. Where would these general or universal standards come from? To his credit, Hazony acknowledges the problem, and in his book *The Virtue of Nationalism* he points to the Ten Commandments as "the moral minimum" that has to be mixed with any nation's law and customs if its nationalism is to be respectable. But presumably he doesn't mean that every nation must abstain from graven images or respect the Sabbath the same way. His "moral minimum" is contained in the second table of the Decalogue, e.g., the prohibitions against murder, theft, and adultery—which Aquinas identified as belonging also to the natural law, knowable by unassisted human reason.

So the national conservatives can't escape the need for moral universals, for natural law. Not every sort of nationalism is created equal. Indeed, the same nation—as the late Angelo M. Codevilla reminded us in his wonderful book *The Character of Nations* (1997)—can express itself in many different political forms. From the German nation came Wilhelmine Germany, the Weimar Republic, Nazi Germany, and the stolid post-war Federal Republic: four wildly different regimes, with statesmen as varied as Otto von Bismarck, Kaiser Wilhelm, Adolf Hitler, and Konrad Adenauer, yet from the same nation, the same *Volk*, with the same underlying customs or culture. Codevilla was making Aristotle's point: it's the regime—the constitution, in the sense of "who rules and for what ends"—that mainly or decisively determines the character of nations. That's why nationalism is never a sufficient principle unto itself.

And it's why, incidentally, Holmes is basically right that Burke was not really a spokesman for nationalism. In the *Reflections* his great theme is rather the British constitution, based on a social contract between "the living, the dead, and the yet unborn." This constitution contains a "principle of growth" that enables it to pursue the "greatest variety of ends," but without endangering the constitution's "Establishments"—the church, the

monarchy, the military, inherited property, and the monied interests. Burke favors the "real rights of man," modified and civilized by "prescription," the principle of inheritance, slow growth, and adaptation, which he called "this great fundamental part of natural law." Like the American founders, though in different ways, Burke is larger and better than mere nationalism. Perhaps the national conservatives will be, too.

The other group of new conservatives that Kim Holmes criticizes is the integralist-led supporters of Aristotle and of old-fashioned natural law. He is on to something important here, but the indictment is fuzzily drawn. His targets—Pierre Manent, Ryan T. Anderson, O. Carter Snead, Patrick J. Deneen, and Adrian Vermeule—are a gallimaufry. For example, neither Manent nor Anderson is as critical of Locke and the American founding as Holmes suggests, and only Vermeule ever defends Catholic integralism. He is also, so far as I know, the only one to defend the administrative state. (The two causes are connected in his mind, as Holmes observes.)

Holmes's real target seems to be Patrick J. Deneen, whose book *Why Liberalism Failed* is sharply critical of the American founders, Locke, and Enlightenment rationalism, but not of classical rationalism or reason *per se*. (For a rousing, book-length critique of it, see Robert R. Reilly's *America on Trial*, from 2020.) It is Deneen who applies Aristotle (not really Aquinas) to the criticism of Enlightenment liberalism of both the capitalist and lifestyle varieties, who traces contemporary nihilism to the hollowing out of "nature" behind modern science and politics both. Holmes realizes that Deneen is following a well-trod path, but maybe without realizing just how trodden it is: the essay mentions Alasdair MacIntyre but not Strauss, the "Eastern" Straussians, Orestes Brownson, Henry Adams, or Alexis de Tocqueville, the latter a particularly large and fertile source for Deneen's objections to modern democracy.

In any case, there are two issues here that Holmes reduces to one. He accuses these thinkers of advocating, deliberately or not, a kind of tyranny of the common good, very much at the expense of individual liberty. He admits, as he has to, that the founders had an ethic of the common good, too, but one that was compatible, he holds, with individual rights and the Golden Rule, which he implies the natural-law view of the common good isn't. But then he notes that the Golden Rule is "one of the most generally accepted offshoots of natural law," meaning old-fashioned and Christian natural-law doctrine. So how do his opponents and the founders differ exactly? He leaves it at insulting his opponents' notion as "a predetermined common-good or religious doctrine as decided by an elite of the polis."

That won't do. A common good is, by definition, shared by all or most members of the political community and can range from national defense to a common education. From one point of view, justice is a part or implication of the common good; from another, justice and the common good may come into conflict, as when it is necessary to lie, or to harm innocents, or to suspend civil liberties in wartime. Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke, and the founders differ in their views of how easily justice and the common good fit together, but none can ignore the common good.

Holmes's issue here, therefore, is not so much with his opponents' take on the common good as with their insistence that laws aim at the highest good, the *summum bonum*, which all agree is happiness. There is a lively philosophical debate, ancient and modern, about the content of happiness, whether it is pleasure or virtue, and whether it is virtue alone or virtue plus external and bodily goods. Some of these contemporary natural-law thinkers, the integralists certainly, confuse the theological or revealed account of happiness as knowledge of and communion with the living God, with the philosophical accounts of it; or perhaps they simply subordinate the latter to the former. Then they demand that the common good bend its knee to the highest good. (At their best, the Christian and Catholic traditions have always resisted both of those steps.) It's from this doctrinaire perch, which ignores the many lower goods that go into the common good,

that the integralists and others view conservatism today as one big sell-out to libertarianism.

Holmes's essay performs an important service by emphasizing and clarifying the degree to which these two emerging schools of the new conservatism are out to "undermine and ultimately overturn traditional American conservatism." Though not every adherent has that in mind, most of them do, I think. And they enjoy patting themselves on the back for it. They underestimate, in my opinion, the extent to which Buckley and Reagan's conservative movement was itself a counterrevolution against the liberal revolutions that had swept over America in the preceding decades. Willmoore Kendall, Frank Meyer, and others spoke openly of the "Revolution of 1932," for instance. Being closer to those upheavals, the leaders of what was called back then—you guessed it—"the new conservatism" realized how deeply liberalism had already changed America, and how difficult it would be to change it back (practically impossible) or to change it to something at least better than the status quo.

The Buckley and Reagan of, say, 1965 would have been astonished to learn that the Soviet Union and its Evil Empire would collapse without war. And they likely would share many of the frustrations of today's national conservatives and natural-law traditionalists at liberalism's seemingly unstoppable victories in the cultural wars. If they were here today, Buckley and Reagan would probably feel the need to freshen and reformulate the conservative cause to meet our changed political circumstances.

The original new-conservative strategy didn't hesitate to force divisions in both the liberal Democratic and mainstream Republican establishments of the day, so as to forge a new, stronger, and wiser conservative opposition to liberalism. They succeeded imperfectly, but America would be worse off if they hadn't tried. I have no objection to today's new conservatives seeking to divide today's conservative movement—so long as they remember the point is ultimately to reunite and enlarge it along stronger and wiser lines. To do that, however, they will need better arguments.

The way forward
by James Piereson

Kim R. Holmes's essay on current fissures in conservative thought is well worth the attention *The New Criterion* has given it in this symposium. Holmes addresses an important controversy among conservatives, and he does so in a way that accurately describes the contending points of view.

In regard to his essay, and the issues and ideas addressed in it, herewith a few observations.

Holmes is on target with two large propositions: first, that the path forward for the United States, if there is a path forward, lies through the traditional conservative ideals of personal liberty, limited government under the Constitution, and free and flexible markets, mixed with a measure of American exceptionalism and nationalism; and second, that the distempers and disorders the country is now experiencing arise not from adherence to Lockean or classical liberal ideals but from departures from those ideals in the form of Marxist, postmodern, and New Left doctrines embraced by leftists and progressives in journalism, government, and the academy.

Holmes identifies two intellectual challenges to the traditional understanding of conservatism: first, national conservatism as advanced by Josh Hammer and Yoram Hazony, which rejects the natural-rights doctrine of John Locke as the basis of the Constitution and recasts the founding as a Burkean enterprise directed to the "common good" of the American people; and second, natural-law conservatism, which similarly rejects the emphasis on natural rights in favor of classical natural law in the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas, which aims to direct human conduct toward the good life of virtue within a just political community. Each of these two schools attempts to formulate a version of the common good—the national conservatives by constitutional interpretation and the natural-law theorists by the exercise of right reason.

The natural-law theory, leaving aside its impressive philosophical heritage and its importance as an approach to morals and jurisprudence, is a questionable candidate for a conservative American public doctrine because it asserts that the American experiment was bound from the beginning to degenerate into libertarianism and license due to its origins in individualistic natural-rights dogma. Such a doctrine is unlikely to attract a wide body of followers, for obvious reasons: a public doctrine, in order to gain acceptance and provide an avenue for candidates to win elections, must promise progress and a better future, which these natural-law theories cannot do. This skeptical view of the American founding and the American future is not accepted by all or even by very many natural-law thinkers—but it appears to be the view of several prominent authors, a few of whom are cited in Holmes's essay.

The doctrine of national conservatism, by contrast, offers a more promising path forward for American conservatives, though it is burdened, as Holmes writes, by the claim that government must pursue a common good that has yet to be substantively defined, and

by a novel interpretation of the Constitution according to which the founders paid more attention to Edmund Burke than to John Locke. On this view, the troubles we face today, particularly as regards libertarian decisions of the Supreme Court, have their origins in Locke's theory of natural rights and personal liberty. It follows that we might unwind these libertarian tendencies by reimagining the Constitution as a Burkean enterprise.

This raises some large questions: Is it really necessary for conservatives to upend the natural-rights foundation of the Constitution in order to meet contemporary challenges? Is it true that contemporary libertarian or progressive tendencies have their origin in Locke's theories?

Josh Hammer, in his intriguing essay in the *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* last summer, says "yes" to both questions. In regard to the Constitution, his case for a "Burkean" interpretation of the Constitution has never won support among scholars who have studied the founding. Prominent historians such as Gordon S. Wood, Bernard Bailyn, and Clinton Rossiter, just to name a few, do not document any significant Burkean influence on those who attended the convention in Philadelphia in 1787, while all point to the theory of natural rights as the dominant political faith of the American colonists in the decades leading up to the revolution and in the decade that followed. These historians have identified in the thought of the founders other sources besides Locke but little evidence that these men found any guidance in Burke. Wood, in *The Creation of the American Republic*, describes an evolution in thinking from 1776 to 1787 away from the grand statements in the Declaration of Independence and toward more practical approaches to creating a union among the states and reining in refractory state legislatures, but he does not write that the founders rejected Locke in favor of Burke.

In any case, Burke was known in 1787 as a practical politician, a leader of the Whig faction in Parliament, and a supporter of the American Revolution, but he had not earned the conservative reputation for which he would be later known. The great works for which Burke is now remembered, including *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and his attacks on abstract reasoning in politics, did not appear until 1790 and thereafter and thus could not have exercised any influence on the founders. Besides, as Hammer acknowledges, various members of the founding generation, including Alexander Hamilton, John Marshall, and leaders of the Federalist Party, had no trouble developing a robust understanding of the Constitution without necessarily recasting it in non-Lockean terms. They also developed an understanding of the "common good," which led them to build up federal power as a means of strengthening the union.

The Founding Fathers were well aware that Locke's doctrine of natural rights outlined a way of designing a polity, with separated powers and an emphasis on liberty, but did not provide guidance as to morals, virtue, or wisdom. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, natural-rights theory advanced as a political doctrine by defining liberty as the individual's right to choose his own way of life—primarily in religion but also, as time passed, in an expanding field of activities. The theory prioritized individual freedom but did not provide instruction as to how one should live, what one should believe, or how to order one's own private conscience. For this reason, many liberal thinkers in the eighteenth century, Thomas Jefferson among them, looked to classical traditions for instruction in important matters of war, statecraft, citizenship, and moral philosophy. For others, religion filled the void in relation to morals and private conduct. However powerful they may have been as political doctrines, Locke's theories, and others similar to them, were judged insufficient as general guides to life and thus in need of support from other sources. These included, as the founders well knew, schools and universities, churches, the family, and civic associations of various kinds. It is the collapse of these other institutions under the sway of left-wing ideologies—not the failure of natural-rights philosophy—that most accounts for the crisis we face today.

One problem with the Federalist formulation is that conservatives today do not share the view that the common good demands building up the power of the federal government as a means of strengthening the nation or the union. Nearly all conservatives today see federal power as a threat to conservative principles, since it usually means more taxes and regulations, less authority for state and local governments, more emphasis upon identity politics, and more money and power for left-wing advocacy groups. National conservatives should be mindful of the risks they run in promoting such an enterprise, as evidenced in recent years by the abuse of the Patriot Act by the FBI, the politicization of the IRS and other federal agencies, the turning of the federal establishment against the Trump presidency, and even recent declarations from the Justice Department that protesting parents should be viewed as "terrorists." Those in the federal establishment are not friends of conservatives.

There is a risk also in reaching too far into the past to identify the origins of a contemporary problem. Hammer and others are correct to identify a trend toward libertarianism in contemporary politics and in several judicial decisions authored by self-described or erstwhile conservatives. But should we blame Locke for developments in national politics that have erupted only in recent decades? It makes more sense to look for explanations in recent events, especially in the political and cultural revolutions of the 1960s. The upheavals of that decade, accompanied by the rise of the New Left, identity politics, and antinomian cultural practices, are more than sufficient to explain the recent drift of national policy and Supreme Court jurisprudence in both libertarian and bureaucratic directions. The radicals of that decade did not look back to Locke or even to the founders for inspiration, but to various New Left doctrines and to Third World revolutionaries like Castro, Mao, and Ho Chi Minh.

The Constitution has served the American people well for two-hundred-plus years through a civil war, foreign wars, the Cold War, economic depressions and recessions, and all manner of minor crises. Any and all of the problems that national conservatives have identified, whether in the form of crime, riots in the cities, open borders, identity politics, debt, misguided court decisions, out-of-touch educators and bureaucrats, or the manifold complications accompanying "big government," can be addressed readily enough without altering the Constitution or our commonsense understanding of it. Moreover, it would not serve conservatives well to explain to the American people that their problems are due to John Locke's theories of natural rights or the emphasis on liberty in the Constitution when in fact they are due to an overly large and arrogant federal establishment ever furnished with new theories to justify its expansion. It is fortunate that, for conservatives of all stripes, the distinction between the two should not be difficult to make.

The internal debate among conservatives is mostly an argument among friends who want the same things for America but who disagree as to the right path forward. The "new conservatives" are not wrong to sense that the United States faces an emergency that requires new thinking or new strategies, especially to deal with an increasingly radical and militant Left. Nor are they wrong to suggest that conservatives have so far failed to rally the American people against what threatens them.

There are numerous signs across the American polity to suggest that conservatives face a crisis both in the country at large and, if they can survive that, with respect to their own place in the American future. The liberals who dominated the national scene in the early decades of the post-war era have now largely disappeared from the academy, journalism, and the Democratic Party, having been replaced by leftists and progressives who are not interested in compromise or opposition and would be happy to get rid of conservatives altogether. They would like to do to the nation as a whole what they have now accomplished in the academy. On top of this, there is the ongoing disintegration of the United States as a functioning nation-state, with its economy

hollowed out by globalization and its population splintered into antagonistic racial and ethnic groups. Conservatives, who would like to keep the national enterprise intact, find to their surprise that they are denounced by leftists for "living in the past" or trying to "turn back the clock" on the civil-rights revolution. Conservatives suddenly find themselves in a battle for their very existence—and to some degree, in a battle for the future of the country, which partly explains efforts to save the situation through new definitions of the conservative enterprise.

Unfortunately, the situation has advanced too far for such lateral moves to be successful. What is more needed today are practical steps to push the dynamics of national politics away from the expansion of government, open borders, and identity politics and in the direction of smaller government, federalism, and the restoration of the ideal that rights belong to individuals rather than to groups.

In that regard, conservatives in Washington might think about reducing budgets and killing programs instead of maintaining a status quo, which is never maintained for long. They should decertify and outlaw public-employee unions, which have turned into lobbying instruments for the Democratic Party and an ever-growing government. In the past, political leaders from Calvin Coolidge to Franklin Delano Roosevelt opposed public unions as conspiracies against the public interest. Leaders today should do what they can to eliminate race-, ethnicity-, and gender-based policies, perhaps via judicial decisions or by banning the collection of racial and ethnic data by institutions receiving federal funds. Some have suggested moving cabinet departments out of Washington and relocating them around the country to places less influenced by the pestilential politics of our current capital—perhaps as a prelude at some point to moving the capital itself to a location nearer the center of our national population. These are fruitful ideas, and just a few of many potential proposals that might be considered to divert the course of national politics in a more conservative direction. In any case, practical proposals of this kind are more needed now than revisions in conservative principles.

The fallacies of the common good: a response

by Kim R. Holmes

I knew when I submitted my essay that I was poking a hornet's nest. From my perch as an executive at The Heritage Foundation, I had watched a revolt unfolding among a small number of activists against the conservative principles of William F. Buckley Jr., Ronald Reagan, and countless other conservatives. Traditional conservatives were called "Reagan zombies." Mostly younger conservatives targeted liberty and the idea of limited government, the same ideas that for well over a century socialists and progressives had made enemy number one in their philosophies and politics. I was surprised that they did not see the danger of flirting with philosophies and tactics embraced by both the Left and the far Right.

But I should not have been surprised. As anyone can see from some of the responses to my essay, these new self-styled conservatives are not content merely to update conservatism to make it more relevant to the times. Rather, they are trying to overturn the actual principles and philosophies of traditional American conservatism. We used to worry at The Heritage Foundation that the destruction of conservatism, if it ever came, would most likely come from within, from either the slow drip of well-meaning but harmful change that is not recognized as such or, worse, from imposters trying to throw the whole thing out the window. Well, it is now a combination of both. Conservatism, in the language of the progressive "hipsters," is now dated. These new-fashioned conservatives are out to make an intellectual revolution that, if it succeeds, will weaken American conservatism and, what is worse, harm the future course of the country.

You would think by the amount of ink spilled in rebutting my essay that these new in-house critics of conservatism represent the majority of conservatives. They do not. The nationalists and common-good ideologists are still a minority, mostly composed of intellectuals and activists. Most conservatives still believe in liberty and limited government, which are the main traditional conservative ideas that these critics have singled out for destruction. The current revolt against vaccine mandates, reminiscent of the Tea Party rebellion against Obamacare a few years ago, reminds us that a mistrust of centralized state power is alive and well in the conservative movement.

James Piereson in his essay understands this fact perfectly well. As he says,

> Nearly all conservatives today see federal power as a threat to conservative principles, since it usually means more taxes and regulations, less authority for state and local governments, more emphasis upon identity politics, and more money and power for left-wing advocacy groups. National conservatives should be mindful of the risks they run in promoting such an enterprise.

The mistake that nationalists make is assuming that the conservation of America's governing philosophy can be reconciled with the essential tribalism of nationalism. No amount of pretending that nationalism is really about Edmund Burke—frankly, it isn't—can alter the fact that

a governing philosophy of nationalism ultimately is about tribalism. Robert R. Reilly in his essay correctly argues that nationalism is at odds with the universalism of the American creed. He believes, as I do, that what makes America exceptional is how its Constitution and way of governance embody the universal ideas of natural law and natural rights. They do so in a specific time and place, and it is this manifestation in the people that constitutes the American "nation." The point cannot be overstated: the American nation is not embodied in the state, nor in one race, religion, or class. It resides in the people.

Nationalists innocent of history may think that nationalism consists simply of striking a tough pose of populism against the encroachments of globalism. If only. Most nationalisms as practiced by other countries in history are fundamentally un-American. If we really think we can absorb and accommodate the methods of Hungarian or Russian nationalism in an American conservative approach, then we might as well start thinking like those peoples in all areas of public life. Some conservatives may believe that the Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán, for example, is great because he is tough on immigrants. But there is a great deal more to his brand of nationalism than being tough on immigrants. There is his cozy relationship with Putin; his corrupt oligarchic management of companies and businesses; his political control of the press; his ethnic-based nationalism; and his strains of anti-Semitism.

I noticed in these essays that sometimes my critics stumble over their past selves. Ryan T. Anderson, for example, spent years at The Heritage Foundation defending the rights of religious conscience and free speech. But now in his essay responding to me, he appears to believe that we give too much credence to conscience. By conceding that conscience is no match for the claims of the common good, which will be defined by politics and not philosophical seminars, Anderson weakens his own appeal to religious conscience as a defense against the new dominant woke version of the common good.

One of the more striking claims made by critics of my essay is that I have supposedly no notion of the common good at all. This is false. I believe that the common good is more than the defense of rights, and I made that crystal clear in my essay. I very much believe that conservatives should develop and promote their notion of the common good in laws and the public square. By this I mean that we should first and foremost cultivate and implement our values, religion, and morality in civil society, mainly in the family and through mediating institutions. That is where we have mainly failed as a movement, and that is what seriously needs our attention now.

What we should not now or ever do is develop a political ideology blindly in thrall to the idea of the common good, based either on sectarian religious beliefs or even quasi-socialist notions of economics, and use that as an excuse to deploy the power of the state to impose it as a political doctrine, devoid of respect for natural rights, on all the people. This line of distinction was well understood for decades, but the new common-good ideologists are now trying to blur it.

I do believe in *natural* rights—the right to life and liberty. Where some of my critics got the idea that I and others like me somehow now believe in the manufactured rights invented nightweekly by libertarians and progressives is beyond me. I have battled real libertarians all my life. I'm fully aware of the difference between an anything-goes, rights-obsessed libertarian who thinks the national parks should be privatized and a limited-government conservative who understands that constitutional powers are enumerated, believes with our founders that Americans were "endowed by [our] Creator with certain unalienable Rights," and doesn't want to bankrupt the country through ever-expanding government.

In his thoughtful essay, Charles R. Kesler believes that I have misunderstood Hobbes's influence on Locke. Anderson draws the same conclusion. I am indeed aware of Hobbes's influence on Locke, but despite that influence, I still firmly believe that Locke had a very different view of natural rights and the purposes of civil government than Hobbes had, and it was this aspect of Locke that was absorbed by America's founders. Hobbes believed in absolute monarchy. Locke did not. Hobbes believed that absolute monarchy was necessary to enforce the social contract. Locke believed civil governments should be instituted to protect the natural

rights and liberty common to all people. Locke believed in religious liberty, whereas Hobbes did not. Locke was far more optimistic about human nature than Hobbes was. Jefferson and other founders took Locke's view of religious toleration and the liberty-oriented ends of civil government, not Hobbes's view.

If the more radical of these new-style conservatives truly believe that the road to defeating progressivism runs through bringing down traditional conservatism, then I remind them of the story of the fall of Warsaw in World War II. Approaching the gates of Warsaw at the very end of the war, the Russians paused outside the city to allow the Germans to eliminate the resistance inside. When they marched into Warsaw after the Germans vacated the city, there was no resistance left because it had been destroyed completely by the Germans.

The progressives are like the Russians watching our internecine battles. They have recognized that having someone inside the conservative fold who hates "bourgeois liberalism" (a term of derision developed by Marxists) as much as they do is an incredible boon for their cause. They will watch and wait, as the Russians did outside Warsaw, until their nemeses, the Reagan conservatives, have been weakened and destroyed from within. Once they are gone, the progressive way of governance—greater spending, bigger government, laws interpreted by a "living" constitution (i.e., adding the new fad of "common-good" constitutionalism), a class-based welfare populism, more identity politics—will have been legitimized by the actions of the Right. Religious conscience will have been sacrificed to the common good because, as the new-style conservatives argue, the common good always trumps conscience and liberty. Freedom of speech to dissent against woke culture will be weakened, since the state will have the power and the prerogative to control it for political purposes at both individual and corporate levels. Trying to limit government spending and the size of government will become a bad joke.

Josh Hammer calls me "yesterday's man" in his essay. Of course, he means it as an insult, which is in keeping with the low road he usually takes. But I agree with him. I am proudly "yesterday's man" because I am—wait for it—a conservative! That is what conservatives believe and do. They conserve what is great about America. I believe the traditions of liberty and limited government are worth saving, even though Hammer and his friends do not.

It is a strange paradox for someone claiming to be a conservative to want to revolt. Hammer has the sensibility of the avant-garde progressive, eagerly trying to find the "next big thing" to shock the old folks. It is the style of the perpetually adolescent male, striking brave verbal blows against "Conservatism, Inc." from the comfort of bars and intellectual seminars. C. Bradley Thompson calls the fringes of this new anti-American movement from the Right "pajama-boy Nietzscheans." They are joined by a strange brew of sectarian professors, Spenglerian pessimists, and paganistic "Bronze Age perverts" who appear to disdain America as it was (and still is in most parts of the country) as much as the Left does. They say they despise only "woke" America, but their war on the American founding and traditional conservatism suggests otherwise.

It is a schtick, however, that will not age well. Not only is the posture of these comfortable young men staring down the "twilight of the gods" in America downright silly. The methodology is also all wrong. Whether or not they wish to admit it, the nationalists and the Catholic integralists are making a deal with the devil of historicism. They can appeal to ancient philosophies and organic cultures all they want to, but the ideas and principles they seek to import are foreign to American history, experience, and values. Perhaps if the United States were Spain or a country in Latin America or Eastern Europe, their proposed political doctrines could be taken seriously. But it is not.

Kesler is right to remind us that not every conservative advocate of natural law believes what Patrick J. Deneen and Adrian Vermuele do. There is no disciplined "school" of thought among all these intellectuals. Moreover, we should make a distinction between the bomb-throwers and serious intellectuals who are raising important questions. But there are sympathies and common attitudes among all the current critics of traditional conservatism

that are undeniable, and they mainly concern critically exploring the limitations of liberty, limited government, and sometimes capitalism. If we can face and debate our differences openly and seriously, rather than engage in sophomoric tirades, we can all benefit.

I recall how conservatives in Europe in the early part of the last century fell for the trope of revolutionary conservatism. Thomas Mann, in his novel *Doctor Faustus* (an apt touchstone if there ever was one in discussing conservative nationalism), described the type:

> It was very strange, partly painful and partly comic, to observe Riedesel's conservatism in contact with another brand of the same thing. Here it was a matter not so much of "still" as "again;" for this was an after- and anti-revolutionary conservatism, a revolt against bourgeois liberal standards from the other end, not from the rear but from the front; not from the old but from the new.

Revolutionary conservatism is an oxymoron. The attempt of new "conservatives" to save conservatism by transcending it destroyed it in continental Europe in the twentieth century. If American conservatism becomes what Hammer and others like him so ardently desire, it will do so under a strange pretense, a "cult of the new" pretending to reconstruct a kind of conservatism that never existed in America in the first place. The irony of using Edmund Burke, who was skeptical of change, to invent an entirely new way forward for American conservatism is obviously missed by the nationalists. They try to get around this contradiction by pretending that we have misunderstood the founding all along, and that all that talk about natural rights is hogwash. But this is historical revisionism pure and simple. The nationalists have every right to want to change America and even reinvent American history, but they should spare us the canard that doing so constitutes a kind of American conservatism.

Kesler suggests I should be more patient with these demands for change. He is right to remind us that the conservative movement has seen challenges like this before. He mentions the conservative revolution of 1932 to show how conservatism can benefit from something resembling revolutionary change. But there is a difference. That revolution then was aimed at progressive liberalism. It was attempting to restore a conservative sensibility that had once existed but had been lost. It was not an attempt to create a new kind of conservatism by importing ideas at odds with our founding philosophy.

The question should be whether the new ideas build upon a solid structure of shared experience, or whether they are foreign to or incompatible with the foundations of that structure. My argument is not against change *per se*, but against ideas that are fundamentally at odds not only with the conservatism of the past decades, but with the American founding itself.

Kesler ends his essay by welcoming efforts to divide the conservative movement "so long as they remember the point is ultimately to reunite and enlarge it along stronger and wiser lines." I am not so confident that some of these critics are as wise as Kesler is. Popularizers at magazines such as *The American Conservative*, who are seeking a place in the sun of the new populism, may be interested in unity, but it is one in which the old guard of traditional conservatives, as they never tire of saying, has been completely overthrown. A new unity could never be achieved with such a mindset. I am particularly concerned that as they make this revolution, dangerous ideas from the fringes are given more leeway and respect than they deserve.

Conservatism in America is not like any other in the world. The key difference has always been a fundamental respect for liberty and natural rights. Without that, conservatism in America could go the way of conservatism in Germany, France, Russia, Hungary, or Spain, either abandoning real conservatism altogether or grounding it in some form of common-good statism or nationalism that shows too little respect for the natural rights of all Americans.

This need not happen. It will not happen if American conservatives remain vigilant. It will never happen if conservatives remember that liberty and natural rights are intrinsic, government should be limited, and the common good should always be pursued in civil society and upheld by the law, but never established as a political or economic doctrine of the state.

New poems
by Nicholas Pierce

Explaining myself

Form, my teacher averred,
can protect against outpourings
of emotion such as occur
after a loss, advice I followed
when documenting the toll
cancer caught late took on you,
subjecting peers in workshop
to accounts raw as they were
rigid (a villanelle whose two
repeating lines suggested remission
and relapse; a double sonnet,
an Elizabethan enclosed within
an Italian's octave and sestet,
about bees that took up residence
in a porch hollow of a house
where I was myself a guest,
the metaphor growing labored
when I tied infestation to disease;
a sestina sodden with perspiration
and sibling rivalry the more
insidious for going unacknowledged,
which relocated *The Tempest*
to South Texas, land of storms
capable of toppling a boat dock,
as one proved the summer,
your last, your firstborn sought
to find out if sweat can expel
grief, pouring himself into work;

a long-imagined, never-finished
pantoum on the bed-swing,
most southern of southern comforts,
my brother's rendering of which
weighed as much as four men
could carry, a hulking mass,
coffin-dense, its construction rushed
to ensure it saw you through
your last days, you whom chemo
had winnowed to a matchstick,
who, swaddled for warmth,
suspended as in water, rocking
back and forth, slept like a baby),
subjecting myself to critique
and, worse, infinitely worse,
to pity—
form, that bulwark.

Housesitting

for William Logan

Meant only to evict, the chemical
kills dozens in the process. In between
furious calls to pest control, I screen
the porch: beneath the corner pedestal,
their former home and new memorial,
the bees start piling up—a hill of bean-
sized corpses mounting to, then past, obscene . . .
Out of the country, on sabbatical,

my host requests an update every day,
worried about his non-invasive guest
equally, it would seem. My rent-free stay
comes to an end in three months, which invests
it with the sweetness of a honey jar's
last drops. And yet, like the remaining bees,
which carry on as if their calendars
went on forever, sowing tapestries
of flowers as they pollinate the garden;
or like my mother in her final weeks,
a captive of her body, not its warden,
fed like a child while wasting through physiques
unfit for someone twice her age—I stick
to a routine. Habits are hard to kick,

but finding substitutes is harder yet . . .
Listening to old voicemails on the porch
tonight, soothed by her voice, though counterfeit,
I mistake a rising hum for static; lurch
forward then. Undulating like a net,
the whole hive sweeps across the yard, in search.

Nocturne

The nights I stayed at MD Anderson,
tossing and turning on that green recliner
or wandering the halls, went on and on.

Post-op, bedridden in a johnny gown
and socks, my mother put on fresh eyeliner
the nights I stayed. At MD Anderson,

her nurses knew me as the quiet son
who studied poetry (with a psych minor)
and wandered the halls. They went on and on

about my mother's strength, fooling no one
when they described her pain meds as "designer."
The nights I stayed at MD Anderson,

I made excuses to be on my own,
forgetting her room number (eight or nine or . . .)
to wander the halls, on and on and on,

sometimes till morning, waiting for the sun
to whisk me away like an ocean liner.
The nights I stayed at MD Anderson,
wandering its halls, would go on and on.

Reflections

Hornblower at the helm

by John Steele Gordon

The action of the *Hornblower* saga, a series of eleven novels and several short stories by C. S. Forester, begins in 1794. At that point in his life, Horatio Hornblower is a penniless, orphaned seventeen-year-old village doctor's son, newly rated a midshipman in the Royal Navy.

His naval career gets off to an unpromising start, to put it mildly. Practically his first act on board ship in the placid waters of Spithead, in the lee of the Isle of Wight, is to become seasick. Worse, he had dim prospects. In an age when who you knew was more important than what you knew, Hornblower knew nobody of any importance. If he was to climb the ladder of promotion in the Navy, it could only be by his own efforts, talents, skills, wit, and pluck. They proved enough. At the end of his life, in 1857, he was Admiral of the Fleet the Viscount Hornblower, a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath. He was the squire of a landed estate in his native Kent and the husband of Lady Barbara Wellesley, the (fictional) sister of the Duke of Wellington. In between was a life of adventure at sea and ashore that involved pitched battles, hurricanes, sinkings, capture and imprisonment, escape, diplomacy, state funerals, madmen, mutiny, intrigue, treasure hunting, and tsarist banquets. It stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean. If you like your buckles well swashed—and who does not?—you cannot do better than *Hornblower*. But these are far more than just adventure stories.

The books have never been out of print since the first one appeared in 1937. And they have spawned a veritable publishing sub-industry, with several series of sea novels set in the Napoleonic wars such as the novels about Richard Bolitho by Douglas Reeman (writing as Alexander Kent) and the Aubrey/Maturin novels of Patrick O'Brian. Hornblower inspired the Sharpe novels of Bernard Cornwell and influenced Gene Roddenberry in creating the character of James T. Kirk in *Star Trek*. The astronauts Eugene Cernan and Harrison Schmitt named one of the craters they explored on the moon in 1972 "Horatio" in honor of Hornblower.

The books have been made into a movie—in 1951, starring Gregory Peck and Virginia Mayo—and television dramas that often get details regarding life in the Nelsonian Royal Navy ludicrously wrong, something that Forester never did.

There is a *Hornblower Companion* (1964), with an essay by Forester on how the books came to be written and how the character of Horatio Hornblower developed and a series of very helpful maps. (The essay is also a wonderful window into how a great novelist plies his craft.) There's even a "biography" of Hornblower by C. Northcote Parkinson that attempts to clear up some questions that Forester left deliberately unanswered. The best-known ambiguity is how in *Lieutenant Hornblower* (1952) Captain Sawyer, deep in paranoia, came to fall down the hatchway. Did he trip or did Hornblower push him?

While Forester (who lived from 1899 to 1966) is best known for the *Hornblower* series,

he wrote many other novels, all of which remain highly readable today. *The African Queen* (1935) was made into an unforgettable movie starring Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn. *The Last Nine Days of the Bismarck* (1959) was filmed as *Sink the Bismarck!* starring Kenneth More.

What has made the Hornblower books so enduring for generations of readers, besides, of course, the often thrilling action, comes down to two things. The first is the meticulous detail and remarkable verisimilitude regarding daily life in the Royal Navy and society at large, both of which featured rigidly hierarchal structures.

As Forester explains in *The Hornblower Companion*, that detail is in large part due to a chance purchase he made in a used bookstore in the 1920s: three bound volumes of the magazine *The Naval Chronicle*. The *Chronicle* was published between 1799 and 1818 and contained hundreds of official letters from serving naval officers to the Admiralty, first-rate primary source material for navies in the age of sail.

One thing that caught Forester's eye was the complete text of the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812. One clause specified when the war would end: twelve days after ratification in the North Atlantic, forty days in the Baltic, one hundred twenty days in distant parts of the Pacific. This meant, Forester explained, that if you took a ship off Java 119 days after ratification, it was yours under the prize money rules. If you took it a day later, you had to give it back.

Prize money always loomed large in the minds of Royal Navy personnel, for it could make an officer rich and give a common sailor more money than he had ever seen. To encourage the taking of enemy ships, the British government allowed the officers and crews to keep the ship and its cargo. Warships would be bought by the Royal Navy, and merchant vessels and their cargoes sold, the money distributed according to a fixed formula.

The admiral who had issued the orders under which the ships were operating, whether he was present or not, got one-eighth, the captain one-quarter, and the members of the crew shared one-quarter. All ships in sight shared the prize money. When four British frigates captured two Spanish ones in 1799, for instance, the four captains received over £40,000 each, a comfortable fortune in the late eighteenth century. Each member of the crew received more than ten years' pay.

Forester put this knowledge to good use. At the end of *Hornblower and the Hotspur* (1962), Hornblower, in command of HMS *Hotspur*, a sloop of war, is detached from blockade duty off Brest to go with several British frigates after a Spanish treasure fleet that was known to be approaching Spain. The Admiralty knew this would result in a Spanish declaration of war, but figured that since the declaration was coming anyway, they might as well seize the treasure while the seizing was good.

The officers and crew of the *Hotspur* could practically taste the huge sums of prize money they anticipated. But Hornblower, often unlucky in the gaining of prize money, encounters a French frigate. Although the *Hotspur* was far too small to fight the French ship one-on-one, Hornblower knew that skillful ship-handling could delay the frigate, and he sees his duty as requiring him to prevent the frigate from reaching the treasure fleet. The result was that *Hotspur* was not in sight in the forthcoming battle. The *Hotspur* returned to England, her officers and crew mourning their lost fortunes. But there they learn that since, technically, Britain and Spain were not at war when the fleet was seized, there was no prize money to be had. Instead the ships were regarded as being like enemy ships seized in port at the outbreak of a war and thus the property of the Admiralty.

The second reason these books have lasted is the extraordinary character at the center of the novels. Forester was interested in the nature of command at sea in an age before modern communications, for it was a profoundly solitary position, what Forester called "a Man Alone." These views are embodied by Horatio Hornblower, who is a hero to everyone but himself.

The character of Hornblower began to take shape on a long, slow voyage from Los Angeles, where Forester had been working in Hollywood, to England on a Swedish tramp

steamer, the *Margaret Johnson*, carrying both cargo and passengers.

At that time the west coast of Central America was very remote and poor, and Forester had time to explore it thoroughly. As the plot of the first novel, involving a British attempt to stir up trouble in the Spanish Empire, then at war with Britain, developed, Forester realized that several things would have to be true about the captain. The ship would have to be a frigate, for ships of the line did not operate independently. That meant the captain would have to be relatively young. He would have to speak Spanish. He would have to be of modest birth, which implied a drive to succeed, and considerable ability, especially in logic and mathematics (which made Hornblower both a superb navigator and a world-class whist player). For instance, in *Hornblower and the Atropos* (1953), he is anchored in a heavy fog in the Downs between the Thames estuary and the Strait of Dover, with many other ships awaiting a favorable wind. Hornblower notices an oar floating in the water. Burned into the blade is the number seven, but with a cross bar, in the European—but not British—fashion. Most people wouldn't have given it a second thought, but Hornblower does and as a result captures a French privateer that had seized a British ship among the idle, fog-bound shipping.

But besides the struggle with Britain's enemies, Forester wanted Hornblower to struggle with himself. As Forester wrote in *The Hornblower Companion*,

> He was to be self-critical. Just as no man is supposed to be a hero to his valet, so Hornblower could not be a hero to his own self. He would be too cynical about his own motives, too aware of his own weaknesses, ever to know content; and he would have to be a man of considerable character so that, even though despairing—hopeless—he could maintain this struggle with himself and not subside into self-satisfaction or humility.

Hornblower was all too aware that he was anything but fearless. He could not see that bravery is not the absence of fear, but rather the suppression of it. Instead he believes his fear is just one more character flaw that he has to overcome, like his propensity to become seasick (a trait he shared with Nelson, by the way) and the tone deafness that prevents him from enjoying music.

And while utterly ruthless when necessary, Hornblower could be deeply compassionate. He hated corporal punishment, then all too common in the Royal Navy. In *Hornblower and the Hotspur*, his servant strikes a superior officer after being badly treated. Under the Articles of War, read to the crew by the captain of every ship on Sundays, he would hang. But in the harbor of Cadiz (Spain and Britain were at peace at that point) Hornblower sees an American ship of war. He asks the servant, "Can you swim?" When told yes, he leaves the servant alone to escape.

The result is one of the greatest characters in all English literature, right up there with Shakespeare's Henry V, Fielding's Tom Jones, and Twain's Huckleberry Finn.

The first Hornblower novel that was published takes place in the middle of the character's career. Over the next three decades, Forester filled in his journey from midshipman to admiral in ten more novels (one unfinished at his death) and six short stories. When I first discovered Hornblower, at age nineteen (appropriately enough on a bookshelf on board a twelve-meter sailboat in the Caribbean), I read them as fast as I could acquire them. And I have read them each at least six times since, with no loss of enjoyment whatever: they are that good. But if you are new to Hornblower, I would suggest reading them in chronological order of the narrative, which is as follows: *Mr. Midshipman Hornblower*; "Hornblower and the Hand of Destiny"; "Hornblower and the Big Decision"; "Hornblower and the Widow McCool"; *Lieutenant Hornblower*; *Hornblower and the Hotspur*; *Hornblower and the Crisis* (unfinished); *Hornblower and the Atropos*; *Beat to Quarters*; *Ship of the Line*; "Hornblower's Charitable Offering"; *Flying Colours*; *Commodore Hornblower*; "Hornblower and His Majesty"; *Lord Hornblower*; "The Point and the Edge" (outlined in *The Hornblower Companion*); *Admiral Hornblower in the West Indies*; "The Last Encounter." Read them at sea or on land; they are transporting either way.

Theater

Spare change

by Kyle Smith

Directed by Sam Mendes, the National Theatre's staging of Stefano Massini's 2013 play *The Lehman Trilogy* (which is at the Nederlander Theater through January 2) came to New York's Park Avenue Armory in 2019, but its planned spring 2020 Broadway debut was postponed for more than a year. Only ninety-nine performances were booked for Broadway, which is a shame because this enthralling piece epitomizes what theater can be: magnificent to regard, trenchantly written, full of fascinating historical information, and deftly acted by a cast of three. It's a rare masterpiece whose like comes along once every several years, if that often; the only play I've seen on Broadway in the last five years that was nearly as good was Mendes's own previous effort, *The Ferryman*, the IRA drama by Jez Butterworth that captured the 2018–19 Tony for best play.

It's hard to say whether the director, the author, or the actors have the most marvelous impact in *The Lehman Trilogy*'s three-hour gallop through 160 years of American history as experienced and in many ways shaped by three immigrant brothers and the institution they created, which fell in spectacular fashion on a grim day in 2008. Though the play is long, staged with two intermissions, it moves with electrical efficiency, and I could happily have sat through a much longer presentation. (The play as written runs five hours; what we are seeing is a truncated version. A television adaptation springing from the longer version is in the works.)

England's Simon Russell Beale and Adrian Lester play the Bavarian immigrants Henry and Emanuel Lehman, joined by their little brother Mayer (a third Englishman, Adam Godley). Henry was the first of the three to arrive in the United States in 1844, and he began to sell clothes in Montgomery, Alabama. He tells us he is the head of the operation, Emanuel is the arm, and the wide-eyed young Mayer is merely the "potato." Segueing into cotton trading, they discover a niche as middlemen, but Henry dies of yellow fever in 1855, one of many crushing setbacks. Still, three years later, Emanuel discovers the importance of trading in New York, founds a little office on Liberty Street, and manages to stay in business through the Civil War. Reconstruction brings the first gigantic profits.

All of this is mere prelude, though, to the central action in which the actors play the three immigrant brothers' own wives and descendants as well as ancillary figures involved in the various Lehman business deals. The financing of the railroads provides one dramatic high point, the crash of 1929 and resultant Great Depression another, the destruction and rebuilding of Europe another still. As the actors slip in and out of roles, though, every little interlude is brilliantly realized, whether it's a world-historical event or merely an illustration of a personality quirk, such as the typically rigorous courtship program enacted by Emanuel Lehman in pursuit of Pauline Sondheim, a suitably well born New York City Jew who eventually bowed to his onslaught and bore him four children.

Mendes stages everything propulsively, with the actors talking rapidly and springing

from scene to scene as Es Devlin's set (a giant glass cube suggesting the twenty-first-century Manhattan skyscraper) rotates majestically on a turntable, accumulating more of the weight of history every time the characters scrawl key figures and words on the glass walls with felt-tip markers. A piano accompanist (Candida Caldicot) playing incidental music (composed by Nick Powell) and mammoth photographic projections behind the actors add to the sensory buffet. Evidently Mendes (who is perhaps best known for his visually splendid films, including *American Beauty*, *1917*, and *Skyfall*) worried that the play might come across as dry or static, so to keep a twenty-first-century audience stimulated he loaded the work with cinematic flourishes. The evening races by so quickly that it leaves the audience in dazed gratitude.

I'm not sure any other play in the history of Broadway has concentrated so much respectful attention on the details of how a great business was built, and, surprisingly for any theatrical offering of our times—much less one in which the Civil War plays an important role—the play does not allow its attention to be diverted to racial anguish and disputation. The sole sop to today's race obsessions is that one of the actors, Lester, is black, because otherwise I suppose the cast of three men playing white people would have to be ritually denounced as "all-white." Lester replaces Ben Miles, who was a better fit for the role, but, as was true in the Park Avenue Armory staging, it is Godley who steals the show. Though his characters are mocked by the others in the early going, in the last of the three acts he seizes control of the work as Bobbie Lehman, the 1891-born playboy who collected art and played polo. Simply by donning a pair of small sunglasses and adopting a louche manner, Godley slips from shy to arrogant. Bobbie's story is the story of Lehman in the twentieth century, and in a knockout scene in which Bobbie dances the twist at an ever-accelerating speed to channel the crazed energy of finance in the post-war decades, Godley propels an already great drama into a stratospheric dimension. *The Lehman Trilogy* is a new classic, and I expect it to be staged many times down the decades, but I can't imagine any production will ever surpass this one.

Your correspondent is not intimately acquainted with the effects of LSD, and no drugs were handed out as tickets were being taken, but *Flying Over Sunset* (at the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center through February 6) aims to provide the musical-theater equivalent of several acid trips, and the way it does so is surprisingly warm and touching. A warning, though: the show shamelessly evangelizes for the benefits of LSD, depicting it as a harmless drug that unlocks hidden memories and allows users to interact with the spirits of the dead. True, three characters nearly drown together, but only because they foolishly ignore advice to remain in a safe space among trustworthy friends while on the drug and go swimming in the Pacific Ocean.

The show's fondness for drugs marks it as something of a throwback to the Sixties and Seventies, when popular culture's interest in hallucinogens seemed to peak. There is a crucial difference in tone, though: previously consigned to comedies aimed at young people, mind-altering substances are in this case depicted as useful tools for people facing the sunset of their lives.

Flying Over Sunset, which was set to be the centerpiece of Lincoln Center's spring 2020 season before events determined otherwise, is an attractively imagined fantasia for the aging. James Lapine, the director and librettist best known for supplying the books for the Stephen Sondheim musicals *Into the Woods* and *Sunday in the Park with George*, conceived of the show after learning that Cary Grant, Clare Boothe Luce, and Aldous Huxley had all, at one time or another, tried LSD in the 1950s, before it was made illegal in 1968.

Since all three principals spent time in Hollywood—Luce, a playwright and journalist who later became a congresswoman and ambassador to Italy, was a successful screenwriter, and the novelist Huxley a less successful one—Lapine imagines the three connecting and agreeing to share a drug trip together at Luce's Malibu beach house. Both Huxley and Luce knew Gerald Heard (Robert Sella), a gay English writer who became something of a spiritual guide to Eastern mysticism among Hollywood types and also encouraged friends to free their minds with LSD.

The first act features each of the three celebrities trying LSD independently before they meet in a restaurant; in the second, they go on their drug voyage together, agreeing to share notes. The characters sing only when they're on LSD, explaining what they're experiencing. Grant, who is uptight and reserved and a bit alienated from a world that has decided he is its most beautiful man, is played by Tony Yazbeck, who makes a somewhat contrarian choice not to mimic the much-mimicked Grant voice, adopting a different mid-Atlantic accent that perhaps is meant to draw attention away from the screen idol. Yazbeck's Grant is not the greatest movie star of all time but merely a man dogged by sorrow about the loss of his mother in a boyhood during which his father dressed him in girls' clothes and pushed him to a fretful and strenuous career in music-hall performing. Harry Hadden-Paton, who played Henry Higgins on the same stage in a feminist take on *My Fair Lady* a few years ago, plays the even more uptight Huxley, who has a wonderful number, "Huxley Knows," about his prodigious learning and equally broad lack of practical knowledge. He loses his wife Maria (Laura Shoop) to cancer in the course of the play. Luce, ably portrayed by Carmen Cusack, has been sexually abandoned by her husband, the *Time* and *Life* magnate Henry Luce, which provides her with one kind of loss. More worrying, she is afflicted by the loss of her daughter and mother, both killed in car accidents around the same time, and uses LSD to commune with her departed loved ones.

The songs are perfectly enchanting thanks largely to Tom Kitt's score, heavy on the woodwinds and tinged with the sorrow and regret that build over a lifetime, though the lyrics by Michael Korie are well-wrought also. The sets, by Beowulf Boritt, do a great deal to enhance the idea of a magical never-never land into which the characters recede while the drug reroutes their thinking, and Lapine manages the various dreamlike fantasies and complications adroitly, especially in the scene about the near-drowning of the male characters in the surf, in which clever lighting and sound effects create a suitably surreal impression of being lost at sea and lost to LSD at the same time. But it's the emotional core rather than the eye-popping staging that makes *Flying Over Sunset* a special experience.

There's a foundation for a wonderful satiric play in a scene in the first act of Tony Kushner's 2003 musical *Caroline, or Change* (at Studio 54 through January 9), but the author lets the opportunity slip through his fingertips. In New Orleans in 1963, the titular character, a grouchy maid (Sharon D. Clarke), is told by the lady of the house in which she works that she may keep any change she finds in the dirty laundry in the course of doing the wash. A few quarters here and there do constitute something of a windfall for Caroline's three children, who are otherwise too poor even to dream of buying frivolous toys and treats at the five-and-dime. But the author's stand-in, a spoiled eight-year-old boy named Noah Gellman (Gabriel Amoroso on the night I attended, though two other boys share duties on a rotation), decides that by intentionally leaving a few coins in his pockets, he can change Caroline's life. He can become a glorious white savior! This is every progressive's most tantalizing fantasy.

A number that toggles back and forth between the children's excited reaction to the largesse and Noah's imagining of how the children can't stop talking about him, their heroic benefactor, says a great deal about the white-progressive obsession with seeing themselves as godlike figures to downtrodden black folk. Noah even imagines himself being welcomed into Caroline's family as a sort of honorary sibling, sharing in the majesty of black suffering. In reality, on the other side of the stage, it never occurs to Caroline to mention Noah to her children, who have no idea he exists. There's a rich seam of comic potential here about one of the most powerful and yet least dramatized forces in American society—white-progressive guilt, which is to the culture what fossil fuels are to industry. A reviewer in *The New York Times*, missing the point rather widely, proclaimed that the show is about the love affair between blacks and Jews. Is it? Are blacks collectively in love with Jews, or is the mystical worship fairly obviously unidirectional? Kushner would be in a strong position to write about this at

length, but instead he lets the matter drop as a one-off joke.

Like many other theatrical efforts, this one implicitly asks, "What is the black experience in the United States? Why, pull up a chair and let a white progressive tell you all about it." Kushner's irredeemably silly vision is mostly glitzy cabaret camp that has about as much to do with the sensibility of a black Southern Christian woman of the pre–Civil Rights Act era as Peru does with Finland: he imagines Caroline communing with a literally and figuratively bubbly woman (Arica Jackson) costumed as a washing machine, seeing Satan in the infernal heat of the dryer (Kevin S. McAllister), and being overseen by a sweetly benevolent moon (N'Kenge) as a trio of soul singers provide commentary while costumed as Caroline's radio. All of these characters are garish, embarrassing figures who undercut the supposed seriousness of the racial theme of the play, and the music, by Jeanine Tesori, that underlies everyone's thoughts in this mostly sung-through show is a hectic clatter of competing tuneless motifs, usually abandoned every few bars as another awful theme rushes in. Musically the show is a total loss.

In the years since *Caroline, or Change* was first produced, white people's lack of standing to discuss black life has become increasingly a source of embarrassment, and so today the theater is actively, even desperately, searching for black playwrights. Future Kushners will likely find that being white disqualifies them from writing about the Carolines of the world, which will have the side benefit of sparing the rest of us from their own guilt-driven and trite declarations of their racial enlightenment.

Kushner, the author of the AIDS drama *Angels in America* and the screenplay for Steven Spielberg's remake of *West Side Story*, does sidestep several traps in the play, which is commendable enough. Caroline isn't an avatar of suffering but just an ordinary working-class lady, and though she looks back in anger about being beaten, the one who abused her was not a white person but her black husband, a sailor when they met who later disappeared. Nor is she a plaster saint of dignity and endurance. She's ill-tempered and rude and (most unforgivable for 2021) abets Noah's secret cigarette smoking, even though the boy's mother died of tobacco-fueled lung cancer. At one point she explodes in anger and informs the boy that, being Jewish, he is damned to Hell, which she does not hesitate to describe in lurid detail. He fancies himself a friend to the woman, but she corrects him about this.

If the character is reasonably compelling (and played with gusto by Clarke), Kushner's autobiographical musings simply are not enough to build a musical around. The activity of yielding some spare change to Caroline doesn't make a strong dramatic hook for a musical, nor does it bear much allegorical substance. This is why so much of the evening is undisguised filler, with the moon and the washing machine belting out their terrible faux–R&B numbers and Kushner proving so at a loss to explore the tight-lipped Caroline's psychology that he keeps retreating to more familiar memory-based ground, such as boisterous arguments about communism around the family dinner table at Hanukkah. Because Christianity doesn't interest Kushner, it's barely a factor in the show, though there are hints that a love of Christ furnishes Caroline with her principal sustenance. The bottom line is that Kushner doesn't really know his lead character, and his play is far more attuned to his own fixations than to the travails of Deep South blacks.

Art

Finding Thomas in her field

by Karen Wilkin

A dozen years ago, when President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama chose a group of modern and contemporary works from the national collections to install in the White House, soon after the inauguration, two brilliantly colored abstractions by the African-American painter Alma Woodsey Thomas attracted special attention in the press. *The New York Times* described their author as one of the selection's "little-known figures," which must have surprised Thomas's admirers, especially the many artists for whom she was an important mentor and role model in Washington, D.C., where she lived and worked. (Born in Georgia in 1891, she died in Washington, D.C., in 1978). The article's identifying Thomas as "the African-American Abstract Expressionist" must have been equally surprising, given that her strongest, most achieved pictures are pulsing expanses of intense color, like those of the Washington Color Field painters whose work she knew and with whom she sometimes exhibited. Perhaps the *Times*'s writer hadn't been paying close enough attention. Thomas may not have been familiar to the general public, but during her lifetime her work was shown with some regularity and more than once in some depth. In the 1970s, she was represented by the prestigious Martha Jackson Gallery in New York and had a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art—the first solo show the museum ever accorded an African-American woman—plus an even larger one-person exhibition at the Corcoran Museum of Art. In the years following these significant shows, major American museums acquired her work. Their interest was, admittedly, a bit belated—Thomas was eighty at the time of the Whitney retrospective—but the artist was also a late starter. She taught art in Washington public schools for almost four decades, and, like Hans Hofmann, who was able to devote himself entirely to the studio only after closing his school, she became a full-time painter after her retirement, in 1960, at the age of sixty-nine—almost a decade younger than Hofmann, who was seventy-eight when he finally stopped teaching.

Thomas was a well-informed, well-educated, and sophisticated artist, despite having spent her childhood and teenage years in the rural South, in the Jim Crow era, before moving with her family from Columbus, Georgia, to Washington, D.C., in 1907. She recalled, about the time of the Whitney retrospective, that when she was a young woman, it would have been inconceivable for a black person to visit a museum, but her family actively pursued education, participating in what Thomas called "cultural clubs" and forming an impressive library of history and literature. During her years of teaching, there were also periods when she seriously studied art herself. She was the first person to earn a degree in fine arts from Howard University, followed a little later by a master's in art education from Columbia University's Teachers College. While teaching, Thomas painted, exhibited, helped to found a black-owned gallery, explored the possibilities of sculpture and marionettes, and through it all was part of a group of dedicated artists. She

took part in an extensive art tour of western Europe with Temple University students and traveled often to New York to see art. She has been described as "haunting museums." Suspicions of responses to the art of the past and recent past in Thomas's paintings are almost certainly accurate—her oddball *Watusi (Hard Edge)* (1963, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.), for example, was a deliberate response to Henri Matisse's *L'Escargot* (1953), seen by her in an exhibition of his *gouaches coupées*. While her early work attests to her training (and ability) as a perceptual realist, her mature abstractions, with their full-throttle hues, their blocky "mosaics" of broad strokes, and, in some, all-over nets of jazzy calligraphy, reveal that she was not only well aware of her younger peers' exploration of the expressive potency of color, but that she also shared many of their concerns and aspirations.

After Thomas's death, interest in her work began to intensify and has only escalated since, as a good deal of scholarship has been devoted to her. The gaps between notable exhibitions have shortened. In 1981, the National Museum of American Art (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum) in Washington, D.C., mounted "Alma Thomas: A Life in Art," but it wasn't until 1998 that the Fort Wayne Museum of Art organized a serious touring retrospective. Since 2001, however, Thomas's reputation has grown exponentially. Her work has been seen in several significant exhibitions, at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York and at Duke University's Nasher Museum of Art, among other institutions. In 2014, her canvas *Resurrection* (1966) was acquired for the White House permanent collection—another first for a black woman. In 2016, the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College and The Studio Museum in Harlem jointly organized a wide-ranging, well-selected survey of Thomas's canvases and works on paper from the 1950s through the 1970s. In 2019, when the Museum of Modern Art opened its latest Diller Scofidio + Refro addition, Thomas's *Fiery Sunset* (1973), a modest-sized square of saturated brick red overlaid by a frayed a web of blue-black floating strokes, acquired in 2015, was part of the initial installation. Cruelly, the painting was hung in the Matisse gallery, at right angles to *The Red Studio* (1911), presumably to illustrate an astonishingly simple-minded idea about all-over expanses of an intense color. It's not surprising that, even though *Fiery Sunset* is a serious, ambitious, and admirable painting, it couldn't compete with Matisse's masterpiece. But fortunately, also in 2019, "Alma Thomas: Resurrection," at the Mnuchin Gallery on New York's Upper East Side, allowed a group of Thomas's signature "mosaic" paintings to speak for themselves, without having to measure themselves against the work of a giant of modernism.

Now, "Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful," a full retrospective organized by The Columbus Museum in Columbus, Georgia (which houses Thomas's archive), and the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia, is on view at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., as part of the Phillips's centennial celebrations.[1] The exhibition is accompanied by a thick, abundantly illustrated volume with essays by a long list of art historians, historians, academics, artists, writers, conservators, curators, and the like. The dense installation includes, in addition to canvases and works on paper, such miscellany as reconstructions of Thomas's clothes and marionettes made with her students, plus an informative film. According to the press release, "Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful" is "a major exhibition of artworks and archival materials that chronicle her dynamic long life." The show, we are told, "captures the artist's trailblazing life of constant creativity." Does it?

To some extent, the exhibition presents the trajectory of Thomas's evolution, starting with early figurative works. I suppose that the full-spectrum palette, turned up to maximum

1 "Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful" opened at The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., on October 30, 2021, and remains on view through January 23, 2022. The exhibition will also be seen at the Frist Art Museum, Nashville (February 25–June 5, 2022) and The Columbus Museum, Georgia (July 1–September 25, 2022). It was previously on view at the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia (July 9–October 3, 2021).

volume, on display in a small, untitled still life (1922/24) of bottles and boxes can be read as early evidence of Thomas's love of color, but it doesn't suggest a future ability to use chroma structurally or expressively. There are, however, glimmers of what was to come, such as *Joe Summerford's Still Life Study* (1952, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.), a testimony to Thomas's fruitful studies with the painter in the title at American University. With its range of subtly varied, full-bore greens, sparked with off-whites and unexpected hits of mauve and red, the painting points to her later prowess at orchestrating contrasting hues. Another early standout, quite different, is the small, straightforward *Grandfather's House* (1952, The Columbus Museum, Georgia) with its roughly brushed, casually indicated yard, vigorous trees, and sketchy figures, made memorable by firm structure and heightened color. Thomas's strengths, her ambition for her art, and her affinities and individuality are also prefigured by a small selection of her early paintings combined with works from the same years by such Washington colleagues as her lifelong friend Jacob Kainen. Another grouping places some of her late abstractions beside canvases by such members of the Washington Color School as Gene Davis, Sam Gilliam, Morris Louis, and Kenneth Noland, with whom she exhibited in Washington galleries and, in 1971, at the Phillips. Thomas's works in this section attest to her embrace, without compromising her individual approach, of the generous scale and bold geometry employed by the younger artists, as well as their enthusiasm for intense, unmodulated color. The two sets of comparisons are informative, but you have to hunt for them.

"Hunt," I'm afraid, is the operative word. The installation claims to be thematic, which it occasionally is. Overall, however, it doesn't seem to be coherently chronological and it is definitely not based on visual considerations. I fully understand that the size and layout of the Phillips's galleries pose constraints and that the curator's desire to include sometimes-enriching archival material imposes its own conditions, but I kept finding myself baffled, intellectually and aesthetically, by the combination of works on a given wall. From time to time, there are illuminating sequences, and, if we make the effort, we can piece together Thomas's evolution. For example, we can discover that, in the mid-1950s, her paintings, while still figurative, became looser and more adventurous, in response to her teachers at American University, who urged her to work in a less conventional way. We can realize, if we concentrate, that, by 1960, she was making abstract paintings on canvas and on paper, pulling broad sweeps of color across the surface, contrasting clear reds and oranges with transparent blues and greens. While the planes of color float freely, they also often seem to possess a memory of a grid or, at least, an acknowledgment of the vertical and horizontal givens of such a support. In some watercolors, the patches are often vaguely rectangular, as if echoing Hofmann's slabs, hovering and pulsing against the white of the paper. Others are more complicated and finicky, with multiple touches forming nesting arches and bands of color. The most fully realized watercolors and acrylics on paper, made about 1968, anticipate Thomas's mature oils with vertical bands of varied widths and varied hues, made of ample, stuttering, stacked touches that fill the entire support. In the early 1970s, she continued to explore other possibilities in relaxed, generous watercolors constructed not with repeated brushmarks, but with large vertical blocks of intense hues—think Clyfford Still without the crankiness and simmering hostility. There are, as well, small acrylic works on paper that employ what became her signature repeated staccato brushstrokes, here sometimes oriented horizontally, unlike the vertical stacks in her canvases of the same period.

Her continued experimentation on paper notwithstanding, beginning in the late 1960s, Thomas seems to have concentrated on all-over paintings constructed with regular, rhythmic patches of color chained into vertical bands, concentric circles, or off-kilter "narratives," such as the series of "Earth and Space Paintings," made in the early 1970s and inspired by the space program. A catalogue essay notes, fashionably, that Thomas began to make her

ambitious abstractions at a time when "environmentalism and environmental justice" were gaining attention. "While making no direct reference to either movement," we are told, "her work nonetheless internalized—at a structural level—the tension between universal environmental values and community concerns." It's hard to reconcile this with Thomas's frankness about having found triggers for paintings in the exploration of outer space or with her frequent citation of the contrasting rings of color in formal flower beds as the source of her own dotted rings (which are impossible not to associate, as well, with Noland's circle paintings).

Whatever their explicit or covert sources, the geometric, rather rigid paintings built with regular pats of color won Thomas attention. But she soon allowed her brushloads of pigment more freedom, altering their sizes and, sometimes, their orientation and degree of crispness. In the early 1970s, she began to use color differently, no longer dividing it into distinct zones, but instead spreading accumulations of a single hue or two closely related colors against white or chromatically contrasting grounds. These all-over paintings have a lushness and sensuality that make the "mosaic" rings and stripes, with their tidy rows of high-contrast hues, seem stiff and a little predictable. The difference can be seen in a series of fluid, red all-over pictures, some prompted, it seems, by space probes sent to Mars, the red planet, others by rose gardens, in which elongated, subtly modulated vertical strokes hover in a shifting cloud over blue-greens, now radiant, now cooling to near-black. In the best of these all-over paintings, the vibrant color contrasts and variations in the density and rhythm of the patches and repeated strokes, combined with the nuances of the ground, create a sense of instability and movement across the surface, as if we were confronted by leaves floating on water or blowing against the sky. Thomas's titles, as well as some of her statements, underscore the stimulus she found in gardens, flowers, and the natural world in general. A flickering patchwork of tender pink against spring yellow-green, for example, announces its source in the title: *Ruth Kainen's Amaryllis* (1976, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts).

At the Phillips, one wall of a large gallery devoted to some of Thomas's last paintings finally allows us to concentrate on her achievement, undistracted by unrelated works. In this group, painted in 1976, the previously regular pats of paint rebel against uniformity. They break discipline, their orderly component strokes becoming anarchic floods of crisp bars and fractured curves, with occasional triangles entering the conversation; some read as sheets of fragmented calligraphy. The marks drift, becoming denser in some parts of the canvas, fraying in others. The most dramatic example, installed in another gallery, is the enormous—roughly six by thirteen feet—*Red Azaleas Singing and Dancing Rock and Roll Music* (1976, Smithsonian American Art Museum). A vigorous tour de force of brushy, delicately varied red patches and strokes apparently blown to the left side of the painting, *Red Azaleas* combines three separate canvases, each a slightly more manageable size for the octogenarian artist, who continued to produce large, energetic works such as these despite crippling arthritis—paintings that are, in fact, her strongest and most ravishing. Their powerful effect in exhibitions where they were emphasized—at The Studio Museum in Harlem and at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, for example—remains vivid in my memory. The herky-jerky installation at the Phillips made me long for a show focusing on Alma Thomas in the 1970s, one in which her mature achievement would be obvious, undiluted by considerations other than aesthetic ones.

The book that accompanies "Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful" is comprehensive and probably definitive, covering the artist's biography and the context—social, political, and cultural—in which she lived and worked, along with generous quotations from her peers and herself, technical analysis, and a dissection of her art that mainly reflects current academic concerns. The handsome volume is lavishly illustrated, but it is as hard to navigate and incoherent as the Phillips installation. Most incomprehensible is the absence of a chronology or exhibition history, important information usually deemed essential to any scholarly publication related to an exhibition. Thomas deserves better.

Exhibition notes

"Imperial Splendor: The Art of the Book in the Holy Roman Empire, *ca*. 800–1500"
The Morgan Library, New York.
October 15, 2021–January 23, 2022

If you ask someone to explain the phrase "Holy Roman Empire," he might mutter something about the Habsburgs, the Reformation, or the Thirty Years' War before throwing his hands up in defeat. Attempts to simplify the history of this patchwork entity—which at times included parts of modern-day Germany, France, Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, Belgium, the Netherlands, and northern Italy—often end in frustration. In the eighteenth century, it was derided by Voltaire, who famously quipped that it was "in no way holy, nor Roman, nor an empire," and by James Madison, to whom it appeared "a nerveless body, incapable of regulating its own members." But despite its loose structure and wobbling borders, the Empire managed to last a thousand years—twice as long as imperial Rome itself. And as the manuscripts on display in "Imperial Splendor" at the Morgan Library make clear, a vibrant network of patrons, scribes, and artists flourished across the Empire's many principalities from the early middle ages through the advent of the printing press.

The first case displays several religious books linked to the Carolingians, the Empire's founding dynasty. In a ceremony on Christmas Day in 800, Pope Leo III, having secured Frankish protection against the Lombards, crowned Charlemagne emperor at the old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, granting him official status as the rightful successor in a supposedly unbroken line of Roman rulers. Foreign scholars, such as Alcuin of York, flocked to Charlemagne's court, where monastic scribes were busy producing illuminated copies of works both sacred and secular. Though he struggled to form letters himself, the emperor passed reforms aimed at improving education and also encouraged the adoption of Caroline minuscule, a relatively easy-to-read handwritten script that is the basis for the printed lower case we use today.

To reflect their ruler's new imperial status, scribes from this period (sometimes called the "Carolingian Renaissance") appropriated decorative motifs from ancient Roman reliefs, mosaics, and architecture. A ninth-century Latin Gospel from Tours, for instance, open to the beginning of the Book of Matthew, contains golden capital letters resembling ancient Roman stone inscriptions, written upon bands of purple paint.

Other manuscripts imitate different sources. The luxurious tenth-century "Golden Gospels" from Trier mirror late-antique codices assembled from dark purple parchment, dyed using orchil extracted from lichen. Resembling a sixth-century Syrian Gospel book leaf displayed nearby, the Trier manuscript contains double columns of unadorned text written entirely in gold ink using an uppercase script chosen for its old-fashioned appearance.

Several books have retained their jewel-inset treasure bindings, which attest to far-flung trade networks. Lining the front and back covers of the ninth-century "Lindau Gospels," decorated with a crucified Christ and mourning figures made from hammered gold, is silk from Syria and Byzantium. No surprise, bindings like these made manuscripts a common target for plunderers. To deter such attacks, the eleventh-century "Berthold Lectionary" bestows a curse of "violent bodily pains" upon anyone who steals it.

No doubt the eponymous Berthold would be horrified to see single leaves of parchment and vellum, perhaps torn deliberately from their original bindings, framed on the walls above his own book's display case. (Dealers in centuries past had no qualms about snipping illustrations, or even decorated initials, from medieval manuscripts in order to sell them as individual pieces.) Drawn upon one such leaf, dated to the mid-twelfth century and forming the frontispiece for a schoolbook, is a robed and sceptered queen (Philosophy) connected by narrow streams to seven female figures representing the classical liberal arts. The catalogue tells us that the hidden verso contains drawings of those arts' famed practitioners, such as Cicero, Pythagoras, and Euclid. Before the emergence of universities,

monastic and cathedral schools were the primary centers of advanced learning for laymen belonging to an increasingly powerful class of nobles. These nobles began to commission works directly from groups of scribes, hence the emergence of personal manuscripts such as a small twelfth-century psalter that likely belonged to a Guelph princess, who is depicted on an open page wearing red, ermine-lined brocade and raising her hands in prayer.

In the fifteenth century, when the exhibition's remit ends, free imperial cities such as Mainz and Nuremberg were prosperous, semi-independent urban centers that fostered cultural behemoths such as Johannes Gutenberg and Albrecht Dürer respectively. These and other large cities such as Prague, Vienna, and Augsburg (each represented here by lavishly decorated Gospels, full-length Bibles, missals, antiphonaries, and graduals of all sizes) were sometimes permitted to mint their own coinage, raise militias, and collect taxes. "Commerce and creativity went hand in hand," says one of the labels; indeed, professional book artists traveled widely, producing illustrations whose complex perspectives rival those seen in painted wood panels.

Next to copies of the Gutenberg Bible and the Nuremberg Chronicle, there is a final case of printed books illustrated by Dürer that were produced for the open market rather than for a patron. *Apocalypse with Pictures*, his first major book project (published in 1498), contains woodcuts illustrating episodes from the wildest prophetic visions in the Book of Revelation. Using clusters of fine lines and delicate cross-hatching, he achieved a level of expression that had been formerly restricted to painting and engraving. On the day I visited, the *Apocalypse* was open to the page in which Saint John eats the "little book," a corner of which is shown pouring into his mouth like liquid, perhaps tasting as "sweet as honey," as the passage in Revelations goes. The angel from whom he receives the book is said to have feet made from "pillars of fire," which Dürer interpreted as two classical columns whose capitals have burst into flames.

It would have been nice to hear more about why these books were collected by Americans such as J. P. Morgan and Henry Walters, mentioned only briefly on a wall panel and in the catalogue; helpful, too, would have been a magnifying glass, given the delicate scale of the illumination (remarkable when you consider that the scribes' only light source was a ray of sunlight, a fireplace, or a feeble candlestick). But these are small complaints. I imagine visitors will leave pleasantly exasperated and full of questions—above all, why do we not hear more about the Holy Roman Empire?

—*Jane Coombs*

"Botticelli: Artist and Designer"
Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris.
September 10, 2021–January 24, 2022

Botticelli, christened Alessandro Filipepi and known as Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), never saw Paris, which in his day was still medieval, its own renaissance coming later than Italy's. For Botticelli and for many others, his native Florence was the center of the world, then brimming with brilliant artists and craftsmen as well as humanists in the accurate sense of the word, men such as Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, all busy rediscovering whatever they could unearth of the ancient world. Supporting these artists and scholars were enlightened patrons belonging to prosperous banking families, the Medici most prominent among them. Lorenzo de' Medici, called Lorenzo the Magnificent, was himself a talented poet in addition to being immersed in humanist studies. Botticelli, born in modest circumstances, the son of a tanner who had had his son trained as a goldsmith—which taught him the basic essentials of draughtsmanship—was in the right place in the right time.

This current exhibition, the second devoted to Botticelli to appear in Paris in the last twenty years (the first was that at the Musée du Luxembourg in 2003), focuses on Botticelli, the industrious craftsman, in the context of his studio. We, under the influence of Romantic notions, are inclined to forget that the giants who thrived in Europe prior to the nineteenth century tended to regard themselves as artisans as much as independent

geniuses. An artist began learning his craft in his youth in the studio of an established artist. In time, he would create his own studio if he had acquired a reputation. Every period tends to cast the giants of the past somewhat in its own guise. The present exhibition speaks in its catalogue and in its publicity of Botticelli as a "skilled entrepreneur" showered with "prestigious commissions" rather than as the dreamy aesthete envisioned by Walter Pater and other late-nineteenth-century writers who rediscovered a Botticelli that had been neglected since the High Renaissance.

Exhibitions celebrating Botticelli have the disadvantage that most of his better-known masterpieces, notably *Primavera* (*ca*. 1480) and *The Birth of Venus* (*ca*. 1485), both at Florence's Uffizi, and gems at London's National Gallery are considered too precious and fragile to travel. Nevertheless, a small selection of Botticelli's works and those of his assistants, including his prize protégé, Filippino Lippi, the son of Botticelli's own master, Fra Filippo Lippi, are more portable. A highlight of the Botticelli exhibition at the Musée du Luxembourg eighteen years ago was the dreamlike *Queen Vashti Leaving the Royal Palace* (*ca*. 1475) from Florence's Horne Museum, thought to be the work of both Botticelli and Filippino Lippi. It appears again in the present exhibition, this time with the two other accompanying paintings from the same era, *Esther at the Palace Gate* and *The Triumph of Mordecai*, both from the National Gallery of Canada, allowing us to see the three pictures together in sequence as intended.

Botticelli is best remembered for his exquisite Venuses, almost chaste as opposed to the more openly sensual goddesses of love presented by slightly later masters such as Correggio and Titian. Scholars suppose that Botticelli painted a large number of these nudes, but many of them are now lost. Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), better remembered for his invaluable *Lives of the Artists* than for his somewhat pedestrian paintings, indicated in his biography of Botticelli that the artist destroyed the nudes still in his possession in later life under the baleful influence of that infamously fanatical friar, Savonarola, a Puritan before the letter, whose "bonfire of the vanities" all but ended the Florentine Renaissance. An essay in this exhibition's catalogue by Patricia Zambrano contradicts Vasari's claim that Botticelli became Savonarola's disciple and died neglected, impoverished, and infirm. Whatever the truth, the evidence shown here indicates that Botticelli and his studio continued to command a high reputation, even if the artist adapted his style to changing concerns, perhaps showing the effects of Savonarola's tormented vision even after the monk himself went to the stake in 1498. Pictures in the exhibition's last room, produced by Botticelli's studio during the artist's last decade and including *Virgin and the Infant with the Young John the Baptist* (*ca*. 1505), show signs of the Mannerism that came to dominate art in Florence and elsewhere during the sixteenth century.

Some of Botticelli's nudes do survive. The exhibition includes two from 1485–90, lent by Berlin's Staatliche Museum and Turin's Musei Reali and showing *Venus Pudica*, both clearly sketches of the "bella Simonetta." This Simonetta Vespucci was the love, apparently innocent, of the ill-fated Giuliano de' Medici, who was murdered in 1478 during the Pazzi Conspiracy against the Medici, an event commemorated in Tobias Stimmer's illustration, included in the exhibition, of Giuliano with a dagger stuck into him. "La Bella Simonetta" was the unmarried Botticelli's preferred muse, and he was buried, like her, in the Church of Ognissanti. The pictures are clearly designs for *The Birth of Venus*, inspired by a lost work by the ancient Greek master Apelles and commissioned by Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, a cousin of Lorenzo the Magnificent and Giuliano de' Medici and a patron of such humanists as Ficino and Angelo Poliziano. Simonetta Vespucci's delicacy was not just a feature of her looks, but also of her fragile constitutuon, and she died of consumption, aged only twenty-three, in 1476. Her exquisiteness became the ideal for young women, several centuries after her death, in the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Devotees of Proust will recall that the courtesan Odette de Crécy bewitches Charles Swann, even if he later comes to feel she is not really his "genre."

Botticelli's originality is apparent in early examples of his work, from when he was still working with Fra Filippo Lippi. The exhibition shows pictures by both painters of the Madonna and Child. Botticelli's Virgin is more introspective and less serene than his master's, entirely immersed in her holy child, avoiding looking out to the spectator. Vasari thought Botticelli wasted his time illustrating Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but Dante's masterpiece fascinated Botticelli, and the work may have been commissioned by Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici. The exhibition includes two drawings from Dante's *Inferno* by Botticelli. Even if Botticelli avoided following Savonarola, his own piety is not in doubt, as evidenced by the plenitude of his religious subjects. Indeed, the artist's last two decades seem to have been entirely devoted to religious pictures. In the exhibition's last room there is a *Virgin and Child in Company with Saints*, Dominic, Francis, Cosmas, Damian, Laurence, and John the Baptist among them, painted in 1495–96 when Savonarola dominated Florence. The saints look as weirdly tormented as 1970s rock musicians. By then, even bold Florentine patrons would not have dared to commission poetical mythological scenes. Comparisons with our own period come to mind.

This small exhibition, full of beauty, has much to tell us about Botticelli, who for all his fame remains something of an enigma. Botticelli may never have known Paris, but visitors to the French capital may revel in his acquaintance.

—David Platzer

"Sickert: A Life in Art"
Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, United Kingdom.
September 18, 2021–February 27, 2022

Visitors to the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool who look at the books on sale at the exhibition of Walter Sickert (1860–1942) might be forgiven for thinking that the painter's greatest achievement was being named as a suspect in the Jack the Ripper murders. Certainly, he was fascinated by the murder of a prostitute in Camden Town in 1907 (still known to aficionados of English murders as the Camden Town Murder), and he painted a room alleged to be the Ripper's bedroom. But one might as well propose that Hilaire Belloc was Jack the Ripper because his sister, Mrs. Belloc Lowndes, wrote by far the most convincing fictional account of the murderer and must have obtained her information from someone, her brother being easily to hand—unless she herself were the Ripper, of course.

Nevertheless, there *is* something dark—literally and figuratively so—about Sickert's vision of the world, as if he saw the world through a glass darkly, or at any rate though dark glasses. He paints as if to depict anything in the full brightness of color were to be sentimental or unsophisticated. "I have seen into the essence of existence," his paintings seem to say, "and it is very dark." George Orwell once said that our civilization is founded upon coal; if so, its appearance for Sickert seems to have been dominated by soot, or at least by sootiness. And indeed, when he came to maturity in England, buildings *were* largely covered in soot. We think we live in polluted times, but they are as nothing compared with those of the first Industrial Revolution, completed in Sickert's time.

Sometimes the darkness works (at least for me), sometimes not. When the owner of the Hôtel de la Plage in Dieppe, where Sickert lived for some years, commissioned from him a series of six views of the town to decorate his restaurant, he sold them straight on because they were too gloomy and would probably have depressed his clients. I cannot but agree with the hotel owner; I think the pictures would have cast a pall over conversation, and Dieppe was, after all, a holiday resort at the time when good cheer was supposed to reign there.

Sickert was often a literary painter, in the sense that his pictures invited their viewers to imagine the life behind their subject matter novelistically rather than to contemplate them from a purely aesthetic standpoint. His early paintings of the London music hall powerfully suggest the escapist quality of the entertainment offered to the working-class audience upon which he turned his attention. Song, dance, and sexual innuendo, daring for its

time, offered the audience a reprieve from their hard and pinched lives, and though it would not be true to say that Sickert was the first serious artist to take the entertainments of the common people as a subject—far from it—he was certainly the major artist of the music hall. He conveyed very well the almost forced or desperate gaiety of it, forced and even hysterical gaiety still being a quality of mass entertainment in England.

Later, after the music hall had become gentrified and Sickert therefore lost interest in it, he painted nudes in Camden Town, then as now a district of London known for its loucheness. These are not nudes to celebrate the beauty of the female body but nudes of those whom the prudish curators insist on calling "sex workers" (perhaps there is a law of the conservation of prudery, such that if it does not attach to one thing, it will attach to another). Moreover, he depicted sex workers not of the courtesan class but of the quick-relief-of-frustration class, beauty not being a necessary qualification for them, who inhabit cheap and dark lodgings with iron bedsteads. As Sickert quite rightly pointed out, murder—and by extension of the argument, prostitution—was a subject for art like any other, but I find these paintings neither emotionally engaging nor aesthetically pleasing. Obviously, others may respond differently.

Occasionally, Sickert hits the mark. His painting *Ennui* (*ca*. 1914), of which he produced several versions, very successfully communicates the desperation of the close association between two people who no longer have anything in common. A late-middle-aged man in a brown tweed suit sits at a table puffing, to all appearances complacently, at a cigar, while a standing woman somewhat younger than him leans on a chest of drawers turning away from him clearly in an attitude of desperation, as if the man has just said something very boring—as usual. She cannot stand it any longer, but (as the stuffed birds in the glass case on the top of the chest of drawers suggest) she is trapped. Virginia Woolf, in her otherwise tediously mannered 1934 essay "Walter Sickert: A Conversation," describes the situation very well. She assumes that the couple comprises a publican and his wife after the day is done:

> It is all over with them, one feels. The accumulated weariness of innumerable days has discharged its burden on them. . . . The grimness of that situation lies in the fact that there is no crisis: dull minutes are mounting, old matches are accumulating and dirty glasses and dead cigars; still on they must go, up they must get.

As Beckett puts it in *The Unnamable*, "I can't go on, I'll go on."

An artist has the right to be judged by his best work, for good work cannot be produced by chance. Even at his best, however, Sickert seems to me limited, or perhaps even stunted. His self-portrait at the age of thirty-six is disturbing, being that of a disturbed man. The brushwork of this self-portrait hints almost at a desire for self-mutilation, especially of the nose, cheeks, and lips. He looks out from the corner of his eye with the suspicious stare of the paranoiac. Sincere or not, this is certainly not a work of self-flattery.

The presentation of the exhibition is itself disturbing. At several points there are inescapable audio recordings, explaining or commenting on the painter's life and works. There is nothing in the world like this to impede a visitor's concentration on the visual; it suggests that the curators think that without such recordings people will have to be left to their own thoughts, which would either be painful for them or represent a risk, to be obviated, of their having the wrong ones. More than once, there are two such presentations audible at the same time, which makes one feel as if one's mind is being put through a food mixer. No doubt this employment of inescapable audio recordings is evidence of the curators' belief in the supposed shortness of the public's attention span, of its need for constant stimulation. Fortunately, I was able once to pull the plug on one of the loudspeakers, thereby striking a tiny blow for silence.

The visual presentation was a disorienting mess also. Nasty-colored walls were painted at various angles with little bits of information,

such as the names of the people whose abodes Sickert had frequented—an impressive list, to be sure. But the visual assault was almost as bad as the auditory. Going through the exhibition was a little like going through the tunnel of fear at an old-fashioned fairground.

I came away with but a moderate regard for the artist. As a draftsman he seemed to me only mediocre, and likely more to be remembered for his strange, and in some sense avant-garde, sensibility than for the beauty of his works. But not every exhibition can—or should—be devoted only to imperishable masterpieces, for how then would we know them to be such?

—Anthony Daniels

"Jennifer Packer:
The Eye Is Not Satisfied With Seeing"
The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
October 30, 2021–April 17, 2022

At the beginning of each semester, I sit my students down, turn off the classroom lights, and have them watch *Why Beauty Matters*, a 2009 BBC documentary written and narrated by the late philosopher Roger Scruton. In the video, Scruton ponders the fate of art and architecture since the advent of modernism and offers counsel on how art can reclaim its purchase on the beautiful. The young artists in my class invariably dismiss Scruton's opinions and ideas: the musings of an old white man—British, too!—are deemed woefully out-of-touch. The observations and prescriptions stated in *Why Beauty Matters* are open to debate, but students do find themselves taken aback when Scruton speaks about how "creativity is about sharing" and "art is a call to others." Generosity of spirit is the last thing they expect from the presumably censorious Scruton or, for that matter, contemporary art. Attitudes that advocate for the generative instead of the rote or nihilistic are all but unheard of.

How likely it is that the painter Jennifer Packer is familiar with Scruton, I don't know. But in an interview with Hans Ulbrich Obrist featured in the catalogue accompanying "Jennifer Packer: The Eye Is Not Satisfied With Seeing," on now at the Whitney, the artist evinces a positivity and receptiveness that is, if not Scrutonian, nonetheless rare in a culture as contentious as our own. Packer's thoughts on portraiture? "The important thing is that . . . [the sitters] are humans worth thinking about beyond their relationship with me." How about realism and its relationship to pictorial form? "I'm interested in something that runs through the work despite what the image is." Packer extolls the visual: "Our eye recognizes things more quickly than our brain." An artist who doesn't partake in the gratifications of narcissism and places a premium on her métier—can you imagine such a thing? Packer does bandy about acronyms like "BIPOC" as if they were organic extensions of the language, and she gets in the requisite knocks on colonialism. But she makes a point of abjuring the buzzword "bodies"—an ugly intersectional trope that diminishes individual worth for theoretical grandstanding. Packer even has kind things to say about Clement Greenberg!

Well, okay, Packer mentions that she's *interested* in Greenberg, but the light she shines is favorable. All in all, the interview reveals a painter who thinks hard about the medium, relishes its malleability, is conversant with history, and privileges the independence of her materials. And here we go beyond the catalogue and its accumulation of words, words, words to enter the exhibition itself. "The Eye Is Not Satisfied With Seeing"—the title comes from Ecclesiastes—is among the most heartening displays of contemporary painting seen at a major institution in some time. Packer first appeared at the Whitney as part of the 2019 Biennial; her canvases stood free and clear of the usual postmodernist folderol. Particularly memorable was *Jordan* (2014), a portrait of the painter Jordan Casteel seated amongst the clutter of an artist's studio. Packer's attention to attitude and body language was sharp: Casteel is corporally at ease, mentally not so much. To the right we see a figure in motion, but, then, the entire canvas is abuzz with painterly incident. Using a palette of dusky earth tones along with rough-and-ready brushwork, Packer managed to create a sense of intimacy that, though counterintuitive, was true and earned. The lone holdout in the vaunted Whit-

ney Biennial made a lot of us curious about what else she might be capable of.

Jordan is included in "The Eye is Not Satisfied with Seeing," an exhibition of thirty-five paintings and drawings that originated at London's Serpentine Galleries. The earliest pieces are from 2011, during Packer's time earning her Master of Fine Arts degree at Yale University; a few portraits, rendered largely in monochrome, date from last year. From the evidence on display, Packer has been on some kind of ride over the past decade—in career trajectory, sure, but also painterly acumen. History gets in the way, of course. *Blessed Are Those Who Mourn (Breonna! Breonna!)* (2020) is an encompassing swath of unstretched canvas prompted by the death of Breonna Taylor in the spring of 2020. The painting is, to put it gently, acidic. Suffused in a bilious yellow-green, *Blessed Are Those Who Mourn (Breonna! Breonna!)* depicts a man, clad in boxer shorts, lying on a sofa. The surroundings are mundane—an iron, a fan and cabinetry, things like that—but the mood is meditative. The left portion of the composition is less tangible in its imagery, as Packer engages in some off-the-cuff mark-making. Symbolist portent is seen at top left: a bird soars through a tightly cropped field of azure blue.

Packer is a master of the telling detail. Take note of the right hand, the right foot, and the crook of the neck in *Blessed Are Those Who Mourn (Breonna! Breonna!)*: they twitch and reach, the body's tension having been rendered palpable and with no small amount of nuance. A person reclining, Packer tells us, isn't necessarily a person at peace. Packer's knowledge of the human form is estimable, and her ability to hold onto the rigors of likeness and anatomy without sacrificing interpretative brio even more so. The sizable charcoal drawings on view are supple in their transitions of mass, line, and volume, but oils are in Packer's wheelhouse. The art scene is rife with artists who put brush to canvas as if it were a distasteful chore; Packer is an artist who actually likes her medium. The surface of each picture is a compendium of skepticism and possibility, in which gritty slurs of oil coalesce into sharply focused definition, and then devolve into patches of sinuous linearity. A handful of still-life pictures are less convincing, being greasy and cluttered. The figure is Packer's compositional anchor—a moral anchor too, perhaps. The painterly freedom to which it gives license is bracing to behold, the depths hinted at impressive. "The Eye Is Not Satisfied" is an uncommon and most welcome exhibition.

—Mario Naves

Visions of Spain

by James Panero

Spanish art often dwells in that dark hour before the dawn. The lights are down. The heavens have closed. The eyes adjust while you feel around. Forms lurk as colors shift in unstable ways. Other national schools have light and lift and plenty of it. Spanish art pushes down and holds you in its shadowy grip.

The appeal of Spanish art is not always immediate, but, like an acquired taste, it can be that much more rewarding to the palate. A little over a century ago, the philanthropist Archer M. Huntington developed an appetite for the Spanish style. The Hispanic Society of America, his 1904 Beaux-Arts creation on Audubon Terrace at 155th Street and Broadway, in Washington Heights, became New York's treasure house of Spanish art, literature, and more. Whenever I am asked about my favorite local institution, the society is always at the top of my list. No other collection in the New World, and perhaps even the Old, can rival certain strengths of its holdings. Paintings by El Greco, Velázquez, and Goya, murals by Sorolla, sculpture, pottery, prints, photography, and ironwork, not to mention an unparalleled library of Spanish books, maps, and manuscripts (all still on card catalogue): this free-to-visit institution is counted as a major discovery by anyone who sets foot inside and goes about exploring its many nooks and crannies. The only problem, and it's a big one, is that the society has been closed to the public since 2017.

That the Hispanic Society remains an undiscovered country has been both a blessing and a curse to the institution. Geographically remote, largely self-contained, the society has been able to carry about its business of preserving, presenting, and even acquiring great works of Spanish culture seemingly beyond the frenetic mandates of today's museum-industrial complex. At the same time, the society's aging infrastructure and, historically at least, rather outsider position in the world of philanthropy have kept its future in doubt and its art and objects vulnerable to the exigencies of the moment. In 2017 the society's main building, which did not even have climate control, was closed for a comprehensive renovation. It remains shuttered today as its reopening schedule seems forever pushed back. We can only hope it reopens soon, and hope that when it does the society will be merely a better version of itself, not a new-normal something else. These days, if something is perfect just the way it is, it almost certainly has to change.

It greatly helps that Philippe de Montebello, director emeritus of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has taken up the cause of the Hispanic Society by serving as the chairman of the society's board of trustees. The words "museum" and "library" have been added to its branding, lest you think the society were some kind of social club. And the society has maintained its activities by organizing exhibitions of its collection in the United States and abroad. In 2017 two hundred of its treasures traveled to the Prado in the society's first international loan exhibition. Major exhibitions have since been mounted in Houston, Cincinnati, Mexico City, and elsewhere.

This past season we have had a chance to consider two of the Hispanic Society's strengths with concurrent exhibitions in New York: "Gilded Figures: Wood and Clay Made Flesh," on view at the Audubon Terrace campus in the society's new East Building Gallery through January 9; and "Treasures from the Hispanic Society Library," which was on view at the Grolier Club through December 18, 2021.[1]

Polychrome Renaissance and baroque sculpture has been collected by the Hispanic Society since its inception. Huntington first pursued them at a time when the red-blooded religious works were largely overlooked by Anglo-Protestant taste. The society has since supplemented his acquisitions, aided by the fact that only very recently has the market heated up (or, at least, warmed up) for these arresting works. Half of the twenty-two sculptures on view in "Gilded Figures: Wood and Clay Made Flesh" are in fact acquisitions made since the 1990s. These works are now gathered together with the highlights of Huntington's original collecting and one loan. Patrick Lenaghan, the head curator of prints, photographs, and sculpture at the institution, has organized the exhibition in partnership with his colleague Hélène Fontoira-Marzin, the head of conservation—the person who has been central to the restoration of these delicate objects and the reason we now find them so powerful today.

While polychromy can be found throughout European art, it was the Spanish who took the form to its living, breathing conclusions—merging the crafts of woodworking and clay-sculpting with the skill of painting. The verisimilitude, of "wood and clay made flesh," went against the ideals of neoclassical statuary, and it can still strike us as unusual today, more mannequin-like than high sculpture. Yet the results give Spanish devotional sculpture a life of its own. The society's survey of twenty-two of these sculptures follows the work from the Spanish Renaissance through the baroque—and on to the New World, as local craftsmen merged Mesoamerican design with Spanish tradition.

Starting clockwise to the left of the door, in a rather jumbled visual presentation, the exhibition begins with *The Resurrection* (*ca.* 1485–1500). This polychromed and gilded pine altarpiece is attributed to the late-Gothic master Gil de Siloé. Here the risen body of Christ is not so much moving up as sliding down the top of his tomb into a space populated by devoted disciples and snoozing soldiers. His chest, his legs, and especially his hands have an uncanny corporeality. The message is to be present. The Resurrection would be one thing you don't want to sleep through.

Polychromy lent itself to the creation of reliquary objects, with lifelike forms designed to contain the actual forms of life. Juan de Juni's *Saint Martha* and *Saint Mary Magdalene* (both *ca.* 1545) are busts that were originally animated by the relics placed on wax seals covering their hearts. Here the saints in different modes of contemplation serve as pendants to each other. Their gilded garments are accentuated by an overpaint that is then scored to reveal the gold beneath.

The most astonishing example here must be Pedro de Mena's bust of *Saint Acisclus* (*ca.* 1680). The saint was a third-century Roman in Córdoba who converted to Christianity and refused to apostasize. De Mena captures him in his moment of martyrdom, as his throat is slit. His furrowed brow, his dark glass eyes, his slight build, his tousled hair, and his parted lips revealing ivory teeth all speak to the emotions of the moment. A thin line of blood drips from his neck as he contemplates his final breath. This detail, overpainted with flesh tones in later years, was brought back to bloody life through the society's restoration work.

Luisa Roldán's baroque tableaux of Magdalene, Catherine, and the flight from Egypt, all from 1692–1706, reveal the extra level of detail that can be imparted through painting terracotta rather than wood. Practically miniatures, these packed cinematic scenes would have been intended for private devotion and, despite their complexities, were created from single pieces of clay.

1 "Gilded Figures: Wood and Clay Made Flesh" opened at the Hispanic Society Museum and Library, New York, on October 15, 2021, and remains on view through January 9, 2022. "Treasures from the Hispanic Society Library" was on view at the Grolier Club, New York, from September 28 through December 18, 2021.

Andrea de Mena, the daughter of Pedro, carried on her father's legacy even after she joined the convent across the street from the family workshop. Her time with the nuns did little to temper her inherited sense for emotion and gore. Andrea's *Ecce homo* and *Mater dolorosa*, both from 1675, incorporate tiny ivory teeth, hair, eyelashes, and at one time a crown of thorns to give these works their extra fleshiness. With the *Ecce homo*, or "Christ as Man of Sorrows," the blood gushing from his wounds is made from red glass that has been dripped onto his head. Each work comes with its original seventeenth-century glass case, encapsulating these emotions in gilded three-dimensional frames.

As Spain brought her saints to the New World, she also brought her art. St. James the Moor-slayer, or Santiago Matamoros, was the apostle who was taken up by the Spanish for miraculously appearing at the battle of Clavijo, itself a mythical fight that became a rallying cry for the expulsion of Muslims from Spain. From the Iberian to the Yucatán peninsula, Santiago Matamoros became the patron saint of the conquistadors in their colonization of Mexico. A 1600 relief by an unknown Mexican sculptor features the equestrian saint trampling the Moors under hoof—but it also works Aztec patterns into the saddle and an unusually carved frame. Everything was not conquered after all.

For the many strengths of the Hispanic Society's art collection, its library of books, arts, and manuscripts is even more rarified. One reason for this was Huntington's own self-guided collecting practices. So as not to deplete Spain of her artistic patrimony, Huntington generally collected Spanish art abroad, gathering works that had already left the country. For the creation of his library, however, which he started first, he imposed no such self-restrictions. His literary sources were that much more abundant and rich than his potential artistic supply. When it came to the books, he could tap into the main arteries of Spanish heritage.

"Treasures from the Hispanic Society Library," organized by the society's former director Mitchell A. Codding and its current curator of manuscripts and rare books, John O'Neill, presented many of the highlights of this aspect of the society's collection. And what highlights they are: a 1605 copy of *Don Quixote*, hand-drawn maps of the New World, Torah fragments from Andalusia, and a letter from Charles V to Henry VIII regarding his challenging of Francis I to a duel over the Treaty of Madrid. The standout of the show might have been the small *Black Book of Hours*, by the circle of Willem Vrelant from around 1458—a haunting work, most likely marking a death, that is written on black vellum. The Grolier Club exhibition supplemented its elegant installation with informative labels giving the backgrounds for each of these objects. When it came to the story of the works, you could hang on every word.

It should be said that for all of these highlights, there is much more in the society's archive that was not on display. At three by eight feet, Juan Vespucci's *Map of the World*, from 1526, may have been too large and delicate to travel. This astonishing chart, a centerpiece of the society's collection, is by the nephew of Amerigo, the man who can lay claim to giving two of our seven continents their names. Juan (i.e., Giovanni) Vespucci was Amerigo's successor as chief pilot ("pilato desus ma[jes]ta," as he wrote on his map) for the House of Trade in Seville.

The Florentine explorer took a rather expansive view of Spain's global claims and decorated his detailed map with the flora and fauna of its more exotic domains. The last time I saw this map in person, it was in the society's dusty private library. Having flagged me down in an empty gallery, a friendly guard waved me over and gave the library's door a gentle knock. The librarian answered and ushered me inside, bringing me past the card catalogue and piles of books that seemed to be overflowing in the small study room—itself just the forward-facing end of the library's extensive closed network of stacks, which runs beneath the terrace's public plaza. On one of the walls was a curtain. The librarian pulled a cord. *Eso*, there was the Vespucci.

The Hispanic Society presents the world through such expansive visions of Spain. I look forward to the time when the map-lines again point the way here. Until then, we are grateful for whatever glimpses and glances we can get of these many sparkling treasures.

Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Leonidas Kavakos, the violinist, and Yuja Wang, the pianist, are starry soloists. (The pianist is starrier than the violinist, granted.) But they occasionally team up, in recital. They are following the footsteps of Rubinstein and Szeryng, Horowitz and Milstein, Oistrakh and Richter, and other pairs we could name.

You may have noticed my inconsistency. I sometimes put the pianist first, sometimes the violinist. Why? It is mainly a feeling or impulse, I think. Interesting as it is, I should not let the question detain us.

Kavakos and Wang came once more to Carnegie Hall. I reviewed their recital on *The New Criterion*'s website. But I would like to say a word about their program, here. It began with Bach—the Violin Sonata No. 3 in E major—and continued with two Bach-besotted composers: Busoni and Shostakovich. The Busoni was the Violin Sonata No. 2 in E minor, a strange work. I use "strange" in the sense that Harold Bloom, the late literary critic, did: unusual, individualistic—its own thing. The Shostakovich was his sole violin sonata, written late in his career. It is one of his death-haunted works.

I would like to point out, simply, that this was not a crowd-pleasing program. So, hats off to Kavakos and Wang. (They played well, too.) And the crowd was pleased, regardless. They asked for an encore, receiving one: the fifth and final movement—"Dithyramb"—from Stravinsky's Duo Concertante. That's not especially crowd-pleasing either.

The night after, the Modigliani Quartet arrived in Carnegie Hall—not in the main auditorium, where Kavakos and Wang had been, but in Weill Recital Hall, upstairs. The Modigliani was founded by friends in Paris in 2003. String quartets like to name themselves after artists: I think of the Miró Quartet and the Calder Quartet, too. I could not think of quartets named after Michelangelo and Leonardo. But I've googled—and there are indeed such quartets. I also thought, "A modern American would say 'Da Vinci,' instead of 'Leonardo.'" Sure enough: there is a Da Vinci Quartet, based in Colorado.

Up in Weill, the Modigliani Quartet began with Mozart: the String Quartet in B flat, K. 458, nicknamed "The Hunt." The players tucked into this music, with freedom and discipline. They did not treat their music as quaint, drawing-room Mozart. That is not Mozart at all. The first violinist, Amaury Coeytaux, played sweetly and bravely. "Bravely"? That's a curious thing to say. What I mean is, you can hear *everything* in this little hall. It is highly "exposed." A violinist is under a magnifying glass, so to speak. Coeytaux was confident and practically unerring.

If I remember correctly, the violinists and the cellist were in white shirts—but the violist, in black. He was a ringer, or rather, a last-minute substitute: Luke Fleming, from New Orleans. He was filling in for the Modigliani's regular violist, who had encountered a travel snag. Throughout the concert, the violist watched the first violinist like a hawk—and performed admirably.

The program ended with Grieg: his String Quartet in G minor, Op. 27. This was not cute Grieg, or adorable Grieg—a lovely little folkloric piece from Norway. No, it was strong and masculine and commanding. The players committed no condescension. The four of them sounded almost orchestral at times. (One advantage of a small hall?) They made an overwhelming case for this work. The final section—Presto al saltarello—was performed with abandon. (A controlled abandon, if you will.) You almost wanted to get up and dance. The saltarello, if I can borrow an American term, from our jazz age, swung.

As I left the hall, I thought, "This Grieg will prove one of the highlights of the season," certainly for me.

The New York Philharmonic has been playing in Alice Tully Hall—a chamber hall, more or less. The Philharmonic's regular hall, David Geffen (formerly Avery Fisher), is undergoing renovation. One night, the orchestra played Brahms's First Symphony. How did it sound, in that smallish hall? Magnificent. I almost regret having to return to the bigger hall. In a smaller hall, when a large orchestra is playing a work such as the Brahms First, you feel almost in the middle of the music.

On this night, the conductor was Simone Young, from Australia. She made a favorable impression three seasons ago, when she led the Philharmonic in the Mahler Sixth. The more recent concert had a concerto soloist—a cellist. I will quote the first two sentences of his bio:

> In great demand worldwide, Sheku Kanneh-Mason became a household name in 2018 after his performance at the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex at Windsor Castle was watched by nearly two billion people globally. He had already garnered renown as the winner of the 2016 BBC Young Musician competition, the first Black musician to take the title.

To most of us Yanks, "the Duke and Duchess of Sussex" are "Harry and Meghan." Also, Kanneh-Mason has "MBE" after his name: only twenty-two, he is a Member of the Order of the British Empire. In any event, with the New York Philharmonic, he played the most famous and popular cello concerto of all: the Dvořák. In an interview, I once asked Steven Isserlis, another British cellist, "Do you ever tire of playing the Dvořák concerto?" He looked at me with something like horror and said, "No!" From Sheku Kanneh-Mason, there was occasionally a lack of polish in the concerto—blemishes here and there. But there was never a lack of heart. Kanneh-Mason gave a loving and lovable account of the concerto.

After he was finished, the audience rose as one for him. He played an encore: a version of "I Say a Little Prayer," which Burt Bacharach and Hal David wrote for Dionne Warwick in the 1960s. Kanneh-Mason not only played, he also whistled. A talented and musical being, this young man.

About that Brahms symphony, under the baton of Maestra Young: it was a standard Brahms First. That sounds like a putdown; I don't mean it that way, at all. What I mean is that it was Brahmsian—naturally and faithfully Brahmsian. It was rich, sweeping, majestic, moving—what you want a Brahms First to be, for which: bravos to all.

On a subsequent night, the Philharmonic was conducted by Dima Slobodeniouk. Who? He is the music director of the Symphony Orchestra of Galicia. Russian-born, he went to Finland as a teenager and is a Finnish citizen. He was making his New York Philharmonic debut. Slobodeniouk is good, really good. I want to say, "A star is born," but all that would mean is that I myself had never heard him before. Now in his mid-forties, he has been conducting for a long time.

He is fluid—very fluid. He finds the "gestural equivalent" of the music at hand. (I have borrowed language that Lorin Maazel once used with me in an interview.) When the music is slow—an Adagio movement, let's say—he goes without a baton, or so he did on the night I heard him. In faster sections, the stick is in his hand. He is immaculate—clean and tidy. At the same time, he is amply expressive. He has an obvious, though not showy, musical intelligence. He has a sure sense of rhythm, and he knows the value of notes. What I mean is, he cuts them off at the right time, not lingering, thoughtlessly.

Under his baton—or fingers—the New York Philharmonic sounded very warm. Warm and rich. Was this our Phil.? (No offense.) Did the warmth and richness result from the hall, i.e., Alice Tully? Or from other variables?

The concert began with the Shostakovich Violin Concerto No. 1. The soloist was Karen Gomyo, who was born in Tokyo and grew up in Montreal. She studied at the Juilliard School with Miss DeLay (the legendary pedagogue Dorothy DeLay). The Shostakovich concerto had its vividness in Gomyo's hands—and in Slobodeniouk's, and in the Philharmonic's. You could smell the fear, coming through the notes. Sight and hearing made for a striking contrast. Before us was a glamorous young woman, in a sparkling blue, shoulderless dress, expressing the fear in a (great) "Soviet" concerto.

During the cadenza—a passacaglia that bridges the Scherzo and the Burlesca—you could have heard a pin drop. I was impressed by the audience—but by the violinist too, who made the audience soundless. For my taste, the Burlesca was a little mechanical. I like it played with a heightened sense of crazy desperation. But it was good enough, and the performance overall was very good.

After intermission, this Finn named Slobodeniouk conducted Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 1, a.k.a. "Winter Dreams." At the end of the evening, as people were filing out, one woman said to her companion, "That was great." He agreed: "That was great." They were right.

Let's have some singing—courtesy of Willsonia Boyer, a soprano I have discussed, and praised, in these pages before. She sang a recital in Marc A. Scorca Hall, at Opera America's National Opera Center. Accompanying her at the piano was Marijo Newman. Their program was an eclectic one. It began with patriotic songs—"America the Beautiful" and "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing." Then there were art songs familiar and more off the beaten track. An example of the former: "Widmung" (Schumann). An example of the latter: "J'ai frappé," by Nadia Boulanger. Eventually, the program turned all-American.

This portion of the evening began with "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair," in the arrangement of Ned Rorem. Boyer also sang a song by Adolphus Hailstork, born in 1941: "My Heart to Thy Heart." The words are by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906), the poet after whom the famed Dunbar High in Washington, D.C., is named. The program concluded with three spirituals.

The last of these was "Hold Out Your Light," in an arrangement of Lena McLin. Born in 1928, she is still with us. So is Ned Rorem, born five years before. His centennial, coming up shortly, should be a happy affair, or year.

Best about Willsonia Boyer's singing, I think, is the sincerity that comes through at every turn: sincerity, warmth, and goodness—"goodwill toward men." There is an old saying: "You play who you are," or sing who you are. If that is true, this lady's singing speaks very well of her.

Did I say "all-American"? Leon Botstein conducted an all-American program at Carnegie Hall. His orchestra was TŌN, which stands for "The Orchestra Now." You need that little line over the O in order to get "tone," as in music, rather than "ton," as in two thousand pounds. The concert began with a work by Julia Perry, who lived from 1924 to 1979. She was one of the multitudes who studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. In the early 1950s, Perry wrote a Stabat Mater, which is what Botstein and his forces performed. It sounds like a lot of American music from the middle of the last century—which is no disparagement, I hasten to say. Perry's Stabat Mater has a variety of tempos and moods, and is full of drama, full of churning, appropriate to the subject matter (obviously). The work requires a singer—who was the mezzo-soprano Briana Hunter. A beautiful voice she owns. It is rich, lush, with some cutting power. Hunter had some trouble on high notes, but this was a minor issue.

In the middle of the program, there was a world premiere: of a violin concerto by Scott Wheeler, dubbed "Birds of America." Yes, birds make their appearances, although the work is not ornithological—it is thoroughly musical, with some birdy touches. There are three movements, the middle one of which is marked "Adagietto." You don't see that much, outside Mahler's Fifth Symphony.

I will not assess this concerto because the composer is a friend of mine. Yet I can recom-

mend that people seek out the concerto for themselves. It is a combination of learning and talent, experience and inspiration, craft and spark. Also, it clearly reflects a love of music. But don't all compositions? Not so as you would know it, no. With TŌN, the concerto was played by Gil Shaham, its dedicatee, who was in very good shape.

A question for you: Who was America's first classical composer? Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829–1869)? Or George Frederick Bristow (1825–1898)? Or someone else? Let's call it a tie. In any event, Botstein and TŌN performed Bristow's Symphony No. 4, "Arcadian." It was commissioned in the early 1870s by the Brooklyn Philharmonic for a hundred dollars. According to a note in our program, this was the first symphony commissioned by an American orchestra from an American composer. As I listened to it, I thought, "Sounds awfully Romantic." Then I thought, "It was written in 1872 or so. What's it supposed to be, Jay? Serialist?"

Although there are no words—no singer or narrator—the symphony aims to tell a story. The first movement is headed "Emigrants' Journey across the Plains." The second: "Halt on the Prairie." Then "Indian War Dance." Finally, "Arrival at the New Home, Rustic Festivities, and Dancing."

Concerning this symphony, there were three separate notes in our program. One of them—"Reevaluating Bristow in 2021"—began,

> Keeping the original, troubling movement titles in George Frederick Bristow's Symphony No. 4, *Arcadian*, offers audiences today an important window into the process by which composers, like Bristow, participated in justifying and culturally normalizing the violent expansion into Indigenous homelands by the United States.

On it went in this vein. My main thought about the note was, "If this is the price that must be paid in order to perform the symphony, so be it. Better than excluding the symphony altogether. But will there come a day, soon, when the symphony will be flat-out verboten?"

In the past twenty-five years or so, Leon Botstein has introduced me, and many other people, to music of the past we would otherwise have never heard. He has rendered a great service. So did Eve Queler, and her Opera Orchestra of New York. From them, I heard Donizetti's last opera, *Dom Sébastien*. It is never staged, for reasons I can't fathom. Speaking of opera: New York City Opera has staged a lot of works that otherwise would have remained under a bushel. How about Dukas's version of *Bluebeard's Castle*? City Opera put it on in 2005, with Botstein in the pit.

Let's end back at the New York Philharmonic, where Joshua Bell teamed up with Jaap van Zweden, the orchestra's music director, for Beethoven's Violin Concerto. About the conductor, I could go on for several paragraphs, but maybe I will write just a few sentences: He conducts Beethoven in basically the same manner as Szell did, or, later, Levine (who had apprenticed under Szell). You don't really hear conducting, or interpretation. You hear . . . Beethoven, as is.

Joshua Bell played his heart out—not forgetting head, to go with heart. He was disciplined and feeling, correct and soulful. There were hiccups or smudges here and there, but we weren't listening to a studio recording, thank heaven. The middle movement, Larghetto, sounded like an arioso, beautifully sung. Like his great predecessors—Joachim, Auer, Kreisler, Wieniawski, and Milstein among them—Bell has written his own cadenzas. They are first-rate. They allow for virtuosity, but virtuosity is not the main point of them: music is. They go with Beethoven but are distinctive, at the same time. In the first movement, Bell modulates freely and smartly. He seems to spend a fair amount of time in B flat. He also introduces a touch—just a hint—of dissonance, which pleases the ear.

When I was young, I knew a pianist who, when a college student, had turned pages for Dame Myra Hess in a recital. In the green room, she asked him what he was working on. He named a Mozart concerto. She said, "Wonderful. Whose cadenza are you using?" The young man gulped and said, "Well, I've written my own." "Splendid," replied Dame Myra. "I'm not gifted that way."

The media

Of some highly convenient truths

by James Bowman

One day last June, my eye fell upon the headline to a *New York Times* column by Paul Krugman—as sometimes happens in spite of my best efforts, for the sake of my blood pressure, to prevent it. "The Week Inflation Panic Died," it read.

Might it, said I to myself, be just a trifle premature for Mr. Krugman to be proclaiming victory over "inflation panic" less than six months from the inauguration of President Biden and the beginning of the potentially inflationary spending program that his administration had at that time only just embarked upon? True, in the article itself the famously Nobel Prize–winning economist was a bit more circumspect, but only a bit. Did it not occur to him that these dismissive words about inflation might come back to haunt him—perhaps even before Mr. Biden had completed his first year in office?

And then it struck me that that must be the point. Professor Krugman needed to claim vindication for his airy dismissal of "inflation panic" while he could still do so with some degree of plausibility. He knew his own words would never be quoted against him, at least not by anybody whose opinion he would need to care about, or even to notice, six months down the road when they might have been—as in fact they now are—proven to be patently false. As a member in good standing of the media confraternity, he knew that his brother and sister scribes would prevent him from suffering any embarrassment from being (not for the first time) so egregiously wrong, and that nobody in his world, or whom he respects, reads those organs of the right-wing press that might think the error is worth pointing out to their readers—readers whose opinion has never mattered or needed to matter to the likes of Mr. Krugman, either. The circle of the honor-group within which he, like much of the rest of the media, now operates is drawn so tightly along ideological lines that he never need fear dishonor—or even honest error—alleged against him by anyone outside it.

Also, of course, he enjoys the protection of the media narrative about inflation which, like other media narratives in the post-Rutenbergian era of journalistic advocacy, is no longer subject to serious or substantive correction, no matter how threadbare its fabric may have become. Thus when Jerome Powell, the chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, said at the end of November that it was time to stop using the word "transitory" to describe inflation, it was not intended, nor was it received, as an admission of error by the media. Instead we learned that the operative assumptions of the Fed in calling inflation "transitory" were based on what Philip Pilkington of *UnHerd* calls the "pandemic inflation naturalistic fallacy"—or the belief that inflation is caused by the coronavirus pandemic (plus, presumably, the measures taken to defeat it) and will disappear when it does. As it now appears that even universal vaccination will not make the virus go away anytime soon, inflation may also be expected to linger. The underlying narrative about inflation stands uncorrected.

This narrative is a bit like that of global warming, but in reverse. In both cases, predictions are made, only to be blithely abandoned when they don't come true. With climate change, the predictions are of the blackest pessimism, but with inflation they are resolutely optimistic. People are meant to be terrified by the climate apocalypse awaiting us a few years down the road—in many cases a fewer number of years than those which have elapsed, without world-shaking disaster, since such urgent predictions were first made in the 1980s and 1990s. In the case of inflation, the narrative calls for constant reassurance that the dreaded event is nothing much to fear. In both cases, predictions of doom or good fortune are meant only to produce an emotional effect on the true believers of one sort or another, who are the only media consumers left. They are not to be taken seriously, or to be remembered, *as* predictions.

This should have been evident in any case from the hyperbolic terms in which both the bad and the good are limned. What thinking person, unblessed with an ideological warrant for believing it, could ever suppose that a warming world unchecked by bureaucratic diktats about what kind of cars we should drive or how we should heat our homes must spell the end of human life on earth? We've adapted to many warmer and colder climates in the past with much less in the way of technological palliatives at our disposal than we have today. As for inflation, the media Pollyannas have lately been vacillating between asking what's so bad about it and wondering, along with the White House Press Secretary Jennifer Psaki, whether or not it might actually be a *good* thing—even if it proves to be, as chairman Powell acknowledged, something other than "transitory." "There's a right way and a wrong way to think about inflation. Here's a right way," wrote Michael Hiltzik in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Just look, he says, at the way FDR scorned the Hooverian and Republican attachment to "sound money" in the form of the gold standard and subsequently brought us out of the Great Depression. Likewise, Jeffrey Frankel of Project Syndicate writes that current inflation is nothing like that of the 1970s because unemployment is falling and growth, at least in forecasts, is looking up. Nothing very much to worry about then, it seems. To Robert Kuttner of *Prospect*, "Larry Summers, as usual, is profoundly wrong when he argues that the $1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, enacted last March, overstimulated the economy"—and yet, somehow, today's "weird" inflation *is* a bit like that of the 1970s in "the combination of supply pressures with too weak a recovery." But all shall be well, thinks Mr. Kuttner, if the president keeps on doing what he's doing and the Fed doesn't lose its head and start raising interest rates, as it did the last time inflation had to be squeezed out of the system.

Mr. Krugman himself, a little less than five months after proclaiming the end of "inflation panic" and at a time when inflation had already risen to levels not seen since the 1990s, was still reassuring those who presumably read him for such reassurances that "History Says Don't Panic About Inflation."

Current inflation is more like that of the immediate post-war period (1946–48), he claims, than it is like that of the 1970s, though this contention appears to be based on a version of the "pandemic inflation naturalistic fallacy," mentioned above, since the alleged parallels with today's inflation are drawn from the immediate post-war periods of the 1920s, 1940s, and 1950s. I guess it depends on what history you choose for comparison—just as whether or not to worry (let alone "panic") about inflation depends on what newspaper (or newspaper columnist) you choose to read. Yet hardly anybody appears to see anything odd about this.

As I have often had occasion to mention before (see, for example, "Constituting truth" in *The New Criterion* of September 2018), with the advent of the Trump administration, "truth" officially became for the media what it had long been in the more rarefied of academic circles, which is to say it became proprietory—"my truth" or "your truth," Republican truth or Democrat truth, rather than *the* truth. Any truth worthy of the name, as the academics I cited in that article put it, must have gathered

to itself a "constituency" prepared politically to will it into being. And once truth becomes partisan and proprietory, it is no longer susceptible to correction or falsification by the truth belonging to some other constituency, still less by "truth" *tout court*, which has effectively ceased to exist. That's why, no matter how high the inflation rate may climb, we must not expect either Mr. Krugman or Mr. Powell ever to acknowledge error for calling it "transitory." After all, everything is transitory when looked at in the context of the sweep of human history.

The public discourse about inflation, like that about climate change, is just one more indication that the American media, outside of a few right-wing redoubts, have become the public-relations arm of the Democratic party. Dissenting views on both subjects, when not easily refutable, are simply presumed not to exist. In November, Ms. Psaki said, in answer to a question about whether or not an additional $1.75 trillion of government spending might have an inflationary effect on the economy, that "no economist out there is projecting that this will have a negative impact on inflation." The reporters present on this occasion would not have had far to look, as Philip Wegmann of RealClearPolitics did, to find abundant evidence to the contrary, but because their relationship with Ms. Psaki is one of the mutual confirmation of each other's prejudices, none of them appears to have bothered.

It's a lesson in how the media routinely gets away with having *said the Thing which was not* without any (to use one of their own favorite words) "accountability"—especially for those of us who might otherwise have been tempted to wonder where were the media mea culpas over the discrediting by John Durham of the media's "Russiagate" narrative, with which they were utterly obsessed for three years between early 2017 and late 2019 and even now continue to cling to. You might as well ask why expired predictions of climate apocalypse don't seem to affect the ever-renewed predictions of climate apocalypse by dates still to come. The simple fact is that there is never any penalty for being wrong in today's media—perhaps because admitting to even slight errors, let alone colossal ones like Russiagate, would compromise the media's ability to perform their number-one function as they now see it, which is to point out everyone else's errors. Or "lies" if you prefer.

In the case of Russiagate, however, there are plenty of reasons for believing that the media were not led into error by ideology, as we may charitably suppose them to have been in the case of climate change or inflation, but were actively conspiring with Democratic partisans, elements of the FBI, and others in the permanent government to fabricate a false "collusion" narrative in order to confound and possibly remove a democratically elected president of whom they disapproved. Why otherwise were they now unwilling to expose the anonymous sources by whom, if they had acted in good faith, they must have been badly burned?

Instead, their relations with such sources continue to be cordial and protective. Even Christopher Steele, one of the few we know about, submitted to an interview with George Stephanopoulos of ABC News only to reaffirm his belief in the credibility of his long-since-discredited "dossier," of its sources, and of their allegations against President Trump. "I stand by the work we did," he said, "the sources that we had, and the professionalism which we applied to it." And ABC News, in reporting on the interview, continues to insist that, in spite of any problems or inaccuracies, "in many ways, the dossier proved prescient" about Russian interference in the 2016 election. Even CNN now acknowledges, albeit by considerable understatement, that "the credibility of the dossier has significantly diminished"—though it repeats the "prescient" trope, to which Holman W. Jenkins Jr. of *The Wall Street Journal* replies:

> Hillary Clinton allies were already pushing this line when Mr. Steele began inventing facts to support it. That's why they hired him. Moreover, it was expected by any half-competent observer, let alone an intelligence professional, that the army of trolls kept ready by the Kremlin would jump on the Trump bandwagon for click revenue and to portray U.S. democracy as a clown show.

Charlie Savage of *The New York Times* tries a different tack by acknowledging that the dossier is rubbish but attempting all the same to keep the "collusion" narrative alive by purporting to show "Why the Discredited Dossier Does Not Undercut the Russia Investigation." He might, once again, have applied to RealClearPolitics, in its RealClearInvestigations incarnation, for the indispensable Aaron Maté's list of the many now-well-established facts which *do* undercut the Russia investigation—and especially the *Times*'s own highly fallible reporting on it, for which the paper, along with *The Washington Post*, received a Pulitzer Prize. The *Post* has made changes in the details of some of its reporting during the "Collusion" craze, omitting pieces of it from the revised versions, but it has not retracted or apologized for anything. The *Times* has not even done this much. Mr. Maté writes that,

> although neither newspaper has given any indication that it is returning the Pulitzer, the public record has long made clear that many of those stories—most of which had nothing to do with Steele—include falsehoods and distortions requiring significant corrections. Far from showing "deeply sourced, relentlessly reported coverage" [in the words of the Pulitzer citation], the *Post*'s and the *Times*'s reporting has the same problem as the Steele document that these same outlets are now distancing themselves from: a reliance on anonymous, deceptive, and almost certainly partisan sources for claims that proved to be false.

In sum, let us finally turn to that other indispensable chronicler of what ought to have been and ought still to be the media's greatest shame, Lee Smith of *Tablet*:

> Now the media is scrambling to distance itself from the dossier, with the *New York Times* "explaining" that just because the prestige press poisoned the public sphere with Clinton-funded smears doesn't mean that the larger Russiagate story they peddled is also fake. That is, the press has taken another page from the Watergate playbook. As that scandal started to unfold, Nixon's White House aides discussed strategies to deal with the looming disaster. They talked about a standard spy service ploy called a "limited hangout." When it's no longer possible to sustain a phony cover story, dangle some partial truths in public and acknowledge some small, albeit honest, miscues in order to keep the most damning parts of the truth under wraps. Just as this strategy failed to protect Richard Nixon and his men, chances are it won't help culpable reporters and news organizations avoid responsibility for their active role in the country's biggest political crime of the past half-century. But it does show quite plainly what the American press has become.

Credit Mr. Steele with this much: he knows how the American media culture now works and about the absolution it is prepared to give to those who, however otherwise false they may be, are true to its narratives. One can imagine him, like Alger Hiss, living into extreme old age and continuing to deny what virtually everybody else in the world familiar with the case now acknowledges. For he, along with Peter Strzok and Lisa Page, Andrew McCabe and James Comey, along with Mr. Krugman and Mr. Powell, along with *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and the Pulitzer committee which bedecks them with its laurels—all of these have a right to the truth of which they are the chief and, increasingly, the only constituents—no matter how much at variance with reality it may be.

We mourn the passing of
Jonathan Reynolds (1942–2021)
A valued supporter of The New Criterion

Books

Russian bear market

by Gary Saul Morson

When the KGB chief Yuri Andropov became the Soviet leader in 1982, candidates for office besieged him. Whenever someone began, "Let me tell you about myself," Andropov replied: "What makes you think you know more about yourself than I know about you?"

The totalitarian Soviet Union, which kept such a close eye on its citizens, seemed stable, but it collapsed with incredible speed. Almost no one expected that, by the end of 1991, the Soviet Union would no longer exist and that fifteen squabbling republics would take its place. Why did this happen? This is the puzzle that Vladislav Zubok, once a researcher for the Soviet expert Strobe Talbott, sets out to explain in *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*.[1]

Nassim Nicholas Taleb famously described a "black swan" as a highly unlikely event that, after it happens, falsely seems as if it had been inevitable. Analysts who did not anticipate the end of the Soviet Union described it in retrospect as bound to happen. In fact, as Zubok demonstrates, the course of events ending in the country's disintegration was anything but inevitable. Only a "hard-core determinist" who disregards the evidence, he asserts, could examine the details of what happened and conclude that no other outcome was possible. There were many turning points, and choices made a difference, as did accidents like Chernobyl. The result also depended crucially on the personalities of the leaders, especially the Communist Party leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Andropov knew that the Soviet economy was in terrible shape. Since producers were evaluated on gross output, quality suffered, and since one factory's output was another's input, that quality worsened at each step in the production process. Poor-quality steel led to poor-quality nails which were used in buildings that readily collapsed. Televisions and other appliances were so poorly made that even Soviet citizens would not buy them. If one valued goods according to the market, as Western economists do, then these goods were worthless. Yet they consumed resources. Year after year, central planners mandated more production. Warehouses were built to contain ever-increasing piles of unsellable goods. For similar reasons, food was produced that rotted before it reached consumers. The only part of the economy that worked was the military-industrial complex.

Because Andropov died a mere fifteen months after assuming power, reform was left to his protégé, Mikhail Gorbachev, who, after the thirteen-month rule of the geriatric Konstantin Chernenko, took over in 1985. Although Andropov and Gorbachev both recognized the need for change, they differed in approach. Andropov represented the classical conservative reformer: step-by-step experiment, using trial, error, and correction to prepare for the next step. The all-powerful Communist Party, backed by the KGB, would implement the changes.

1 *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*, by Vladislav M. Zubok; Yale University Press, 560 pages, $35.

Given the severity of the country's economic crisis, was such a slow approach feasible? Could a party filled with people brought up to think in terms of central planning, to prefer command to incentives, and to assume that consumers should be grateful for anything, actually make the economy more efficient? Could the secret police, who had mastered violence and intimidation, adopt a whole new mentality of innovation and risk-taking?

Unlike his mentor, Gorbachev answered these questions in the negative. He viewed the party as an obstacle. Rather than proceed step by cautious step, he pushed full speed ahead to implement change both extensive and irreversible. But he had no idea what he was doing. To remake an economy, it pays to know economic theory at a reasonably sophisticated level, but Gorbachev still thought in terms of Marxism-Leninism. He had little conception of what a "market" was. When I began my career in Slavist studies, scholars debated whether anybody still believed in Marxist-Leninism, but there is no question that Gorbachev idolized Lenin and blamed only Stalin for the country's woes. So he kept looking in Lenin's works for clues about what to do. Zubok makes this superstitious devotion to Lenin's writings seem like a form of bibliomancy.

Lenin first tried to abolish all trade outside government control, to militarize labor so that absence from work would be treated as desertion, and to eliminate money. Peasants would not be paid for their grain, they would yield it at gunpoint. When they revolted, Lenin demanded they be suppressed with the greatest cruelty possible. In one case, poison gas was used. The predictable result was unprecedented mass famine, and so Lenin eventually retreated to the "New Economic Policy," a return to the market meant to be as short as possible. Gorbachev took that return as his inspiration. Lenin had plunged headlong into radical reforms, so Gorbachev resolved to do the same.

As a Leninist, Gorbachev never quite reconciled himself to private property and kept seeking some middle way. The result, in 1987, was the oxymoronic "Law on Socialist Enterprises" designed to combine socialism with a (state-regulated) market. Each enterprise would henceforth belong to its management and "workers' collective." The "Three S's" policy—self-accounting, self-financing, and self-governance—formed the basis of decision-making. For the first time, party bosses would not interfere. Enterprises also acquired freedom of export and could have their own currency accounts. In practice, they used their newfound freedom not for investment and innovation but to cannibalize their capital and send it abroad.

The Soviet Union had already acquired a mountain of debt, as had its satellites in Eastern Europe. At some point, lenders wonder whether they can ever be repaid, and they either dramatically raise interest rates—which makes repayment even harder—or refuse to lend any more. Instead of improving the dire situation, Gorbachev's economic reforms made it worse. Tax receipts declined by more than half. Even old economic partners like Deutsche Bank and the Austrian banks, Zubok explains, closed off Soviet access to money markets. Would the country even be able to import needed food?

Far from providing their Russian rulers with wealth, the Eastern European countries required subsidies, as did Mongolia and Cuba. The infusion of rubles into the Soviet economy rose from under four billion in 1986 to over ninety-three billion in 1991.

Zubok compares Gorbachev to the sorcerer's apprentice, who could not control what he had unleashed. Highly reluctant to use force, Gorbachev projected an image of weakness that the three Baltic republics—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—took as an opportunity to gain independence. Zubok repeats that if Gorbachev had been willing to use force, as the Chinese did in Tiananmen Square, and was less given to waffling, he could have held the country together long enough for some sort of reforms to work. Historians often assume that personalities don't matter in comparison with underlying social forces, but Zubok maintains that "Gorbachev's leadership, character, and beliefs constituted a major factor in the Soviet Union's self-destruction" because "he combined ideological reformist zeal with political timidity, schematic messianism with practical detachment."

The freedom to travel abroad that accompanied the economic reforms changed everything. For the first time, many Soviet citizens could visit the West, and what they saw there dumbfounded them. For people accustomed to perpetually empty shelves and long lines, the sight of an ordinary Western supermarket, packed with choices and free of lines, proved almost unbelievable. On a trip to the West, these sights converted Yeltsin (when sober) from a socialist to a believer in markets.

With Gorbachev as the head of the Soviet Union, Yeltsin found a power base in the Russian republic (officially the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, or RSFSR). He therefore had every incentive to weaken the union and transfer power to the other republics. Instead of seeing Russia as the ruling part of the empire, he treated it as another victim of Soviet imperialism. It was as if not only Scotland wanted to secede from the United Kingdom, but England as well, while claiming Britain's resources, army, and police for itself. Bit by bit, the Soviet Union lost out and eventually disappeared. Zubok describes Yeltsin as an alcoholic, sadistic bully who believed in democracy but loved to dictate. An economic reformer, he had no knowledge of economics and did not understand the radical reforms he demanded.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's book *Rebuilding Russia* impressed Yeltsin. Although Westerners who cannot get beyond ready-made categories have denounced Solzhenitsyn as a Russian chauvinist and imperialist, he was almost the opposite: a patriot who opposed all imperial ventures. In Solzhenitsyn's view, Russia should have stopped controlling its neighbors and focused on its own spiritual renewal. It needed to recover a sense of morality after decades of Communist teaching that compassion and conscience are reactionary concepts. Further, he believed that the empire weakened Russia, which should consequently get rid of it.

Solzhenitsyn impressed Yeltsin with the idea that Russia should confine itself to the lands where the population is primarily Russian or, at least, Slavic. That meant letting the Baltic, Transcaucasian, and central Asian republics go their own way. Since the Soviets had set republican boundaries for arbitrary, political reasons, Solzhenitsyn saw no reason those boundaries should be respected. They should, rather, be redrawn to reflect the identity and desires of each region's people. The new Russia would therefore include predominantly Russian areas of neighboring republics.

Yeltsin soon discovered that republics demanding the right to separate would not consider giving the same right to their own provinces. Reading Zubok's account, I was struck by the fact that Crimea, which President Putin invaded in 2014, already posed an issue as the USSR was falling apart. With a population overwhelmingly Russian, it had been ceded to Ukraine by the Communist Party leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1954. The Donbass, the predominantly Russian area of Eastern Ukraine that is now the scene of armed conflict, also posed an issue as the country was breaking up. Would Ukraine have been better off had it not insisted on retaining these undigestible parts?

With Gorbachev trying to hold the USSR together in some form and Yeltsin siding with the republics wanting independence, their rivalry dominated the news. Zubok relates the story of how Richard Nixon, on a visit to the USSR in 1991, could not get an appointment with either Yeltsin or Gorbachev. Nixon's advisor Dimitri Simes tried a ruse. Knowing the KGB was monitoring them, Nixon and Simes began to talk loudly in their hotel lobby about their upcoming meeting with Yeltsin. Within a few hours, Gorbachev invited Nixon for a chat, and an invitation from Yeltsin soon followed.

Even those familiar with the opulence in which the leaders of the world's first socialist state lived will be shocked by Zubok's description of the vacation villa Gorbachev had built in 1988. It cost one billion rubles at a time when the Soviet defense budget, which Zubok believes was fifteen per cent of GDP, was seventy-seven billion rubles. Today, the U.S. defense budget is about $750 billion, which would make the cost of an equivalent villa $9.75 billion. That doesn't include the upkeep and endless staff, such as the scuba divers making sure no one could infiltrate by water. Given the country's fiscal crisis, one can't help

but recall the extravagance of Louis XVI. As it happened, Gorbachev's new Congress of People's Deputies convened in 1989, just two hundred years after the Estates General, which, of course, also resulted from an inability to obtain more credit.

Had Gorbachev been the only incompetent waffler, the USSR might still be here. Everyone resembled the Keystone Cops. In 1991 several Soviet leaders staged a coup against Gorbachev with the hope of preserving the union. So incompetent were they that they did not bother to turn off Yeltsin's phone or prevent him from organizing opposition. One of Yeltsin's supporters was able to fly to Paris, denounce the coup, and prepare, if necessary, to set up a government in exile. Opposition news sources, who knew what was happening better than the coup leaders themselves, continued their broadcasts to the West. "The situation was unbelievable," one KGB general recalled. KGB analysts were learning about a crisis "in the capital of our Motherland from American sources." When Margaret Thatcher accepted advice to telephone Yeltsin, she recalled, "to my astonishment I was put through."

It was a Keystone coup. Right after the organizing meeting of the plotters' Emergency Committee, Zubok explains, "some members went home and succumbed to various illnesses. [Valery] Boldin was already suffering from high blood pressure; he went to a hospital. [Valentin] Pavlov . . . tried to control his emotions and stress with a disastrous mixture of sedatives and alcohol. At daybreak, his bodyguard summoned medical help, as Pavlov was incapable of functioning." Pavlov later took some more medicine to control his nerves and "had a second breakdown that incapacitated him for days."

To be sure, some on the other side displayed similar ineptitude. "The mayor of Moscow, Gavriil Popov, who had just returned from vacation, huddled in a fortified basement of the [parliament] building, fearful for his life and totally drunk." Alcohol figures in Russian history as nowhere else.

The coup might still have succeeded if the military had been willing to use force, as their Chinese counterparts had done. "[General Dmitri] Yazov found himself in an awkward situation: he had brought massive military force onto the streets of downtown Moscow, yet he did not want to use it." The KGB chief Vladimir Kryuchkov proved no braver. He "was well aware of the requirements for a successful coup, but he simply lacked the guts to implement them."

For Zubok, this indecisiveness marked a turning point. "Had the KGB chief been a resolute counter-revolutionary, history would have turned out differently." I agree that the collapse of the Soviet Union was not inevitable, but this counterfactual fails to convince. Let us imagine that the coup plotters had retained power: as Zubok himself points out, the junta leaders "had launched emergency rule without any clear plan or a viable economic program." How would tanks on the streets have refinanced the debit or reduced the deficit? How could these incompetents have managed the secession of the republics? It is hard to see how their rule would have made much difference.

Using remarkably copious archival sources, which he has mastered with impressive thoroughness, Zubok presents an almost day-by-day, or even hour-by-hour, account of events, with what he calls "many 'fly on the wall' episodes. . . . To make the texture of the historical narrative authentic, I give preference to instantaneous reactions, rumors and fears, rare moments of optimism and frequent moments of despair, that characterized those times." It is not a technique for any but the most skilled writers to attempt. When Solzhenitsyn used such a fine-grained approach in his multi-volume novel about March 1917, he was able to convey the sense of events confusing to participants who did not know their outcome. With Zubok it is the reader who is confused. Anyone but a specialist on the fall of the USSR will not only lose the forest for the trees, but also the trees for the branches, even the branches for the twigs.

Since Zubok stresses the economic explanation for events, it is unfortunate that his economic commentaries sometimes lack clarity. On January 22, 1991, Pavlov announced that fifty- and hundred-ruble notes would no lon-

ger be valid and had to be exchanged within three days for new ones. Apparently, this forced exchange was supposed to soak up "30 billion rubles from the shadow entrepreneurs and currency speculators," but Zubok does not explain how exchanging old notes for new ones would soak up anything, or why, if one is transitioning to a market economy, one would want to stifle entrepreneurship destined to be legal. Americans will look in vain for explanations that allow them to use basic economic theory, as taught in college economics classes, to comprehend what was happening.

Zubok accepts the myth, so flattering to some intellectuals, that "for almost two centuries, the intelligentsia had daydreamed about a constitution and people's rights." But beginning in the 1860s, the intelligentsia overwhelmingly rejected liberal constitutional reforms and individual rights in favor of one or another revolutionary program, like the intolerant one that eventually triumphed. Indeed, the strict sense of the very word "intelligentsia," which we get from Russian, designated not educated people but extreme believers in a materialist, atheist, and revolutionary ideology hostile to all moderate change. A truly liberal movement had developed by the early twentieth century, but then even the Kadet (Constitutional Democratic) Party supported terrorism and tried to sabotage the fledgling Duma in order to maintain their credentials as true *intelligents* (members of the intelligentsia).

Zubok's logic occasionally puzzles. He argues that President Reagan's increased defense spending, meant to pressure Soviet leaders to make changes, "did not push the Soviet leadership towards reforms: the realization of their necessity dated to the early 1960s." But the fact that the necessity of reforms had been appreciated for decades does not contradict the possibility that Reagan's policies "pushed" the leadership into actually embarking on them. Quite the contrary, they could only have been pushed to do what they already had in mind. Zubok also hopes that his book has put paid to the idea that Russia, steeped in despotism, was bound to choose authoritarianism over democracy. Yet the portrait of bungling "democrats" who did not understand democracy makes that view plausible. By Zubok's own account, Yeltsin could not wait to get his own KGB and rule by decree.

These cavils aside, Zubok's study presents a powerful, detailed picture of puzzling events of great importance. He wisely concludes: "This amazing story teaches us not to trust in the seeming certainty of continuity and should help us prepare for sudden shocks in the future." One is bound to reflect: a long history does not guarantee stability or even continued existence. A country that acts as if debts can grow without limit, is led by a bumbling chief executive whose weakness is obvious to foreign enemies, and contains culturally different regions increasingly contemptuous of each other—and whose intellectual leadership no longer believes in its founding principles—such a country may experience a sudden catastrophe resembling the disappearance of the USSR.

Little Chips

Simon Heffer, editor
Henry "Chips" Channon:
The Diaries, 1938–43.
Hutchinson, 1,120 pages, £35

reviewed by David Pryce-Jones

The first volume of these diaries, chronicling 1918 to 1938, is over a thousand pages long and leaves the impression that Chips Channon was rather ridiculous. Whether or not he knew it, he was busy inventing an identity and he did it with such misplaced self-importance that he became a figure of fun, more laughable than anything else. The second volume of the diaries is also more than a thousand pages long, and there is a third volume to come, no doubt just as hefty. But the more you read of Chips, the less likeable he becomes.

In the first place, consider his personal life. In 1933 he married Lady Honor Guinness, whose parents, Lord and Lady Iveagh, were among the richest people in the coun-

try. Guinness money paid for Chips's social climbing, "my long harlot-esque life," as he put it. "Axis" is the odd euphemistic shorthand that Chips uses for a sexual affair. July 3, 1939, was the happiest day of his life, he was to say, because it was then at a ball that he formed an enduring axis with Peter Coats (unkindly known as "Petticoats"). And even so, Chips goes in for semi-confessions, for instance how he and his brother-in-law took part in "a Rabelaisian scene . . . which I cannot bring myself to describe." Chips is prudent enough not to speculate why Lady Honor left him. Instead he says that when she is moody and makes a scene she must to be drunk or mad, and he calls the man she eventually goes off with a "horse-coper."

Chips's wider world divides into charmers and bores, though all too frequently charmers change effortlessly into bores. His sense of superiority is captured in his demeaning use of the adjective "little"—"the little King"; "Sir William Spens is a pleasant little don." The diary has an account of a meeting with Noël Coward and features affairs with the playwright Terence Rattigan and the popular journalist Godfrey Winn, but otherwise brings out nobody of general interest. Instead Chips preens himself in the company of Prince Paul of Yugoslavia and his wife Princess Olga, King George II of Greece, and the abdicating Duke of Windsor and his brother the Duke of Kent. As for Marina Duchess of Kent, she telephones nonstop and is so beautiful that Chips would marry her if he could. Queen Elizabeth, the wife of George VI and then on the throne, he thinks "fooled everyone, really, for she is a frivolous but friendly fraud." A grand gala at Covent Garden led to the snobbish boast, "I wore my court dress—I am only happy in velvet really." In short, "royalty is a heady wine."

The five years covered in the second volume, 1938 to 1943, were the most dangerous in the whole history of Britain. Adolf Hitler's Germany was incompatible with democracy. Whether to appease him or oppose him was an existential question. Lady Iveagh, Chips's mother-in-law, was the member of Parliament for Southend, and, when in 1935 she handed the constituency over to Chips in the old rotten-borough manner, he acquired a foothold in public life.

Nobody now disputes that Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain did not have the character or the experience to deal with a man like Hitler and therefore made the mistake of taking him at his word. He sincerely thought he was keeping the peace at the very moment when Hitler was telling his generals that he had met appeasing politicians and found them to be worms. Chips made up his mind at once. Promoted to the position of parliamentary private secretary to R. A. Butler (a forked-tongue careerist), he had a position in the Foreign Office and with it some influence. The diary is full of abuse of colleagues whom he saw as warmongers, "foolish, carping, finicky, inefficient and futile." Much of his energy was spent intriguing to have them sacked, which meant dropping poison into ministers' ears, in his expression.

In his diary, Chips has the courage of his convictions. He could write about "my hysterical, almost fanatical, worship" of the prime minister and go on to compliment him as "the greatest man of all time." In fact, appeasement was a form of Vichyite collaboration that could only have ended in British dependency in Hitler's Europe. Unlike Chamberlain or Chips, Winston Churchill had the imagination to foresee this outcome. It is painful to find Chips denigrating Churchill for his intolerance, his arrogance, and his unfailingly bad judgment. "I have a deep and bitter loathing of him which dates from many years; yet I see his great and many qualities; but he remains a selfish, paranoidical [*sic*] old ape, charmless, arrogant, grumpy, disagreeable, bullying, irritating, indeed infuriating." Duff Cooper and Anthony Eden and those whose votes in the end replaced Chamberlain with Churchill are so many Glamour Boys, traitors, and Quislings. Hitlerite fellow-traveling is the other side of the coin. Hitler's menacing speech of January 30, 1939, is "really reasonable and quieting." Another of Hitler's speeches "is good stuff . . . . all my sympathies are with him in what he says." People "are either mad or blind or both on the subject of Germany." Chips's anti-Semitism would not have been out of

place in Germany. He calls Julian Amery "an insinuating Jew" and the French President Léon Blum "a Jewish agitator." Self-deception sometimes rises to black comedy. As late as July 19, 1939, Chips called on the Duke of Buccleuch, an open Nazi fellow traveler: "I assured him that there was to be no war this year." Five days before the German invasion of the Soviet Union, he prophesises, "If Hitler does attack Russia it will be the cleverest act of his whole career." Once the war is underway, Chips is blitzed like everyone else and sends his son to be safe in America. Social occasions appear to mean more to him than battles fought far away. He devotes a page to Dunkirk and two lines to Stalingrad. Devotion to Peter Coats takes him to Egypt, where Coats is ADC to Field Marshal Lord Wavell.

An experienced historian and biographer, Simon Heffer has edited the diary in the belief that it is a valuable document. The footnotes are marvelously complete, some of them quietly humorous or sardonic, altogether better than Chips deserves.

The end of the affair

Edward Shawcross
The Last Emperor of Mexico:
The Dramatic Story of the Habsburg Archduke Who Created a Kingdom in the New World.
Basic Books, 336 pages, $30

reviewed by Jeremy Black

Here is a well-researched, ably written, consistently interesting, and mercifully short book that deserves reading. Edward Shawcross's *Last Emperor of Mexico* skillfully links developments in Mexico with the career of his difficult but noble protagonist, a man who did not understand the task thrust upon him. Though possibly latent in any presidential system, monarchy was more explicitly a threat to the nascent republics of the New World, and particularly so in Mexico, though Haiti, too, had imperial moments from 1804 to 1806 and 1849 to 1859, and Brazil did not become a republic until after its empire came to an end in 1889.

In 1822, Augustín de Iturbide, an army officer who had played a key role in the fight for Mexican independence, declared himself Emperor Augustin I, although he was forced to abdicate in 1823 after the army turned against him. General Ramón María Narváez, the head of the Spanish government from his successful rebellion in 1843 until 1851, was a supporter not only of the coup by which General Mariano Paredes seized power in Mexico in 1845, but also of the plan to bring stability to Mexico by restoring the monarchy in the shape of a Spanish prince, a plan that would also thwart American expansionism and thus protect the Spanish position in Cuba. James Buchanan, then the secretary of state, however, made clear in 1846 that America would resist any attempt to install European monarchy in Mexico, a position that foreshadowed the opposition to Emperor Maximilian in the 1860s. In 1846 the monarchist plan was destroyed by the impact of American victories in the Mexican–American War on the prestige of the Paredes government, which was swiftly replaced.

Born in the Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna, Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian Joseph Maria von Habsburg-Lothringen (1832–67), the brother of Emperor Franz Joseph, similarly played a role in European policy toward America, but in this case the power was France, not Spain—and France under a figure for whom military emperors were desirable, namely Napoleon III, the nephew of the great Napoleon. Civil war in Mexico from 1858 had led in 1861 to the country defaulting on its international debts and to coordinated action by Britain, France, and Spain with the goal of making Mexico fulfill its obligations. Veracruz, Mexico's leading port, was occupied, but, wary of "mission creep," Britain and Spain decided not to interfere in Mexico's internal affairs and instructed their commanders accordingly. The French, however, took intervention much further, a contrast that also reflected differences over policy toward the American Civil War. In 1863, the French captured Mexico City and stage-managed the offer of the crown to Maximilian.

The Commander-in-Chief of the Habsburg fleet from 1854 to 1861, Maximilian had helped modernize it. Indeed, landing in Mexico in May 1864, he offered the Mexican liberals amnesty and their leader, Benito Juárez, the position of prime minister, but had no success. Nor did Maximilian's support for some liberal policies win him popularity. Regarded internationally as a liberal, he had been appointed Viceroy of the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia in 1857 in order to try to lessen Italian opposition to the Habsburgs, only to be dismissed in 1859 by Franz Joseph, who disliked his liberalism.

In April 1864, the month in which Maximilian had set out, the American House of Representatives unanimously passed a resolution that it would not acknowledge "any monarchical government erected on the ruins of any republican government in America under the auspices of any European power." Opposed to the Monroe Doctrine, Napoleon III moved French units already in Mexico toward the American border in order to block possible Union support for the republicans.

The end of the American Civil War led to an increase in American supplies to the republicans, rather as with the end of the Chinese Civil War and the Viet Minh. In 1865, American generals, notably Grant and Sheridan, backed continuing pressure, as they saw Napoleon III, Maximilian, Mexican conservatives, and Confederate exiles as the key elements in a far-ranging hostile geopolitical and ideological combination. *Estafette*, the French newspaper in Mexico City, pressed in 1865 for new immigration to protect Mexican interests from the aggressive and appropriating tendencies of the Anglo-Saxon race in North America. Somewhat differently that year, Percy Scarlett, the British envoy, reported:

> The future regeneration and progress of Mexico are eminently associated with a well-directed system of foreign immigration. A population so sparse as this is, and so incapable, both physically and morally, of undertaking the development of resources which require abler and more numerous hands, renders it imperative that the Emperor Maximilian should turn his serious attention to the subject of immigration.

Scarlett added that Maximilian's intentions were "too frequently frustrated by the old-rooted prejudice of the Spanish Mexican race against the admission of foreigners."

Both America and France had exploited Mexico, America by launching a war of aggression and seizing territory, France by trying to turn it into a satellite state. War between America and France, however, was avoided by a more cautious French government keen on demobilization, just as America also decided not to drive the British from Canada.

Instead, Napoleon III in January 1866 chose to withdraw his forces, the *Corps législatif* being informed that Maximilian was now strong enough not to need French assistance, which Napoleon knew was untrue. American pressure was certainly significant in helping to change Napoleon's mind, but so also were the problems that France faced in Mexico, as well as the developing crisis in Europe. Napoleon had to consider how best to respond to Prussian strength closer to home, all the more troubling because of Prussia's alliance with Italy. He prepared for confrontation with Prussia, and indeed the two powers went to war in 1870. Napoleon was heavily defeated and subsequently abdicated.

The last French troops left Mexico in March 1867, and the imperial position collapsed. Maximilian did not follow Napoleon's advice to leave. Puebla, Querétaro, and Mexico City were successfully besieged by the liberals, while imperial forces were defeated in battle. Refusing to leave, Maximilian was captured on May 16, when Querétaro fell and an escape attempt failed. He was executed on June 19, 1867, alongside two of his generals, providing Manet with an epic subject. Fortunately, Maximilian has also found a biographer he deserves.

Notebook

The man who laughed in church

by Julia Friedman

"I do not want to be fair. I want the art I hate to go away. . . . I am not in favor of art—I'm in favor of the art I like."
—Dave Hickey, 2007

On July 9, 1975, the guest on *Firing Line* with William F. Buckley Jr. was the author and journalist Tom Wolfe, whose book *The Painted Word* had lately sent shockwaves through the art scene it described so unflatteringly. A sanguine Buckley delivered zingers but left the more tedious work of interrogating Wolfe to the three panelists in their thirties. Two of them, Frances Barth and Tony Robbin, both Ivy League–affiliated painters who taught art history, mounted an impassioned albeit ineffective critique of the book. They had little success in undermining Wolfe's main thesis—that art criticism had a disproportionate influence on painting at the time—and their fervent tone rather supported Wolfe's contentions about the art world's insular and cultish quality. The third panelist, introduced by the host as "Mr. David Hickey—an art dealer and a critic and a former editor of *Art in America*," cut a figure unlike those of the dour, casually dressed painters. Hickey was at once insouciant and dapper. His outfit consisted of worn indigo jeans, polished black leather boots, and a tailored dove-gray jacket paired with a stylish black collar shirt. This sartorial choice, whether deliberate or subconscious, was Hickey's way of straddling the fence dividing elite public intellectuals such as Buckley and Wolfe and the SoHo bohemians whom he had joined a decade and a half earlier after leaving his native Texas.

Hickey's contribution to the television program validated this cross-cultural gambit. While he was there as a mere panelist, the force and subtlety of his arguments placed him on par with the host and his high-profile guest. Unlike his co-commentators, who vented their resentments *at* Wolfe, Hickey engaged the author by drawing him into a jousting match over the influence of Clement Greenberg. "You've met some of these artists," he needled—"Johns, Rauschenberg, and these people. Do you really think that men of this intelligence and sophistication could actually be seduced by Greenberg's sort of primitive discourse?" (He did concede that such "primitive discourse" had had a salient influence on the Abstract Expressionists.)

Wolfe had been able to brush off or debunk with ease the objections to his book made by Barth and Robbin, but Hickey's rhetorical mischievousness—"Well, would you think then that there are Rembrandts tucked away at the University of Wisconsin?"—kept him in an alert and even defensive posture throughout their exchanges. Decades after, with Hickey's subsequent output as an art critic and an analyst of Western culture (as he has referred to himself) now in hindsight, it makes sense that he would be the one to challenge a sharp-witted and bigheaded Wolfe. The two even found common ground, as when Wolfe agreed "100 percent" with Hickey's deadpan assertion about the imperatives of art: "That's one of

the great privileges, you know, that you don't have to like it at all." This is fitting, because hindsight also shows Hickey to be that rare sort of individual whom Wolfe described as going "in the opposite direction of the Freight Train of History."

Dave Hickey was born in Fort Worth, Texas, on December 5, 1938, and died at his home in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on November 12, 2021. He was eighty-two. For those of us who knew Dave well, his death was not unexpected, but it was still a shock. As Dave's wife Libby Lumpkin put it: "The world just got darker." Earlier last year, the University of Texas Press published a critical biography of Hickey, *Far from Respectable*. The author, Daniel Oppenheimer, makes a solid case for why we need to read and reread Hickey now: not only did he produce some of the best English-language essays on art and culture of the last century, but in our times those writings have proved themselves more prescient than ever. In the canonical *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Art Issues Press, 1993), Hickey outlined how the "new puritans" from the progressive Left took over and transformed the new "therapeutic institutions"—museums, art schools, and fund-granting bodies. By prioritizing virtue over beauty, these institutions disrupted a delicate ecosystem in which works of art were validated by individuals who "correlated" into communities around such beautiful objects, the "icons of happiness," as Hickey called them.

The Invisible Dragon was the book that put Dave Hickey on the cultural map, but it was his second nonfiction book, titled *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (Art Issues, 1997), that made him one of the most recognizable names of the art scene in the Nineties and Aughts. He had already been writing for publications including *Artforum*, *ARTNews*, the *London Review of Books*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Art in America*, where he served as an executive editor until, according to Dave, he was sacked for doing lines of cocaine on his desk. (He claimed that his employer objected not to the cocaine but to the scratches on the furniture.) *Air Guitar*, which he once referred to as "a very serious critique of abjection and institutional cowardice," went through multiple reprints, and became popular enough to generate its own question on *Jeopardy*.

The book turned Dave into something of a cult figure. He traveled across Europe and North America, conducting seminars and giving lectures in which, in the words of one critic, he wove emotional nuance into intellectual rigor. In his talks, Hickey praised commitment to objects (as opposed to what he called the "creation narrative"), pleaded for subtlety and against generalization, and advocated for "the great privilege of not having to like it" and for honoring personal taste. He raged against the urge to see art in terms of content. "Content," he proclaimed in a 2007 interview published in *The Believer*, "is irrelevant." That includes political content, because while "art has political consequences . . . the idea of political content is irrelevant." With more than a hint of libertarianism, he insisted that "the government should not touch art." He warned against "care" as inextricably linked to "control," citing the Turner Prize, which he said "was designed to keep British art on the steady pace of post-conceptual minimalism." He thus restated the "first principle of Foucault: care is control."

Hickey knew his French theory well: he studied it in the linguistics Ph.D. program at the University of Texas at Austin, from which he dropped out without finishing his dissertation. That departure, like every other professional withdrawal in his career, can be read as a testament to his integrity: having internalized the core message of poststructuralism as a critique of power, he recognized the incongruity of remaining within the institutional hierarchy while confronting institutional tyranny. He wrote about this conflict in his column at the *Texas Observer* in the late 1960s, describing the fatuousness of teaching "meanings" of literature and "the rewards of studying it—the two attributes of literature which are irrelevant unless you *must* read it for a living or grade." As a graduate teaching assistant, he resented "being a cop" and having the "police power" of grading his students on how well they imitated their instructor. Hickey did not want to be granted an authority to exercise power over

others. From the start, his goal was freedom, unconditional freedom for all.

In another *Texas Observer* article titled "Language and Freedom," Hickey said that "what human language is necessary for, is freedom," and that "only by using human speech can a man simultaneously assert his membership in the community and his individuality within it." A good pupil of Orwell, he realized that the danger to freedom of expression in America would come from the dissolution of meanings, in the vein of reductionist Newspeak where "true" also means "false," "good" means "bad," and "war" means "peace." When language, a "fantastically complicated and sensitive instrument," is corrupted, "even with all the words in the world and the sacred right to speak them, the individual is silenced." Presaging cultural impasses half a century *avant la lettre*, he explained:

> The simplest way to rob a man of his individuality and his freedom is to censor his language or blur its distinctions so that he can only say one of two things: yes or no. This is a standard tactic, sometimes necessary, but hardly honest. General statements are always used to incite violence, since they eliminate choice by censoring the language. If "all whites are racists" is true, then there is no freedom. And true or not the language is being used coercively.

So Hickey advocated for looking at art with great sensitivity and as an aesthetic thing-in-itself, outside of the "quasi-Protestant 'cult of content'" and the moralizing "utopian bureaucracies" within the "therapeutic institutions."

Nor did Hickey enjoy being subject to authority himself. Despite all the honors and accolades that he received over the years—the 1994 College Art Association Frank Jewett Mather Award for art criticism, a 2001 "Genius Grant" MacArthur Fellowship, and the 2006 Peabody Award—he was forever skeptical of organized arts. The "creative" bureaucracies were still bureaucracies, just as Marxist professors could still be self-interested careerists. Because he cared for students—his own, and students in general—he spoke about the dangers of predatory faculty complicit in the explosive growth of the MFA programs, who rather appreciated the near-total attrition rate because it provided a measure of job security. He warned art students of what he termed the '79 Datsuns of art instruction: jealous of others' talent because their own studio careers have either fizzled out or never took off in the first place, their only recourse for paying a mortgage on a house with a spa was to push through as many MFAs as possible, stifling nonconforming outliers and encouraging compliant mediocrities along the way.

I met Dave in 2012, the year he announced his "retirement" from the art world. The reason he gave was the dilution of aesthetic discourse by growing insularity, and the reluctance of critics, curators, and magazines to support art that demonstrated real taste (as opposed to a preoccupation with identity or social relevance). Dave also said that he quit because he was about to get fired. During the last decade, when he published three more books, the ranks of the easily offended multiplied, and Dave's sagacious witticisms prompted more indignation than reflection. His health deteriorated, and during a convalescence, while unable to do serious writing, Dave took to Facebook and conducted something of an inverse Thoreauvian experiment in "simple living"—while Thoreau retreated into solitude, Dave created an online commons where interested folks could talk art. In 2015, I compiled and edited two pendant volumes based on those Facebook exchanges, and in 2016 Dave and I held several events to promote the books. After that we celebrated two birthdays together (one his, one mine), and continued to speak on the phone often.

In the last few months, as we discussed Oppenheimer's book, which I was getting ready to review, Dave shared a few things that have lingered in my mind. One had to do with the definition of art. We went over a few possibilities before Dave suggested this version: "When you take away everything boring, what's left is art." The other came out of a conversation about identity politics, the cult of victimhood, and the increasingly common reliance on emotion in public discourse. In Dave's view this was a zeitgeist problem. "Feeling is unresolved thinking," he said.