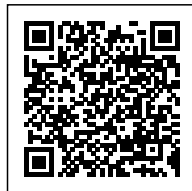


THE DECAY OF AMERICA: A CONVERSATION WITH PAUL GOTTFRIED

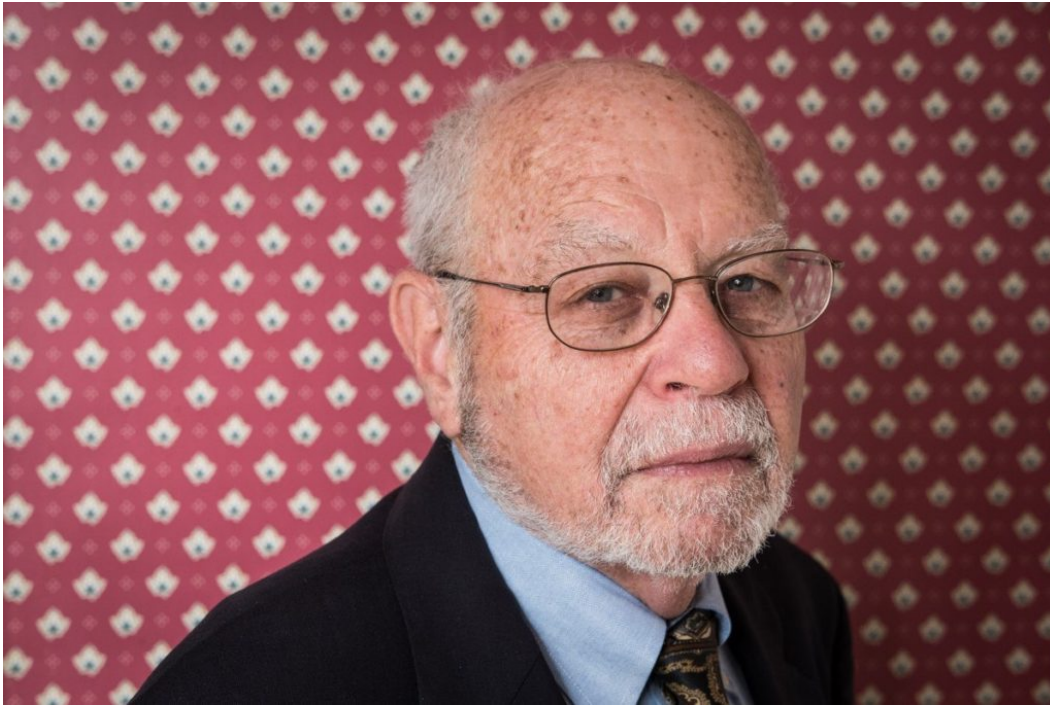
Posted on July 1, 2021 by Paul Gottfried



It truly is a great delight and honor to bring to our readers this insightful and wise conversation with Paul Gottfried, one of the foremost thinkers in America today. He is the author of well over fifteen books and [innumerable articles](#), all of which carry the mark of his great scholarship that is the perfect cicerone upon the high road of wisdom. He edits the prestigious journal, [Chronicles](#). Professor Gottfried is here interviewed by [Zbigniew Janowski](#).

Zbigniew Janowski (ZJ): You are American, but unlike most Americans – I do not mean ordinary people who never left the country, who are hardly aware of the outside world – you are critical of America. In many respects, you remind me of someone you wrote about, namely, [Robert Nisbet](#), a towering figure in American sociology, who was also critical of America and her egalitarian tendencies. From our private conversations, I get the impression that you perceive the present-day America to be a danger to itself and the rest of the Western world. Am I correct?

Paul Gottfried (PG): I'm not really hostile to the US, and in fact I value my friendship with my neighbors in the small Pennsylvania town in which I reside. They remind me of the people I grew up around in a Connecticut rust-belt city in the 1950s. I also admire the founders of the American republic and their obvious civic-mindedness and skill in creating a form of government that provided for ordered liberty. Where I become more ambivalent and even suspicious is seeing how American "liberal democracy" has developed in the twentieth century and even more in the last twenty years. The combination of triumphalism in international relations (which is pushed by our bogus conservatives) and LGBT madness as a crusading American political religion will likely sow harm beyond this country's borders. Since the US is hardly a minor player on the world stage, our influence is felt in other "liberal democracies," particularly in the Anglosphere. I can easily understand why the Russian government, which is situated on the nationalist Right, would present itself as the defender of whatever normal behavior the American government now identifies with "prejudice."



Paul Gottfried.

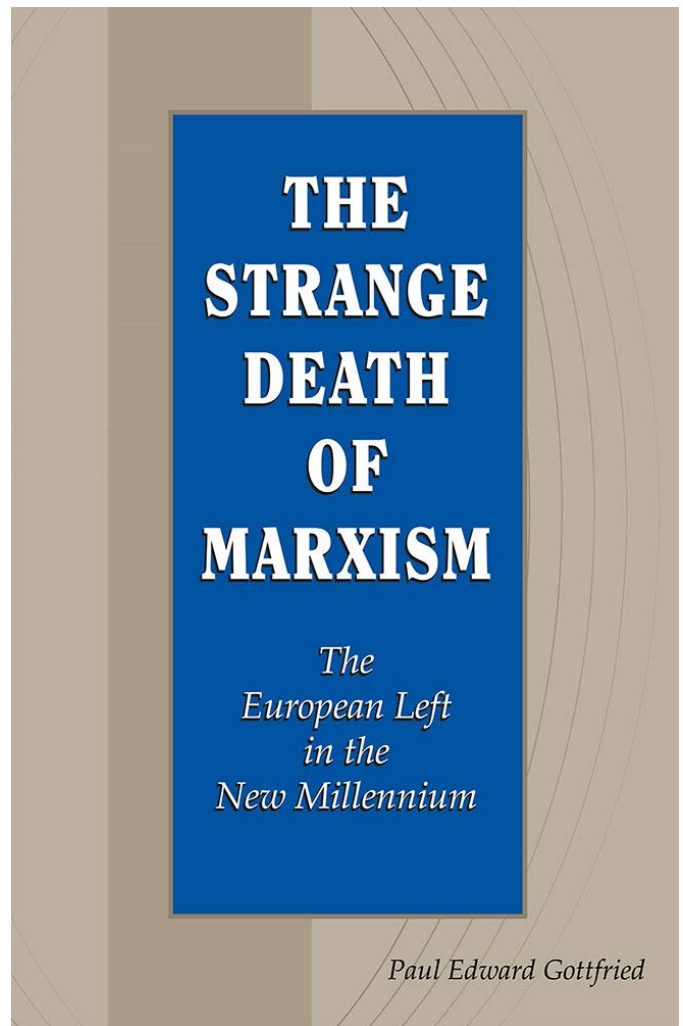
You are right to assume from reading [*Revisions and Dissents*](#) that I learned a great deal from Robert Nisbet, who figures large in my autobiography, [*Encounters*](#). There were two sides to Bob: an America-affirming perspective that is reflected in the occasionally hopeful things that he said about the country (this was especially evident during his friendship with the neoconservatives), and the very dark perspective that can be seen in [*Quest for Community*](#) and [*Twilight of Authority*](#). Clearly, I was more influenced by this second Nisbetian perspective. Nisbet was also among the few American social thinkers who valued the European counterrevolutionaries for laying the groundwork for the study of social theory. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on [*Louis de Bonald*](#).

ZJ: In your view, is what we call Corporate America, American free-market capitalism, part of the problem as well?

PG: I'm not sure that our corporate capitalists represent the free-market system that our libertarians praise and which they sometimes imagine exists in this country. Corporations now support the totalitarian Left and are quite happy pushing vast redistribution schemes that the government is urged to carry out, at the expense of the middle and working classes. The corporate board members and the

tech giants won't have to worry about their earnings being redistributed, since they wield vast power on the political Left and in any case have tax attorneys to protect their profits. It is our corporate capitalists who provided most of the billion or more dollars that went to Black Lives Matter and Antifa last year to wreak havoc in our city streets and to shoot policemen. Employees of our corporations are drowned in Critical Race Theory and LGBT slogans. By the way, I am not against a "free market economy." What I oppose is a socially and morally destructive capitalist class, which seems to be making war on the white Christian population of Western countries. They also seem more than willing to fund the assassins of black and Asian business owners and policemen.

ZJ: Let me touch upon PC ideology, something you devoted a few of your books to. When people ask me, when PC started, I tell them: probably around 1987 – the date of the publication of *The Closing of the American Mind*. In this book, [Allan Bloom](#) captured the cultural trends that morphed, very quickly, into what gave expression to PC in the early 1990s. PC started with something that appears very insignificant, but which is of paramount importance – the changes in language (the use of personal pronouns). You belong to the generation that learned that the personal pronoun "he" refers universally to all of mankind. At the beginning of the 1990s, a number of academic institutions would send around "guidelines" on how to use masculine and feminine pronouns, so as not to exclude women. Ever since then, we talk about "inclusive" language. Now we are told that there is more to us than just men and women. Hence the need to create even more inclusive language.



I am invoking this because what started as something that few people had objected to 30 years ago, became a battlefield on which the fate of Western civilization is being played out. Commonsense, as Orwell's Winston came to understand, is a heresy. It can get you killed. Several years ago, Canadian psychologist [Jordan Peterson](#) refused to use the "new" inclusive language. His colleagues signed the petition to have him fired because of that. To a normal person, it sounds silly, childish. On the other hand, as we know from the history of totalitarianism and Orwell's *1984*, without a new language, or New-speak, totalitarian reality is impossible. Language can be a prison, and totalitarian reality is just that: It is a realm where there are no free people, only prisoners. Would you agree that unless we create an alternative, non-PC language, we will persevere in our absurd reality.

PG: I have never thought highly of *The Closing of the American Mind*, because of Bloom's exaltation of America as a global democracy with a universal rights mission and because of his unproved claim that Heidegger, Nietzsche and other German thinkers had corrupted college students. The American disease that I have witnessed infecting the Western world has not been "the German connection." It is the fixation on equality, and then the search for ever-new ways to apply this dangerous concept to the human situation. At a certain point, it became obvious that we were not going to apply that concept and its implications to economics, because capitalists were part of the ruling class and because Americans were not going to adopt the economic practices of impoverished socialist societies. So, we looked for other new ways to push our poisonous obsession with equality, which would not be incompatible with the pleasures of a consumer society. Given the modest position to which I was reduced professionally by both the Left and the conservative establishment, I have never had to worry about giving offense by using gender specific pronouns. I do it all the time, with impunity.

I think much of what Orwell wrote in his description of Newspeak and thought control in a future totalitarian state is already happening. What clearly separates our therapeutic regime from what Orwell depicted in his writing is the absence of a warrior ethic. In [Nineteen Eighty Four](#) there seems to be a lot of fascist settings and rhetoric left over from the Second World War. In our version of mind control, we find a purer, egalitarian Left in power, and well-orchestrated indoctrination, making physical coercion of secondary importance, if not totally unnecessary. Unlike the world of *Nineteen Eighty Four*, we also hold ritualized elections but also make it hard for anyone but PC leftists to win. The media and the rest of the political class relentlessly smear any challengers as fascists or neo-Nazis.

ZJ: Even if you are right that Bloom's diagnosis is not satisfactory, he was viciously attacked by the academic establishment just before academia turned PC. Is it a coincidence? Bloom must have said something that touched the nerve of the academic establishment.

PG: Bloom was not really addressing PC. What he was attacking was the development of the Hippie culture and to some extent the New Left, which emerged in the 1960s. He targets some of the familiar villains of the Straussians, value relativism, insufficient faith in liberal democracy, and a lack of appreciation for the classics, as taught by Bloom and other students of Strauss. Bloom also goes into a long tear against certain German philosophers, whom he manages to blame for both Nazism and the breakdown of discipline in American universities.

ZJ: I find your explanation persuasive. However, there is one point which, I think Bloom was right about:

His discussion of the impact of psychology on America. Until recently, the big divide between the US and Europe was psychology. To be sure, Europeans would not deny the validity of psychology as a discipline, man's psychological problems, and they go to psychologists too, but not en-masse, not to seek solutions to their daily problems; whereas Americans made psychology a national sport. Everyone has a shrink. How do you account for it? In my mind, this has detrimental effects on society. A shrink is like crutches without which Americans can't walk. We are a society with thousands of experts trying to help us find solution to our problems, most of which are banal. Schools, colleges, corporations employ them full-time. They are a disease. As Bloom said, a hundred years ago, people would have claimed they were sinners; today, they seek various explanations pertaining to the Self.

The American Self is weak; and the weaker it gets, the more problems it creates. Part of the PC movement is the protection of a weak individual against old social norms and institutions, which are fundamental for the maintenance of a healthy and strong society.

PG: My book, [*Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt*](#), explores this aspect of Bloom's work much more thoroughly than he does. Sam Francis does the same in [numerous essays](#) for *Chronicles*. What may be different in Bloom's case is that the neocons and the conservative establishment in general pushed his book to the top of the bestsellers list because he was also getting across their views on American Exceptionalism, the evils of German thought, and the harm that the hippies were inflicting on the Academy. Unlike the Old Right, Bloom has only kind words to say about American foreign policy and the "liberal democratic" state.

ZJ: You wrote the book, [*Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement*](#). It is, as the subtitle says, a critical appraisal. You said that what you find objectionable in Bloom is his faith in liberal democracy. Now, as liberal democracy shows its threatening face, one can indeed be skeptical of Bloom's diagnosis. Was the Bloomian defense of liberal democracy of his own making, or did he learn it from his Master, Leo Strauss, as did his other students, such as Harry Jaffa? Strauss was a refugee from Nazi Germany, and, like most of his generation, he could see totalitarian Nazism and Communism to be a threat to freedom; whereas liberal democracy was perceived as a paradise, a place where individual freedoms and the free market could flourish. Not long after Bloom published his book, his student, Francis Fukuyama, wrote an influential piece in the early 1990s, after the collapse of Communism, in which he [claimed that History ended](#). It was a triumphalist piece.

PG: As I have argued repeatedly (perhaps to no avail), it is impossible to understand Straussianism as a

school of thought without noticing its explicit political thrust. Although that thrust can already be found in the Master, it has been far more operative in most of his prominent disciples. If you are asking me whether Bloom's *livre de succès* was not an event that Straussians and their neoconservative allies planned for political effect, allow me to respond unequivocally in the affirmative. They and their media allies pulled out all stops to promote Bloom's book, as a statement of their ideas about an American mission, their academic grievances, and other assorted complaints.



REVISIONS —and— DISSENTS

Essays

PAUL E. GOTTFRIED



ZJ: Bloom told me once that American political science was the creation of the Germans – Strauss,

Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin (he was Austrian, but in this context, it may not matter). To what extent, according to you, did they influence how American academic political science establishment thinks of politics? Now, there is a world of difference between Strauss, Arendt and Voegelin, but one thing that they shared was the reading of the classics, especially the Greeks and the Romans. This last point makes me think that their insistence on deriving the principles of politics from the ancient sources is in keeping with the American tradition of Great Books that goes back, if I am not mistaken, to the 1920s and 1930s, but also to the Founding Fathers, who, like Jefferson and Adams, were very well versed in the classical tradition.

PG: What I argue in my book is that certain themes and concerns in Strauss's writings take on added importance among disciples like Bloom. The cult of Anglo-American liberal democracy, Zionism, suspicion of the "German connection," and an aggressively liberal internationalist foreign policy can all certainly be found in Strauss's remarks and observations focusing on current events. But they became even more pronounced among his epigones, who may have gravitated toward the master at least partly because of these shared causes and concerns. This would apply to disciples who were not Jewish, like [Walter Berns](#), [Thomas Pangle](#), and [Harvey Mansfield](#), as well as to the very self-consciously Jewish Bloom.

Of course, there have also been people influenced by Strauss's scholarship (e.g., Stanley Rosen) who did not show the characteristic (not to mix words) idiosyncrasies. Strauss was indeed well-versed in classical languages and scholarship, much more so (I would guess from reading her) than Hannah Arendt. Voegelin was probably Strauss's equal as a scholar; and although I am much more attracted to his interpretation of Plato than I am to Strauss's and believe that he is correct about the religious elements in modern ideology (which Strauss mostly ignores), I think Strauss was the more original thinker. As a scholar of German thought, I recognize all the stuff that Voegelin borrowed from Carl Schmitt, [Hans Jonas](#) and even that philosophical popularizer [Karl Jaspers](#). Strauss creates his own school of thought with his own ideas. Although I disagree with his premises about the dangers of relativism and historicism, his rationalistic approach to the classics, and his sometimes-strained efforts to uncover the secret intent of political thinkers, I regard Strauss as a serious scholar.

ZJ: You have been writing a lot about our current problems. Do you have an explanation as to what happened in the last 30 years or so? Or, were we doomed to be where we are? What I mean by this, is that certain theoretical assumptions about politics were bound to create problems we now deal with, and from which we no longer know how to extricate ourselves. From what you said about Bloom, you

do not see the problem to have its sources in Hippie culture, relativism, and the so-called "culture wars" of the 1990s. You imply that the problem lies deeper; that it is democracy itself which is a problem. In this respect, forgive me for saying so, you sound like a heretic. I spent the last 36 years in America and can be forgiven for not having much faith in democracy on account of being foreign born. You, on the other hand, are duty-bound to praise the system. I cannot think of a single TV anchor, politician, policy-maker who would express doubts about "the people," popular government, the founding principles of America, the glorious breakaway from the British Crown. In the minds of most Americans, including serious historians, these points are like the theological dogma you must believe. Disbelief is heretical. You, on the other hand, openly question the American belief in democracy and equality.

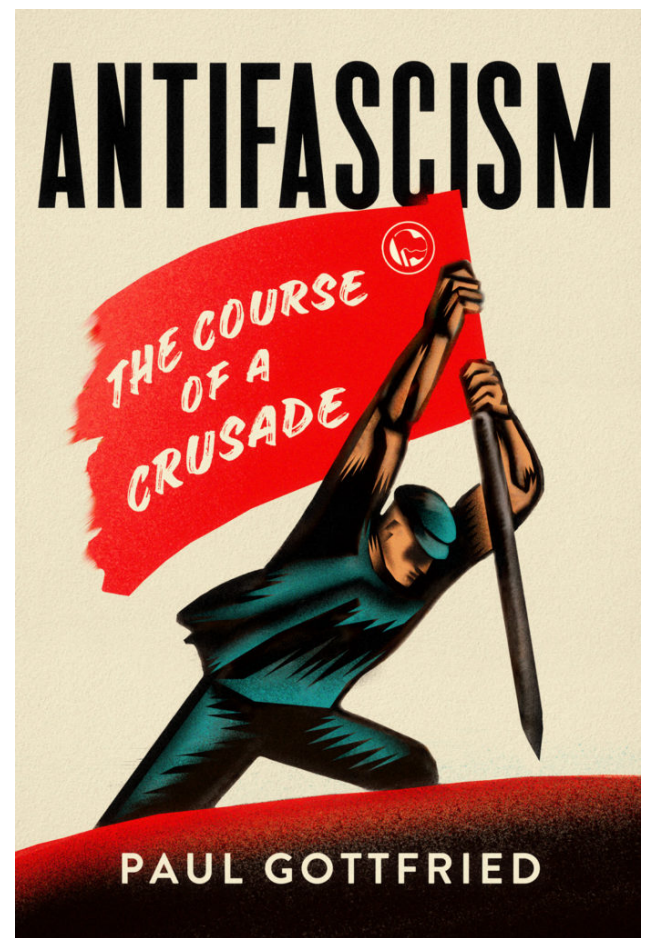
PG: I am very much in agreement with you and Professor Legutko about the demon in liberal democracy, as a modern political invention that has been used to radicalize society. Mind you, I am not against the kind of *Volksdemokratie* that exists in Poland, Hungary or Japan, providing the current political culture and "*Umwertung aller Werte*" (although not in Nietzsche's sense) that is pouring out of "the democratic West" is kept away. What has happened is that the religion of equality has corrupted all human institutions in the West, although the result has not been to create a society without classes. Instead, we are burdened with our present anti-Western, anti-white elites that claim to be helping us to overcome "prejudice" and "discrimination." This rule does not at all clash with the spread of corporate capitalism because within it there are busily-at-work multinational corporations, Big Tech, and international finance. Managerialism and Deep States also belong to this system of control, which justifies itself as means of making us all more equal and more resistant to "prejudice," however tendentiously that term is defined.

ZJ: The language of "prejudice" and "discrimination," which you referred to, is the expression of the egalitarian spirit. Without it, the whole PC edifice would collapse. I am convinced that if we retain a blind faith in equality, we will continue being prisoners of the current predicament and the situation will only get worse. Do you see much sense in applying this term anywhere else than in administration of justice?

Secondly, you said about "overcoming of 'prejudice' and 'discrimination.'" This sounds familiar to every student of Marxism. In Marx it was called "false consciousness," and socialism was a state where all forms of discrimination (or alienation, as Marxists would have it) were to disappear. Religion, arts, justice, family, morality, law, science were to Marx forms of the so-called "false consciousness;" they are like prison-cells which we must liberate ourselves from before we can view the world objectively. The

American justice system has been attacked as racist many times (it serves either the dominant White class, or the class of heterosexuals; you can hear that science is an expression of the White mind (therefore minorities are not doing well in science classes), marriage and family (man and woman) is problematic, and so on and so forth. You wrote about Marxism; so the topic is familiar to you. Do you see the American fight against "prejudice" and "discrimination" as something that the American Left borrowed from the communist tradition?

PG: I fully agree that the reckless war against "prejudice," in which the majority white male population stands under judgment, issues from the "liberal democratic" obsession with equality. This lunatic project, as I argue in my [forthcoming book on antifascism](#), is kept going by the practice of linking all still permitted inequalities to fascism and eventually to Hitler's Final Solution. Even the concept of freedom, as interpreted by most libertarians, can only be understood through the prism of equality. Everyone on the planet is meant to enjoy the same abstract freedoms, which are hubristically or imaginatively raised to universal applicability.



The only political freedom that makes sense to me comes out of and must be justified by long-standing historical experience. What Edmund Burke wrote about this topic struck me as self-evident, even when I was an undergraduate sixty years ago. Except for the Hobbesian axiom that subjects only owe allegiance to a state that protects them, I avoid speaking about universal "rights" and "freedoms." Provoking wars to spread or impose these inventions, which is an American progressive-neoconservative temptation, may become a real international danger. Our state department has begun to treat LGBT demands as a foundation for international relations. What idiocy comes next in order to implement "equal rights" more perfectly everywhere in the world?

The rhetoric and concepts wielded by our Left and Conservatism Inc. (to make a difference without a real distinction) sounds like a variation on what the Communists used to say. I'm not sure this comes from direct borrowing as much from the fact that Communism, Intersectionality and American

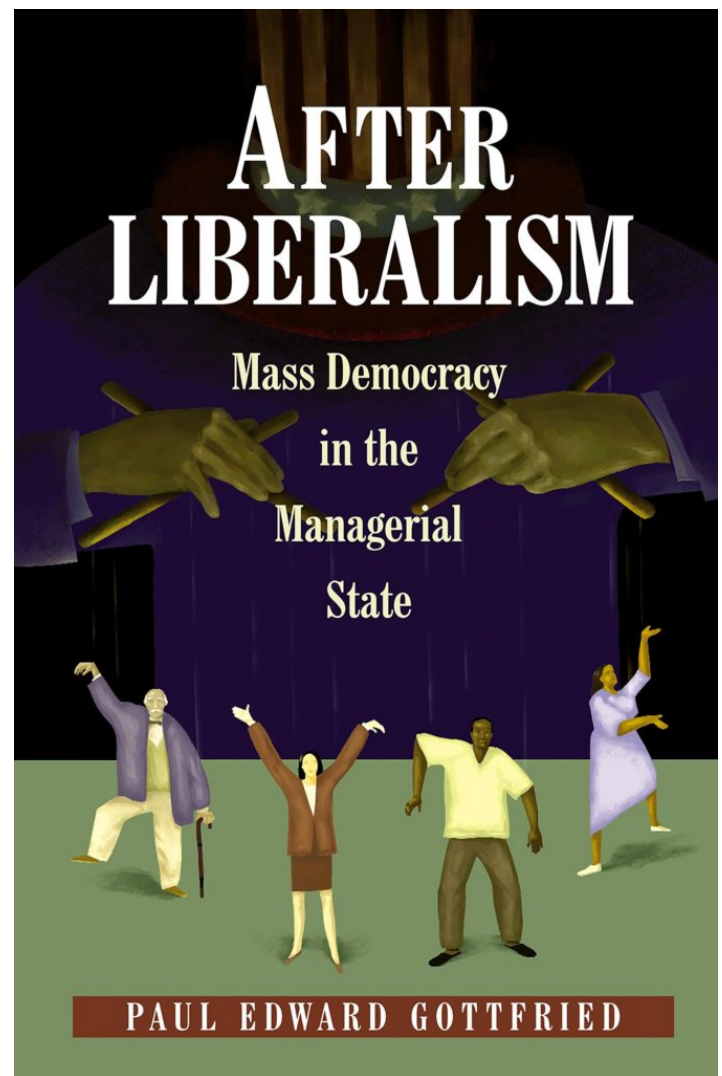
Exceptionalism share a leftist point of origin. To a certain extent, all leftists think alike.

ZJ: It would be difficult to disagree with what you said about LGBTQ demands as the foundation for American international politics. One can say the same thing about the European Union. The conflict within the EU over Poland and Hungary's stance – both countries strongly oppose the imposition of EU regulations in this regard – is very telling. In both countries, there are conservative governments; and one can be certain that as long as they stay in power, it is unlikely that they will yield to these kinds of demands. The UK, France, Spain, Germany capitulated to the new ideology. If you add to it the immigration policy in those countries, the situation is dire. What do you expect the near future to bring, and is there a way out of this situation?

PG: I just began writing about this for an American Greatness column. I don't expect anything good to come out of any of this demographic and cultural change. Central and Eastern Europe (if we exclude the robotized Germans) seem to be largely immune to the disease of wokeness and (not coincidentally) resistant to American media and cultural influence. Unfortunately, residents of the former Soviet bloc are going to be affected by what happens in the Anglosphere and Western Europe, given the pervasiveness of American power and our ubiquitous cultural industry. As someone influenced by Carl Schmitt, I believe that friend/enemy relations form an essential part of human society as well as political life. Once the "liberal democracies" finish their war against themselves and their ancestors, their less civilized or less decadent successors will fall out among themselves. I don't see any way the Western world can recover from the devastation caused by its struggle against "prejudice," which has now taken the pernicious form of a war against gender distinctions and national identity.

ZJ: How far, in your opinion, can we extend equality?

PG: The quest for further equality (which itself suggests madness) has empowered a vicious, totalitarian elite, which may no longer be removable. There is a tiny hope that the Deplorables and the rest of the populist Right will succeed in wresting power from the woke elites and the Deep State. I sometimes focus on this possibility in my commentaries and make it appear that resistance can win. It may be too late for a genuine revolution (the woke elites representing the ruling class in all the liberal democracies). But I have no doubt that the black nationalists, corporate executives, High Tech giants, gays, feminists, Muslim Fundamentalists, and other members of the leftist coalition will fight over the spoils once they've destroyed what remains of a normal society. Their combined rule over the rubble won't last very long.



ZJ: This sounds very much like a Leninist scenario, at least from the 1905 Revolution to the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917. Then you had another episode, after Lenin's death: the infighting between Stalin, Trotsky, and Zinoviev over succession. In both cases, only the most radical element won. The Bolsheviks were more radical than any of the socialist factions; and Stalin was more radical than the two other competitors. The winner takes all – all the spoils.

PG: I'm not sure the Soviet example works very well, because the Bolsheviks were more rational than the current intersectional Left. The battle that Russian Communist leaders engaged in for power after Lenin's death involved contending leaders, often with differing visions of where the Bolshevik

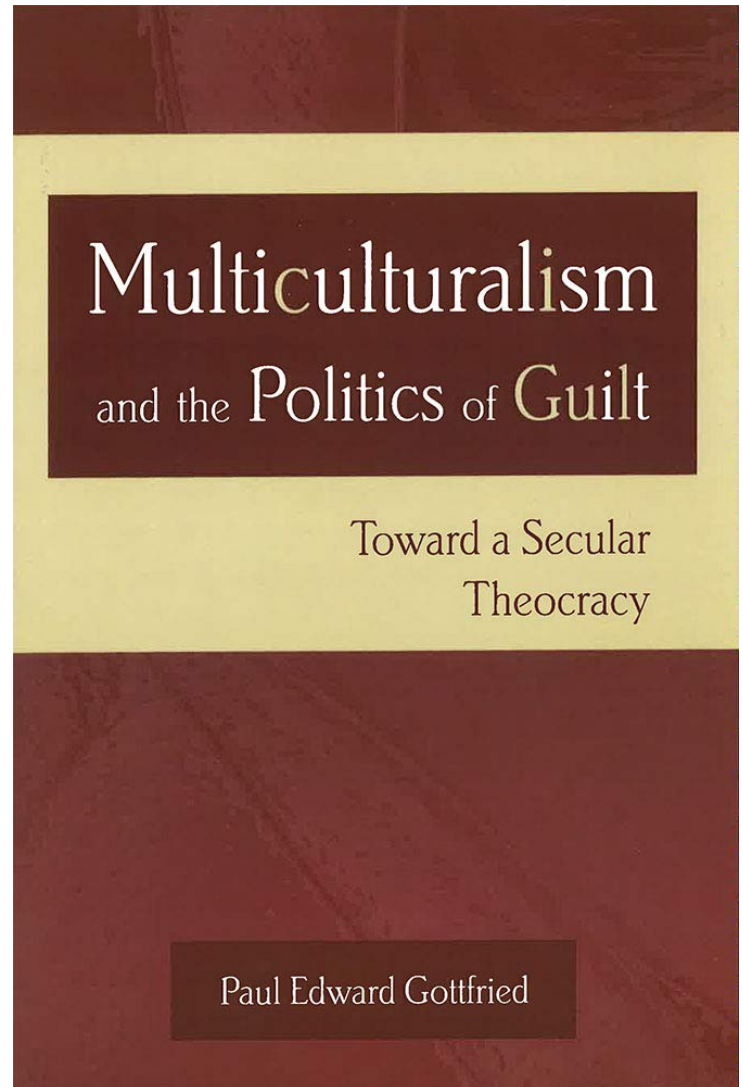
Revolution should lead. The present leftist actions approaches sheer madness. Antifa and LGBT mobs, warriors against fixed gender identities, and black racialists are unleashing their anger on normal Americans, who are mostly trying to stay out of the line of fire. Meanwhile the Deep State, the tech giants, and corporate executives, all of whom are promoting the lunge toward the cultural Left, are trying to manipulate the activists, naturally for their own ends (I can't really figure out their end game). My own question is whether these powers will be able to control the Bedlam they've unleashed.

ZJ: You know the chapter from my *Homo Americanus*: "The Dissidents' Rights and Wrongs." I wrote it because I was troubled by the fact that there are no "dissidents" in the sense that we talk about dissidents under Communism. Without them one can hardly imagine the collapse of Communism. They were a voice of conscience. They rebelled against injustice, enslavement, moral corruption that socialist ideology created. Dissidents, if they happen to emerge in a democracy, have no (or extraordinarily little) public support. And if someone says something that sounds like a voice of conscience, he is condemned within minutes and apologizes. This is a phenomenon that Tocqueville observed and which Zamyatin explored in his *We*. Having different views from the rest is to place oneself outside the great collective, it is to be sick, like Zamyatin's protagonist or Orwell's Winston. There is no room for moral and intellectual independence in a democracy.

Would you agree that democracy is highly successful in suppressing conscience? My experience in teaching young Americans tells me that only religious students, mostly Catholic, have a sense, intuition, that something is not quite right with American reality. My explanation is that most secular students, students who had no religious upbringing, derive their sense of morality from schools, from the media. Their morality is social; it is imposed from above; it tells you how to be a member of a collective; what the rules of engagement are – but tell you nothing how to form a moral bond with other individuals. Without a moral bond, we cannot build a community. At best, it will be a legalistic society with a growing mountain of rules and regulations.

PG: Allow me to try to answer your last several questions in one unifying response. It seems to me that religious Christians, whether Catholic or Protestant, will resist the antiwhite, anti-biblical egalitarian rot that is being forced down their throats by public institutions and the media throughout the "liberal democracies." But there is an openness of both religious groups to the Left. Their leaders have increasingly sold out to the power elites to avoid marginalization, and in European countries, defunding. In the US, Catholics still generally tend toward the Left, because they view the Right as dominated by nativist Protestants (this of course is vastly exaggerated), or because American Catholics have parents

and grandparents who came out of the "labor movement." Protestants who gravitate toward the Left (and they move in that direction in somewhat fewer numbers than Catholics) seem to be hung up on "racism" and the continued persecution of gays. Antiracism has become dominant issue, truly an *idée fixe*, in American Protestantism; and this is true for the Evangelicals as well as the de-Christianized leftist denominations like the Methodists and Episcopalians).



I agree that a right-wing proletariat without leadership may not offer the most effective resistance against our leftist rulers, but that deficient resistance is still better than having no resistance at all. What

would make our opposition (or what there is of one) more useful is a serious Right rather than the silly clowns whom I see on Fox news and who keep telling us that the Democrats are the real racists, antifeminists and homophobes. Massive boycotts of large commercial enterprises that support black terrorists should be taking place. The Right should adopt all the same tactics as the Left in order to show that it will not be pushed over. Unfortunately, our bogus conservatives want to dialogue with the Left (and perhaps be invited to write for the New York Times) rather than deal with a determined totalitarian enemy. I always compare our authorized conservatives to the *Blockflötenparteien* in the DDR, which were called into existence to offer fake opposition to the communist regime. Merkel and other German "liberal democratic" politicians came out of that system.

ZJ: In your answer you touched upon the social differences between the Catholics and the Protestants. This may certainly be one difference, but don't the cultural differences between them stem also from older theological difference, histories of their respective churches. Let me give you one example that illustrates this difference. We live in what I called in my book a great age of democratic apologies. We apologize for trespassing against our 7 deadly sins. Our apologies remind me of Protestant confession of sins; it is a group behavior, Calvin's Geneva. You prostrate yourself before the community of the faithful, not in the privacy of the confessional. Protestantism was always more "democratic," and the PC movement is almost an exclusive property of the Protestant countries. The extent to which it exists elsewhere, it is a borrowing from America and the Anglosphere. You know Protestant culture all too well. Do you see this the way I see it? Sins are public, not just private. They are not just offensive against the Almighty but against the community and its set of values, a community claims you to be its member. Thus, dissent is more difficult.

PG: This is what happens to Catholic countries when they decay internally. My commentary will be posted on American Greatness. Onetime Catholic Ireland may be becoming even more decadent than what is no longer Lutheran Sweden.

You may have read my book, [*Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt*](#) in which I make most of your points. But it seems to me that one should distinguish between historical Calvinist churches (some of which have been very conservative) and the way Protestantism has manifested itself in the US as a force that nurtures both American Exceptionalism and Political Correctness. These tendencies may have more to do, as I argue in my book, with a peculiarly American synthesis of politics and religion than Protestant theology as such. What is however true is that Protestantism has been generally more malleable to political ends than the Catholic Church, which has maintained an authority structure, and

which is overseen by an international magisterium. There are of course certain characteristically Calvinist (but not Lutheran or Anglican) beliefs and attitudes that have manifested themselves with suitable adaptations in the religion of wokeness and white guilt. *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt* goes through all of them all in detail.

ZJ: I would like to make the following comment. You seem to be fond of Poland and Hungary; the current socio-political situation there. For many decades, under Communism, Poles and Hungarians were looking up to the West, especially America; longed for civilized existence and democracy as it was practiced there. Now, three decades after the collapse of Communism, some of the comments you have made make me think that Americans like you long for “*la democracie a la polonaise.*” A paradox?

PG: It's not that we on the American intellectual Right want the US to turn into something it is not, namely, a European country. But we notice that countries that were in the Soviet bloc have been spared or been able to resist the latest wave of modernity, the effect of which has been to destroy human society and the civilization that preserved it. I would also note that these countries have been less poisoned by the antifascist ideology (which is a lethal variation on the Communist formulation) that has gravely infected Western “liberal democracies.” Curiously in the German case, American “reeducation” of what was a supposedly Nazified country has resulted in a Nazi-like adherence to Political Correctness among German anti-Nazis. The most tolerant Germans I encounter are the German nationalists, who among Germans seem least to resemble our received stereotypes about authoritarian German personalities.

ZJ: Given your comment, I would agree that today (I am not sure for how long) democracy in Poland may be less “demoralized” than in the US or Western Europe because, as you pointed out, “modernity” there developed more slowly, given Communism. In the meantime, the countries on the Western side of the Iron Curtain embraced modernity or progressivism more fully, much faster, which destroyed culture that had kept democracy alive and well for several decades.

Here are a few thoughts that I would like you to comment on. It would be consistent with what you said to argue that, for a healthy democracy to operate well, we need strong culture. You destroy culture and democracy will collapse. However, one could also argue that democracy is bound to disintegrate for the reason Plato gave us in *The Republic*, Bk. 8: namely, equality dissolves authority. Expansion of equality is the real problem; and the last several decades saw historically unprecedented expansion of

equality. (All we hear about is "more rights," "more equality"). When no one yields authority over another, Plato says, we prepare ground for anarchy.

Even in democracy we need authority to preserve democracy. But this does not seem possible – democracy's twin sister is equality, which wants to appropriate more and more for itself, and the more equality you get the weaker authority becomes. Democracy in Athens collapsed not because "modernity" corrupted Athens' "cultural" foundations; it collapsed because the expansion of equality created the situation which led to lawlessness. We observe the same process on American streets and in other Western countries, college campuses, at home where parents can't discipline their children, and so on.

PG: I fully agree with your observation that sooner or later democracies show their true character as egalitarian enterprises, in which other goods are subordinated to the demand for a more perfect equality. That is why popular government has to be tempered with nondemocratic and even aristocratic features to prevent this derailment (*parekbasis tes politeas*) from occurring. Thus, Aristotle, and other wise political thinkers after him, insisted on the need for "mixed regimes" that could rein in the passion for equality and contain the danger they saw as inherent in democratic government.

But with modern "liberal democracies" there is another problem that ancient and medieval thinkers did not foresee – the role of public administration, and more recently, the media in shaping popular beliefs. This is not something that Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant or even Tocqueville could have imagined in those bygone ages in which they lived. These developments occasion the question of whether what calls itself democratic in Western countries reflects a popular will or merely expresses the will of powerful elites. They also cause someone like myself who is critical of democracy to rally *faute de mieux* to the populist banner because what the populists are fighting seems so much worse. In the US, we are confronting a counterrevolution by leftist occupants of high political and media positions, as well as by corporate capitalists. They are making war on poor and middle-class white Christians, by inciting racial riots and radicalizing the culture. The ruling class is hypocritically claiming the egalitarian high ground, while trampling on those below them.

ZJ: You alluded to Legutko's *The Demon in Democracy* and my *Homo Americanus*. Do you think it is a coincidence that the two books, which are unabashedly critical of democracy and equality, were written by foreigners? (I should add, however, that I left Poland for America 36 years ago); or, should I say, the former denizens of the egalitarian paradise who for this very reason happen to dislike equality?

One should also mention here Leszek Kolakowski, another Pole, and his magisterial critical study *Main Currents of Marxism*, which deals with another egalitarian utopia.

PG: I don't think it's surprising that two incisive critical works on American egalitarian "democratism" should come from Eastern Europeans. You and Professor Legutko stand outside the milieu of democratic-human rights zealotry. You are writing as informed observers looking at our American obsession from outside. Because of my quasi-European background, I too have looked at this all-enveloping ideology with wonder and sometimes horror. I became persona non grata to the American conservative movement, when I dared to notice how its celebrities made all the same curious noises as the Left that it claimed to be opposing. The sad truth is our conservative establishment trades in the leftist platitudes of five or ten years ago about democracy, equality, progress, and human rights. It can never leave the leftist conceptual and programmatic framework that you and Professor Legutko call attention to. By now this foolishness may be an identifiably American thing passed on to our satellites.

ZJ: You are editor of a very prestigious and influential magazine: *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*, founded by the Rockford Institute, edited in the late 1970s and 1980s by a Polish émigré, [Leopold Tyrmand](#). His name is still well-known in Poland, especially for his *Diary 1954 (1954- Dziennik)*, which is a fantastic record of life in Stalinist Poland. You knew Tyrmand very well. There is no question that as editor of *Chronicles*, Tyrmand shaped the "ideological line" of it. Did he exert influence on you as well?

PG: Leopold Tyrmand gave the magazine a direction that it has clung to over the years, although it may be a case of taking a provisional strategy for a long-term orientation. He conceived of *Chronicles* as the voice of the American heartland, which represented a more cohesive and more pristine concept of the American people, than urban publications, particularly those based in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, or even Chicago. Although Leopold always hoped for a reconciliation and possibly alliance with the neoconservatives, he continued to promote the heartland theme until such a plan could be worked out. He even tried to create a Rockford Institute in New York, which turned out badly (after his death) and led to more bitterness between paleoconservatives and their more advantageously placed neoconservative adversaries.

Tyrmand balked at the idea of making me editor of the magazine, while he tended to other matters, because of my firm belief that a war with the neocons was inevitable and that we should give up any notion that we could deal with them as equals. I also differed with Leopold (although we became close

friends) on his optimistic view of America. Unlike him, I thought we were headed for a moral and cultural crisis because of an irremovable leftist hegemony. But even I failed to understand how bad the looming crisis would become.

ZJ: Your rather unexpected answer made me think of something: Tyrmand was an émigré from socialism who became editor of a very American journal, located in Illinois – the heartland of conservative America; back then, the place was much more conservative than it is today. How well, in your opinion, did he understand the States, its culture and American conservatism? From our private conversations, I would say that your understanding of America – its religious and political traditions and history – is exceptional. Even if Tyrmand was wrong about you (as you said, he balked at the prospect of you taking *Chronicles* over), would you say that the history of the last 30 years vindicated you and disproved Tyrmand?

On the other hand, he was not blind to the shortcomings of the American system. If there is one thing that he should be remembered for is his piece ["The Media Shangri-La."](#) As far as I know, it was a piece that caused commotion and made him visible.

PG: I think my forebodings turned out to be justified, while Leopold misjudged the gravity of the political and cultural situation we were facing even in the 1980s. What underlies "The Media Shangri-La" is the assumption that the media are a self-contained negative force that inhabit their own *zweite Realität* (to use Voegelin's phrase, borrowed from [Heimito von Doderer](#)). Actually, the media constitute (in my phrase) the "priesthood of the ruling class" here and throughout the Western world. They are not an isolated band of eccentrics. They are a power elite, who determine what the masses of people are allowed to believe and to say. As far as I can tell, Podhoretz and other neocons thought that Tyrmand was a "conservative Polish Catholic." Needless to say, this false idea could be the kiss of death in their circles. Kolakowski was more acceptable, since he was not viewed as a Polish nationalist; nor was his Catholicism thought to be a powerful influence on him. I would never credit neocons however with being worldly thinkers. They came out of an exceedingly narrow cultural world and inherited lots of unfortunate prejudices. Those factors make their triumph seem even more remarkable.

ZJ: You are described as a paleoconservative, the category less known today, but something that was very well known in the 1970s and 1980s, just like the traditional conservatism of Russell Kirk, the author of *The Conservative Mind*. Both were often contrasted with neo-conservatism. What does the term paleoconservatism mean? What are the basic suppositions of your version of conservatism?

PG: I am inclined to give you the long introduction to an anthology of essays on paleoconservatism that Cornell University will soon be bringing out. But I shall resist that impulse. Paleoconservatism has been ruthlessly canceled by the conservative establishment (which is a slightly recycled version of neoconservatism plus GOP boosterism). No one associated with our movement is now allowed to publish in any conservative magazine (other than *Chronicles*); and even *The American Conservative*, which started out with paleo leanings, now belongs to the conservative establishment. The main difference between the paleos and their despisers in the continually updated conservative movement is that we dare to say "No" to all the accommodations of the Zeitgeist that Conservatism, Inc. engages in to make itself agreeable to its leftist talking partners. We have no leftist talking partners, and certainly not in the "LGBT community" or among those who believe that the US before the civil rights and immigration reforms of the 1960s was an "unjust" country. In this case the reforms proved more disastrous than the injustices they were supposed to address. Paleos represent the only American Right, because we alone – of all American political positions – do not worship the idol of equality, and in fact view it as the enemy of all traditional social institutions. Americans and their satellites are going to have to live with hierarchy in the end; and that form of it, provided by the media, "educational institutions," and public administration may be the pernicious example of that arrangement.

ZJ: You authored some fifteen books, and you edited a magazine. You know that ideas matter and that reading good authors and good magazines is essential for a healthy life of a society. Today, students read bad authors and their dreadful books. The effect is the society in which we live. From your own books, I would choose *Revisions and Dissents*, which is a wonderful and beautifully written little collection of essays. There is a chapter on Robert Nisbet, a towering figure in the field of sociology, whom I read passionately in the 1980s, and forgot. If you were to advise a young student what 10 contemporary authors, in the field of sociology, psychology religion, political theory – people of Nisbet's generation and older – and 5 magazines he should turn to, what would you recommend?

PG: Of all the book that I have published, the one that seems the most zeit-relevant is *The Strange Death of Marxism*. The other book that seems made for the time is the work on *antifascism* that Cornell will be bringing out this summer. By the way, the conservative press and most conservative magazines in this country have a policy of never mentioning my books or even my name, except to remind their readers that I'm paranoid and should not be brought into polite conversation. I doubt that my efforts to distinguish the current Left from classical Marxism or even from what used to be called "socialism" will meet any approval from "conservatives" who blame everything now on a "return to Communism."

Nisbet may be among the last social theorists, chronologically, whom I would recommend to the young, although there are some French and German social critics who impress me. The only American magazine that I'm reading these days is my own, which requires a lot of editorial work from a dedicated staff.

I should mention [Chantal Delsol](#) as a contemporary social thinker whose French books I have been avidly devouring. I also published last year a long German essay in [Neue Ordnung](#) (an illustrious Austrian conservative magazine) on [Rolf Peter Sieferle](#), the author of [Finis Germania](#). Sieferle was an environment-conscious man of the Right, who committed suicide out of despair for the future of his country and the West. These days I read (as well as help edit) [my own journal](#); I also pay attention to [First Things](#) and [The American Conservative](#), which the editors graciously send me gratis and which cover some of the themes that we address.

ZJ: Thank you so very much for this insightful and delightful conversation.

