
The Ways of John Gray

A Libertarian Commentary

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In writing about classical liberal ideas and libertarian reforms, John Gray uses various terms. Besides “classical liberalism” and “libertarianism,” he uses “neo-liberalism,” “market liberalism,” “paleo-liberal,” “the New Right,” “the market,” “free market ideology,” and, most broadly, “the Enlightenment Project.” To understand why a libertarian such as myself might feel an urge to comment on Gray’s writings, consider the following statements in which Gray disparages libertarianism:

The argument of *Beyond the New Right* [Gray 1993b] . . . suggested that the historic inheritance of liberal institutions and practice was endangered, not as hitherto by left-liberal policy and ideology, but by the market fundamentalism sponsored by the New Right. (1995a, vii)

The libertarian condemnation of the state and celebration of the free market is a recipe for social breakdown and political instability. (1997, 133)

The celebration of consumer choice, as the only undisputed value in market societies, devalues commitment and stability in personal relationships and encourages the view of marriage and the family as vehicles of self-realization. The dynamism of market processes dissolves social hierarchies and overturns established expectations. Status is ephemeral, trust frail, and contract sovereign. This dissolution of communities promoted by market-driven labour mobility weakens, where it does not entirely destroy, the informal

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social monitoring of behaviour which is the most effective preventive measure against crime. (1995a, 99)

The tendency of market liberal policy is significantly to reinforce subjectivist and even antinomian tendencies which are already very powerful in modernist societies and thereby to render surviving enclaves and remnants of traditional life powerless before them. (1995a, 99)

The desolation of settled communities and the ruin of established expectations will not be mourned and may well be welcomed by fundamentalist market liberals. For them, nothing much of any value is threatened by the unfettered operation of market institutions. Communities and ways of life which cannot renew themselves through the exercise of consumer choice deserve to perish. The protection from market forces of valuable cultural forms is a form of unacceptable paternalism. And so the familiar and tedious litany goes on. (1995a, 100)

In this paleo-liberal or libertarian view, the erosion of distinctive cultures by market processes is, if anything, to be welcomed as a sign of progress toward a universal rational civilization. Here paleo-liberalism shows its affinities not with European conservatism but with the Old Left project of doing away with, or marginalizing politically, the human inheritance of cultural difference. . . . This perspective is a hallucinatory and utopian one. (1995a, 102)

Market liberal ideologists will argue that the stability of a market society is only a matter of enforcing its laws. This thoroughly foolish reply need not detain us. (1995a, 102)

Communities need shelter from the gale of market competition, else they will be scattered to the winds. (1995a, 112)

At present, the principal obstacle we face in the struggle to renew our inheritance of liberal practice is the burden on thought and policy of market liberal dogma. (1995a, 113)

It is in social policy, however, that the errors of unrestrained neo-liberalism are most egregious. (1993b, 53)

Conservative government has the responsibility of protecting and renewing the public environment without which the lifestyle of market individualism is squalid and impoverished. Conservative individualists, unlike their liberal and libertarian counterparts, recognise that the capacity for unfettered choice has little value when it must be exercised in a public space that—like many American cities—is filthy, desolate, and dangerous. (1993b, 60)

Liberal ideologues, in the nescience of their rationalist conceit, suppose that they can answer the question posed by the greatest twentieth-century Tory poet: what are days for? These ideologues have still to learn that, when local knowledge is squandered in incessant self-criticism, people realise that

solving that question
 Brings the priest and the doctor
 In their long coats
 Running over the fields

(Gray 1993b, 53 [quoting Philip Larkin's poetry])

Gray's vituperation is especially remarkable because Gray was once a classical liberal. Although he did not begin as a classical liberal, he apparently moved in that direction during his thirties. For years, he contributed to the intellectual refinement and social cause of classical liberalism. He wrote books on John Stuart Mill, on F. A. Hayek, and on the history of liberalism. The back cover of his *Beyond the New Right* (1993b) contains the statement that "for over a decade [Gray] has been associated with the ideas and think-tanks of the New Right." In the United States he worked with libertarian or classical liberal organizations, including the Institute for Humane Studies, the Cato Institute, the Liberty Fund, and the Social Philosophy and Policy Center. In Britain he worked with the Institute of Economic Affairs, which in 1989 published his classical liberal booklet *Limited Government: A Positive Agenda*. But early on, Gray's work had shown a definite discomfort with classical liberal ideology, and that discomfort evolved into harsh denunciation.

I came to read Gray's books in the course of researching a project on ideological migration. Gray is significant because he migrated far and especially because, subsequent to his more classical liberal phase, he migrated in an uncommon direction—from belief in small government to belief in not-so-small government. In researching Gray for the ideological migration project, I found that he habitually argued in certain ways. Once I had discerned his characteristic ways, reading his work became much easier.

I present here a memorandum on the ways of John Gray, which takes the form of a broadside against his writings. Although I set myself up as Gray's opponent, I do so with significant misgivings. I share what is perhaps most fundamental in this thought—an agonistic attitude, as he aptly puts it, about political philosophy and about liberalism in particular (Gray 1993a, chap. 6; 1995a, chap. 6; 1996, chap. 6). Also, I admire his wide learning, his daring, and his industriousness. Yet I feel that he has been intellectually irresponsible in ways that damage the cause of good policy reform. My aim is to expose and counteract certain regrettable themes and rhetorical tactics in his work. The ways of Gray that I will treat are as follows:

- Gray habitually sets up a straw man and then knocks it down. He often neglects to specify whom or what he is attacking.

- Gray often attributes an extreme brittleness to his opponent's ideas, insisting that as soon as any ambiguity or incompleteness is identified, the entire body of ideas shatters. Yet Gray does not hold his own ideas to the same extreme standard for definitiveness and completeness.
- In many cases when Gray does identify the opposition, he flagrantly misrepresents it. He presents citations and truncated quotations to signify ideas that are quite at variance with what the sources are really saying. (I will consider in particular his misrepresentation of Hayek.)
- Gray often casts the opposition in hyperbolic terms, turning his opponent into an apocalyptic bugaboo.

Two themes in Gray's writings to which I call special attention are Gray's hostile view of the United States and his elitism.

The Liberty Maxim and Its Limitations

Gray has always opposed the foundationalist and rationalist strains in classical liberal thought. Finding the same antipathy in Hayek's writings, he praised Hayek in 1984 as follows:

We find in Hayek a restatement of classical liberalism in which it is purified of errors—specifically, the errors of abstract individualism and uncritical rationalism—which inform the work of even the greatest of the classical liberals and which Hayek has been able to correct by absorbing some of the deepest insights of conservative philosophy. (1984, viii)

As Gray began his turn away from classical liberalism, he began using charges of rationalism, foundationalism, and fundamentalism to flog classical liberalism. This maneuver, which he has employed regularly since 1989, depends on constructing a straw man and on attributing a false brittleness to the victim. Before considering examples, let us explore the significance and relevance of foundationalism and rationalism in libertarian and classical liberal thought.

The central idea of libertarianism is liberty—the maxim of private property and freedom of consent and contract. But the maxim has limitations of several kinds.

First, it is sometimes ambiguous. The terms of consent and the rights inhering in property are sometimes unclear and indeterminate. Consider the following gray areas: the unsightliness of a neighbor's house; unpleasant noises; the basis of consent by the young, the senile, and the mentally retarded; issues relating to the unborn fetus; the tacit terms of ongoing relationships, including employment and marriage; the continuum that spans private voluntary agreement and coercive local government. The maxim also is ambiguous about whether the taxation to finance

a minimal state ought to be deemed coercive and in violation of liberty. Ambiguities abound.

Second, the maxim is incomplete. It stipulates no rules to govern the use of government resources; it is silent on ten thousand issues of public administration. Given that the government imposes taxes and raises revenue, the maxim of liberty, by itself, does not say whether that revenue may be used for welfare benefits. Where we believe that government resources should be privatized, it fails to tell us how and how fast to privatize. It does not instruct us about meting out punishment and enforcing restitution. Incompleteness abounds.

Third, in some cases, abiding by the maxim is undesirable. A policy maker with the power to rush toward liberty may be unwise to do so. Piecemeal steps in the direction of liberty, such as the deregulation of the U.S. savings-and-loan industry in the 1980s, may be unwise. Should all governments do nothing to control air pollution in Los Angeles today? Should the government not grant eminent-domain powers in the construction of a particular highway today? Should all levels of government allow a free market in machine guns and bombs? Instances of undesirability abound.

Fourth, libertarians think the desirability of liberty is much more frequent and much more decisive than current policy admits, and they oppose high taxes and the welfare state. But no body of argument provides an authoritative justification, or “rational foundation,” for libertarian reform; no body of argument represents fundamental truths from which the validity of one’s libertarian position can be derived.

Gray reminds us again and again that libertarianism has these four limitations. What are objectionable are his claims, first, that all libertarian theorists deny these limitations and, second, that the limitations make libertarianism meaningless and absurd.

Gray Sets Up a Straw Man

The following statements exemplify Gray’s claims that classical liberalism or libertarianism denies the limitations just identified:

The classical liberal idea that our liberties, negative and positive, can be specified, once and for all in a highly determinate fashion, is a mere illusion. (1993b, 82)

This species of political rationalism . . . represents political reasoning as an application of first principles of justice or rights. . . . It supposes that the functions and limits of state activity can be specified, once and for all, by a theory, instead of varying with the history, traditions, and circumstances that peoples and their governments inherit. It demands of political discourse a determinacy in its outcomes and a certainty in its foundations that it does not and never can possess. (1993b, xii)

Traditional varieties of liberalism are all exemplars of conceptions of rational choice. They are also all exemplars of a universalist anthropology for which cultural difference is not an essential but only an incidental and transitional attribute of human beings. (1995a, 66)

In all of its varieties, traditional liberalism is a universalist political theory. Its content is a set of principles which prescribe the best regime, the ideally best institutions, for all mankind. (1995a, 64)

Classical liberalism, or what I have termed market fundamentalism, is, like Marxism, a variation on the Enlightenment project, which is the project of transcending the contingencies of history and cultural difference and founding a universal civilization that is qualitatively different from any that has ever before existed. (1995a, 100)

The kinship of market fundamentalism with classical Marxism is evident. . . . Both are forms of *economism* in that their model of humankind is that of *homo economicus* and they theorize cultural and political life in the reductionist terms of economic determinism. (1995a, 101)

My focus here has been on the specious claims of paleo-liberal ideology, in which individual choice is elevated to the supreme value and at the same time emptied of all moral significance. (1995a, 118)

The danger of the neo-liberalism that has lately come to dominate conservative thinking is the danger of utopianism—the belief or hope that the predicament in which people find themselves, in which goods are not always combinable and sometimes depend upon evils, and in which the elimination of one evil often discloses another, can somehow be transcended. This was the danger inherent in the domination of conservative thought by the ideology of the New Right—the dangerous delusion that contemporary problems could be conjured away, in their entirety and presumably forever, by the resurrection of the theorisings of the Manchester School of *laissez-faire* liberalism. (1993b, 65)

Young Randians—adolescent boys and girls searching for a simple salvation—may discover libertarianism and neglect, or even deny, its limitations. But Gray's assault is not aimed at seventeen-year-olds. Among the condemned are leading libertarian thinkers—indeed, all thinkers and classical liberal thinkers, including not only Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard, and Robert Nozick but also Adam Smith, William Graham Sumner, Ludwig von Mises, Milton Friedman, and F. A. Hayek.

Many classical liberals have shunned precepts of “natural law” and “natural rights” and have in no way pretended to possess, or even hoped for, an authoritative “rational foundation” for their views. Hayek warned against the pitfalls of rationalism and

foundationalism, shunned simple maxims such as *laissez-faire*, called attention to ambiguities, incompleteness, and undesirabilities, and argued against a narrow conception of the individual as a unified utility maximizer.

Gray's Brittleness Ploy

The four limitations of libertarianism are not philosophically damaging because the same limitations—ambiguity, incompleteness, undesirability, and lack of foundation—mark all rival political philosophies as well. A political philosophy—an agenda for government reform and a supporting body of argument—is bound to fall short of the qualities that seventeen-year-olds seek. Yet Gray pretends that classical liberal thought depends on being a brittle system of that sort. He supposes that ambiguity, incompleteness, undesirability, and lack of foundation are sufficient to shatter classical liberal thought. He argues as though, so long as there is a twilight, there is no meaningful distinction between day and night. Gray recognizes that the same limitations mark his own thought. Why then don't they undermine his own arguments as well?

The following statements exemplify Gray's false attribution of brittleness to classical liberal or libertarian thought:

The objection to negative liberty, taken in and of itself, is that its content is radically indeterminate. (1993b, 78)

This indeterminacy in the very notion of negative liberty spells ruin for the classical liberal project of stating a principle—Spencer's principle of Greatest Equal Freedom, say, or J. S. Mill's "one very simple principle" about not restraining liberty save where harm to others is at issue—which can authoritatively guide thought and policy on the restraint of liberty. Because we cannot identify "the greatest liberty," principles which speak of maximising it are empty. To talk, as classical liberals still do, of minimising coercion by maximising negative liberty, is merely to traffic in illusions. (1993b, 78)

Classical liberal conceptions of the role of the state that are spelt out in terms of a principle of *laissez-faire* suffer from the disability that that principle is itself practically vacuous. . . . The ideal of *laissez-faire* is only a mirage. (1993b, 6)

Theories of the minimum state, therefore, are worse than uninformative; they are virtually empty of content. (1993b, 6)

In truth, because their content is open-ended and their very definition uncertain, the negative rights in terms of which the minimum state is theorised confer upon [the minimum state] all of the indeterminacy which characterises my own account of the proper functions of government. (1993b, 6)

The brittleness ploy shows at least a lack of graciousness on Gray's part. Even when an opponent's case has weaknesses, they do not subvert strengths that stand independently. Consider the use of the term *rights* in David Boaz's recent book, *Libertarianism: A Primer* (1997). Boaz writes:

The corollary of the libertarian principle that "every person has the right to live his life as he chooses, so long as he does not interfere with the equal rights of others" is this: *No one has the right to initiate aggression against the person or property of anyone else*. This is what libertarians call the nonaggression axiom, and it is a central principle of libertarianism. (Boaz 1997, 74)

I agree with Gray that it is misleading to speak in terms of axioms and corollaries and that, in referring to abstract maxims about what should be, it is not useful to speak in terms of rights (which Boaz elsewhere identifies as "natural rights"). I might fault Boaz for not paying more attention to the ambiguities, incompletenesses, and hard cases of his maxim. But such criticism would not detract greatly from his book. Most of the book is argumentation about the relative robustness of the libertarian maxim. The argumentation speaks of the role of property, consent, and contract, not only in achieving economic prosperity but also in affirming people's dignity, encouraging toleration of diverse lifestyles, generating trust in social relations, and vivifying civil society. Boaz's weak handling of the twilight does not destroy the value of his distinction between day and night, nor does it invalidate his argumentation in favor of one over the other. (And it is doubtful that a primer should dwell on the twilight.) Gray pretends that the whole of libertarian thought is a brittle doctrine critically dependent on the absence of twilight. Yet most of libertarian thought—including the writings of Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Lysander Spooner, Herbert Spencer, Albert Jay Nock, Rothbard, and other utopian liberal rationalist Enlightenment dogmatists—consists of day-versus-night discussions that weather Gray's unrelenting objection, "But there is a twilight!"

Chandran Kukathas comments on Gray's brittleness ploy:

According to Gray, the content of negative liberty is "*radically* indeterminate." Now if by this he means that we cannot, from a principle enjoining respect for negative liberty, derive a definitive set of entitlements and prohibitions on individual and institutional conduct, he is perfectly correct. But I fail to see why this is a serious objection. Political theory does not end with the assertion of a set of principles; political argument and moral reasoning must still continue; principles have to be interpreted and interpretations have to be defended. Social theory generally is "indeterminate." We should indeed accept Aristotle's wise suggestion that

we not look for more precision than a subject will allow. (Kukathas 1992, 105; italics in original)

Gray's Misrepresentation of Adam Smith

Gray's writings are flawed both in their citation of supporting authorities and in their criticism of opposing authorities. Consider Gray's use of Adam Smith as a supporting authority.

Gray has always paid attention to the effects of commerce and market forces on manners and morals. As early as 1984, he began using Smith's authority in the following way: "In both Adam Smith and the neoconservatives it is suggested that the unregulated market or commercial society tends to produce a sort of mindless hedonism which renders it defenceless against more vital tyrannies" (1984, 131).

Gray's own attitude about the moral consequences of commercial society have flip-flopped. He has written, for example, that "the prejudice that markets promote egoism, while collective procedures facilitate altruism, is, if anything, the reverse of the truth" (1993b, 79). Since 1992, however, his portrayal of market processes as ravagers of cultural bonds and norms of decency has escalated, as shown by quotations already provided. "The market," he insists, scatters communities to the winds, makes "trust frail," "overturns established expectations," and unleashes crime. Gray seeks to protect communities from the "ravages" of the market (1995a, 181).

To support the ravages view, Gray has repeatedly called on Smith's authority (1984, 131; 1995a, 55, 98; 1997, 5). He does so most fully when he quotes *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, in which Smith describes the disadvantages of commercial society. After quoting Smith at length, Gray concludes with the following:

Most of Smith's latter-day epigones seem nevertheless not to have taken to heart his wise summary and conclusion: "These are the disadvantages of a commercial spirit. The minds of men are contracted and rendered incapable of elevation, education is despised or at least neglected, and heroic spirit is almost utterly extinguished. To remedy these defects would be an object worthy of serious attention." These moral and cultural shortcomings of a commercial society, so vividly captured by one of its seminal theorists, figure less prominently, if at all, in the banal discourse of free market ideology. (1995a, 98)

One cannot deny that libertarian-liberal scholarship has paid insufficient attention to issues of conduct and community in commercial society. But one may fault Gray for his one-sided use of Smith's writings. Smith's discussion of "the influence of commerce on manners"—from which Gray amply quotes—begins as follows: "Whenever commerce is introduced into any country, probity and punctuality always

accompany it” (Smith 1978, 538). Smith provides a lengthy account of how frequent dealings and reputation encourage good conduct in commercial society. He rounds out the discussion by declaring:

Whenever dealings are frequent, a man does not expect to gain so much by any one contract as by probity and punctuality in the whole, and a prudent dealer, who is sensible of his real interest, would rather chuse to lose what he has a right to than give any ground for suspicion. Every thing of this kind is [as] odious as it is rare. When the greater part of people are merchants they always bring probity and punctuality into fashion, and these therefore are the principal virtues of a commercial nation. (Smith, 539)

Only after expressing such optimism does Smith turn to the pessimistic elements, which he prefaces by stating, “There are some inconveniences, however, arising from a commercial spirit.” Gray’s account begins where Smith’s optimism ends. Nowhere does Gray let on that Smith warmly praised commerce for promoting trust and good conduct. (For a discussion of Smith’s views on morals and commercial society, see Shearmur and Klein 1999.)

Gray’s Treatment of Hayek

As noted, Gray apparently moved toward classical liberalism while in his thirties. But he has always exhibited chameleon-like qualities. Jeremy Shearmur (1997) writes that “some of [Gray’s] more recent work contains a fair bit of posturing and playing to the gallery.” In his treatment of Hayek, Gray played up conservatism for the *Salisbury Review* in 1983 (reprinted in Gray 1993a). He was more enthusiastic about Hayek’s liberalism and anti-statism when visiting the Institute for Humane Studies to write his book on Hayek (1984) and when sketching policy agendas for the Institute of Economic Affairs in 1989 and 1992 (reprinted in Gray 1993b). As political opinion shifted away from the market vanguard, and as Gray’s prominence as an opinion maker increased, Gray—whether writing for the conservative Centre for Policy Studies or, in recent years, for Green and Labour auditors— anxiously denounced Hayek. Gray now portrays Hayek as a “neo-liberal ideologue” (1995a, 53) and a single-minded exponent of “the impersonal nexus of market exchange” (1993b, 52).

My View of Hayek

Hayek was candid about the ambiguities and incompleteness of his philosophy. He neither pretended to possess nor hoped to find an authoritative body of reasoning that one could claim to be a “rational foundation” for classical liberal positions. He was at ease with the twilight regions and the infinite regress of justification

(and of the self; see citations to Hayek in Klein 1999a). What he attempted in *The Constitution of Liberty* was not to give the desirable in law and government policy a definitive characterization, but to give it a fuller, more comprehensive, and more palatable characterization than others with similar sensibilities about the desirable had given it.

Yet, one feature of Hayek's approach does expose him to charges of rationalism: his concept of liberty always accords with his sensibilities about the desirable (desirable, that is, in a society that he imagines to be entertaining his proposals). Maintaining that the desirable always accords with liberty led him into convolutions about liberty being dependent on the absence of coercion by arbitrary acts, which is dependent on the rule of law, which is dependent on a standard of abstractness for rules and principles (see Hayek 1960, esp. 11, 142–44). The result was an arcane, abstract, and often unintelligible notion of liberty.

I prefer to use *liberty* in its Rothbardian sense (see Rothbard 1982)—property, consent, and contract—but I regard liberty merely as a maxim that exhibits the limitations set out earlier. Hayek admitted limitations with respect to ambiguity, incompleteness, and lack of foundation, but he resisted the idea that the desirable sometimes conflicts with liberty. Rothbard also held that the desirable always accords with liberty, but he molded the desirable to fit his idea of liberty, whereas Hayek molded liberty to fit his sensibilities about the desirable. My own approach is Rothbardian in its notion of liberty but Hayekian in its sensibility of desirable reform. Restrictions on the ownership of bazookas, for example, by my and Rothbard's lights, violate liberty, but in given circumstances may, by my but not Rothbard's lights, be desirable. Hayek would perhaps agree on the desirability, but also might see such restrictions as compatible with his notion of liberty.

The flaw in Hayek's *Constitution of Liberty*, however, is not fatal. At bottom, the issues on which Rothbardian and Hayekian judgments about the desirable might disagree, such as the bazooka issue, are not especially important. Rothbard and Hayek basically agree on desirable reform—they are both libertarians—and Hayek's book nicely advances the case for the common agenda.

Hayek's approach was, perhaps, appropriate to his circumstances. Had he taken up the more concrete, Rothbardian maxim of liberty, Hayek's deep anti-statism, acquired from von Mises, would have become more obvious and would have driven away many readers who were indeed moved by Hayek's arguments. Any way of conceptualizing a political philosophy will have similar problems—my preferred conceptualization, which readily admits the identified limitations, not excepted.

In his portrayal of Hayek's thought, Gray has flip-flopped in at least three respects: whether Hayek is a rationalist (Gray said no, then yes), whether Hayek is more a conservative or a libertarian-liberal (Gray has varied, depending on his audience), and whether Hayek's thinking is laudable (Gray said yes, then no).

Hayek a Rationalist?

When we speak of rationalism, we mean the conviction, aspiration, or intention to definitively characterize the desirable, or to give a final (metacultural) “rational” foundation for the desirability of whatever it is that one holds to be desirable. Rationalism is the denial or undue neglect of the limitations I have identified.

In 1981, Gray’s article “Hayek on Liberty, Rights and Justice” was published in the academic journal *Ethics* (reprinted in Gray 1989). The article concentrates on the problem already raised, that Hayek set up “liberty” to fit the desirable. In Gray’s characterization, Hayek’s theory of liberty is “underdetermined”: “The conceptual connections which hold between liberty and justice [or, the desirable] thus become, in Hayek’s doctrine, relations between mutually constitutive concepts” (1989, 97; see also 91–92). The aligning of liberty with the desirable leads Gray to claim that Hayek’s thinking had an element of rationalism: “The main interest of Hayek’s work in social and political philosophy lies in his attempt to marry . . . the rationalist and the sceptical” (89). Gray notes that Hayek pretends neither to give rational foundation to his characterization of the desirable (90), nor that his vision of the desirable is appropriate (or takes the same forms) for all people (Gray 1989, 94). On the whole, Gray’s article is academic and, compared to his other writings, reserved. It shows that Gray has always been preoccupied with points of philosophical form, rather than substance. His article does not deal with Hayek’s vast body of rich argumentation for smaller government. It considers only Hayek’s characterization of liberty and justice.

In 1983, Gray’s article “Hayek as a Conservative” was published in the *Salisbury Review* (reprinted in Gray 1993a). There the portrayal of Hayek is more decisively that of an anti-rationalist:

Most distinctive in Hayek’s sceptical and Kantian theory of knowledge, however, is his insight that all our theoretical, propositional or explicit knowledge presupposes a vast background of tacit, practical and inarticulate knowledge. Hayek’s insight here parallels those of Oakeshott, Ryle, Heidegger, and Polanyi; like them he perceives that the kind of knowledge that can be embodied in theories is not only distinct from, but also at every point dependent upon, another sort of knowledge, embodied in habits and dispositions to act. (Gray 1993a, 34)

We can never know our own minds sufficiently to be able to govern them, since our explicit knowledge is only the visible surface of a vast fund of tacit knowing. Hence the rationalist ideal of the government of the mind by itself is delusive. How much more of a mirage, then, is the ideal of a society of minds that governs itself by the light of conscious reason. The myriad projects of modern rationalism—constructivist rationalism, as Hayek calls it—founder

on the awkward fact that conscious reason is not the mother of order in the life of the mind, but rather its humble stepchild. All of the modern radical movements—liberalism after the younger Mill as much as Marxism—are, for Hayek, attempts to achieve the impossible. (Gray 1993a, 35)

Hayek's criticism echoes a distinguished line of antirationalist thinkers. (Gray 1993a, 36)

[Hayek's] chief importance, I think, is that he has freed classical liberalism from the burden of an hubristic rationalism. (Gray 1993b, p. 37)

In Gray's 1984 book on Hayek, the anti-rationalism is still uppermost (as the quotation from the preface, provided earlier, indicates). Gray does find in Hayek's thought "a conflict between its rationalist and its sceptical aspects" (1984, 139), but he concludes:

None of these revisions compromises the central insights of Hayek's research programme—that social institutions emerge as the unintended consequence of human actions, and are fruitfully to be conceived as vehicles or bearers of tacit social knowledge. . . . Hayek liberates contemporary inquiry from the dead weight of the superseded intellectual tradition of constructivist rationalism. (Gray 1984, 140; see also 114, 130)

In Gray's later writings, in which Hayek is repudiated, Hayek is suddenly transformed into a rationalist, with no explanation of Gray's change of mind. Gray claims that the liberalism of Hayek (and others) "turns on a conception of rational choice" (1996, 8; see also 1995a, 66). Hayek's treatment of the idea of social justice, earlier praised by Gray as "devastating" (1993b, 36; 1993a, 33), becomes a "rationalistic critique" (1995a, 187 n. 20), but Gray does not elaborate or provide any page reference directing us to the rationalist element in Hayek's writing. As Shearmur has noted, Gray's attitude toward Hayek's social-justice critique "shifts from earlier fulsome praise to condemnation . . . without discussion of the respects in which he now thinks Hayek was incorrect." In his 1997 collection, Gray writes of the "crassly rationalistic terms" of "Hayekian theory" (37) and denounces the New Right for being influenced by "classical liberal rationalism, as that has been revised in our time by such thinkers as Popper and Hayek" (6).

Hayek: Conservative, Liberal, or Both?

In his 1981 article in *Ethics*, Gray did not dwell on Hayek's ideological affinities; he did declare that "Hayek's writings compose one of the most ambitious efforts at a liberal ideology made this century" (1989, 89), and he characterized Hayek as a liberal (100), not a conservative.

In “Hayek as a Conservative” (*Salisbury Review*, 1983), Gray wrote that Hayek’s thought “embodies the best elements of classical liberalism” (1993a, 32; see also 33, 38), but “at the same time it derives from some of the most profound insights of conservative philosophy, and puts them in an original and uncompromising fashion” (1993a, 32).

In his 1984 book on Hayek, Gray again portrayed Hayek as a mixture, but, in this case, he emphasized the classical liberalism. Gray concluded that Hayek “returns thought about man and society to the great tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment, and opens up to us the abandoned road to genuine knowledge of man and of the conditions of his freedom and welfare first laid down by the thinkers of classical liberalism” (1984, 140; see also viii, 114, 130, 139).

Subsequently, Gray’s writings became steadily more statist. In “The Moral Foundations of Market Institutions,” first published with critical commentaries in 1992 by the Institute of Economic Affairs, Gray cited Hayek approvingly while developing a rather activist policy agenda. At one point Gray suggested the goal of “reduction of state expenditures to around a quarter of national product, as advocated by Hayek” (reprinted in Gray 1993b, 121). Did Hayek actually advocate that government spend a quarter of national product? Gray refers to a page on which Hayek discusses taxation in these words:

What is needed is a principle that will limit the maximum rate of direct taxation in some relation to the total burden of taxation. The most reasonable rule of the kind would seem to be one that fixed the maximum admissible (marginal) rate of direct taxation at that percentage of the total national income which the government takes in taxation. This would mean that if the government took 25 per cent of the national income, 25 per cent would also be the maximum rate of direct taxation of any part of individual incomes. (Hayek 1960, 323)

Clearly, Hayek was merely illustrating his point about the relationship between marginal and average tax rates with a numerical example, not advocating 25 percent as a desirable rate. Gray misrepresented Hayek, perhaps in an attempt to smooth the transition from his former enthusiasm for Hayekian ideas to his more statist positions.

Soon, however, Gray began to repudiate Hayek’s thinking. In the introduction to his 1993 collection *Beyond the New Right*, he wrote that “[in questioning the] dogmas of modernism . . . the conservative thinker will find most sustenance in the thought not of Hayek or Popper but of Oakeshott and Polanyi” (1993b, xv; see also xiii). Not long afterward, Gray wrote that “neither of them [Hayek and Popper] belonged to a recognizable tradition of British or European *conservative* thought” (1997, 187 n. 3; Gray’s italics). Gray began to refer to “the free market libertarianism of

Herbert Spencer and F. A. Hayek” (1997, 74) and “neo-liberal ideologues such as Hayek” (1995a, 55).

Gray charges Hayek with “technological hubris” (1993b, 144) and a devotion to ideas of progress:

The idea of progress reinforces the restless discontent that is one of the diseases of modernity, a disease symptomatically expressed in Hayek’s nihilistic and characteristically candid statement that “Progress is movement for movement’s sake.” No view of human life could be further from either Green thought or genuine conservative philosophy. (Gray 1993b, 139)

“Progress is movement for movement’s sake”—a nihilistic remark, we are told without further discussion. (Gray even fails to provide the page reference for the quotation.) Here, from Hayek, is the full context of those six words:

It is knowing what we have not known before that makes us wiser men.

But often it also makes us sadder men. Though progress consists in part in achieving things we have been striving for, this does not mean that we shall like all its results or that all will be gainers. And since our wishes and aims are also subject to change in the course of the process, it is questionable whether the statement has a clear meaning that the new state of affairs that progress creates is a better one. Progress in the sense of the cumulative growth of knowledge and power over nature is a term that says little about whether the new state will give us more satisfaction than the old. The pleasure may be solely in achieving what we have been striving for, and the assured possession may give us little satisfaction. The question whether, if we had to stop at our present stage of development, we would in any significant sense be better off or happier than if we had stopped a hundred or a thousand years ago is probably unanswerable.

The answer, however, does not matter. What matters is the successful striving for what at each moment seems attainable. It is not the fruits of past success but the living in and for the future in which human intelligence proves itself. Progress is movement for movement’s sake, for it is in progress of learning, and in the effects of having learned something new, that man enjoys the gift of his intelligence. (Hayek 1960, 41)

Could anyone honestly read this passage as a profession of idealistic faith in progress? Does Hayek express a nihilistic will to advance progress, even if it means scattering communities to the winds? (And by the way, in what sense is the remark quoted by Gray “characteristically candid” of Hayek?)

For his statement that Hayek “seems to subscribe to a doctrine of historical progress which . . . cannot be endorsed by any twentieth-century conservative” (1993a, 38), Gray provides no documentation. He claims that Hayek “generalizes from the English experience to put forward a grandiose theory of the spontaneous emergence of market institutions that is reminiscent in its unhistorical generality of Herbert Spencer and Karl Marx at their most incautious” (1995a, 40; see also 1998a, 8). One expects a scholar to support such a grand claim with references, but Gray provides merely a footnote that refers to Hayek’s *Fatal Conceit* without a page reference. He adds that “Hayek’s treatment of the emergence of market institutions in England as paradigmatic is evidenced in many of his earlier works” (1995a, 186 n. 8), again without providing any reference. Gray would be hard-pressed to make good on the assertion.

Is Hayekian Thinking Laudable?

In his earlier works, Gray clearly praised and favored Hayek’s thought (especially 1984, the reprint in 1993a, and the two IEA publications reprinted in 1993b). But, as already noted, Gray later repudiated Hayekian thinking. Hayek becomes, in Gray’s prose, emblematic of nasty market forces and the turmoil they generate. Gray refers to the “Hayekian” privatization in Russia that has yielded “a sort of anarcho-capitalism of competing mafias” (1995a, 57). He refers to “the wager on indefinite economic growth and unfettered market forces” as “Hayek’s wager” (1995a, 88). He speaks of the “view of society, explicit in Hayek and before him in Herbert Spencer, in which it is nothing but a nexus of market exchanges” (1995a, 101). “A society held together solely by the impersonal nexus of market exchanges, as envisaged by Hayek,” declares Gray, “is at best a mirage, at worst a prescription for a return to the state of nature” (1993b, 52).

Does Gray attempt to support his new view of Hayek’s thought? The only elaboration is a footnote (attached to this last quotation) in which he merely quotes the following words from Hayek: “The only ties which hold together the whole of a Great Society are purely ‘economic’” (quoted in Gray 1993b, 180 n. 6). Again we must go to the source, in this case Hayek’s *Mirage of Social Justice* (vol. 2 of *Law, Legislation and Liberty*):

It is the great advantage of the spontaneous order of the market that it is merely means-connected and that, therefore, it makes agreement on ends unnecessary and a reconciliation of divergent purposes possible. What are commonly called economic relations are indeed relations determined by the fact that the use of all means is affected by the striving for those many different purposes. It is in this wide sense of the term “economic” that the interdependence or coherence of the parts of the Great Society is purely economic.

The suggestion that in this wide sense the only ties which hold the whole of a Great Society together are purely “economic” (more precisely “catallactic”) arouse[s] great emotional resistance. . . . It is of course true that within the overall framework of the Great Society there exist numerous networks of other relations that are in no sense economic. (Hayek 1976, 112)

Hayek was saying that the whole of a great society represents the pursuit of many different purposes. As any Hayek scholar knows, Hayek took pains to prevent the very misrepresentation that Gray perpetrates. Hayek’s use of quotation marks around “economic” and his repeated mention of the “wide sense” with which he is using the term speak for themselves. Hayek often pointed out, as in the passage just provided, that all manner of nonmarket social organizations—families, churches, communities, clubs, friendships—coexist and thrive in a great society (see, for example, Hayek 1944, 42; 1948, 23; 1973, 46; 1960, 37; 1988, 37).

Final Remarks about Gray on Hayek

Although he tries to dissociate himself from Hayek, Gray continues to use insights he gained from Hayek. Even as he denounces Hayek, Gray tells us how “theories, at their best, can only remind us how little we know” (1993b, 65). He might have quoted Hayek: “The most important task of science might be to discover . . . [the] limits to our knowledge or reason” (Hayek 1988, 62). In announcing that “liberalism is to be regarded as a form of moral and political practice, a species of partisanship” (1989, 100), Gray might again have quoted Hayek: “Liberalism[‘s] aim, indeed, is to persuade the majority to observe certain principles” (Hayek 1960, 103). Articulating and endorsing Isaiah Berlin’s view of man as “inherently unfinished and incomplete, as essentially self-transforming and only partly determinate” (Gray 1996, 9), Gray could have quoted Hayek’s statement that “human decisions must always appear as the result of the whole of a human personality [which] cannot be reduced to something else” (Hayek 1952, 193). Arguing against “[the construction of] a critical morality, rationally binding on all human beings, and, as a corollary, the creation of a universal civilization” (1995a, 123), Gray could have quoted Hayek:

Whether a new norm fits into an existing system of norms will not be a problem solely of logic, but will usually be a problem of whether, in the existing factual circumstances, the new norm will lead to an order of compatible actions. . . . A new norm that logically may seem to be wholly consistent with the already recognized ones may yet prove to be in conflict with them if in some set of circumstances it allows actions which will clash with others permitted by the existing norms. This is the reason why the Cartesian or “geometric” treatment of law as a pure “science of norms,” where all

rules of law are deduced from explicit premises, is so misleading. (Hayek 1973, 105–6)

If Hayek could comment on Gray, he might echo something Karl Kraus once wrote: “X said disparagingly that nothing would remain of me but a few good jokes. That, at least, would be something, but unfortunately not even that will remain, for the few good jokes were stolen long ago—by X” (Kraus 1990, 45).

Prophecy and Apocalypse

Gray writes about current affairs with alarm. In the introduction to *Beyond the New Right* (1993b, xv), he states: “By returning to the homely truths of traditional conservatism . . . the ever-present prospect of disaster is staved off for another day.” In *Endgames* (1997, 140), he writes that our “everyday freedoms to walk the streets without fear as well as democratic freedoms to challenge the increasingly anonymous institutions that rule our lives . . . are everywhere at risk.” In *False Dawn*, “we stand on the brink [of] a tragic epoch, in which anarchic market forces and shrinking natural resources drag sovereign states into ever more dangerous rivalries” (1998a, 207).

But the peril would be even greater were we to adopt the policies of the “New Right,” “the market,” and so forth: “Western liberal projects as GATT,” for example, “aim to subject all human cultures and communities to the hegemony of unfettered technology and of global market institutions.” Such processes “cannot avoid desolating the earth’s human settlements and its non-human environments” (1995a, 181). Attempting to construct “a market liberal utopia . . . has as its only sure outcome the spawning of atavistic movements that wreak havoc on the historic inheritance of liberal institutions” (1995a, 104). Policies such as open immigration undercut the common culture and must be rejected—“or else Beirut will be the likely fate” (1993b, 59).

Like Schumpeter, Gray believes that market liberalism plants the seeds of its own destruction: “Neo-liberalism itself can now be seen as a self-undermining political project. Its political success depended upon cultural traditions, and constellations of interests, that neo-liberal policy was bound to dissipate” (1995a, 87). In particular, “the political legitimacy of Western capitalist market institutions depends upon incessant economic growth; it is endangered whenever growth falters” (1993b, 152). Don’t support the libertarian wing, Gray warns, because it is headed for a crash.

But doomsaying is somewhat self-limiting. To alarm people, one must make *specific* prophecies, and such prophecies are accountable to time. Gray has made some prophecies that he may well hope no one remembers:

Any prospect of cultural recovery from the nihilism that the Enlightenment has spawned may lie with non-Occidental peoples, whose task will then be in part that of protecting themselves from the debris cast up by Western shipwreck. (1995a, 184)

The likely result of the GATT agreements, if they are ever implemented, is not only ruin for Third World agriculture, with a billion or more peasants being displaced from the land in the space of a generation or less, but also—as Sir James Goldsmith has warned—class war in the advanced countries as wages fall and the return of offshore capital rises. (1995a, 114)

In Britain, the Internet culture seems likely to remain as marginal, and perhaps as ephemeral, as that which grew up around manned spaceflight. Already the sites of space missions evoke less interest than those of the Pyramids. Similarly, in much less than a generation, the Internet will provoke stifled yawns rather than passionate controversy. For all its aura of futuristic novelty, the Internet worldview harks back to a culture of technological optimism that—at least in Britain—is irretrievably dated. (1997, 139–40)

The United States, through the initiative of a Congress dominated by the free-market and religious Right, is now engaged in an experiment which is indeed unparalleled in any other country—that of withdrawing government from any responsibility for the welfare of society or the protection of communities and confining its functions to a repressive core having to do with the maintenance of law and order and the inculcation of certain supposedly basic national values. (1997, 111)

Gray claims the United States has “epidemic crime” (1997, 100; 1995a, 97). He writes, “American cities have ceased to be enduring human settlements and are approaching the condition of states of nature” (1997, 112). Meanwhile, the U.S. Bureau of Justice reports that the rate of serious violent crime (rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and homicide) has declined significantly since 1993 and is the lowest it has been in at least twenty-five years.

On the heels of the stock-market crash of the summer of 1998, Gray cranked up his prophecies and his long-practiced ploy of identifying processes that deeply involve state institutions—such as central banks, the International Monetary Fund, and governmental bodies that insure, guarantee, and restrict private lending and investment—as “the free market” or “capitalism”:

It is beginning to be accepted that global capitalism is in serious trouble. That has not always been so. When my book *False Dawn* was published this past spring, I expected it to be attacked. I was not disappointed. Most reviewers were incredulous. Some dismissed the claim that the global market was heading for a breakdown as an apocalyptic fantasy. Less than six months after *False Dawn* was published, that claim has been largely vindicated. The regime that a seemingly unshakable consensus took to be permanent has begun to fall apart. Soon, I have no doubt, it will be an irrecoverable memory.

A year or so from now, it will be difficult to find a single person who admits ever having believed that a global free market is a sensible way of running a world economy. (Gray 1998b)

Less than three months after Gray's article appeared, the Dow-Jones industrial index had recovered fully and was achieving new highs.

Gray's Denigration of the United States

The United States looms large in Gray's work as the dystopia that Britain and Europe must avoid. He refers to

a divergence between the United States and Europe—in their economies, their forms of social life and their public cultures—which is deep, growing and very probably irreversible. . . . Their differences were masked for a generation or more by the common interest they had in defeating Nazism and responding to the perceived danger of Soviet expansionism. In the post-communist period these differences are likely to be increasingly profound. (1997, 110)

“What is needed in Britain,” he writes, is “a clear perception of the distinctively European values which we do not share with the Americans” (111). It is common for academics and intellectuals, including those in the United States, to disparage American culture. But Gray seems intent on inciting in Britain a truly invidious attitude toward America:

The spectacle of American decline, and of America's slow, faltering but inexorable disengagement from Europe, should embolden opinion in all parties in Britain to make the choice it has always so far steadfastly avoided—that between our being an outpost of a fictitious Atlantic civilization and our real destiny as a European nation. (1997, 113)

Robert Skidelsky comments: “Gray's hatred of American capitalism is visceral” (1998, 12).

Gray's denunciations of the United States may strike one as an effort to foster an inferiority anxiety and a need to proclaim a distinctive British identity. I suspect that Gray has miscalculated the popular effect of his tactic. I suspect that British citizens on the whole do not find their selfhood in distinguishing a national character, to be called theirs, from the supposed national characters of other countries. I suspect that since World War II, and especially since the end of the Cold War, the trend in the West has been away from just that source of selfhood. I think the trend is healthy and something for all liberals to celebrate. Other institutions can serve much better than national identity in creating for people a rich, humane, and becoming sense of self. Westerners increasingly find their selfhood in their relationships with friends, families,

lovers, colleagues, clients, and customers, personal rivals and competitors, church communities, chess and bridge and poker partners, softball and bowling mates, e-mail correspondents, and in their work, hobbies, and interests—literature, film, music, television, sports, and so on.

Gray, obviously, is uncomfortable with the trend. He expresses his discomfort this way: “For us, in Britain today, individualism and pluralism are an historical fate. We may reasonably hope to temper this fate, and thereby to make the best of the opportunities it offers us; we cannot hope to escape it” (1995a, 111).

According to Gray, individualism and pluralism are rampant in the United States, eviscerating whatever merit exists in the culture:

The ongoing implosion of the United States, its wild oscillations between cultural introversion and messianic intervention, and its likely slide in coming decades into a kind of Brazilianization, are significant for Europeans, if at all, as evidences of the decline of the American model of unfettered individualism. (1997, 112)

The result [in the United States] has been further social division, including what amounts to a low-intensity civil war between the races. As things stand, the likelihood in the United States is of a slow slide into ungovernability, as the remaining patrimony of a common cultural inheritance is frittered away by the fragmenting forces of multiculturalism. (1995a, 24)

It is hard to guess what Gray means by “individualism.” It would not make sense to interpret the term to mean, specifically, libertarian policy. Gray often notes that America has high rates of crime and incarceration (1995a, 97; 1997, 112, 140–43; 1998a, 2, 113, 116–17). But these problems are to a large extent the result of highly unlibertarian policies that define victimless crimes, as Gray has acknowledged (1993b, 53). At present, approximately 20 percent of the state prison population and 60 percent of the federal inmates are incarcerated for drug violations, and drug prohibition generates a significant portion of all violent crime. Many of America’s problems, including crime, bad schools, poor housing, and disorder in public places are no doubt caused in part by highly unlibertarian policies.

Misleading claims about the United States abound in Gray’s work. Some claims—that over the past two decades the incomes of 80 percent of Americans “have stagnated or fallen” (1998a, 114), that free-market policies prevail in America (1998a, chap. 5), or that an “ideal of minimum government . . . animates the Washington consensus” (1998a, 200)—are so preposterous that to refute them would be to rehearse evidence well known to anyone commenting on the issues (for refutation of the poor-getting-poorer claim, see Cox and Alm 1999). Attempting to correct all of Gray’s misleading claims about America would require a separate article.

I do wish to note, however, in relation to three of Gray's statements, the significance of church participation in the United States. First, Gray portrays America as a place poor in meaningful community institutions, a country careening toward "Brazilianization." (What must Brazilians think about this expression?) Yet church participation is much higher in the United States than in virtually every European country (Iannaccone, Finke, and Stark 1997, 352; Iannaccone 1998, 1487). Gray (1998a, 126–27) acknowledges the vibrancy of America's churches, but cites it only as further evidence of atavistic American fundamentalism. Second, Gray declares that "individualism" and "the market competition" scatter communities to the winds, dissolve social bonds, and so on, but it has been argued that the chief cause of the success of U.S. churches is the complete lack of government intervention or subsidization (Iannaccone, Finke, and Stark 1997; Iannaccone 1998, 1489). Third, Gray disparages American "legalism" and trust in constitutional guarantees (Gray 1997, 21), citing the U.S. Constitution itself as a failed attempt to constrain government (Gray 1993b, 8), yet one robust explanation for the absence of government involvement in American churches is the First Amendment, which mandates a *laissez-faire* policy for religion (Iannaccone 1998, 1488).

Gray's Elitism

As mentioned previously, Gray maintains that a market-liberal society is self-undermining. The greatest danger, he writes, is allowing policy "to be formed on the tacit supposition that the cultural preconditions of the market can safely be left to look after themselves" (1993b, 64). To sustain individual freedom and civil society, it is not enough that the state affirm and uphold libertarian principles of property, consent, and tort (1993b, 64). Political stability and legitimacy depend on a broad appeal to the polity, a concordance with conceptions of fairness, cultural norms, and established expectations (1995a, 102). Here, as elsewhere, in criticizing libertarian policy, Gray shifts between claiming that it would be undesirable and claiming that it is not politically realistic.¹

Gray writes about British society as if it were a club with its own peculiar rules: "Entry into civil society in Britain presupposes subscription to its norms. . . . This common culture may be reinforced by laws and policies which resist pluralism when pluralism threatens the norms of civil society itself" (1993b, 59).

Every club, of course, has its officers and directors. Sustaining the club depends on a class of "guardians of continuity in national life" (1995a, 87). They appreciate the club's multiple values and delicately tend its common culture. Club directors must

1. For instances, see 1993b, 6, 10, 25, 51, 63, 115. Chandran Kukathas (1992, 113) comments: "One of the reasons for [Gray's] rejection of classical liberalism, I suspect, is that he sees such a philosophy as having no capacity to play a practical role in the real world of politics."

preserve “our institutional inheritance—that precious and irreplaceable patrimony of mediating structures and autonomous professions” (1995a, 87).

Gray’s vision of the club and its guardians leads him to reject pragmatic libertarian policy. He opposes free international trade because the global market “has destroyed the idea of a career or a vocation on which our inherited culture of work was founded” (1997, 123). Regarding drug prohibition, Gray writes: “The siren voices now calling for drug legalization should be resisted by all who seek to preserve what still remains of Britain’s inheritance of social cohesion and civilized government” (1997, 133). Regarding transportation policy: “The impact of the car on cities is to destroy them as human settlements in which generations of people live and work together”; hence the need for “the drastic curtailment within cities of the motor car” (1993b, 160). In many areas of public policy, Gray condemns libertarian policies because they upset traditional patterns of the club. In the unfettered market, “status is ephemeral” (1995a, 99).

Although Gray often notes the importance of voluntary mediating institutions, in the end he views the club as the nation and the club directors as government officials. His depiction of the nation-state as “the pre-eminent political form” (1996, 115) is most fully developed in his characterization of Isaiah Berlin’s view of nationalism. Because that characterization conforms with the broad patterns of Gray’s thought, and because Gray does not criticize what he conceives to be Berlin’s view on the matter, I take Gray’s words to represent his own views:

The essential human unit in which man’s nature is fully realized is not the individual, or a voluntary association which can be dissolved or altered or abandoned at will, but the nation; . . . it is to the creation and maintenance of the nation that the lives of subordinate units, the family, the tribe, the clan, the province, must be due, for their nature and purpose, what is often called their meaning, are derived from its nature and its purpose; and . . . these are revealed not by rational analysis, but by a special awareness, which need not be fully conscious, of the unique relationship that binds individual human beings into the indissoluble and unanalysable organic whole which Burke identified with society, Rousseau with the people, Hegel with the state, but which for nationalists is, and can only be, the nation, whatever its social structure or form of government. (1996, 105–6)

The book on Berlin is not the only place where Gray affirms politics and government. Elsewhere he writes of “[restoring] the primacy of the political” (1995a, 130), of the British state as “on balance a civilizing institution” (1997, 133), of “[enfranchising] all people as active citizens in a polity to which everyone can profess allegiance” (1993b, 59).

For a pragmatic libertarian such as myself, there are two interpretations of Gray’s embrace of government as guardian and shepherd of the national club. One interpretation is that Gray simply does not see the reason to believe the following claims. First,

as a basis for community or club identity, the state is severely flawed and inferior to voluntary and local institutions. Second, libertarian principles can be shared and sustained even when—especially when—government remains small (indeed, Gray [1993b, 35] says as much). Third, the need for trust in a large, mobile society is best met by voluntary institutions functioning within a libertarian legal framework (Klein 1997b, 1999b). Fourth, the basis for community and a fabric of life in a large, mobile society is best met by voluntary institutions functioning within a libertarian legal framework. Fifth, from where we stand, the principal reforms needed to advance individual dignity and individual responsibility are libertarian reforms (Klein 1997a). Sixth, neither in Britain nor in the United States is society coming apart at the seams.

Gray should admit these claims, or at least some of them. Because he does not, we are led to suspect that what troubles him is that he sees a world undergoing change, a world that has less and less use for the likes of John Gray. His agenda, at the core, seems to be to preserve the status of an elite governing class, in which he yearns to be a well-regarded and influential member. I take this view because it fits the patterns in Gray's work.

Why, for example, does Gray need to portray the United States in false and exaggerated terms? Because, as he rightly states, "The United States no longer possesses any recognizable common culture or a political class that could speak for such a culture" (1997, 112). Although public policy in America is not becoming more libertarian, the government is floundering badly as the leader of any national club or common culture. (Gray [1998b] writes amusingly of recent events: "The political class in the United States is currently preoccupied with whether serial fellatio constitutes a sexual relationship.") Every day, America becomes less and less a club.

But that development hardly foretells the social collapse that Gray luridly conjures. Gray needs to see an America in moral decay and disarray in order to maintain that society needs a governing class of traditional elites.

John Gray, Ideological Migrant

In his writings since *Beyond the New Right*, save the book on Berlin, Gray has demonstrated a heightened propensity to speak out of both corners of his mouth. At one point he condemns a policy or its supporters, but elsewhere those who oppose the policy. Discerning Gray's position becomes an exercise in weighing abuses. Shearmur (1997) has commented: "One of the strange features of Gray's writings is that he frequently offers us criticisms of various positions which he himself seems to have held until fairly recently, but which are then characterized in the most pejorative of terms, and as if only a fool or a knave could hold them." In a review of *False Dawn*, Skidelsky remarks on Gray's migration patterns:

Gray's intellectual gyrations have become legendary. I am told he was a socialist in the 1970s. He was a Thatcherite in the 1980s. (The Iron Lady once said to me: "What ever happened to John Gray? He used to be one of us.") Then

he adopted the fashionable communitarianism. Judging from his latest book, he is what Marx would have called a “Reactionist”—with hope extinguished, but with a lively apprehension of disaster. He plays each role with passion and panache. But with so much here today, gone tomorrow, it is hard to know how seriously to take his arguments. (Skidelsky 1998, 11)

Gray is one of the more notable instances of an intellectual who has migrated away from classical liberalism. There is a certain notoriety in ideological migration. The back cover of *Beyond the New Right* (1993b) notes that Gray had been closely associated with the “New Right” but now he offers “a criticism of the ideological excesses of the New Right ideology and a radical critique of the New Right itself.” The back cover of *Enlightenment’s Wake* (1995a) says the book “stakes out the elements of John Gray’s new position.” The back cover of the second edition (1995b) of *Liberalism* notes that since the first edition (1986) “the author’s views have changed significantly.” The dust jacket of *False Dawn* (1998a) declares, “John Gray, a former supporter of the New Right, believes. . . .”

Ideological migrants are special and important cases. The intellectual shifts found in the work of ideological migrants can offer special insights into contending perspectives in public philosophy. To profitably examine an individual instance of ideological migration, it is important to gain an appreciation of the overall character of the person and his thought.

Libertarianism Doubly Cursed

Libertarianism does not stipulate that the levers of positive government power should be used in this way or that. Basically, it maintains that the levers shouldn’t exist. Meanwhile, power influences public discourse by virtue of its being power. Governments control broadcast licenses and run schools, universities, radio programs, and the postal system. Government officials speak to journalists, who rely on their cooperation for news. Government makes news. It employs tens of millions in the United States and spends about 40 percent of national income. It taxes and regulates all, and, to varying extents, it subsidizes everyone. Anyone aspiring to eminence in polite society knows he had better not laugh out loud at conventional ideas about government. Anyone seeking invitations to sit and talk with power ought to avoid libertarian associations and rid himself of any cause for suspicion.

Libertarianism is a reform agenda cursed also by its own strength. The extent to which sensible libertarians regard the liberty maxim as well defined, widely applicable, and widely desirable is much greater than the extent to which those in other ideological camps regard their leading maxims as well defined, widely applicable, and widely desirable. In a sense, it is a curse to be the most in anything, because it arouses accusations of being entire. The cogency of the liberty maxim in the libertarian’s mind often leads others to think that he regards it as an axiom that is always clearly defined,

everywhere applicable, and always desirable. Critics such as Gray condemn libertarianism for pretending to possess airtight definitions, absolutes, and foundations, and therefore they attempt to dispose of libertarianism on formalistic grounds rather than engaging the substantive arguments offered for the reform agenda.

Libertarians might deter slights and hectoring by emphasizing the limitations of the liberty maxim and expressing its virtues in comparative terms.

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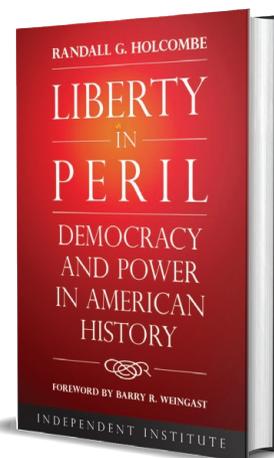
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