

Look Homeward, America: In Search of Reactionary Radicals and Front-Porch Anarchists

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The past six years have found progressives, liberals, and socialists busily rethinking their ideologies, allegiances and priorities. The tumult of the post-9/11 world has shaken up the certainties of the right as well. The result has been what Tony Blair called 'an orgy of political cross-dressing.'

Most of the mainstream conservative intelligentsia in the US still support the 'war on terror,' but even this is starting to sound strained and creaky. A significant minority weren't convinced in the first place; no less than William F Buckley Jr, founder of *The National Review*, wrote, on the eve of the Iraq War, that President Bush should have been 'more cautious when he spoke of the prospects for Iraq after liberation. Portugal, climbing out from monarchy soon after the turn of the century, moved towards an autocracy that lasted for 35 years, after which was the military coup, reaching an institutionalized democracy only in the late '70s.' [1]

Those on the right who agree with Buckley often come from the ranks of 'paleo-cons,' isolationist, traditionalist conservatives who regard Franklin Roosevelt – whose two singular accomplishments were a more muscular internationalism and the beginnings of the modern welfare state – as a sort of traitor to something essential in American society. Lately, representatives of this tendency have gained a new confidence, as well as a new audience.

Patrick Buchanan's magazine *The American Conservative* provides a convenient, bi-weekly guide to the paleo-con imagination. To take just a recent issue: the editor-in-chief calls for withdrawal from Iraq (he quotes an earlier column of his in which he rhapsodised about the special talents that 'Islamic peoples' possess for guerrilla warfare [2]), a cover story details the threats that free trade poses to the purity of our groceries ('Thanks to what one FDA official calls the "globalization of the food supply," the US...has come to rely on foreign food sources that are questionable at best.' [3]), and another article speculates on the inevitably ill effects of immigration

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and multiculturalism. These issues – the folly of Iraq, the drawbacks of a diverse economy and society – are consistent themes of *The American Conservative*, and indeed of the paleo-con movement in general.

The website *antiwar.com* is another popular outlet. The site's title and amateurish design have led more than one confused commentator to mistake it for a left-wing site – an effect which may not be wholly unintentional – but the brains behind the operation belong to an old-right libertarian by the name of Justin Raimondo. The archives section of *antiwar.com* offers up a veritable cornucopia of paleo-conservative screeds on the usual topics: the EU ('the re-emergence of a totalitarian form of socialism' [4]), the decadence of modern American society ('...pragmatism is supposedly synonymous with the American Way. It was, however, a degeneration of the American character that only occurred at the turn of the century, after World War I, waves of immigration, and the vulgarization of the culture had already eroded the foundations of our old Republic.' [5]) and, above all, the necessity of avoiding foreign entanglements.

Raimondo initially professed weak support for the overthrow of the Taliban, but his preferred strategy was, in the words of a headline, to 'Kill 'Em and Get Out.' [6] The attempt to rebuild Afghan civil society was, in his view, a waste of time: 'It's interesting, too, how the rhetoric of the Afghan "liberators" and their western supporters so closely resembles that of the Soviets at the time of the Russian invasion. The Russians claimed that they were liberating women, bringing education and Western enlightenment to Afghanistan's medieval darkness: they, too, claimed to be agents of modernity and "internationalism."' [7]

But what distinguishes *Antiwar.com* and *The American Conservative* from pre-9/11 paleo-conservatives is their willingness to reach out to isolationist elements on the left. Raimondo's site in particular has worked very hard at this; as I pointed out earlier, the presentation and tone (sample headline: 'Why Are We In Ko\$ovo?' [8]) resemble a caricature of a certain style of left-wing muckraking. But *Antiwar.com* has made its pitch to liberals much more explicit than that. A recent (30 March 2007) article on the site by Jon Basil Utley made the case for a 'Left-Right Alliance Against the War' ('Opposition to American empire can serve as the banner that welcomes us into the one big tent of people opposed to war, an Anti-Imperialist League for the 21st century.' [9]). On the 10th May 2006 we are informed by 'life member of the John Birch Society' Thomas R. Eddelem that 'Now Is the Time for a Left-Right Alliance.' [10] Even farther back, a 2002 column by Raimondo advises

a 'Turn Toward the Left.' 'The only voices of dissent are heard, today, on the Left – or, at least, are raised by those who in no sense consider themselves conservatives.... [A] new campus movement aimed at Israel's depredations against the Palestinians in the West Bank has arisen, along with a growing antiwar movement.' [11]

Bill Kauffman's *Look Homeward, America* sprouts from the same soil as *The American Conservative* and *antiwar.com*. Like the former, it draws on many of the classic paleo-con ideas and traditions; like the latter, it attempts to find connections between that ideology and the contemporary left. Each chapter profiles figures from the past or (less often) present who exemplify, in his words, 'an American cultural-political tendency that is wholesome, rooted, and based in love of family, community, local self-rule, and a respect for permanent truths.' (p. xii) Kauffman calls these people – and himself – 'radical reactionaries'; a revisionist move designed to link together a rather large number of individuals whose ideas overlap in ways that he finds significant, whatever their professed political allegiances. In this way he tries to create an alternative genealogy of American thought rooted in the values of the old right, one which Kauffman explicitly hopes will serve as an inspiration.

As a work of activist history, *Look Homeward* has its merits. Kauffman has an evident love for and deep understanding of figures from the American fringe. This is not meant as a disparaging term, merely a descriptive one; for although a few of the subjects of the book are now commonly recognised in all their heroic stature, many of them are largely forgotten figures: utopians, obscure writers, second- or third-string abolitionists, cranks, failures, artists and several others that someone with a better-than-average acquaintance with American history might not be familiar with (if I take myself as an example). This is a very good 'cheat-sheet' of some of the lesser-known characters of US history, and it is almost guaranteed that anyone interested in the subject will learn something.

If there is an ideological core to 'reactionary radicalism,' it is surely isolationism and pacifism. Almost every one of the people Kauffman profiles seems to have devoted their lives to the pursuit of one or both of these causes, in various different historical circumstances; Kauffman uses their stories to evangelise for these values.

Isolationism first. Kauffman is an isolationist of the first order (his first book, 1995's *America First!*, is a history of this very tendency in the US). For him, practically any foreign engagement of any kind – military or otherwise – is not worth the effort. Kauffman shrinks the arena of legitimate human intercourse and solidarity

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to the bare minimum – too much concern for those outside your immediate family and neighbours is rootlessness at best, imperialism at worst. Or, as he suggests at the book's end, by way of a plan of action: 'Stay with your family. Your tribe. Your neighbourhood. Your town.' (p. 185) Railing against 'the hypermobility that is the great undiagnosed sickness of our age,' (p. 91) Kauffman heaps scorn on those who would seek their fortune beyond the horizon, chastising them for 'pulling up roots... leaving soil erosion and deforestation and sobbing mothers in their wake.' (p. 112)

Throughout the book, Kauffman insists that one must forsake global concerns and attend to the local; in the last chapter he says, pointedly, that you 'can care about your backyard or Baghdad; you can't tend to both.' (p. 183) The notion that one might live a vigorous and fulfilling life engaged in both your local community as well as the wider world leaves him cold. 'Loving all equally, the humanitarian universalist loves none especially.' (p. 109)

This isolationism gives rise directly to Kauffman's pacifism, rather than the other way around. While he certainly abhors the wreckage of lives and property that is the inevitable result of modern warfare, his overriding concern is for the impact felt off the battlefield. He rather gutsily disputes the need for the two universally agreed-upon 'good wars' – the American Civil War and World War II – believing them to be, literally, Pyrrhic victories. The Civil War has no claim to any kind of moral justification, in Kauffman's view, since, whatever else it accomplished, it also 'enshrined industrial capitalism, the subordination of the states to the federal behemoth, and such oddly statist innovations as conscription, the jailing of war critics, and the income tax ...' (p. 156). If one was to point out that the US has since overcome or at least learned to live with these unintended consequences, Kauffman could still reply with the claim that 'No cause is worth 600,000 deaths.' (p. 163)

That last critique, at least, has some sense of proportion (though it does not take into account the lives that would have been spent in legal bondage had the war not occurred). But his arguments against American involvement in World War II go beyond the contrarian and into the frivolous. What scene of depravity from that disastrous conflict, what demonstration of sheer inhumanity haunts Kauffman's nightmares? Stalingrad, Nanking, Babi Yar? No, Kauffman writes of horrors much greater than these:

'During the Second World War, the divorce rate more than doubled, normal patterns of courtship were disrupted. Daylight Savings Time was imposed nationwide over

the objections of rural America, and the subsidized daycare industry was born via the Lanham Act, which sponsored 3000 daycare centers to incarcerate the neglected children of Rosie the Riveter.' (p. 96) Later, he remembers to include such outrages to decency as the Interstate Highway System (which he, of course, likens to 'Hitler's autobahn' (p. 95)) and consolidated schools. Kauffman suggests that Americans follow the advice of the title in order to avoid such catastrophes in the future.

A greater emphasis on 'looking homeward' would probably prevent future foreign wars (at least for a time), but it would also preclude any type of peaceful engagement with the prisoners of closed societies as well. In Kauffman's perfect world, the militaries of the Coalition nations would not be involved with Iraq's internal affairs, but neither would those nations' civilians – no correspondence or solidarity with the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, say, no volunteers assisting in the reconstruction of civil society (after the fashion of the late Marla Ruzicka). What's more, one gets the impression that Kauffman himself thinks this is a distinction without a difference. For him, the essential truth of the modern, globalised world is war; whether it is fought by soldiers and Marines or schoolteachers and building contractors is, for him, a superficial matter.

In the end, Kauffman proves to be little more than a 'small-is-beautiful'-style critic of impersonal, decadent, alienating modern society. Like any good paleo-conservative, he feels that the way back is the only way out. He attempts to sound a hopeful note in his final chapter, suggesting that '[n]o statesman's coercive power should ever extend over people he does not know,' and pointing to the example of the community-supported agriculture movement as a model for 'an economy based on the human scale, on stewardship of the earth, on production for local consumption, and, yes, free enterprise and mutualism...' (p. 189).

But the overall mood of the book is nostalgic, made up as it is of a succession of bucolic utopias wrecked by the march of progress. A fine chapter on the Regionalist movement in American art ends with the provinces marginalised by World War II (and with Kauffman informing us that 'you can believe in the American Empire...or you can believe in the American Main Street...' (p. 89)). Dorothy Day's Distributist movement suffers the same fate: 'World War II destroyed agrarianism as an active force in American intellectual life just as it fortified the urban citadels of power and money.' (p. 45) Eugene Debs is introduced with a lament for his native Terre Haute, an "enchanted little village," destroyed by industrialism, as the maple trees fell to the "hideous steel prison walls" of the modern factory and office building.' (p. 133)

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It may seem strange to encounter Dorothy Day or (certainly) Eugene Debs in a book so overtly conservative in tone. In fact, Kauffman's cast of characters is drawn from all across the political spectrum; if anything, he probably profiles more figures from the left than from the right. His very first chapter focuses on Senators Eugene McCarthy and Daniel Moynihan, whom he describes with the chapter heading 'Two Independent Catholic Liberals.' As the book proceeds, he gravitates toward more radical figures: the aforementioned Day and Debs, labour agitator Mother Jones, quasi-New Leftist Karl Hess and many others. By bringing these names into his argument, Kauffman means to demonstrate that the heroic causes and characters of the American Left – particularly the New Left – owe an unacknowledged and probably unrealised, debt to traditionalist conservatism. As he writes of Hess: 'Reckoning that the best qualities of the Right of his boyhood – its cranky individualism, quasi-pacifist isolationism, and Main Street decentralism – had been purged, he rushed headlong – heedlessly, perhaps – into the New Left.' (p. 139) This particular argument is very powerful and, I think, not entirely without merit.

Echoes of this – of 'reactionary radicalism,' if you like – can be heard in much of the rhetoric of self-identified leftists today. A treasure-trove of left-conservatism can be found every month in the pages of *AdBusters*, a Canadian magazine that has become a focal point for a certain breed of activist. One of the preoccupations of this journal is the alleged decadence of modern society, particularly as contrasted with more settled, traditional cultures. These observations, found in the 'Toxic Culture' department, typically take the form of rather benign protests against, say, the alienating effects of communication technology or various other excesses of consumerism. At times, however, these critiques shade off into venomous anti-modernism. Here is an excerpt from Kalle Lasn's recent essay 'The Existential Divide':

When a modest, pious man living in a poor village a world away looks at us, what does he see? ... Have we found total freedom, or absolute disconnect? Are we becoming more liberated, or just increasingly self-centered and alienated? What, really, are our moral, cultural and spiritual foundations now? [12]

This isn't too far removed from the world of *Look Homeward, America*. Modern society – which exists here as a monolithic 'we' – is 'self-centered and alienated,' while the imaginary (and, in this case, presumably Muslim) peasant may as well be

one of Kauffman's townies: 'modest, pious' and, in contrast to the vulgar modern, practically awash in 'moral, cultural and spiritual foundations.'

Later in the essay, we come to the logical endpoint of this thinking.

We kill ourselves slowly, by eating too much or too little, becoming fat, or anorexic, or diabetic. Physically and psychologically we wither away in our culture of collective self-absorption and material sloth. And our boundless, insatiable greed now threatens to drag the entire planet down with us.

Meanwhile, in our eyes, the Islamist suicide bomber has come to epitomize 'the terrorist,' a modern savage, a psychopathic degenerate utterly disconnected from any redeeming social or moral values. Yet, in fact, this 'other' is a man whose life revolves around the mosque, daily prayer, restrained dress, moderate fasting, a tight-knit family and community. When pushed to the limit, a committed Muslim may decide to sacrifice his own life, his own body, for what he sees as a greater social and spiritual good. Which one of us in the west will do this now? [13]

AdBusters, flying the flag of the left, doesn't see the future of humanity in the future at all, but in an idealised, traditionalist, pre-industrial past. I have no way of knowing if its writers or editors have sought inspiration in paleo-conservatism. But there is a fairly obvious overlap in rhetoric and thinking and, if Kauffman, Raimondo and others are seriously looking for allies outside their particular ideological fiefdom, perhaps a good place to start might be among the ranks of the ultra-left.

Look Homeward demonstrates the sometimes twisted roots of a certain type of American conservative thinking, one that has not been prominent for some time, but may yet prove to have legs. Paleo-conservatives like Kauffman, Raimondo, Buchanan maintain that the pace of change and the increase of productivity and flexibility of the economy will function as a disruptive influence on society. As the global economy marches over the horizon, it is plain that the global society is close behind. Whether you find this development to be, in and of itself, something to hope for or something to dread provides an essential clue to just how radical or how reactionary you are.

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Notes

- [1] Buckley 2007.
- [2] Buchanan 2007, p. 6.
- [3] Grigg 2007, p. 7.
- [4] Raimondo 14 May 2001.
- [5] Raimondo 8 August 2001.
- [6] Raimondo 28 September 2001.
- [7] Raimondo 16 November 2001.
- [8] Raimondo 14 March 2001.
- [9] Utley 2007.
- [10] Eddlem 2006.
- [11] Raimondo 7 June 2002.
- [12] Lasn 2007, p. 12.
- [13] Lasn 2007, p. 20.