

Confronting the New Conservatism: The Rise of the Right in America

Michael J. Thompson (ed), New York University Press, 2007, 304 pp.

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In the final contribution in *Confronting the New Conservatism*, Stephen Bronner sets out how progressives and liberals (in the American sense) can challenge the Right. The Left, he argues, underestimated neoconservative ideology and can learn from the success of the Right. The conservative message has been primarily aimed at everyday people rather than other intellectuals. The Democrats have tried to speak to the same people but their pragmatism and their lack of any deeper guiding beliefs has meant the needle of their political compass is constantly drawn to the pole of the Right. Bronner, a political science professor from Rutgers, argues that the Left must undergo changes itself if it wishes to defeat the Right. A key problem is the fragmentation of the Left into autonomous constituencies especially on the basis of identity politics. Because of this the Left ‘appears far weaker than the sum of its parts.’ Academics and intellectuals of the Left are separated from the general public by a chasm. Which is all more or less correct.

Bronner is grappling with the key problem of the Left in advanced industrial countries: how can the fragmented constituencies of the broad left become a political force which can confront the new conservatism and set a new political agenda? The answer is that a new kind of glue is needed to bind and inspire the movements which range from greens to trade unionists to democrats. He hints that the answer lies in a new kind of ‘class ideal’ which ‘speaks to the interests of working people in all groups but privileges none in particular.’ A ‘class ideal’ suggests some new kind of universalist set of beliefs is needed and that is certainly true. Bronner does not spell out what his new ‘class ideal’ consists of but appeals to class interests are not likely to succeed. In fact it was the slow collapse of socialism and social democracy – once robust frameworks and influential guiding beliefs based on class – that was a precondition for the successful trajectory of the Right which began with Thatcher and Reagan. A telling expression of this is the rhetorical conceit pioneered by the neo-cons and now used by many conservatives that they represent ordinary people against the ‘liberal elites.’

A book on the Right is a welcome thing because so much of the contemporary intellectual Left prefers to either memorialise its radical past or to specialise in cultural questions rather than examine why its ideals have been defeated and how this might be changed. To do this and to overcome the ascendancy of conservatism, it is well to keep in mind the statement attributed to John Stuart Mill that 'he who knows only his own position knows little of that. Take particular care to understand the position of your adversary – and to understand it not in a caricature or superficial form but at its strongest, for until you have rebutted it at its strongest you have not rebutted it at all.'

In this light only a few of the contributions to 'Confronting the New Conservatism' try to understand the success of the American Right, rather than simply describing it. The editor Michael Thompson does understand its success and argues that it is based on its ability to 'weave a new public philosophy.' The new philosophy is a new form of liberalism which rejects the 'old liberalism' which supported a strong social framework in which individuals could flourish. This new lean and mean liberalism grows out of the increased atomisation of modern American and expresses of philosophy of extreme individualism, he says. The genius of the American Right is that this economic liberalism has been synthesised with the contradictory stance of a religious Right which supports moral norms which are in essence collectivist. Claire Snyder points out that the Right is aware of this 'paradox of freedom' and that this explains why neo-conservatism upholds family values, along with the religious Right. Values are the glue which holds the Right together but Snyder's conclusion is that we must therefore denounce family values rather than argue for a reframed and inclusive definition of family values.

If we did this we could exacerbate the potential divisions within the Right which are crucial to defeating it. For example, the kind of libertarian economy championed by the free marketeers actively undermines the family by deregulating working hours to the detriment of shared family time. This potentially offers a way of splitting the Right by appealing to blue collar conservatives but such an appeal is anathema to many (though not all) feminist intellectuals. The first generation of neo-cons – Irving Kristol and especially Daniel Bell were aware of these kinds of divisions. Bell's book *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* argues that affluence undermines the ethic of deferred gratification that formed capitalism's disciplined core, as Nicholas Xenos reminds us.

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Several contributors usefully trace the ideas and evolution of neo-conservatism, from its origins as a form of social democratic anti-communism preoccupied with domestic social issues, to its present state which emphasises America's imperial role and economic issues. Charles Noble points out that neo-conservatism began as a critique of the Great Society's welfare state. Their views on the unintended consequences of government action, on the importance of the family and on the phenomenon of welfare dependency still need to be debated, in my view, and not simply denounced.

Remarkably, for a book wanting to confront the new conservatism, no contributor has much to say on economic policy. Yet neoliberal economic policy is one of its key strengths and conversely, it was especially on economic questions that the world view of the old socialist Left has foundered. Some contributors wildly exaggerate the dominance of the Right. Philip Green, who also has sensible things to say, prefaces them by talking about a 'proto-totalitarian moment' in US politics in which one party is intent on establishing a one party state.

There is a temptation, not absent in this book, to scorn the 'neo' in neo-conservatism and comfort oneself that its ideas are merely the old ideas in new garb. This is usually allied with an emphasis on the power of right wing foundations to fund conservative think tanks. Both these points have the comforting effect that one need not concern oneself with grappling with the intellectual substance of neo-conservatism. Yet this is crucial because neo-conservatism's strength lies in its ideas. The first step in dealing with its ideas is to study them and for this reason *Confronting the New Conservatism* is valuable book though one which also reflects some of the analytical weakness of the US Left.

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