

Not Worth the Effort

John Gray, Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age, Routledge, London, 1995

Reviewed by Andrew Norton

JOHAN GRAY has become something of an embarrassment. There is embarrassment for liberals, in that a leading defender of liberalism is now a leading denouncer. There is embarrassment for Gray, in that we must now doubt the intellectual credentials of a once consistently sharp and systematic thinker.

In his Preface, Gray says that *Enlightenment's Wake* brings to a conclusion a train of thought developed in his three previous books of essays on liberalism (p. vii). Well, sort of. There is a consistent theme of examining liberalism's foundations, and increasingly finding them wanting. What is more striking, though, are the departures from his previous thought. In the first collection, *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy* (Routledge, 1989, but containing papers dating back to 1976), John Gray Mark I at least hopes that rational foundations can be found for liberalism. This hope is gone from his next collection, *Post-Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* (Routledge, 1993). In this book John Gray Mark II, while insisting that liberal foundationalism must be abandoned, still believes liberal institutions to be appropriate to our time. In *Beyond the New Right* (also Routledge 1993, but containing essays mostly written more recently than the other volume), John Gray Mark III moves close to the view that liberalism is intellectually and institutionally self-undermining. In *Enlightenment's Wake* we have John Gray Mark IV, in which liberalism is just about abandoned. It includes an essay endorsing aspects of Martin Heidegger's thought — Heidegger being better known for his Nazism than his liberalism — and suggesting that the West may be in 'irreversible' and 'perhaps, not to be lamented, decline' (p. 183).

Both Gray's intellectual credibility and the strength of his current line of argument are open to serious question. Admitting mistakes cannot itself be criticised, but after Gray's third or fourth mistake wariness is in order. Gray is quite aware of his propensity to change his mind (pp. vii-viii, 136), which makes it odd that he is so definite in the views he currently holds. Gray Mark IV holds the 'Enlightenment project' to be not just flawed but 'humanly unintelligible', 'destructively purposeless' (p. 146) and in 'dim ruins' (p. 145). An opposing view, though one similar to Gray's own position in *Post-Liberalism*, is dismissed as 'theoretically and historically groundless' (p. viii). All this suggests a distinct lack of intellectual prudence.

Unfortunately, this impression is reinforced by other aspects of *Enlightenment's Wake*. Key assertions are inadequately defended by evidence or argument. Gray claims that 'inherited institutions have been swept away by the market forces which neo-liberal forces release or reinforce' (p. 87). But Gray does not show that any institutions have been 'swept away' and he does not show to what extent institutional

decline is linked to the market. There are many social, political and economic forces at work at any time, and sorting out their different effects is a major intellectual task that Gray does not even attempt.

Suspensions of intellectual carelessness are reinforced by Gray's reluctance to provide references. He attacks views that sound like caricatures, and in the absence of citations that is a good reason to believe that they are caricatures. Name-calling — 'free market fundamentalism' (p. 61), 'Maoism of the Right' (p. 87), 'dim ruins of paleo-liberal ideology, gibbering of global markets' (p. 109) — is no substitute for naming names; for Gray showing what his opponents actually believe.

Gray is obsessed with the idea that, influenced by the Enlightenment, liberals seek to ground their ideas in universally valid principles (pp. 64-5), and believe that liberal institutions are 'nearly universally mandated as conditions of human well-being in the late modern period' (p. viii). As Gray finds this universalism implausible, he believes liberalism to be fatally flawed. But this is to treat one liberal theme as definitive of the entire political tradition. Most observers, I suggest, are more likely to emphasise individualism and freedom as liberalism's major themes. Neither individualism nor freedom needs universally valid principles to sustain itself. Individualism can be taken as the product of European civilisation, and freedom the appropriate political response to societies which place a high value on individual well-being. Gray's critique of liberal foundationalism has few, if any, implications for liberalism in Western countries.

Gray favours a pluralist approach to political, economic and social systems that does not regard non-liberal systems as inferior. Western liberals need not reject this stance, but, so long as they recognise that there are near-enough universal human attributes, their system pluralism must be heavily qualified. Otherwise, like Gray, they will come very close to rationalising what ought to be condemned. For example, Gray argues that because liberal rights and democracy have no special status, the 'distinctively Chinese' experiment of creating market institutions without them may end up being 'legitimate precisely because it owes little or nothing to Occidental ideologies and promotes the well-being of its subjects as that is perceived by them from the perspective of their indigenous cultural traditions' (p. 127). I am sure Gray's endorsement of Chinese communism will be very consoling to its millions of victims. Gray's reaction against the 'universalist anthropology' (p. 66) of the Enlightenment goes much too far, and leaves him unwilling or unable to propose criteria by which non-liberal systems can be judged.

Gray's books have been receiving increasingly critical reviews. Until now, they have been worth reading. But, sadly, I do not think *Enlightenment's Wake* is worth the effort. What little I learnt from reading it was not enough to justify putting up with the overblown attack on the Enlightenment and the unwarranted pessimism about the West, or a discussion of alternatives that was no more plausible than the critique it followed.

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