

## The Party of Modernity

by David Kelley

As Henry Steele Commager noted in his *Empire of Reason*, “It was Americans who not only embraced the body of Enlightenment principles, but wrote them into law, crystallized them into institutions, and put them to work. That, as much as the winning of independence and the creation of the nation, was the American Revolution.”

What were those Enlightenment principles? A short list would have to include reason, the pursuit of happiness, individualism, progress, and freedom. The culture of the Enlightenment prized reason and its products, including science and technology; it regarded happiness in this life as the natural goal of human action; it held that individuals are the locus of moral value, with the moral right to live their own lives and choose their own convictions, mode of life, personal relationships, and occupations; it expected and welcomed continuous progress in meeting human needs, both spiritual and material; and it regarded freedom, including the economic freedom to produce and exchange, as a core political value.

“Modernity” is the term that historians use to describe this individualist and rationalist culture. Modernity accompanied the growth of science, the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of capitalism and constitutional democracy. As a culture, however, it was an intellectual, not a material or political, phenomenon. It was the underlying constellation of beliefs, values, aspirations, and demands that led people in the West to alter their way of life profoundly.

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Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan and Cato Institute chairman William A. Niskanen reminisce at Niskanen's 70th birthday party, held at Cato on March 12. James M. Buchanan, Robert Litan, Mickey Levy, Ben Zycher, and William Poole discussed Niskanen's career and writings before a dinner in the Wintergarden. See p. 17.

### Modernity and 9/11

America today is still the country that most fully embodies and symbolizes modernity. That fact is the deepest source of our tensions with Europe and our clash with political Islam. If there were any doubt about this, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, should have removed it. “Nothing is more telling about the recent terrorist attacks in the United States than the nature of their targets,” observed Luis Rubio, general director of Mexico's Center for Research for Development.

The Twin Towers in New York City represented the future, modernity, America's optimistic outlook of the world and, more recently, of globalization. The terrorist attacks constitute a direct hit against those values, which is the main reason why the whole Western world immediately rallied in support.

*Continued on page 14*

### In This Issue



Charlene Haar and the PTA, p. 6

<b>Crane on the politics of deceit</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Voucher Wars by Clint Bolick</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Cowen v. Barber on globalization</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Cato Calendar</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>How new technology makes old regulations obsolete</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>State spending binges</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Dangerous Pakistan</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Niskanen's 70th</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>School choice and special ed</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Biggs joins SSA</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>To be governed . . .</b>	<b>20</b>

# “Both the cultural right and the cultural left are descendants of the counter-Enlightenment that rose up among intellectuals, artists, and social activists who opposed the values of modernity.”

**MODERNITY** *Continued from page 1*

It was obvious to virtually everyone that the World Trade Center was targeted because it represented freedom, secularism, tolerance, innovation, commercial enterprise, the pursuit of happiness in this life. Our modernist values were thrown into sharp relief by the hatred they provoked in our enemies.

Yet our enemies are wrong if they think American culture is consistently modernist. Indeed, in our domestic culture wars, modernity has hardly had a voice. Battles over issues like family values, the role of religion in society, sex and violence on TV, and political correctness have been fought between conservatives on the cultural right and progressives on the cultural left. Neither camp advocates the values of modernity. On the contrary, both are descendants of the counter-Enlightenment that rose up among intellectuals, artists, and social activists who opposed the values of modernity.

## The Premodern Culture

Nineteenth-century conservatives such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge in England and Joseph de Maistre in France feared that the Enlightenment's enthusiasm for individualism and progress would destroy the stable society of the past. As reason and science called into question the mysteries of revealed religion, conservatives bemoaned the loss of “enchantment” and the increasingly secular focus of life. They sought a restoration of premodern values: faith, tradition, social stability and hierarchy.

Their greatest fear was that modernity would undermine morals. The intellectuals of the Enlightenment, notes the eminent historian of the period, Isaac Kramnick, “believed that unassisted human reason, not faith or tradition, was the principal guide to human conduct.” Edmund Burke, the father of modern conservative thought, warned that the result would be social chaos. Believing that “the private stock of reason . . . in each man is small,” Burke argued that reason could never replace religion, custom, and authority as guides to conduct.

That view is echoed today by cultural conservatives such as Irving Kristol. “Sec-

ular rationalism has been unable to produce a compelling, self-justifying moral code,” he declares. “And with this failure, the whole enterprise of secular rationalism—the idea that man can define his humanity and shape the human future by reason and will alone—begins to lose its legitimacy.”

Such conservatives' skepticism about the possibility of a secular moral code results not only from their lack of confidence in reason but also from their view of morality itself. Enlightenment thinkers tended to see morality as a means of pursuing happiness and success in this life. The famous list of virtues in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, for example, includes frugality and industry in personal affairs, in order to keep our long-term interests in view against the temptations of short-term pleasures. It includes fairness and sincerity toward others as means of enjoying peaceful and productive relationships with them. The point of morality was not self-denial and self-sacrifice but self-discipline.

The conservative tradition, by contrast, has always held the older view that our worldly interests reflect the animal side of our nature, which leads us to seek wealth, sexual gratification, and power over others. The function of morality, in this view, is to bridle those desires through self-denial and self-sacrifice. The point of morality is not the pursuit of happiness but the acquisition of virtue; happiness is a blessing that comes and goes but is not what life is about. Thus Peggy Noonan complains, “I think we have lost the old knowledge that happiness is overrated—that, in a way, life is overrated. . . . We are the first generation of man that actually expected to find happiness here on earth.” The virtue ethic is the primary source of concerns about the loss of “family values”—from sexual liberation to gay marriage to working moms to sex- and violence-drenched entertainment—a trend that conservatives blame on hedonism.

Most conservatives see religion as the source of moral standards. An increasingly secular society is therefore bound to be increasingly self-indulgent, as William Bennett warned in a lecture to the Her-

itage Foundation: “In modernity, nothing has been more consequential, or more public in its consequences, than large segments of American society privately turning away from God, or considering Him irrelevant, or declaring Him dead.” That's why the public role of religion has been a major front in the culture wars. Many conservatives today favor state-sponsored prayer in public schools. Some have supported the creationists' effort to counter the teaching of evolution. Many have welcomed what they see as a religious revival in America, specifically the growth of fundamentalist and evangelical denominations.

The belief in a religious basis for morality is not unique to conservatives, however. Their more distinctive theme is that morality needs the backing of tradition, custom, and authority. Like Burke, the conservative tradition has always held that we learn the rules of virtue through social sanctions, which also provide the main incentive to obey the rules. Customs, manners, and mores lose their grip on people who are encouraged to follow their own judgment or offered options among lifestyles. Along with the decline in religious faith, therefore, conservatives lament the weakening grip of tradition and conventional standards of behavior. “Our society now places less value than before,” observes Bennett, “on social conformity, respectability, observing the rules; and less value on correctness and restraint in matters of physical pleasure and sexuality. Higher value is now placed on things like self-expression, individualism, self-realization, and personal choice.” Thus while conservatives, in America at least, generally value independence and innovation in the economic sphere, they seek conformity in the moral sphere of life.

Preserving a morally healthy social environment, in the view of most conservatives, is a function chiefly of civil society rather than government. Coercion is the least effective instrument for encouraging virtue, which is better left to families, churches, professions, mutual aid societies, and other voluntary institutions. Nevertheless, conservatism is open to the possibility of government action as well, of

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“statecraft as soulcraft,” as George Will has put it. Bennett, for example, has said, “We need to make marriage the institution through which all rights and all obligations are exercised.” Kristol insists that government must take “a degree of responsibility for helping to shape the preferences that the people exercise in a free market—to ‘elevate’ them if you will.” Pat Buchanan argues that government should use its power to regulate economic affairs to protect social stability against the dissolving forces of global trade and innovation.

Conservatives, in short, have been critics of the Enlightenment’s confidence in reason and progress as well as its moral and political individualism. But conservatism was only one wing—the premodern wing—of the counter-Enlightenment. On the cultural left, thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx rejected modernity from a different standpoint.

### The Postmodern Culture

Rousseau hated the cosmopolitanism and refinement of Enlightenment life and vehemently criticized inequality, which he thought was an inescapable consequence of civilization. He offered an idealized image of primitive man not yet corrupted by civilization and of life in a nature not yet polluted by cities or machines. The source of those primitivist views was Rousseau’s antipathy to reason. He felt that emotion and instinct should be our guides to action. In this respect, he was the father of the 19th-century Romantic poets and of the counterculture of the 1960s, with its demand for sexual liberation, its contempt for “bourgeois morality,” its emphasis on self-expression rather than self-discipline. The Age of Aquarius sought release from the constraints of reason through drugs and New Age religions. Like Rousseau, it rejected the cosmopolitan modernism of the Enlightenment and praised the authenticity of primitive modes of life.

Rousseau and other thinkers in the postmodern tradition also hated the Enlightenment’s individualism and were repelled by capitalism. Like conservatives, they wanted to reassert the primacy of society over the individual, but they realized that there was no going back. They argued

instead that we must leap forward to a new society in which community, stability, and social control of change were reintroduced in a nonreligious, nontraditional form, as in Marx’s vision of a communist utopia “in which the free development of all is the condition for the free development of each.” Unlike conservatives, postmoderns have generally favored equality as the chief social value, and many were prepared to seek this value through violent revolutionary means.

On the cultural left today, postmodern intellectuals have been vociferous foes of reason, attempting to undermine and expunge the very concepts of truth, objectivity, logic, and fact. The followers of Jacques Derrida claim there is no reality beyond language: we can never see past the assumptions and preconceptions embedded in the way we speak; different societies live in different worlds, have different outlooks, use different methods of thinking, none of which is better than others. Richard Rorty, perhaps the most eminent living philosopher in America, tells us “that the world does not provide us with any criterion of choice between alternative metaphors, that we can only compare languages or metaphors with one another, not with something beyond language called ‘fact.’” For many postmoderns, the use of reason is an exercise in power, a stratagem on the part of white Eurocentric males to dominate women and suppress other cultures.

Few people outside university departments of humanities and social science can swallow such corrosive nihilism at full strength, but it is available in countless diluted forms. Postmodernism has influenced law schools, for example, through the “critical legal theory” movement. And its central themes now dominate schools of education, from which legions of primary and secondary school teachers have learned that respecting other cultures is more important than learning facts or acquiring the methods of thought that enable one to decide which point of view is correct.

Marx’s doctrine of class conflict remains a central article of faith on the cultural left. Multiculturalists have expanded the doctrine to include racial, ethnic, and sexual classes, in addition to the economic divi-

sions that Marx emphasized, but they draw the same distinction between victims and oppressors. In academia, this worldview has led to racial and other preferences. Humanities courses have dropped the works of “dead white European males”—the oppressor class—in favor of works by women, blacks, and other minorities. Postmoderns have created new disciplines of victimology such as “queer studies” and postcolonialism. And they have imposed speech codes, “diversity training” workshops, and other means of enforcing political correctness.

Though postmoderns subscribe to cultural relativism, and deny the possibility of objective knowledge or values, the very term “political correctness” reveals an underlying ethic that they take as an absolute. Indeed, it is a virtue ethic whose essence is self-denial. Like conservatives, postmoderns tend to see the pursuit of happiness as sinful. The standard of sin is different—exploiting minorities and degrading the environment rather than disobedience to God—but sin still entails guilt, atonement, and renunciation. Thus, to take one minor example, many people recycle garbage with all the piety of a daily sacrament. Not one in a hundred could cite evidence that recycling, on net, saves resources, but that’s not the real point; the real point is that recycling is a pain in the neck and thus serves the purpose of atoning for the joys of consumption.

Despite the differences between the cultural right and left and their mutual hostility, there are deep similarities based on their common rejection of modernity. They sometimes join hands against their common enemy. A few years ago, Dave Foreman, founder of the radical left environmental group Earth First!, wrote that Dan Quayle and William Bennett might be on to something in talking about virtue. “There really is a crisis of values in this country, and it really is incumbent on the conservation community to talk about it, to talk about restraint instead of excess, to talk about humility instead of arrogance.” More recently, we have had the spectacle of the “What would Jesus drive?” campaign against gas-guzzling SUVs.

*Continued on page 16*

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# “What is still missing is the awareness of modernity itself as a cause that needs an organized defense, a public identity in cultural debates.”

## **MODERNITY** *Continued from page 15*

Patrick Buchanan on the right and Jeremy Rifkin on the left have united to oppose free trade, immigration, and high-tech innovation. Fundamentalists and radical feminists joined forces in an effort to outlaw pornography. And some conservative intellectuals, like Richard John Neuhaus, editor of the conservative *First Things*, have welcomed the postmodern critique of objectivity: “[Relativists’] rebellion against the pretentious certitudes of Enlightenment rationalism, often defined as modernity, is in large part warranted, and that is the kernel of truth in ‘postmodernism.’”

### **Who Speaks for Modernity?**

The values of modernity still animate much of American life. A commitment to reason is still the operating principle of many intellectuals, especially in the sciences. It is the operating principle in engineering, medicine, and other professions. It is the source of the extraordinary technological advances in computers, telecommunications, and pharmaceuticals, among many other fields. It is the source of new business techniques for financial management and streamlining production. In most areas of our working lives, faith has no voice and tradition is continually overturned.

In the realm of personal life and aspirations, the anti-modern cultures have more sway. Over a third of the populace, to judge by various surveys, look to religious faith as their main source of moral guidance; they believe in the literal truth of the Bible, the immediate presence of God in their lives, and the conservative ethic of duty and virtue. A smaller but more prominent and vocal segment seeks salvation in postmodern values: New Age spirituality, environmental activism, anti-globalization protests. But that leaves a sizable portion whose main concern is personal happiness. Those are the people whose demand for secular moral guidance has fueled a booming industry of self-help books and seminars. In many best-selling works, like those of Philip McGraw and Nathaniel Branden, the message is neither hedonism nor duty but rather a discipline

for pursuing happiness through achievement, commitment, rationality, integrity, and courage.

Who speaks for those values? Who provides the intellectual defense? Who carries the banner of modernity in the culture wars? Among popular writers, Ayn Rand was far and away the most articulate advocate. At the center of her Objectivist philosophy, which she explicitly aligned with the Enlightenment, was a morality of rational individualism. Milton Friedman and other free-market economists who, with Rand, inspired the rebirth of classical liberalism also spoke from the standpoint of modernity. In academia, organizations such as the National Association of Scholars and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education have been formed to defend objective research and academic freedom against the oppressive regime of postmodernism. Individual scholars such as philosopher John Searle and historian Alan Kors have been prominent defenders of what postmoderns dismiss as “the Enlightenment project.” Scientists such as Richard Dawkins, Edward O. Wilson, and Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg have spoken out for the integrity of science against its detractors on the premodern right and postmodern left.

What is still missing, however, is the awareness of modernity itself as a cause

that needs an organized defense, a public identity in cultural debates. Among conservatives, a network of organizations, alliances, and publications has created a shared sense of mission, a kind of party of the cultural right. Whatever specific issues they are concerned with, conservatives know who their allies are. Their cause has a public name and face. The same is true on the left. But as yet there is no party of modernity.

We had a fleeting glimpse of such a party in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, when the terrorist threat to the values of modernity was denounced by commentators across the political spectrum, from Aryeh Neier to Charles Krauthammer, from the *New Republic* to the *Weekly Standard*. An enduring version of that consensus is possible. And it is vital for the future of our civilization.

It is especially important for those who have committed themselves to the political cause of liberty, individual rights, limited government, and capitalism. We are more likely to find allies and converts among those who value reason, happiness, individualism, and progress than among those whose values are premodern or postmodern. It was the Enlightenment that gave us liberty as a moral ideal and a practical system. The culture of modernity is still liberty’s natural home. ■

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## **POLICY FORUM** *Continued from page 10*

reggae music being one example—and they haven’t dwindled away. In spite of all kinds of real hegemony and power, the creative human spirit in those poor countries has managed to do well.

The point about terrorism is an important one. I’m not for all forms of globalization: I’m not for the globalization of attack tactics and weapons. But if we look at the countries from which the terrorists come, we find one very common element. There are very important strands of globalization that those countries have very fiercely resisted. Parts of the Islamic world have fiercely resisted democratization, they have fiercely resisted a market economy,

they have corrupt governments. Saudi Arabia, obviously an important place for terrorism, tries harder than just about anyone else to keep out Western influences, to keep out the idea of gender equality, to keep out a well-functioning labor market, to have censorship, to monitor what’s sent in over the Internet, and so on. I think there is arguably a problem with a kind of halfway globalization that gives some people enough ideas to do some nasty things but not enough of the good part of globalization to have healthy societies. From my point of view, if there’s going to be a solution for the problems in the Islamic world, that solution will be more globalization, not less. ■