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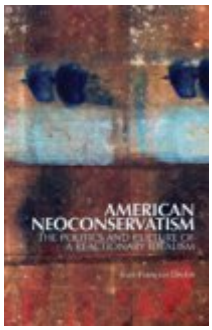

Jean-François Drolet. *American Neoconservatism: The Politics and Culture of a Reactionary Idealism.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. x + 306 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-70228-7.

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In the last decade, "Neoconservativology" has become a sort of interdisciplinary field of research in itself. Historians, political scientists, political theorists, journalists, and the variegated punditocracy dealing with U.S. politics and foreign relations have all discussed and dissected the roots, visions, ideologies, plans, and, sometimes, follies of American neoconservatism. Often dominated by contemporary concerns and interests, this scholarship has produced many instant, and eminently forgettable, books and articles, along with some serious, and less sensational, historical and intellectual works.[1] Jean-François Drolet's *American Neoconservatism* is a welcome addition to the second camp. This is an original and sophisticated analysis of the philosophical, cultural, and intellectual foundations of neoconservatism. The basic argument of the book is quite idiosyncratic and challenges the common wisdom and mainstream literature about neoconservatism. According to Drolet, U.S. neocons were not, as often maintained, "the guardians of a 'liberalism betrayed' by the events of the 1960s" (p. 5). Their conservatism was not liberal, but culturally "authoritarian" and "ferociously predatory on liberal values--both in domestic and global politics" (p. 7). The terrain of the power struggle in which they engaged was primarily cultural. For Drolet, U.S. neoconservatism was "heavily influenced by a radical critique of liberalism and Enlightenment philosophy" which harked back to "the authoritarian intellectual circles of Weimar Germany" (pp. 11-12). The emphasis on culture allows Drolet to introduce the figure of Leo Strauss, who is claimed to have had "a crucial formative influence on many neoconservatives," providing "the movement with vital intellectual ammunitions to fight the culture wars" of the 1960s and 1970s (p. 13).

After a general, introductory chapter on the evolution of post-World War II U.S. conservatism and the rise of neoconservatism, Drolet dedicates his second, quite dense, chapter to Strauss and his "critique of the modern liberal democratic state" (p. 53). Strauss is convincingly linked to and read through Carl Schmitt: precisely the kind of con-

nection, Drolet argues, neocons have always been wary of, given Schmitt's controversial works and life. By focusing on the Schmitt-Strauss exchange on Thomas Hobbes, Drolet discusses the Straussian critique of the Enlightenment, the "self-destructive tendencies of modern rationalism" and the moral void created in modern societies by a "doctrinal worship of reason" that has "led to a world without any commanding truth, in which all opinions are deemed of equal worth and uninhibited individualism is the norm" (pp. 59, 58). From here, Strauss moved progressively to an "intellectual recovery of the wisdom of the ancients," centered on the denunciation of the intellectual crisis of modernity that began with Niccolo Machiavelli and Hobbes, and culminated in the "nihilism and value-relativist philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger" (p. 75). According to Drolet, U.S. neoconservatives adopted, and somehow vulgarized, "Strauss's intellectualization of the crisis of modernity," deploying it in the cultural battles of the 1960s, when new and fashionable intellectual trends were portrayed by neocons as a form of "intellectual leveling resulting from" an "assault on the establishment" (pp. 89, 88).

The following chapters discuss, from different angles, these battles and how they contributed to shape and refine the neoconservative vision. Following a customary pattern, Drolet discusses the culture wars of the 1970s and '80s, the clashes between the neocons and the New Left, and their hostility to the new postindustrial class ("university lecturers, lawyers, computer programmers and bureaucrats of all sorts who make a living from ideas and social criticism," [pp. 106-107]). He offers intelligent and astute comments on the uneasy relationship between neoconservatism and neoliberalism, the market catalyzing some of those degenerate, nihilistic processes the neocons denounced and tried to reverse. "In spite of all the praises for capitalism," Drolet convincingly argues, "neoconservatives are profoundly anxious about the strains which market forces and corporate culture tend to inflict on the American social compact" (p. 96).[2] Hence, the search for an "extra-market moral anchor"--often found in religion--capable of balancing, or at least tempering, materialist infatuations for rationalism, technology, and consumerism (p. 99). As conservative pundit and political theorist William Bennett put it, the return to religion in public discourse was necessary to counter "the new nihilism" and tame the "basest appetites, passions and impulses" of the citizenry (p. 101).[3]

Drolet then examines the neoconservative attack on the post-1960s welfare policies, although this aspect is surprisingly marginal within his analysis. More detailed is the part on the neoconservative vision of international relations and the role of the United States in world affairs. Here, Drolet does not break new ground, but clearly sums up previous works, particularly on the neoconservatives' emphasis on how "regime type" shapes both "domestic and world politics," and their critique of the "static interpretation of history" offered by classical realism (pp. 128, 127). The model of democracy the neocons saw fit, and tried to export, is described as "elitist" and "polyarchic," based on a minimalist--that is, almost exclusively electoral--definition of democracy, which Drolet believes was inspired by Joseph Schumpeter's 1947 classic, ***Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*** (p. 137). Resolutely hostile to liberal globalist projects aimed at consolidating and extending the reach of multilateral institutions and international law, neocons confronted head-on the problem of sovereignty and crisis of the Westphalian model.

Three solutions were offered to the potential conundrum provoked by their resolute defense of national sovereignty and the simultaneous rejection of realism and cosmopolitan liberalism. The first was to connect sovereignty to security and order: "in a nutshell," Drolet writes, "the idea is that in the same way that the norms of sovereignty and non-intervention should be made conditional upon a state's capacity to ensure the basic

well-being and human rights of its citizens, a government that directly or indirectly supports terrorism de facto forfeits its right to rule without external influence" (p. 149). The second--so clearly outlined by Robert Kagan in some of his most famous works--is to replace the liberal chimeras of global governance with the reality of a hegemonic power, the United States, willing and capable to "exclude itself unilaterally from the legal order so as to institute a new set of norms or protect existing norms when the latter are under threat or have become inadequate" (p. 171).[4] The third, and last, is not to reject forms of interstate policy coordination--as long as the United States is "granted special prerogatives and exemptions"--but instead to refuse interpretations of international law that transform it "from a mechanism regulating interstate relations to a regime of individual rights," where the "state remains an important institution but ... ceases to be an end in itself" (p. 176). American neoconservatives consider such a postmodern view of the relationship between law and rights contrary to both America's "republican constitutional tradition" and the assumption that "the legitimacy of positive law is derived first and foremost from the fact that it expresses the will of an historical community" (pp. 176, 177). The last part of the book is thus dedicated to the neoconservative exceptionalist view of the American experience and of the position and role of the United States in the international system. Neocon "sovereigntism" and opposition to global governance are tightly connected to such exceptionalism and the belief in both the uniqueness of U.S. history and the necessity to preserve national identity and consciousness, thereby escaping the dogmas of relativist multilateralism and liberal globalism.

More could and should have been said on the nationalist exceptionalism of the neoconservatives. And this leads to my first criticism of Drolet's work. At a certain point in the book, he convincingly castigates the neoconservatives for casting their democracy promotion discourses in a sort of "political and historical void" (p. 153). Sometimes, however, his analysis seems to suffer from the same problem. Drolet does not engage with the rich historiographical debate on the peculiarities of U.S. nationalism and exceptionalism.[5] The connection between the rise of the New Right and the transformation of U.S. political discourse in the 1970s is read quite unilaterally through the almost exclusive (and inevitably deforming) prism offered by neocon writings. Historical reconstruction is lacking: some of the crucial elements of the complex transition of the 1970s are overlooked or treated in a very scholastic way; the absence of references to the political father of U.S. neoconservatives, Senator Henry Jackson (D-Washington), is baffling and surprising; the scant attention paid to the new discourse of "human rights" and its influence on U.S. foreign relations is hard to justify.[6] By focusing so much on the intellectual debate and the Straussian heritage, Drolet often leaves the history, evolution, and contradictions of U.S. neoconservatism far too much in the backstage.

Finally, by treating neoconservatism as a coherent and unitary phenomenon--and stressing so strongly the formative influence of Strauss--Drolet is compelled to some conceptual and semantic acrobatics, which leaves this reader puzzled and disoriented. The structure of the book itself is sometimes disjointed, and the connection between the Strauss-Schmitt debate, anti-Enlightenment conservatism, modern international relations, and neoconservative foreign policy visions are often tenuous, if not forced and artificial. The conclusions are, in this regard, quite telling. To keep all the threads together, Drolet resorts to a sort of dialectical trick that seems to counter what he wrote a few pages earlier. The "idiosyncratic mixture of realism and idealism" that, according to him, "characterizes the neoconservative mode of political engagement with the world" is thus presented as the "manifestation of a nihilistic and deeply atavistic form of ***Realpolitik***," which "accounts for much of the incoherent fit between the

emancipator rhetoric of neoconservative discourse and the oppressive neo-Hobbesian character of neoconservative politics" (pp. 189, 190). U.S. neoconservatives end up being more or less everything: Straussian and Hobbesian, realists and idealists, interventionist and sovereigntist.

These objections notwithstanding, *American Neoconservatism* is an engaging, stimulating, and important book. It adds another contribution to the (slowly) expanding body of scholarship on U.S. neoconservatism. Drolet not only dissects the intellectual parable and reveals the eccentricities of neoconservatism in the United States, but also offers intriguing insights, well worth being expanded on in future works. (Such studies could include: the new sovereigntism of the neocons; the reflections on the post-Cold War legitimization of the use of violence and the "new American way of warfare" fusing "strategy with ethics" (p. 146); and the connection between the crusades for democracy and U.S. identity.) More important, this unique work complements more conventional studies of neoconservatism, thereby enriching our understanding of such a peculiar, and peculiarly American, intellectual and political phenomenon.

Notes

[1]. Among the latter, the best recent works are Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) (originally published as *Histoire du néoconservatisme aux États-Unis* [Paris: Odile Jacob, 2008]); Maria Ryan, *Neoconservatism and the New American Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); and Danny Cooper, *Neoconservatism and American Foreign Policy: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2010). For an earlier, but still highly valuable, book on U.S. neoconservatives and foreign affairs, see John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1994* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

[2]. On this aspect, see also Corey Robin, "*Remembrance* of Empires *Past*: 9/11 and the End of the Cold War," in *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History after the Fall of Communism*, ed. Ellen Schrecker (New York: New Press, 2004), 274-297.

[3]. William Bennet, "America's Cultural Decline Must Be Reversed," *Human Events* 50 (1994): 12-13.

[4]. Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America vs. Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003); and Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012). For an incisive critique of Kagan, see David Runciman, "A Bear Armed with a Gun," *The London Review of Books* 25 (April 3, 2003); and Tony Judt, "America and the World," *The New York Review of Books* 50 (April 10, 2003).

[5]. See, for instance, Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *The American Historical Review* 96 (October 1991): 1031-1055; Daniel Rodgers, "Exceptionalism," in *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past*, ed. Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 21-40; and Daniel Rodgers, "American Exceptionalism Revisited," *Raritan* 24 (Fall 2004): 21-47.

[6]. On U.S. foreign relations and domestic tribulations in the 1970s we have now some excellent, and very innovative, works. Among them are Charles Maier, Niall Fergusson, Erez Manela, and Daniel Sargent, eds., *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010); Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); and Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History* (Prince-

ton:Princeton University Press, 2011). On human rights and the crucial shift of the 1970s, see Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

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Mario Del Pero is Associate Professor of U.S. History at the University of Bologna. Among his most recent publications are *Libertà e Impero. Gli Stati Uniti e il Mondo, 1776-2011* [*Empire and Liberty. The United States and the World, 1776-2011*], Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2011 (2nd ed.); *Democrazie. L’Europa meridionale e la fine delle dittature* [Democracies. Southern Europe and the End of Dictatorships], Rome: Le Monnier, 2010 (with Víctor Gavín, Fernando Guirao and Antonio Varsori); and *The Eccentric Realist: Henry Kissinger and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010, and *Spiare e Tradire. Dietro Le Quinte della Guerra Fredda* [Spying and Betraying. Behind the Scenes of the Cold War], Milan, Feltrinelli, 2011 (with Phillip Deery).

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