

BOOKS

[*Conservatives Without Conscience*, John Dean, Viking, 288 pages]

Conformity Without Conscience

By Austin Bramwell

SOMETHING IS ROTTEN in the state of conservatism, says John Dean in *Conservatives Without Conscience*. Today's conservatives are "hostile and mean-spirited," "vengeful, pitiless, exploitive, manipulative, dishonest, cheaters, prejudiced, mean-spirited [again], militant, nationalistic, and two-faced," not to mention "enemies of freedom, antidemocratic, antiequality, highly prejudiced, mean-spirited [once more], power hungry, Machiavellian, and amoral." Mental handicaps such as "intolerance of ambiguity, need for certainty or structure in life, overreaction to threats, and a disposition to dominate others" turn them ineluctably into "authoritarians" and "social dominators." Unless stopped, Dean warns, conservatives "will take American democracy where no freedom-loving person would want it to go."

Those who buy the conclusion that Dean all but assumes—namely, that movement conservatives are destroying the Republic—will find all this wonderfully cathartic. No need to troll the internet for anti-Republican Party talking points: *Conservatives Without Conscience* hits them all. The GOP has shifted to the extreme right and imposed virtual one-party rule; evangelicals want to install a theocracy and tear down the wall of separation between church and state; the Bush administration has stripped citizens of their civil liberties and emasculated the other branches of

government; social conservatives hate women and gays and want to reduce them to second-class citizens; conservative legal scholars, merely by questioning the theory of judicial supremacy (which Dean confuses with the power of judicial review), threaten the independence of the courts. The right wing gets away with these and other crimes by being a bunch of hypocritical, sanctimonious jerks.

Humorlessly posing as a disinterested champion of the public weal, Dean defends his unkind words for conservatives by invoking the theory of the "authoritarian personality." First introduced by the neo-Freudian Theodor Adorno in the 1940s but largely discredited by the 1970s, the theory evidently still has its champions, who have carried on a small, if obscure, research industry in its name. Their work does not appear to have earned widespread acceptance among academic psychologists. No matter: in Dean's mind, as he spends the bulk of *Conservatives Without Conscience* arguing, the theory of the authoritarian personality establishes the malevolence of conservatives as scientific fact.

To anyone not blind with ideological rage, however, the theory has patent flaws. The whole thing turns out to be rather trivial, notwithstanding all the portentous claims made on the theory's behalf. Take, for example, the work of Dean's favorite guru, a University of Manitoba psychologist named Robert Altemeyer. Altemeyer has spent a career administering a questionnaire he calls the "Right Wing Authoritarianism Survey," in which he asks subjects to agree or disagree with statements such as "the old-fashioned ways and old-fashioned values still show the best way to live" or "there is nothing wrong with premarital sexual intercourse." After collecting the results, Altemeyer goes on to find that those who score high on the "RWA" scale also tend to be political conservatives. Well, yeah: the questions themselves do little more than elicit conservative or liberal attitudes in the first place. The RWA scale shows only that conservative beliefs correlate well with ... other conservative beliefs. Call it science if you will—Dean

does—but it certainly hasn't much in the way of explanatory power.

Furthermore, to the extent that the RWA survey measures anything at all, it measures nothing close to what Altemeyer thinks it does. Is it true, for example, that "Our country desperately needs a mighty leader who will do what has to be done to destroy the radical new ways and sinfulness that are ruining us"? Maybe Altemeyer thinks that anyone who answers "yes" pines for a charismatic nationalist leader *a la*—who else?—Adolf Hitler. But, in fact, any effective political leader could fit the description. In the civil-rights era, for example, did not our country "desperately need" (to rectify injustice) a "mighty leader" (he certainly had a large following) such as the sainted Martin Luther King Jr. who was willing to "do what it takes" (organize marches and boycotts) to "stamp out" (end) "sinfulness" (segregation) and "radical new ways" (racist backlash)? Logical consistency would compel nearly everyone to agree with the statement, no matter how provocatively phrased. If it turns out that only conservatives say that they agree, this shows only that conservatives understand the meaning of words.

The RWA survey teems with other such statements, many of almost irredeemable silliness. Take, for example, "God's laws about abortion, pornography and marriage must be strictly followed." Well, who could disagree with that? If God's laws are by definition perfectly good, then by *modus ponens* one should follow them whether God exists or not. The statement is as self-evidently true as "All unicorns are horses." Curiously, however, Altemeyer finds that left-wingers tend to disagree with the statement. One may conclude, therefore, that leftist ideology tends to incapacitate logic—an important result, perhaps worthy of further research, but not the one Altemeyer was going for.

Meanwhile, the RWA survey seems specifically calculated to avoid identifying authoritarian attitudes on the Left. Altemeyer claims to have looked for left-wing authoritarians but failed to find them. If

so, this does not speak well of his scientific imagination. One could probably find left-wing authoritarians in an afternoon by asking subjects if they agree that “those with intolerant or bigoted views shouldn’t be allowed to express them in public” or “God condemns anyone who is judgmental or intolerant of people who have different religions or lifestyles.” Instead, the “left-wing” statements on the RWA survey—e.g., “there’s nothing wrong with nudist camps”—merely afford subjects an opportunity to show how free-thinking they are. Not once does the RWA survey attempt to draw out the myriad conventions and prejudices that characterize left-wing ideologies.

Finally, Altemeyer’s research never comes close to demonstrating that “authoritarian” attitudes, as measured on his survey, actually predict authoritarian behavior—or any other kind of behavior, for that matter, whether good or bad. (Hilariously, Dean himself, in a passage on how hypocritical conservatives are, cites research showing that conservatives tend to behave just like everyone else.) Altemeyer’s favorite proof of right-wing turpitude comes from something he designed called the “Global Change Game.” Altemeyer does not explain the game in detail, but, essentially, participants control various regions of the globe and then make decisions (e.g., wage war, allocate “resources,” restrain population growth) about what their respective regions will do. Apparently, when only RWAs played the game, “after 40 years, not counting nuclear war, 2.1 billion people had died.”

Frightening, no? Only until one reads that the 2.1 billion figure was calculated “according to a complicated formulae used in the game to take into account the consequences of war, long-term unemployment, malnutrition and poor medical infrastructures.” In other words, the results of any game simply reflect the designers’ assumptions as to how the world really works. Altemeyer takes it for granted, for example, that foreign aid from wealthy countries reduces suffering in poor countries, notwithstanding the contrary theory

that foreign aid makes matters worse by entrenching kleptocracies and rewarding government failure. Hence, the hapless high RWAs who don’t see the world the way Altemeyer does necessarily fail when they play the game. The Global Change Game, in short, proves only that Altemeyer’s political views differ from those of conservatives. As he is hardly reticent about making this point to begin with, it is unclear why he needed a “sophisticated simulation” to prove it.

So much for the theory of the authoritarian personality. Whatever its scientific merits, as a systematic explanation of political behavior it is plainly bogus. The theory’s implications for political theory, moreover, are chillingly, shall we say, authoritarian. “Probably about 20 to 25 percent of the adult American population,” Altemeyer tells Dean, “is so right-wing authoritarian, so scared, so self-righteous, so ill-informed, and so dogmatic that nothing you say or do will change their minds. They would march America into a dictatorship and probably feel that things had improved as a result ... they are not going to let up and they are not going to go away.” Let us pray that nobody takes Altemeyer’s views seriously. Personally, I would rather not live in a time when the conviction became popular that a minority of citizens threatened the well-being of everyone else. Altemeyer, I fear, would march his country into a dictatorship and probably feel that things had improved as a result.

What remains of *Conservatives Without Conscience* is a series of profiles of such figures as Phyllis Schlafly, G. Gordon Liddy, and Newt Gingrich, all of whom Dean diagnoses as classic authoritarians. Although I cannot assess the accuracy of his research, I would not recommend putting much confidence in it. As it happens—full disclosure here—Dean includes me and my wife in his rogue’s gallery of right-wingers, and, while he does not treat us as harshly as he does, say, Pat Robertson, he bungles my argument made in these pages that Congress has the power to define marriage as between a man and a woman. Dean says that I “relied on the same

approach employed by an uglier version of conservatism in a past era: white supremacy,” yet my argument assumed the very opposite. Given that the Constitution protects the right to marry against infringement by the states, I wrote, Congress can enforce that right by preventing the states from redefining the institution of marriage out of existence. In other words, I rejected the segregationists’ argument that the Constitution does not protect the right to marry. Since Dean is too intelligent to have made such a mistake, I can only assume that his purpose was to put the words “a young conservative” (that’s me) and “white supremacy” in the same sentence. Not very sporting.

For all the book’s flaws, Dean has addressed a timely and important topic. The conservative movement has become a powerful force in America; for that reason alone, one would like to see how and why it works. Dean’s thesis, however, that nefarious authoritarians suddenly overwhelmed it, adds almost nothing to our understanding. He may as well have said that conservatism was taken over by zombies.

A more insightful book might say the following. First, the conservative movement in large part exists to promote intellectual conformity. Few writers or scholars affiliated with the movement care to risk their sinecures (or their institutions’ funding) by disagreeing too vociferously with the official movement position. Consciously or unconsciously, right-wing writers instead tend to suppress thoughts that may be deemed too eccentric or independent. Meanwhile, the movement selects and promotes the careers of young writers whose primary qualification consists of believing *ab initio* what the movement tells them to believe. One should not be surprised, given this incentive structure, if the movement has become increasingly bland, notwithstanding the usual humbug about how intellectually superior the Right is these days. Blandness is part of the institutional design.

Second, those at the top of the conservative movement have wide discretion to set its movement’s official positions.

Bedrock or founding principles, whatever they may be, play very little role in determining what policies the conservative movement will embrace. Whatever may be said of the Bush administration's policies in Iraq, for example, they were surely not deduced from immutable conservative principles. Nevertheless, the signature achievement of the conservative movement in the past decade has been to rally—or, perhaps more accurately, manufacture—public support for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. With just one or two changes in personnel, however, one could easily imagine events turning out very differently. Reckless or prudent, thoughtful or ignorant, the opinion-mongers at the top set the movement line; the other constituents—the donors, the directors, and the other writers and the consumers of opinion—then accept and promulgate whatever positions the movement tells them to.

This is, of course, precisely how ideology works. In one of the better passages in *Conservatives Without Conscience*, Dean rejects the view—upon reflection, almost patently false—that “conservatism” as now understood is not an ideology. He rightly senses that conservatism, in the philosophic sense, does not define the conservative movement; rather, the conservative movement now defines conservatism, at least as far as the media and the public understand the term. In Dean's model, however, conservative elites respond to the (dangerous) psychological demands of the conservative masses. It is much more likely that, on the contrary, the conservative masses respond to the demands of a handful of movement elites. An open question remains as to who, exactly, constitutes the elite, especially as movement institutions that once sought to change minds now passively disseminate opinions devised by newer, more vigorous outlets. In any case, it will take another book to provide a better understanding of how the conservative movement actually functions. ■

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[*The Big Ripoff: How Big Business and Big Government Steal Your Money*, Timothy P. Carney, John Wiley & Sons, 304 pages]

Partners in Crime

By Bruce Bartlett

ONE OF THE MOST common media myths is that Big Business is relentlessly in favor of the free market. Corporate lobbyists, we are told almost daily, use their campaign contributions mainly to prompt Congress to get government off business's back and gut regulations that protect consumers. Without the federal government to defend us from Big Business, we would all be at its mercy.

Those who actually observe Big Business at work in Washington on a day-to-day basis, however, have long known that this is nothing but a caricature with little basis in truth. The reality is that Big Business is and always has been one of the principal proponents of Big Government in the U.S. They are not so much enemies as partners—occasionally competitors, but never really enemies—each using the other to serve its own ends.

Any conservative activist in Washington or the state capitals can probably cite chapter and verse about being betrayed by corporate lobbyists, who sold out the free market in a nanosecond when they calculated that it would add to the bottom line. And this is true even in cases where some proposed law or regulation hurt every business. What the lobbyists will often do is calculate that their business will be hurt a little bit less—perhaps because they have managed to slip some exception or loophole for themselves into the law or regulation—thereby giving them a competitive advantage.

In *The Big Ripoff*, journalist Tim Carney documents the symbiotic relationship between Big Government and Big Business and how they work together to squeeze taxpayers and consumers. It is must-reading for every con-

servative activist, especially those who must work with the business community.

The idea that business and government have more in common than not was observed more than 200 years ago by Adam Smith, the wisest of all economists. “The interest of the dealers,” he wrote, “is always in some respects different from, and even opposite to, that of the public. To widen the market and to narrow competition, is always the interest of the dealers.”

Government regulation, Smith went on to observe in *The Wealth of Nations*, always restricted competition, with the result that businesses were able to raise prices. “To levy, for their own benefit, an absurd tax upon the rest of their fellow-citizens,” as he put it. Therefore, government should be extremely cautious about imposing new regulations, especially those requested by the businessmen themselves.

Carney points out that many of the government's most onerous regulations were indeed imposed at the behest of the businesses that were regulated. One of the earliest examples was the meat packers, who requested government regulation after their industry had been exposed by muckraking journalist Upton Sinclair in 1906. He documented the unspeakably filthy conditions in which raw meat was handled in those days in his book *The Jungle*.

The meat packers quickly recognized that only government inspections would get consumers to buy meat again, even from meat packers who had always observed sanitary methods. Although their costs would rise, so would their sales in the long run. In 1932, Sinclair lamented the fact that the meat inspection system instituted by Teddy Roosevelt “is maintained and paid for by the people of the United States for the benefit of the packers.”

Citing research by historian Gabriel Kolko, Carney points to a number of businesses and industries that have solicited government regulation in order to suppress competition and improve their profits. These include trucking, airlines, steel, and railroads.