

[What Are Intellectuals Good For? by George Scialabba]

Untenured Radical

Clearing space for the utopian imagination

By Patrick Allitt

SPARE A THOUGHT, conservatives, for America's leftist intellectuals. The Right has had its ups and downs over the last 30 years, but the Left has had nothing but downs. What could be more painful than to see so many of your hopes hammered flat by history, so many good intentions turned to ashes? All the more reason then for readers from Left and Right alike to salute George Scialabba, whose new book teaches valuable lessons on how to look difficulties in the face and to accept defeat gracefully.

Scialabba is a rare bird among serious nonfiction writers in that he's not a professor or a foundation fellow. In some ways reminiscent of the longshoreman-philosopher Eric Hoffer, he comes to the work of Plato, David Hume, Matthew Arnold, and Karl Marx not on the basis of a life spent in university seminars but from his own experiences as a social worker and office clerk. He can always produce an appropriate insight from John Stuart Mill or a scintillating quip from George Bernard Shaw. He keeps alive the ideals of the Enlightenment, dares to think utopian thoughts, and still feels the romantic pull of the Left, but hardly ever succumbs to wishful thinking. This collection of his essays and reviews from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s makes surprising reading, not least because Scialabba, from a principled position on the Left, makes so many assertions with which conservatives will readily agree.

His heroes are the public intellectuals of the 20th century who spoke for a humane version of socialism, who

rebuked cruelty and malice wherever they found them (including on their own side), and who resisted the temptation of thinking in lockstep for political reasons. He singles out for high praise Randolph Bourne, Dwight Macdonald, George Orwell, and Irving Howe among the English speakers, Albert Camus, Nicola Chiaromonte, and Ignazio Silone among the Europeans. They all brought wide learning, moral subtlety, and a refined literary style to their work.

Why, Scialabba asks, are such writers no longer to be found? Part of the problem is the greater complexity of the world, many elements of which can be mastered only through years of technical training and specialization. A general familiarity with the humanities and a deep sense of common decency might have been sufficient for Orwell to denounce the Communists in the Spanish Civil War, but it's not enough when the issues are ICBM-targeting doctrine, biotechnological research, and the arcane lore of leveraged buyouts. Today's public intellectuals find it difficult to speak confidently on more than a few topics. Another part of the problem is the vastly increased sophistication of government and corporations, whose manipulation of the media and whose skillful, unrelenting propaganda have come almost to shape the reality in which we live. "When amateurs were in charge of deceiving the public about American foreign policy," Scialabba writes, "they did it badly; Henry Kissinger, Richard Perle, and Elliott Abrams are another matter entirely."

But must increasing complexity and the sinister reach of propaganda end the dream of a better world? In a meditation on utopianism, Scialabba says no. He understands the intellectual progress of recent centuries as a joint venture undertaken by skeptics and visionaries, who challenged ancient falsehoods and dreamed of a finer world: "The skeptics can be seen as clearing a space for the utopian imagination, for prophecies of a demystified community, of solidarity without illusions. The skeptics weed, the visionaries water." He is not ashamed to outline his own utopia, a world in which everyone will sing in harmony at least once a week, in which folks will know plenty of great poems and speeches by heart, have useful and stimulating work, enjoy civil arguments with one another, won't depend on consumerism for a feeling of self-worth, and will be able to hike in unspoiled wilderness. I would be glad to join him there.

Scialabba regrets that most leftist intellectuals have given up on utopia and retreated completely into academic life. They deceive themselves, he argues, when they claim that their esoteric work in critical theory has political significance. Their ventures in multiculturalism, he adds, are often mere academic empire building, which do little or nothing to aid the actual disadvantaged members of society. Worse, by asserting that their academic work is "political," they feel absolved from doing the hard and joyless work of organizing and agitating that their predecessors generally undertook.

Equally, he regards the Left's politicization of high culture as "misguided and counterproductive," and he deplores the "staggering amount of mediocre and tendentious" art that has been produced on behalf of political correctness. In an essay about *The New Criterion*, he notes that its editors, Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball, find it difficult to specify the exact aesthetic and moral criteria by which all art should be judged. Never mind, he says, it is enough that they "muddle along, employing and occasionally articulating the criteria that have emerged from our culture's conversation since the Greeks initiated it, and showing that what used to and still usually does underwrite our judgments about beauty and truth is inconsistent with giving Robert Mapplethorpe a one-man show ... or Toni Morrison a Nobel Prize."

He has no patience with writers whose zeal leads them to misrepresent their opponents. For example, in a devastating critique of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, he describes the Palestinian scholar's tendency to offer only a grotesquely distorted version of his antagonists' views, straw men that are inevitably easy to knock over. Said's writing is "clumsy, stilted, verbose, imprecise and marinated—pickled—in academic jargon," and his "polemical manners are atrocious." You can almost taste Scialabba's indignation as he reproaches Christopher Hitchens for abandoning old friends after 9/11 and becoming an aggressive advocate of war against radical Islam: "On and on Hitchens's polemics against the left have raged, a tempest of inaccuracy, illogic, and malice," whose cumulative effect has been to damage his "reputation for fairness and urbanity."

Scialabba is often hard on conservatives, too. He describes the late Irving Kristol as an "anti-public intellectual" and makes a persuasive case that William F. Buckley Jr. never understood

the irreconcilability of Catholicism and capitalism, his Church and his ideology. In many places, however, Scialabba's ideas do coincide with those of conservatives. This convergence is apparent, first, in his recognition that elites are indispensable and that it's no good hoping for sustained virtue and wisdom from "the people." Democracy and equality are ideals to aspire to, but ineradicable differences among people, and the fact that most people are neither willing nor able to lead, puts responsibility in the hands of a conscientious and highly educated minority.

Another point of convergence is Scialabba's rejection of economic centralization and his acceptance of the market economy. In an essay on the English philosopher John Gray, he writes that "self-reliance, self-restraint, and the other virtues fostered by market relations are indispensable" and that "markets are far superior epistemically to any alternative yet proposed."

Most conservatives would stay with him when he makes an important qualification: "It is also true that humans flourish only in the shelter of families, neighborhoods, tribes, traditions, and well-known and loved places, and only with a minimum of economic security," all of which are threatened by the remorseless spread of market relations into ever more areas of human life. He takes seriously the idea that modernity constitutes a vast assault on family integrity. In a sympathetic reading of Christopher Lasch's *Haven in a Heartless World*, he recognizes the possibility that civilization took a fatal wrong turn when it accepted mass industrialization. It snuffed out the possibility of small-scale production and the family as the basic productive unit in the economy, changes with whose jarring psychological consequences we are still coming to terms. Scialabba's gloss on Lasch brings to mind Russell Kirk's inveighing against industrialization in the

opening pages of *The Conservative Mind*. He also deplores the remorseless grip of television, arguing that young Americans who watch hundreds of hours of junk TV are fatally compromised in their ability to learn and love their nation's political traditions.

Scialabba opposes the standardization and facelessness that often accompany modernity. In an essay on Michael Walzer, he speaks up against abstractions and in favor of particular, usually national, loyalties. "The minimal code of near-universally recognized rights that underwrites international law is too thin to support a dense moral culture. Only a shared history—which usually means a national history—of moral discourse, political conflict, and literary achievement can generate values of sufficient thickness and depth." Again, conservative readers would nod in agreement.

Moreover, Scialabba resists the temptation to think that the end sometimes justifies the means. He praises Lionel Trilling for his chastened sense of progressivism, his insistence that moral scrupulosity always matters, no matter how desirable the political objective. Trilling's view, he argues, was "yes to greater equality, inclusiveness, cooperation, tolerance, social experimentation, individual freedom ... but only after listening to everything that can be said against one's cherished projects, assuming equal intelligence and good faith on the part of one's opponents, and tempering one's zeal with the recognition that every new policy has unintended consequences, sometimes very bad ones." Insights like these, scattered throughout this collection, offer a welcome reminder that the distance between at least some parts of the Left and Right is far smaller than our more irritable pundits would like us to believe.

A cloud of gloom hangs over most of these essays, but Scialabba never feels sorry for himself. You can rely on him to

inject flashes of wit into the most sober accounts of the Left's decline. He describes Stanley Fish's mood as "about as wistful as the twelve-cylinder engine of his infamous Jaguar," and he imagines Russell Jacoby as a kind of intellectual dentist "scouring verbal plaque and conceptual decay with his high-powered electric-sarcastic drill." Advocates of multiculturalism, he observes in another review, including "quite a few college presidents, professors, schoolteachers, and principals," are "plausibly depicted, largely in their own words, as horses' asses."

It's hard to imagine that readers of *The American Conservative* would turn left after reading Scialabba's essays. More likely, they will be astonished at his stubborn integrity on behalf of a vanishing ideal. Perhaps, however, he will make them re-think certain overused formulae, such as the familiar claim that Marxist theory led straight to the Gulag Archipelago. Not so, says Scialabba; Stalinism was "more like Czarism plus electricity." The horrors of 20th-century Soviet history will be grasped not by a study of dialectical materialism but only by prolonged learning in Russian history.

Agreed. We all get lazy, we all have intellectual blind spots, and there's a great deal to be said for thinking unfamiliar thoughts, especially when they are attractively and persuasively presented by a graceful stylist. Travel broadens the mind, and a journey into George Scialabba's mental world—at once entirely familiar and strangely foreign—will remind us that history is rarely the struggle of right against wrong. Much more often it is the struggle of right against right. ■

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Party Favors

Conservative bestsellers run long on celebrity but short on ideas.

By John Carney

EVEN IN LEAN ECONOMIC times, conservative books are a booming business. Once right-wing publishing was the province of profitless true believers. Now conservative imprints are ensconced in most of New York's major publishing houses. The liberals who dominate the scene hold their noses while their hired-hand conservatives bid big dollars for contracts with the Right's marquee names.

On one level, it is tempting to greet the rise of the conservative bestseller with elation. Our long exile from the world of letters has ended. We're on the *New York Times* bestseller list. We have arrived. But where?

The triumph of conservative book sales has not coincided with great gains for conservative ideas in politics or the broader culture. Conservatives hold little sway in the Republican Party, and the Republican Party holds little sway in the nation's capital. We're the backbench of a minority. More importantly, there's not much intellectual rigor in the Right's bestsellers. For all the pages printed, the movement runs short on real ideas.

Before Regnery Publishing launched a million anti-Clinton tracts—the first signal to mainstream houses that a certain kind of conservative book could power up the charts—it dealt in short runs of weighty tomes and took a kind of pride in the purity of its niche. Founder Henry Regnery observed in his *Memoirs of a Dissident Publisher*, "In

matters of excellence the market is a poor judge. The books that are most needed are often precisely those that will have only a modest sale." He lived by those words—early Regnery books included such highbrow, less-than-stellar sellers as Catholic existentialist Gabriel Marcel's *Man Against Mass Society* and Martin Heidegger's *What Is a Thing?* "A remark my father made to me sticks in my memory," he recalled, "If you ever begin to make any money in that business you are going into, you can be pretty sure that you are publishing the wrong kind of books."

Regnery made bold choices, also bringing to market works by untested authors—a young Yale student, one William F. Buckley Jr., taking aim at his godless university, and an eccentric Michigan State history instructor whose *Conservative Mind* would become the movement's catechism. Back then criticism of liberalism was subject to the standards of good literature and the demands of logic, with stalwarts like Albert J. Nock, T.S. Eliot, and Richard M. Weaver at the helm. They built a canon that has endured for generations.

Now conservative offerings come with diagrams of farting cows—bless Glenn Beck. No one is likely to have his worldview rocked by Sean Hannity's *Deliver Us From Evil* or his political eyes opened by Michelle Malkin's *Unhinged*. Laura Ingraham's *Shut Up and Sing* slides easily down the memory hole. But permanence isn't their intent.