

BOOKS

America's 30 Years War

by Balint Vazsonyi

Regnery Publishing • 1998 • 285 pages • \$24.95

Reviewed by Clarence B. Carson

As a child of eight, Balint Vazsonyi experienced National Socialism (Nazism) when the Germans took control of his native Hungary during World War II. In 1948, the Communist Party came to power, followed by Soviet occupation and the elimination of all opposition. Those events left a lasting impression on him, and he concluded that Nazism and communism were branches of the same socialist plant, differing only slightly in the details.

Vazsonyi was able to escape to the United States in 1959. A virtuoso pianist with a strong interest in philosophy, he has been a keen observer of the American scene ever since. He concludes that for at least 30 years a struggle (he terms it a war) has gone on between those who would transform the United States into a socialist nation and those who would preserve—or perhaps we should say restore—the principles of the Constitution. This book expresses his observations on the course of that war.

The frame in which he encloses his argument is original, and his insights into how the United States is being transformed (which is to say that the war is not going well) are worth studying. Vazsonyi's early experiences with the twin evils of Nazism and communism make his book all the more compelling.

He argues that the war is really between two different ways of looking at the relationship between man and government: what he calls the "Anglo-American" view that individual rights are prior to government and that government must be constitutionally restrained to protect those rights, and what he calls the "Franco-German" view that government needs to be absolutist and wield enormous power to bring about the best possible society.

These peoples are the only ones, in his view, who have produced political theories worth attending to.

This way of characterizing the opposing sides may well produce more heat than light. Neither the French nor the Germans are apt to be pleased at being credited with a series of disastrous, discredited ideas; nor have the Anglo-Americans been pure defenders of the ideas of individual liberty and limited government. England has as good a claim to the title "birthplace of evolutionary socialism" as any.

It is not at all clear to me that ideas have a native habitat and that there are national traits in political philosophy. We do ill, I think, to attribute the liking for or antipathy to various political arrangements to whole peoples. Vazsonyi would have done better to avoid pinning a national label on the contending theories.

That aside, Vazsonyi provides many clear insights into how socialist thought has mutated through hard experience to become more dangerous to America. He writes, for example, "The appetite to manage all corporations, large and small, has given way to the realization that a combination of threats, restrictions, and controls will provide access to the fruit, without ever having to plant the tree, buy the fertilizer, or perform any of the ongoing chores that go with production." This is the triumph of the fascist (Nazi) side of socialism, the realization that you encounter less resistance and get "better" results by insinuating the state into a position to take key decision-making power away from private owners, rather than trying to expropriate those owners directly.

Having lived under the control of the commissars, Vazsonyi is able to clearly see current trends in the United States. He can see how our own bureaucrats are increasingly resembling those commissars in their control over our lives. Rightly, he understands that the environmental movement and its accompanying hordes of bureaucrats are erecting a structure for a vast expansion of government authority. Since almost every use of land or activity could be said to have some impact on the environment, we are moving toward a future in which government officials will have enormous control over us.

Vazsonyi also correctly sees that piecemeal opposition to the modified socialist program is a losing game. If we argue over the “right” amount of government control, each time hoping to negotiate a somewhat better deal from the socialists than they initially propose, we are certain to see a continuing erosion of our freedom. He argues strongly in favor of an uncompromising return to our original constitutional principles, and to that I shout “Bravo.” □

Clarence Carson, a contributing editor of The Freeman, has written and taught extensively, specializing in American intellectual history.

In Praise of Commercial Culture

by Tyler Cowen

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• \$27.95

Reviewed by Donald J. Boudreaux

For most of this century, capitalism was regularly accused of not delivering the goods as efficiently as could socialism. Today, this accusation packs as much persuasive force as do claims that ouija boards foster communication between the living and the dead. Even capitalism’s most strident critics today admit that capitalism can’t be beat at satisfying people’s material needs. “In fact,” bark the critics, “that’s the real problem with capitalism: it’s too responsive to consumers!” Capitalism’s unparalleled capacity for delivering new ‘n’ improved things to satisfy the vulgar needs of the masses supposedly results in a shallow culture, whose dumbed-down denizens recognize Ronald McDonald’s mug more readily than they recognize Mozart’s music.

Unlike the productivity-based criticisms of capitalism, the cultural criticism of free markets comes not only from the left, but also from the right. When the likes of hyper-feminist Catharine MacKinnon are joined in their crusade against free markets by influential conservatives such as Pat Buchanan and William Kristol, the resulting coalition might well turn out to be fatal to capitalism.

The menace of this left-right alliance against the alleged cultural inadequacies of capitalism is reason alone to applaud—loudly, while standing!—Tyler Cowen’s *In Praise of Commercial Culture*. But this book’s virtues go well beyond the assistance it delivers in the intellectual battle against those who would substitute the whims of a political elite for the wishes of individuals. Cowen’s book is also a wellhead of information about art, music, and literature, brimming with economically inspired insights into the patterns of culture and people’s responses to those patterns.

Cowen, a professor of economics at George Mason University, uses as a springboard in his book the continuing debate between “cultural pessimists” and “cultural optimists.” He casts his lot squarely with the (outnumbered) optimists. His case for cultural optimism is woven skillfully from sound economics and a careful study of cultural history.

One element of Cowen’s argument grows from his exploration of the sources of cultural pessimism. Many pessimists are simply unimaginative old coots—as Cowen writes, they “identify great culture with what they know and have learned to love.” If you spend, say, the first 40 years of your life listening only to the music of baroque composers, when you first hear the music of romantics such as Tchaikovsky, it sounds barbarous. In economic terms, you dislike post-baroque music because you haven’t yet developed the human capital required to appreciate it.

Cowen also exposes the self-centeredness of many cultural pessimists. If the masses can enjoy a new work immediately, cultural pessimists haughtily pan it; but if the cultural pessimists themselves are baffled by the work, they dismiss it as illegitimate. Each pessimist regards his or her own unique accumulation of cultural human capital to be the only legitimate accumulation.

Another source of cultural pessimism that Cowen identifies is fear of the future. Many people truly fear for society when they see its cultural basis changing. This fear, however, owes far more to lack of imagination than to any evidence that cultural change necessarily portends social dry rot or disintegration. The culture of 1990s America differs from that of