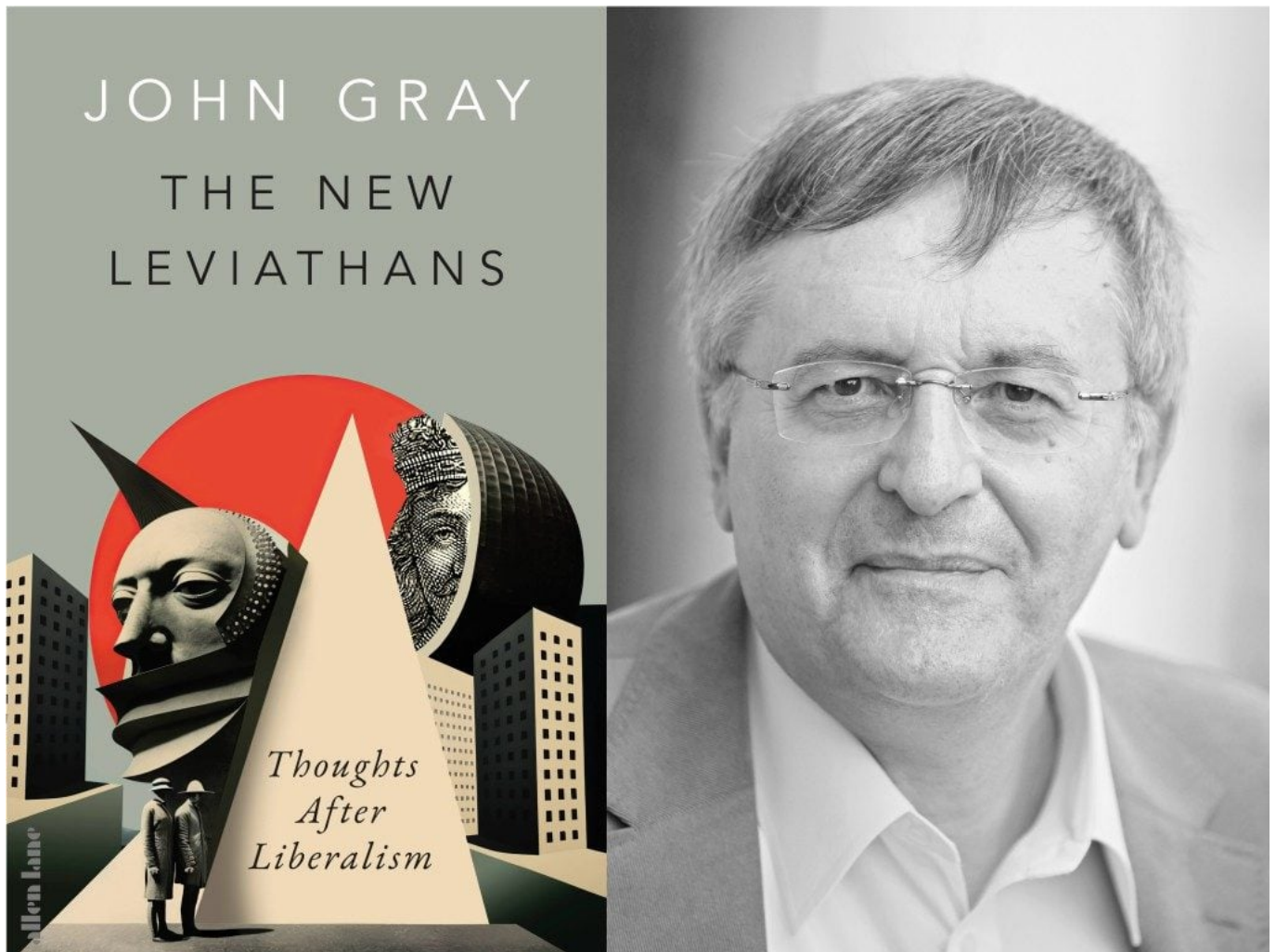


# The New Leviathans



**a review by Theodore Dalrymple**

[\*The New Leviathans: Thoughts After Liberalism\*](#), by John Gray (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 192 pp., \$24.49)

A well-known philosopher and social commentator, John Gray is difficult to place on any political spectrum. Sometimes he sounds like a student revolutionary, at others like the chief leader-writer of the *Daily Telegraph*. His main effect, or at any rate aim, is to puncture the complacency of those who believe they have a doctrine that will answer all of life's problems, from personal to political, from social to economic. Chief among these in the West is the doctrine of liberal democracy, which seemed to have triumphed so comprehensively with the fall of the Berlin Wall, but now, only 34 years

later, is in retreat even in those polities in which it appeared most firmly rooted.

Gray's short new book employs a scattergun approach, and sometimes reads like the essay of a clever young man who is proud to have read so widely and likes to quote from authors whom his readers have not read or of whom they have not even heard, both to humiliate them and to establish his own erudition. This makes it hard to follow the thread of the argument—but since it is central to Gray's outlook that there can be no final, satisfactory answer to the question of how best life is to be lived, or what political arrangements best encourage the good life (or even the salience of those questions themselves), he has to be careful not to erect a settled doctrine himself. Somewhat miscellaneous reflections, inspired by Hobbes but taking in figures from Hegel and Marx to Beckett, and from Schopenhauer and Bettina Spielrein to Vladimir Putin, are his favored way of proceeding. This method easily descends into the undisciplined; nevertheless, Gray is stalking a prey of some size and importance.

It is his contention that liberal democracy contains within itself the seeds of its own decay—what Marxists would once have called its internal contradictions—because it is not moored to any substantive belief system, such as that which Christianity once supplied. Under what he calls *hyperliberalism*, the individual is left, and in fact is enjoined, to find his own identity and purpose, free of the barnacle-like accretions of intellectual, moral, and political history. The world for such individuals is an existential supermarket, in which nothing is received from the past, no possibilities are closed off, and no one has the right to interfere with anyone else's choices. If today someone wants to be a man, tomorrow a woman, and the next day neither, so be it.

This is thin gruel, however, for a social animal endowed with self-consciousness. Man may desire to be free (whether this

desire is inborn or the product of circumstance is beside the point, at least in the West), but he also desires to belong, for it is only by belonging that he can achieve some kind of transcendent purpose or find some transcendent meaning. The old group identities—religion, state, nation, class—have withered in the West under the relentless assault of supposedly rational criticism, but since group identity is an imperative need, new, more egotistical identities, highly balkanized, have taken their place, and are now engaged in a struggle for power.

Christianity once promised a better, indeed perfect, life in the hereafter, but once belief in the truth in its historical claims and doctrines began to waver, hopes for perfection moved from heaven to earth. Liberalism promised, if not perfection, at least constant progress toward it; but by also promising equality, not in the eyes of God, but here on earth, it opened the way to endless squabbles about what such equality meant, and to resentment when it was not achieved. My supposed right to equal respect is also my right to survey, censor, or suppress your thoughts—and vice versa. A state of paranoia results.

Liberalism is a doctrine of rights but, unsupported by any common cultural understanding in the population, it has become a kind of inflamed legalism, in which the law must adjudicate between, for example, the right to life of the conceptus, on the one hand, and the right of a woman to decide what goes on in her own body, on the other. Both rights, for those who uphold them, are absolute; no compromise is possible so long as the question is couched in these terms. Where the law adjudicates more and more in this way, it is not the legislature (which cannot even read all the laws it passes), but the apparatchiks and the nomenklatura, and a favored class of economic actors, that become the powers in the land. A liberal order gives way to an administrative authoritarianism. At the same time, a huge intelligentsia, created by the

expansion of tertiary education, and largely antinomian in nature and surplus to the ability of the economy to absorb it, raises endless ideological tensions as it seeks its place in the sun, destructive of the very pillars of liberalism. Countries and societies weaken as a result of these tensions and divisions, which are largely navel-gazing in nature. The countries or societies are thus ripe for takeover, so to speak, by their enemies—at least, if any stronger and more determined countries remain in the field that are not yet rotted by liberalism.

This is Gray's diagnosis. He does not offer a firm prognosis, first because the future remains unknown, and second because liberalism's competitors have weaknesses of their own. One reason for Islamists' rage, for example, is their awareness of the extreme vulnerability of Islam to rational criticism, which must therefore be intimidated into silence. Islamists are aware of what happened to Christianity, or even to Communism, once the intellectual nitpickers got going; they think that prevention is not merely better than cure, but it is the *only* cure. In this, they are right, but it is hard to ensure a public mentality that will be immune from all outside influences.

In fact, Gray offers no solutions to the dilemmas faced by those who retain some affection for the liberal societies of the recent past. A return to that past is not possible: it would be like trying to restore the eggs from which the omelet was made, and even Charles X did not manage to restore France to the *status quo ante*. Gray doesn't suggest anything else, either.

Does Gray overdraw his gloomy, radically pessimistic picture? I am no optimist myself, but at points I feel that he does. In saying, for example, that wealth is being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, and that the middle class is in effect being immiserated (as if the wealth were simply being sucked out of them), I detect a certain exaggeration. How, exactly,

did Elon Musk's pharaonic wealth impoverish me? I still own my own house, I still eat the same food, I still go about my avocations as before. This is true of all my friends and acquaintances; admittedly a selected sample, but when I look around me, while I see problems, even on a large scale, they do not appear to be to be of an unprecedented severity or insusceptibility to amelioration. Many of them have been created by foolishness, and foolishness is no more immutable than wisdom.

Gray is a famous detractor of progress as a dangerous illusion. If by progress is meant a rapid and inevitable movement to a life without dissatisfaction or existential limitation, he is right to be skeptical. In art, we see better and worse, but not progress. Those who expect salvation, or even a more satisfying life, from an accretion of technological gadgetry are destined for disappointment at best. And yet, when I consider that were it not for the progress so decried by Gray, I would long since have been dead after a prolonged period of suffering, I cannot help but put in a small word for progress, at least in a limited sense. Thanks to little pills that once did not exist, I am symptom-free, and no doubt it is very shallow of me, but I take this as a sign of progress. I doubt that there are many people alive, including Gray himself, who could not find something to say for progress. To deny it would be humbug.

That said, Gray's book is instructive, and there is pleasure in the instruction.

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