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Profile: John Gray

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A sceptic who thinks all our ills stretch back to the Enlightenment, he is also a visionary who predicted the credit crunch



The writer and political thinker John Gray is in the Bloomsbury offices of his agent and is talking about the world financial crisis. He recalls the critical reaction to a brief treatise on "the delusions of global capitalism" that he wrote a little over a decade ago.

Published in 1998, at what Gray describes as the "peak of neoliberal confidence", *False Dawn* predicted that the regime of global laissez-faire then being engineered by transnational organisations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation would be short-lived. The cheerleaders for globalisation, he argued, had failed to see that financial markets are congenitally volatile and prone to periodic shocks or convulsions. "Overshoot," he wrote, "is their normal condition." The flourishing of an "enormous, practically unknowable virtual economy of financial derivatives" merely exacerbated the risk of a catastrophic failure of the world system of free markets.

"When it first came out," Gray remembers, "*False Dawn* was considered completely off the wall." Today it simply looks uncommonly prescient; but back then, as he points out, "we were in the middle of the long boom. That's one of the reasons my analysis was regarded as implausible, though, in fact, the first cracks had already begun to appear: there was the Asian crisis in 1997, and then the Russian default the following year. But the crisis hadn't got into the heartland, America, which people didn't think was possible."

Gray's was not the only voice of caution or alarm, of course. The journalist and author of *The State We're In*, Will Hutton, who has known Gray for many years, was another to warn of the dangers of economic hubris. "There were a few people who had doubts about the economics and ideology of financial market liberalisation," Hutton says. "And [that] scepticism has been amply justified by events."

But what marks Gray out, in Hutton's view, is the way he has tethered his critique of neoliberal utopianism to an altogether more speculative and far-reaching attack on the very idea of utopia or progress itself. The "dark, troubling aspect of John's thinking is that he tracks all mistakes back to the Enlightenment: Mao, Stalin, Hitler, Marx, Alan Greenspan, New Labour are all tributes to Enlightenment theology. It doesn't wash. John is a compelling writer, and challenging. But progressives should be wary of a thinker who is so sceptical about the Enlightenment."

Hutton is certainly right to suggest that, for Gray, the prestige that neoliberal economics enjoyed in the late 1990s derived not from its predictive power, but from the way it gave expression to a peculiarly "modern" myth. The assumption that US-style free-market capitalism was destined to spread itself across the globe was just the final version of the Enlightenment project of a "universal civilisation". What the architects of the putative global free market had in common with Enlightenment thinkers such as Jefferson or Paine, Mill or Marx was the certainty that the world was converging, more or less rapidly, on the western way of doing things.

Neoliberal triumphalism was misplaced, not only because it wrongly assumed free markets to be self-regulating, and not just because it insisted, in the face of evidence to the contrary from the east Asian economies, that there was a single, normal form

of capitalist development that applied in all cases. Gray reminds me that he has “always insisted on the non-universalisability of a certain, ie, American, model of capitalism”. He has an abiding interest in the distinctive form capitalism has assumed in Asia, notably in countries such as Singapore and Japan (his wife is Japanese), where markets are embedded in institutions and forms of life very different from those of the Anglo-Saxon west.

So, for Gray, neoliberalism, like Marxism, was a kind of spilt religion – a secular salvation myth – rooted in the belief that the world is infinitely pliable or tractable, susceptible to being remade in the image of abstract ideals.

As for the geopolitical significance of the current and most likely definitive crisis of neoliberalism, Gray thinks this lies “not only in the fact that it has happened in the heartland, but also that it accelerates the loss of American primacy which started with the Iraq War”. And that war, and with it the “War on Terror”, was itself animated, in Gray’s view, by the same modern or Enlightenment belief that the world can be transformed through an act of will; in this instance, that human conflict can be extirpated and the world made safe by a “Pax Americana”.

All Gray’s books since *False Dawn* – a sequence including *Straw Dogs* (2002) and *Black Mass* (2007) that has established him as one of the most reliably provocative and heterodox voices in British intellectual life today – have been elaborations of this theme: that neoliberalism is merely the latest in a series of unrealisable utopias, comparable in its ambition, if not in its murderous scale, to the communist experiments in the Soviet Union and Mao’s China.

Gray acknowledges how controversial all this is. “The most indigestible part of my analysis is not so much the critique of the eschatological or revolutionary versions of utopianism as my critique of meliorism,” he told me. “That’s probably the most subversive part. Meliorism, as I understand it, is the view that changes in ethics and politics can become as irreversible as gains in science. In the past couple of hundred years, there has been a vertiginous increase in human power and human knowledge. But why should one think that, because knowledge has grown, human beings will be less prone to cowardice and cruelty?”

He was once asked if he thought that having children (he and his wife are childless) would have tempered his pessimism. He was cheerfully dismissive of the idea. “I’ve reached these views not by reflection on my own circumstances,” he said. “The fact that you have children won’t stop you from acknowledging the truth.”

Such scepticism about even the most modest notions of moral progress, though it may not lead to nihilism or a kind of quietistic mysticism, as some of his critics have charged, also implies a deep scepticism about what politics can achieve. In his new book, *Gray’s Anatomy*, he writes that politics is best understood, not as a path to salvation, but as the “art of devising temporary remedies for recurring evils”.

“I’ve never thought of political life in terms of comprehensive projects,” he says now. “And though I have in the past been politically partisan, I’ve been criticised, particularly by people I’ve been formerly connected with in politics, for moving my allegiances.”

Gray is alluding here to what the Oxford academic and former Labour MP David Marquand has described as his “intellectual journey from Thatcherite champion to scarifying enemy of market fundamentalism”, though he denies that he was ever a Thatcherite true believer and says he only ever saw early Thatcherite policy as a response to “local difficulties”. (Richard Reeves, the director of Demos, who knows Gray well, thinks he was an “enthusiast for Thatcherism” because he was an “enthusiast for change and he thought Thatcher was on the radical side; she wanted to break things open and I think that quasi-anarchistic side of Mrs Thatcher appealed to him”.)

What is a matter of record is that, in the 1980s, after establishing himself as a tutor in politics at Oxford (having arrived there as an undergraduate in the late 1960s from grammar school in South Shields), Gray became closely involved with a number of “new right” think tanks, including the Institute of Economic Affairs in this country and the Cato Institute and the Liberty Fund in the US. Among the fruits of this activity was a sympathetic, book-length treatment of the economist F A Hayek, one of Margaret Thatcher’s heroes.

Soon, however, Gray started to have his doubts about the direction the Thatcher project was taking. “The moment I really jumped ship was the moment of triumph – 1987 onwards. The moment when it turned into a kind of theory. I thought, ‘That’s it, I’m off.’ The structural similarities between Thatcherite neoliberalism and Marxism-Leninism were too obvious to me: radical progressivism and the unimportance of the superstructural realm.”

The shadow secretary for innovation, universities and skills, David Willetts, whom Gray taught at Oxford and who later co-wrote a pamphlet with him for the Social Market Foundation, says: “John was never really in with or interested in the Conservative Establishment. He became increasingly worried that free-market Conservatism contained the seeds of its own destruction, as it eroded the moral traditions which Conservatives themselves value and which capitalism needs to survive.”

For a brief period in the mid-1990s, Gray’s “liberal communitarian” concerns at the effects of the unfettered free market on the structures of common life led him into the orbit of the nascent New Labour. He reminds me that Tony Blair “initially marketed himself as a sort of One Nation Labourite”. The flirtation did not last long, however.

“I started to criticise Blair quite quickly, once he made his move towards a more Thatcherite position.”

Today, Gray says he neither belongs to nor supports any political party. “The aim is more to inject a certain type of thinking than to push any particular policies.” One of the vantage points from which he seeks to do this is his seat on the advisory board of the Progressive Conservatism Project at Demos. He thinks the work of Phillip “Red Tory” Blond and others is “different and refreshing” – he rightly observes that “there’s nothing happening” in a Labour Party that became intellectually “hollowed out” under Blair – and yet he is far from being an uncritical friend.

At the launch of the project in January, Gray wondered how much headway an “anti-statist, pluralist, organicist” conservatism like Blond’s could make in a context in which the state has made a comeback; in which the commanding heights of the financial economy now lie in government hands. The state, he declared, is an essential buffer against the transnational economic storm – especially in Britain, whose economy is more open and vulnerable to fluctuations in the global financial system than almost any other.

Gray retired last year from his post as professor of European thought at the London School of Economics and is now at liberty to play the role of Socratic gadfly to the body politic – a role that, one senses, he feels has always been his true vocation. “I’ve long been opposed to the view that political philosophy is about developing apodictic principles of justice,” he says. “Political philosophy is not like logic. It’s connected with history. An important figure for me has always been John Stuart Mill, in that he took as his subject matter the great problems and political movements of his time.”

Richard Reeves, who wrote a biography of Mill, thinks the parallel between Gray and the author of *On Liberty* is accurate. “Until the very end of his life, Mill was arguing and changing his mind. One of the last things that happened to him was that he got kicked out of the Cobden Club because he came out in favour of a much more socialised land reform system. Those are the kinds of intellectuals we need today: open, engaged and active. John Gray is one of them. Someone whose mind will never really settle, because he knows that the world never really settles.” 1

“Gray’s Anatomy: Selected Writings” is published by Allen Lane (£20). John Gray joins the *New Statesman* this week as one of our lead book reviewers (page 49)

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