
REVIEW

Right Turns on the Pathway of Life

Walk Away: When the Political Left Turns Right

by Lee Trepanier and Grant Havers

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In 2018 a social media campaign #WalkAway was launched to encourage people to “walk away” from the political Left and the Democratic Party in the United States. The authenticity and effectiveness of this campaign have been disputed.

What cannot be disputed, however, is that since the mid-twentieth century, a number of prominent leftists have turned away from their original political commitments and embraced right-wing ideas, in whole or in part. This book, *Walk Away: When the Political Left Turns Right*, edited by Lee Trepanier of Saginaw Valley State University and Grant Havers of Trinity Western University, is a collection of brief biographical accounts of a number of prominent converts to conservative ideas.

The thinkers covered in this collection could be broadly categorized into three groups: 1) those who unmistakably shifted from the Left to the Right; 2) those who shifted in a rightward direction to become centrists or ideologically ambiguous; and 3) those who essentially remained on the Left but who revised their perspectives in a conservative direction. All three groups share the experience of abandoning left-wing ideas, but some became wholesale conservative converts whereas others simply became modified liberals or moderated socialists.

The first group includes James Burnham, Willmore Kendall, and the Neoconservatives. The second group includes George Grant, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Benedict Ashley. And the third group includes Christopher Lasch, Jürgen Habermas, Kai Nielsen, and G. A. Cohen.

The stories of each of these individuals is, of course, unique. Nevertheless, a somewhat repetitive pattern emerges. Each one began on the Far Left and then shifted rightward over time, some very dramatically, others less so. But

the pattern is always there. Thankfully, for some of us at least, ideological movement to the Right by intellectuals is always a “good news” story.

OUTRIGHT CONSERVATIVE CONVERTS

The experiences of James Burnham and Willmore Kendall share much in common. Before World War II, they were both Marxists. After the war, they both became important conservative thinkers and writers. They were both involved in *National Review* magazine from its inception, and contributed to it for many years.

Paul Gottfried notes that “Burnham went from being perhaps the brightest advocate of Trotskyist political policy in the US (and an intimate of the exiled, former Soviet leader) to a hardened anti-communist” (2). Similarly, Christopher H. Owen writes of Willmore Kendall that “As a young scholar in the interwar period, Kendall saw himself as a Marxist and advocated collectivist economic principles. Thereafter, Kendall proclaimed himself a conservative and for more than two decades actively promoted a ferocious brand of anti-communism” (15). Clearly, these two scholars made a clean break from the Left and came to fully embrace conservative ideals.

The “neoconservatives” may have taken a longer journey but they went in the same direction. Most of this group consisted of Jewish intellectuals in New York. Among the better known were Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Nathan Glazer.

Originally they were leftists who opposed Stalinism, but during the course of the 1960s they became repelled by the anti-American extremism of the New Left. As the New Left expanded its influence within the Democratic Party, this

group of intellectuals felt pushed out. Lee Trepanier writes, “Having been ‘mugged by reality,’ neoconservatives started a robust defense of American values, culture, and institutions and aligned themselves with the conservative movement and Republican Party” (42).

Trepanier provides a brief summary of neoconservative thinking as follows:

In spite of the evolution and diversity of their ideas and policies, neoconservatives have four fundamental principles in their ideology: 1) a distrust of social engineering projects, such as the Johnson administration’s Great Society programs; 2) a defense of cultural and educational standards informed by Western civilization and traditional social values; 3) a skepticism of international law and institutions to achieve security and justice; and 4) a belief that the United States should be the hegemonic power in international politics (35).

The fourth point became especially controversial in conservative circles. The administration of President George W. Bush adopted neoconservative foreign policy ideals after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This led to an aggressive use of American military power, culminating in the pre-emptive invasion of Iraq, perhaps the worst foreign policy decision in American history.

FROM LEFT TO CENTRE

Canadian political philosopher George Parkin Grant has been notoriously difficult to categorize on an ideological spectrum. Nevertheless, there is a general consensus that his work was more compatible with the Left in the 1960s and more compatible with the Right by the 1980s. This perception may be partly a function of the issues he addressed at different periods in his career.

During the 1960s, Grant strongly defended the historical conception of Canada as a British-influenced garrison in North America. That was the theme of his most famous book *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*. Canadian nationalism was closely identified with the Left in those days, and Grant was counted as one of its proponents. His seemingly leftist stance was magnified by his outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War.

However, Grant’s focus began to change in the 1970s. His 1974 book *English-Speaking Justice* contained a powerful critique of the US Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision

and abortion in general. His 1986 book, *Technology and Justice*, continued his critique of abortion and euthanasia. Dart succinctly summarizes the situation as follows:

Many within the New Left in Canada continued to hold Grant high until his work in the 1980s on abortion and euthanasia made them see his classical vision could not be co-opted by the Right or Left (interestingly yet predictably so the political Right held him high in the 1980s) (70).

Charles Taylor was an unambiguous leftist in the first decades of his career. He ran as a candidate for the socialist New Democratic Party (NDP) in the four Canadian federal elections of the 1960s. However, during the 1970s, Dart writes that Taylor was moving increasingly away “from his more committed (in thought, word, and deed) leftist Hegelianism to a more centrist and less ideological leftist political stance” (74).

By the early twenty-first century, Taylor was writing sympathetically about religion and the challenge of secularism. As Dart notes, “Taylor’s deeper Roman Catholic commitments (and his approval and support of religion and spirituality through a deeper delving in [William] James) was suspected by the Left which once held him near and dear” (76).

Taylor, then, did not become a conservative as such. However, in recent decades his thinking moved towards the Right from his earlier unambiguous leftist stance.

Internationally-renowned moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in some ways parallels Charles Taylor. MacIntyre began unambiguously on the Left, even embracing Marxism. But he later abandoned Marx for Aristotle and is now widely known as a prominent Aristotelian. That was a clear rightward shift, but without going as far as outright conservatism.

As Kelvin Knight writes, MacIntyre became “disillusioned by the institutionalized practice of actually existing socialist states and parties.” In abandoning his previous leftist sentiments, “It was also Marxism as a tradition of reasoning that he abandoned. What he did not at all abandon was the questioning of contemporary capitalist social order that he had previously conducted from within that tradition” (94).

The final thinker in this second category, Benedict Ashley, is probably less known outside of Catholic circles. However, following a path much like the others recounted here, Ashley changed from being a committed Marxist and

Trotskyite to joining the Catholic Church where he made major contributions to Thomist philosophy.

One statement by Christopher S. Morrissey points to the decisive change in Ashley's life: "after Ashley was baptized on Palm Sunday, April 10, 1938, the momentous event very quickly led to his being expelled from the Socialist Workers Party" (109). Expelled from the Socialist Workers Party, but joined to the Catholic Church.

NOT QUITE RIGHT

Christopher Lasch, like the others, began on the Left and moved rightward. However, despite becoming a cultural conservative, he was not conservative in other respects. Jeremy Beer summarizes Lasch's experience as follows:

Lasch had once been closely associated with the political Left, and part of what made, and continues to make, his analysis so arresting is that he never entirely disavowed such influences as progressivism, Marx, Freud, and the Frankfurt School. Unlike the Left's other postwar exiles, he never underwent a Damascene ideological conversion, but rather gradually and reluctantly came to shed certain leftist presuppositions and preoccupations (122).

Importantly, however, "Lasch also kept the postwar conservative movement at arm's length because of its hard-line anti-communism" (134).

Pedro Blas Gonzalez writes that Jürgen Habermas belatedly revised some of his views and now recognizes the value of religious sentiments for societies. This is a welcome development but does not in any way approach a complete change of perspective. As Gonzalez writes, "In the last two hundred years Marxism has failed to disprove the claim that philosophical materialism paralyzes human aspiration and atrophies free will. Jürgen Habermas's thought appears to be a late-comer to this historical reality" (146).

Finally, Grant Havers addresses the careers of Kai Nielsen and G. A. Cohen, two noted analytical Marxists. He summarizes their experience this way:

Although neither Nielsen nor Cohen abandoned his leftist politics in a categorical manner, both of these philosophers later in life embraced positions that fit more comfortably into the opposite side of the political spectrum. In the case of Nielsen, a new openness to the importance of the nation-state emerged. In

the case of Cohen, a deep appreciation of the Christian tradition's influence on morality became evident" (153).

Nielsen and Cohen earn a spot in this collection due to their rightward shift, although they did not change enough to become conservatives. As Havers summarizes, "Cohen and Nielsen have taken on positions that are to *the right* of the socialist politics that they embraced in an earlier time of life" (162).

CONCLUSION

The pattern of ideological change is not the only thing that these stories share. In the Introduction to *Walk Away*, Havers highlights a common influence that prodded many of these thinkers to re-evaluate their political commitments: "The most important reason that explains why most of these gentlemen moved from Left to Right lay in the abysmal failure of the Soviet Union to create a free, prosperous, and humane political order" (viii).

Thankfully, the Soviet Union is long gone. But on the other hand, it is no longer available as a living, horrifying example of socialist errors to spark a re-evaluation of leftist beliefs. This leads Havers to note, "The fact that these thinkers broke away from the Left because of disillusionment with orthodox communism suggests that their distinct versions of the walk away will probably not be repeated in our own time" (xvi).

Under current circumstances, therefore, "the prospect of prominent leftist intellectuals walking away from their ideological home towards [the conservative] side of the political spectrum is unlikely" (xvii).

Despite that depressing conclusion, the overall message of the book is quite positive, i.e., some committed leftists are willing to re-evaluate their beliefs when faced with the obvious deficiencies of Marxism, and then revise their views along conservative lines. As mentioned, the pattern is somewhat repetitive. But that is not a bad thing when each account is a "good news" story. Can there ever be too much good news in one book?

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