



The right-wing mirror of critical theory: studies of Schmitt, Oakeshott, Hayek, Strauss, and Rand

Larry Alan Busk, Lexington Books, Lanham, 276 pp., 2023, ISBN 1666929638

Charles A. Prusik¹

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited 2024

If one can gauge the necessity of a work of critical theory by the amount of interest and frustration it will likely induce in its readers, then Larry Busk's most recent book can be counted as an important, if unsettling intervention. In *The Right-Wing Mirror of Critical Theory* he argues that critical theory has ignored its theoretical adversaries, and, perhaps more significantly, has reinstated many of the right's core political commitments. The central issue that unites right-wing theory is the 'rejection of intelligent design' in politics (p. 2). By 'intelligent design,' he suggests that 'the political world should be approached as a self-conscious and intentional creation with the stated purpose of realizing our own nature and our own interests' (p. 18). A left critical theory that prohibits the rational, self-conscious articulation of an alternative, future society is not only passive and quietist, but it also backs itself into a theoretical corner, encouraging submission to the authority of the status quo.

Through an impressively synthetic recounting of the political theories of Schmitt, Oakeshott, Hayek, Strauss, and Rand, Busk identifies a commonly shared political principle: society cannot be designed by human reason. His true opponent is a theoretical left that has unwittingly assimilated such a principle. Adrift in the many discourses of democratic theory, postcolonial theory, pluralism, and post-foundationalism, the anti-Enlightenment left has jettisoned universality, reason, and progress in the name of particularity, affect, and difference. Through an inculpatory survey of many of the dominant strands of post-foundational, progressive political theory, Busk raises uncomfortable questions for the left regarding its political proximity to the right, as well as its incapacity to effect practical change in the face of the crises of ecological climate change. As I cannot do justice to the details of all of the conservative figures Busk engages here, I have chosen to focus on Schmitt and Hayek,

✉ Charles A. Prusik
c.prusik@moreheadstate.edu

¹ Morehead State University, Morehead, KY 40351, USA



as it seems to me that the left's mirroring of these figures is the most harmful for its own political horizons.

Busk develops his central argument by establishing the theoretical and political consequences of rejecting intelligent design in politics. The critique of intelligent design is a 'quintessentially right-wing intervention', because such a politics abjures any politics of progress and embraces the authority of the present order (p. 22). Such a rejection can be seen in the long history of rightist theory, from Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre's conservative opposition to the French Revolution, to Friedrich von Hayek's neoliberal critique of socialist planning. The critique of intelligent design dooms all rational planning to failure and enjoins us to affirm the socio-historical institutions of the past. The theoretical right favors status quo structures (à la Burke's conventionalism, Schmitt's 'nomos', or Hayek's extended order) and tirelessly points to the complexity and rightness of bourgeois society (p. 41). According to Busk, because of its own theoretical allergy to foundationalism, reason, and progress, much of the left has relinquished its own capacity to propose alternatives to present norms.

But what does it mean to affirm intelligent design in politics? Busk is quite clear about the core theoretical criteria involved: a commitment to political foundations that are rooted in human needs and progress; a critical concept of 'totality' that can grasp the contradictions of a capitalist global system; and a concept of 'reason' that can provide a transcontextual standard of social and economic planning. In a return to Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Busk retraces many of the familiar rejections of enlightenment reason (including its false universalism, its Eurocentrism, and its essentially colonial orientation), showing why the whole-sale rejection of reason and progress amounts to a right-wing justification of an irrational social world. Rather than revoking these ideas, he enjoins us to use the tools of reason to redress the wrongs and contradictions of an Enlightenment project that has not yet been realized (p. 25). How are we to confront the present injustices and crises of capitalist society if we cannot comparatively evaluate the conditions of the past? A theoretical left that can deal with the looming threats of the far-right, economic crisis and climate change must equip itself with the tools of enlightenment reason and a politics that can respond to the demands of complex coordination and planning. In a powerful formulation, Busk writes: 'Avoiding a dystopian future requires a coordinated, centralized, global, totalizing effort, which includes identifying and neutralizing the structural logic of our present course of suicidal inaction' (p. 32).

In chapter two, '[t]he Fascist and his Shadow,' Busk develops a welcome critique of the political theory of jurist, Carl Schmitt, as well as his recent appropriation by certain strands of the left. Busk poses the following question: 'is it possible to accept Schmitt's political ontology without also accepting the political conclusions he derived from it?' (p. 59). Can we accept the itinerary of Schmittian concepts (i.e. secularized theology, the sovereign decision, and the friend/enemy distinction) while applying these concepts to progressive politics? Busk answers with a resounding no. Not only is Schmitt's theoretical infrastructure antithetical to a left-progressive project, it also compels a fascist political orientation. Schmitt's ant-foundationalism and anti-rationalism rely on a reactionary defense of myth and narrative,



ultimately converging on a normative defense of status quo institutions that preserve the ‘concrete order’ (p. 66). According to Busk, Schmitt’s defense of the concrete order amounts to a critique of intelligent design in politics, because by appealing to the irrational power of myth, rootedness, and the authority of the given, his politics preempts the capacity of reason to provide to a critique of prevailing bourgeois institutions. All ‘left-Schmittian’ attempts to provide a post-foundational politics cannot overcome the arbitrariness of a politics that abjures rational grounds, even if such a politics affirms progressive norms (pp. 70–77).

In chapter four, ‘Hayek’s Game: Reification and the Production Paradigm in a Warming and Stratified World’, Busk develops a sustained critique of Hayek that cuts to the core of neoliberal theory’s contradictions, bringing out the implications of such a theory for the realities of anthropogenic climate change. Hayek’s opposition to intelligent design in politics was rooted in his commitment to the belief that competitive markets are more intelligent than any designer. Hayek’s ‘methodological individualism’ derived from a narrow economic framework that regarded society as a composite of rational price-takers. He radicalized such methodological individualism by stressing the incomplete nature of individual economic knowledge, pointing to the free market as the presumptive allocator of all necessary information for rational decision-making. (Because no one can know what the market knows, no socialist planning committee can solve the problem of economic calculation). Intelligent design in politics, according to the Hayekian script, is bound to fail.

Through careful treatments of many of Hayek’s key works, Busk demonstrates how his defense of ‘spontaneous orders’ opposed all politics of intelligent design. But Busk does not leave us with a simple rejection of this politics. He points to the ways in which the left invariably seems to agree with a fundamentally neoliberal principle: rational planning can’t work. Pointing to the dire necessity of mounting a politics of resistance through collective, democratic, rational planning, he urges the left to consider the realities of climate change, a crisis that neoliberal institutions have largely succeeded in capturing in the logic of marketization (and a good deal of political planning).

Throughout Busk’s well-defended opposition to the critique of intelligent design, a political defense of socialist planning clearly emerges. Intelligent design often means the rational planning of economic life, or, alternatively, the use of reason to coordinate social activity according to substantive human needs. At its strongest, his argument identifies the limits of a theoretical left that has abandoned its capacity for self-conscious, rational critique. A left that loses sight of how society could be organized according to rational, humane ends is bound to recapitulate the irrationality of capitalist society.

However, questions remain regarding the status of intelligent design at a political level. Who is the designer of such a politics? Busk names a Leninist politics of vanguardism as the key political form of organization. But such a vanguardism seems curiously trapped in the realm of intellectual ideas. On the basis of what practices and forms of resistance is such a vanguard party supposed to emerge? He is careful to note that the vanguard is not simply a collection of intellectuals (and disambiguates vanguardism from Strauss’ elitism). He refers to an ‘epistemology of ignorance of academia’, detailing the myriad ways in which professional intellectuals have



failed to grasp the recent upsurge of right-wing populism (p. 211). Once the left has sufficiently removed itself from its collusion with the critique of intelligent design at the level of ideas, what practices should an organized left pursue to begin the project of rational planning? Future research could, for example, pursue the question of how specific political parties, institutional arrangements, and forms of resistance could provide the material and practical basis for a left that is oriented to building an alternative, humane society. *The Right-Wing Mirror of Critical Theory* is a welcome challenge to widespread theoretical beliefs.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

