

# Book Reviews

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***The Devil's Pleasure Palace: The Cult of Critical Theory and the Subversion of the West***, by Michael Walsh, hardcover, 215 pp, \$16.31, Kindle \$15.49, ISBN 978-1594037689, New York City, Encounter Books, 2015.

Michael Walsh, an essayist with a previous career as a *Time* music critic, is now a regular columnist for *PJ Media*. His book focuses on cultural issues and the corrupting effect of Marxist ideas and attitudes that infiltrated American academia and the media chattering classes in the last 80-plus years.

The Frankfurt School of Marxist academics, who left Frankfurt for the U.S. to avoid Nazi persecution because they were in many cases Jews, and in all cases communists, set up shop on the West (Hollywood) and East (Columbia University) coasts and settled in to achieve high levels of influence in American academia and media.

The Frankfurt School's "Critical Theory" took advantage of America's tendency toward self-criticism, making Americans easy marks for guilt-gamers. Saul Alinsky borrowed from the Frankfurt toolbox for his *Rules for Radicals*. The best tool in the box was to use the admonition to be tolerant and nonjudgmental, and twist that into an intolerant totalitarian political correctness useful to intimidate, and always poised to control.

Proponents also introduced the nihilism that is now labeled "postmodernism." This is best described as the belief that there is no truth, no reliable scientific method of inquiry, no intellectual rationality that deserves respect, and that everything about Western Civilization is the product of an oppressive oligarchy. Dominant in

the academy, postmodernism posits that all is relative, all is subject to each's opinion, and nothing can be relied upon among modern civilization's accepted truths. The oxymoron here is that if nothing can be relied upon, why indeed rely upon postmodernism itself?

As Walsh said in one of his recent columns:

Flying their customary false flag of "tolerance," the Frankfurt School injected the poison of moral relativism into the American body politic. From and through them flowed all the major crackpot, anti-human bad ideas of 19th and 20th centuries, including sexual license (Wilhelm Reich), hatred of existing institutions (Herbert Marcuse) and even the twelve-tone system of musical composition (Theodor Adorno), which temporarily killed the Romantic impulse in music and emptied concert halls across Europe.

Walsh exposes the evil influence of the Frankfurt School and the dead-end proposition of socialism, and contrasts the uplifting effects that come from art, religion, and what he likes to call the Ur narrative (ancient or primitive story) of heroism and redemption. He uses *Paradise Lost* and *Faust* in particular to provide a reference point on issues of morality and virtue, but also the ominous presence of Satan, whom he considers to be the personification of the evils of leftist amorality and nihilism.

Walsh promotes art, in the broad sense of what is good and uplifting, as the path to good values and culture. As he puts it, science doesn't get one

to the proper sense of the good and virtuous life, but the "art" of living does. Walsh describes the left as Satanic in its efforts to demean human life. Cloaked in the robe of tolerance, the left promotes amorality and nihilism. Walsh takes off on a particularly devious argument of the left, the "why not?" He shows how the left seduces the young, and then destroys their sense of virtue and decency—why not? Why not the unfettered life? Why not do your own thing? Why not the High Holy Church of Anything Goes? Liberty becomes libertine.

Walsh extols virtuous living and the value of the Stoic approach, asserting that we all want to be virtuous, and that is the reason we have been so attracted to heroic narrative throughout history. Everyone has dreams of being good, achieving good things, being a credit to family and friends, achieving some form of greatness, and being a hero. Walsh properly places heroism and virtue in front of us and asks how a society, a civilization, can survive a loss of virtue and heroism, because fortitude enables the other virtues.

The Frankfurt School attacked traditional family, sexual mores, procreation, and institutions with little concern about what would replace what was lost. We are paying the price for that now, because many in our society bought the Left's immoral concepts polished up by the Frankfurters. While adults in our society should be prudent and temperate, fair and just, we have adult children: chronological adults who think as adolescents. In effect the Frankfurters created generations of immature American adults who may not allow our nation to survive.

Walsh is eloquent and enlightening because of his literary and historical

lines of thought woven to make it more than just another political book. It is a culture and morality book, a book about literature and music, and the potential of human society and civilization.

**John Dale Dunn M.D., J.D.**  
Brownwood, Tex.

***Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin***, by Timothy Snyder, softcover, 524 pp, \$19.99, ISBN-13: 978-0-465-03147-4, New York, Basic Books, 2012.

This monumental work tells the story of the mass murders from 1930 to 1945 in the lands trapped between Hitler and Stalin: the Baltic states, Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine. Fourteen million human beings were deliberately murdered by starvation, gassing, or shooting.

Until recently, these lands and their gruesome history were sequestered behind the Iron Curtain. Timothy Snyder, a professor of history at Yale University, did massive research in 16 archives in six languages to unearth the details, and bring them to life. We must not focus on the statistics, an abstraction no one can grasp, he writes, but remember that every death ended a unique life. He cites poignant examples, such as the diary of an 11-year-old girl in Leningrad who noted the time of death of everyone she knew—until only Tania was left.

Snyder discusses the Soviet famines, the concept of class terror, the notion of the “Polish military organization,” the consequences of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement, the role of economics, and the Generalplan Ost that intended to make the western Soviet Union a German colony. He chronicles the plight of people who experienced not just one, but two or even three occupations, such as in the Warsaw ghetto. There were mass deportations in an effort to make populations homogeneous in

nations whose boundaries were being redrawn.

There was of course Hitler’s Holocaust, which mostly took place in Poland, not Germany. Auschwitz, where about one in six of Hitler’s Jewish victims died, is the main showcase for the horror—which we know about because there were survivors. Auschwitz was partly a labor camp. Other places like Treblinka were solely extermination centers. The Final Solution was accelerated when the Wehrmacht invasion was stopped in Moscow, and the extermination of Jews was presented as a kind of ersatz victory.

The German and Soviet regimes had similarities and differences in their motives and methods, and their interaction made the situation far worse than it might otherwise have been, Snyder writes. They were concerned about destroying any potential sources of resistance, such as the educated classes. The culture of Poland was virtually wiped out.

To understand events, Snyder writes that the perpetrators as well as the victims must be humanized. Both slowly lost their humanity, as Hannah Arendt noted, first in the anonymity of mass society, then later in concentration camps.

Totalitarian regimes begin, Snyder observes, by advancing a utopia, which is compromised by reality and then implemented as mass murder. “Hitler and Stalin thus shared a certain politics of tyranny: They brought about catastrophes, blamed the enemy of their choice, and then used the death of millions to make the case that their policies were necessary or desirable.”

One of Snyder’s most important insights is that the most brutal regimes still managed to portray—and see—themselves as victims. Soviets even considered themselves to be victimized by starving Ukrainian peasants, who had the audacity to die in front of them:

No major war or act of mass killing in the 20th century began without the aggressors

or perpetrators first claiming innocence and victimhood. In the 21st century, we see a second wave of aggressive wars with victim claims, in which leaders not only present their peoples as victims, but make explicit reference to the mass murders of the 20th century. The human capacity for subjective victimhood is apparently limitless, and people who believe that they are victims can be motivated to perform acts of great violence. The Austrian policeman shooting babies at Mahileu [Belarus] imagined what the Soviets would do to his children.

Snyder notes the importance of faith and ideology, especially of a Nazi value that is not entirely alien to us: the sacrifice of the individual in the name of community. It was Gandhi who noted that evil depends upon good, in the sense that those who come together to commit evil deeds must be devoted one to the other and believe in their cause.

Little of this appalling history has been made known in the West, and parallels to themes of today are chilling indeed.

Despite the grimness of the story and the painstaking detail with which it is told, this is an engaging book that commands one’s attention from cover to cover.

**Jane M. Orient, M.D.**  
Tucson, Ariz.

***Critics of the Enlightenment: Readings in the French Counter-Revolutionary Tradition***, edited and translated by Christopher Olaf Blum, hardcover, 357 pp, ISBN 1-932236-13-9, Wilmington, Del., ISI Books, 2004.

In his essay “On the Reading of Old Books,” C.S. Lewis recommended that everyone read an old book every time

one read a new one, or at least one old one for every three new ones. He pointed out that our forebears had different blind spots than we do and made different mistakes.

I did not expect very much of this book that had been gathering dust on my shelf for as long as 10 years, containing essays by six Frenchmen of whom I had never heard, written between 1798 and 1883. It turns out that this book has more dog-eared pages than practically any other book on my shelves. It seems that these writers are telling about many of the same mistakes that we are making today.

The French Revolution, an outgrowth of the French Enlightenment, fundamentally transformed France. It was far more radical than the English Enlightenment. John Locke, much admired by our Founding Fathers, was not anti-Christian, in contrast to the Jacobins, who tried to replace God with Reason. The French counter-revolutionaries were anti-modern and desired to restore the Ancien Régime. Their critique "frequently underscored the truth that power cannot be regulated unless it submits to principles that are anterior to it and come from religion or nature," writes Philippe Bénétou in the foreword. "In a world in which indeterminate liberty reigns, political power will oscillate between the extremes of libertarianism and despotism, or will combine features of both."

In the first essay, written in 1814, François-René de Chateaubriand states that the French Revolution, in the name of the law, "overturned religion and morality; we renounced experience and the customs of our fathers." Yet, he states, "at least our principle was noble." The aftermath was worse. From the calamity of the revolution, a stranger arose to take power "to appease the true French by proclaiming himself to be the restorer of order, law, and religion." Chateaubriand insists on spelling Napoleon's name Buonaparte to emphasize the fact that he was a foreigner, a Corsican. While Corsica is

now a region of France, it was ruled by the Republic of Genoa from 1284 until 1755, when it was briefly independent until it was conquered by France in 1769.

"Some pretended that Buonaparte was not a foreigner despite his visage, his habits, his character, or his accent, as well as his name. He himself was more sincere than his flatterers: He did not see himself as French. He hated and disdained us."

To the extent that he could, Buonaparte obliterated all things French, Chateaubriand writes. "Every liberty died. Every honorable sentiment, every generous thought became a conspiracy against the state." Prefiguring Orwell, Buonaparte changed the meaning of words. All publications were filled with lies: "If it rained, we were assured that it was sunny." Buonaparte placed children in schools where "they were taught irreligion, debauchery, disdain for domestic virtues, and blind obedience to the sovereign. Parental authority, respected by the most hideous tyrants of antiquity, was treated as a prejudice and an abuse by Buonaparte."

The regime "ceaselessly destroyed morality and religion," and sought to found an order upon force and police spies. While Buonaparte's administration was praised, in fact its extravagance "swallowed up half the revenues of the state." If an industry was born in France, "he would seize it and it would immediately dry up in his hands." He conscripted a huge army and sent it to be slaughtered in pointless wars; he destroyed the navy; he destroyed property; he imprisoned people for life without trial.

The parallels to the transformation of America are chilling.

Some of the issues discussed by other authors in the book are ones that our modern society has virtually forgotten, such as primogeniture and the relationships between the sovereign and the pope. But others we forget at our peril: the importance of the family, the role of women, the just division of property, the results of

egalitarianism, and the need for sexual morality. The consequences of radical social revolution that they foresaw are apparent everywhere today.

These authors do much to puncture the modern conceit that "every day in every way things are getting better and better." We flatter ourselves that we are far freer, happier, and more enlightened than the peoples who lived in the presumably oppressive monarchies, or even under a system of feudalism. We tend to blame religion, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, for stagnation and oppression of the masses. It is impossible to summarize such a wealth of profound wisdom briefly, but it might be worthwhile to mention a few observations.

Luis-Gabriel-Amboise de Bonald writes: "In olden days in France, our manners were lighthearted and our minds were serious. The Revolution changed all that. It made our minds superficial and our manners grave. Today we have neither reason nor joy." Bonald suggested some criteria whereby we might judge which form of government provides the greatest happiness. "Will there be fewer abandoned children, crimes, and lawsuits? Will the houses of detention and the places of deportation be less heavily populated? Will there be ... more good faith in commerce, more independence and integrity in the administration of justice, and so on?"

Joseph de Maistre wrote about the popes and civil liberty. He thought that the greatest contribution of the popes and the church in general was to repress in princes "their access to the terrible passion that constantly wreaks havoc with the holy laws of marriage whenever it is left to itself." De Maistre believed that "when not tamed by civilization, love is a ferocious animal, capable of the most horrible excesses." He would be appalled by crowds celebrating that "Love wins!" On the other overpowering human passion, aggression, he writes: "Violence has never been stopped by moderation. Powers are not boundless except by contrary efforts."

While America is frequently and justly castigated for slavery, he notes that "slavery has constantly been the natural part of a very great part of mankind until the establishment of Christianity; and as universal common sense saw the necessity of this order of things, it was never contested by laws or reasoning." Maistre points out that the number of free men in antiquity was far less than the number of slaves. Athens had 40,000 slaves and 20,000 citizens. At the end of the Roman Republic, Rome had about 1.2 million inhabitants, but barely 2,000 property owners. At times, one individual might own several thousand slaves. He writes that the proposition that "until the era of Christianity, the world had always been covered with slaves" is unshakable.

Frédéric le Play writes on social reform in France in 1864, highlighting prejudices and facts on the family. He acknowledges the tremendous progress and great benefits resulting from labors in the physical sciences. Civilization would not want to do without things such as the telegraph, for example. However, "the innovations brought today in the domain of the moral sciences...remain entirely sterile and are all condemned to be forgotten after a brief period of agitation or scandal." He states that after lengthy researches, he found that the only result of trying to implement innovations proposed for the moral order is always "a weakening of productive forces and a recrudescence of social antagonism." He finds the physical sciences and moral science to be radically different. The physical sciences concern an unlimited number of phenomena. But moral sciences have but one object: the study of the soul and its relations with God and humanity. He believes that innumerable thinkers in all civilizations who have undertaken the analysis of the virtues and vices "have added

nothing to the Decalogue of Moses."

Le Play's views would surely antagonize today's feminists. One subheading is "The Wise and Modest Woman is the Principal Agent of Social Progress." He states that the Bible presents almost all of the excellent aspects of this subject, and that in the Middle Ages several European peoples "raised the respect owed to women to the level of a social dogma." He states that the errors committed on these difficult subjects result from attempts to place the two sexes in a condition of equality. To produce an absolute equality would instead "produce an intolerable situation for both." Moreover, this "misplaced independence always turns to the detriment of women, who gain rights of little use while remaining shorn of the advantages and guarantees they most desire."

Émile Keller writes on the papal encyclical of the 8th of December by Pope Pius IX and the principles of 1789. He is strongly against excluding the church from a position of influence on political authority and states that "this disastrous separation will necessarily end in the triumph of brute force, the unbridling of material desires, and the loss not only of the Faith, but of all civilization and liberty." He remarks that in the eyes of the church of the day, "socialism and communism, which menace family and property, are both the logical consequences of naturalism and politics and rationalism in theology."

Perhaps today's pope could benefit from reading about the dire consequences of the seizure of property in 1789 and its redistribution. "Far from benefitting the country, these goods were sold at the lowest prices, and the pittance they raised was soon rendered meaningless by the shortfalls created by stoppages of work." Destruction of prosperity and

ever-greater centralization of power was accompanied by oppression and firing squads.

Keller also warns about democracy, stating that it is always the self-styled democratic idea that in the end is despotic and Caesarist, and "provokes and exploits our divisions." He explains as well as anyone the danger of socialism. "The socialists' insane schemes will only end in the destruction of acquired capital, the disorganization of work, the reconstitution of slavery under the form of a proletariat, and on top of these wounds, the cancer of ancient Caesarism." He emphasizes that social liberty is a moral problem and is founded uniquely on a respect for social truth. "Wealth is consumed, destroyed, and wasted by the sterile experiments of error."

This book is a profoundly conservative and pro-Catholic book that deals with the most important fundamental issues of our time, including the generation of wealth, relationships between capital and labor, the family, property rights, and the relationship between church and state. It is evidence that indeed there is nothing new under the sun. There is much to be learned from history about what results the basic ideas have had when implemented in the past. It attacks the assumptions of modern liberalism and progressivism, and also libertarianism. I suspect that the writers of these essays would also be appalled at the direction that the Roman Catholic Church seems to be taking today.

Many readers will disagree with much that is in this book, but all will be much better informed than they were before.

**Jane M. Orient, M.D.**  
Tucson, Ariz.