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In Praise of Reason: A Review of *Springtime for Snowflakes: Social Justice and its Postmodern Parentage* (New English Review Press, 2018)

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PLATO records an important dialogue in *The Republic* between Socrates and Adeimantus wherein the interlocutor questions the philosopher about the skeptical eye he casts upon democracy. Socrates replies with a parable serving to illustrate some of the unseen dangers democracy can pose to societies and their survival. If the state were a ship, who is best prepared to pilot the vessel safely on its voyage through time? The captain schooled in the fine arts of seafaring? The untrained crew members possessed of a popular theory who, perceiving they truly know the way, seek to commandeer the craft and chart their own course—even as their reckoning puts them on a path toward an iceberg?

This ancient dialogue calls our attention to the value of the intellectual life of the citizen pondering decisions over who should lead and what sort of philosophy should guide the leader. We infer from the Socratic intercourse that voting is a skill, not an intuition or a feeling whose satisfaction can be best confirmed by merely exercising a birthright. The people must possess sufficient knowledge of the problems pressing upon them, of those who seek office over them, and the internal and external threats to their way of life. The underlying fear is the spread of demagoguery and its deceptive power over time to dispossess people of the knowledge and skills they painstakingly refine so as to reason effectively.

In *Springtime for Snowflakes: Social Justice and Its Postmodern Parentage* (New English Review Press, 2018), Michael Rectenwald confronts such

threats to contemporary society by tracing the emergence of a new demagoguery for any onlookers baffled today by the political forces now moving to remold North American societies and other cultures around the globe. It is a classic form of demagoguery that appears to favor the ‘threat of force’¹ over reasoned dialogue. As a widely recognized expert in literature and liberal studies at New York University, Rectenwald had worked tirelessly to preserve free speech rights and the academic freedoms that flowed from them. This review highlights some of the illuminating insights, among a plethora, readers will encounter throughout his book.

As a method of dissecting the complex problem society faces in the contemporary Social Justice (SJ) movement, Rectenwald adopts a journalistic approach to critical reflection and analysis. In placing himself within this narrative framework, he unfolds a wide-ranging critique of the movement seeking full control over fundamental aspects of language and thought and, ultimately, over the social order. It is a novel and effective approach that synthesizes the autobiographical, the analytical, and the reflective.

The author opens with a Preface to the recent history of Social Justice as the offspring of postmodernism informed, in part, by disciplinary methods cultivated during China’s Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.² We learn how remnants of yesterday’s ‘struggle sessions’ and ‘autocritique’ during the Maoist purges are today reconstituted in the disciplinary practices of ‘privilege-checking’,

¹ Rectenwald, M. (2002). *Springtime for Snowflakes: Social Justice and its Postmodern Parentage*, London: New English Review Press, 108.

² Ibid, vii

'cancel culture', and 'callout'.³ A cornucopia of corresponding SJ concerns, readers will find, wear clever new labels such as 'mansplaining', 'micro-aggressions', 'cultural appropriation', and 'white privilege'⁴ (among many others). They appear in SJ demands for the widespread societal development of official language policies and 'bias reporting hotlines'⁵ that serve to inform authorities of transgressors and their suspected treachery.

Indeed, many of these demands have already been met at elite institutions of higher learning throughout the United States and Canada. For students interested in modern history, they will have little trouble seeing the haunting parallels to East Germany's Stasi where sophisticated social systems had been designed to contain dissidence by undermining the self-assurance of nonconforming citizens, sabotaging their professional work, trashing their reputations, and damaging their personal relationships.⁶ Where the bludgeon of the East German state had threatened the citizen who resisted official policies, mudslinging, name-calling, and other forms of invective today serve fervent SJ ideologues keen to cow anyone who questions the aim of establishing a new social order.

RECTENWALD also takes us through an introduction of himself during his tenure at NYU and of the events that had led to his initial, though anonymous, call on Twitter for a return to a more reasoned public discourse. He reports on his realization of how vital democratic freedoms of speech are threatened by PC authoritarians in charge at the University and what this threat might portend for free speech at large across the nation. His satirical analysis of 'social justice ideology'⁷ in social media precipitated the now-famous reprimand that motivated the book. He offers a record of key exchanges between himself and University administrators claiming to act out of 'concern' for his 'health and wellbeing'⁸ (sick euphemisms for 'emotionally unfit') and the purported necessity of his taking a recommended leave of absence. Here, we begin to see the

reasons why a noted scholar whose politics are left of center would come out in public so strongly to counter the traditionally leftist PC culture.

The author also offers reflections on his formative years in Pittsburgh as the son of a hardworking middle class business owner. He traces the history of this upbringing with its embrace of diligence and pragmatism and his movement away from university studies of medicine toward poetics. The daring idealism of his youth, we find, sends him packing up, leaving for a season during his undergraduate studies, and pursuing his dream to work in Colorado with his ideal, at the time, Allen Ginsberg. An exploration of that period during his studies with the legendary poet leaves readers with the clear impression that Rectenwald will go to astonishing lengths to surmount huge obstacles en route to meeting righteous goals.

Readers will see woven into the narrative enlightening lectures on the genesis of the SJ movement in its current stage as the author guides us back East to his hometown in the wake of his apprenticeship with Ginsberg. Here, we see the young newly married man settled into new work in the advertising industry—an unfulfilling period of his professional life when vexing questions about the deeper meanings of life would sustain his focus on finding satisfying answers. He shares an awareness of how this pastime of voracious reading apprised him of the flawed career path he had taken in the industry and how he arrived at the decision to work toward the goal of becoming a scholar. He offers critical reflections on a wide survey of texts in postmodern theory and philosophy. We can infer from his reflections on Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* how the universal epistemic culture of science remains open to the potentially destructive powers of social and political movements, a way in which SJ revolutionaries today, for example, could disrupt the endeavor of science itself.⁹

Indeed, for careful observers of contemporary public discourse the kind of demagoguery that

³ Ibid, viii.

⁴ Ibid, ix.

⁵ Ibid, x.

⁶ Rectenwald expounds examples on pages 116 and 117.

⁷ Ibid, 16.

⁸ Ibid, 21.

⁹ Ibid, 51.

Rectenwald describes throughout the book appears to reject principles of classical logic and reason, the peace it creates and social cohesion it fosters. It undermines, too, a major premise upon which societies are constructed: males and females cooperate and mate to produce heirs that might work to preserve the social progress made by preceding generations. A dynamic struggle of extremes has emerged. If the post-9/11 world has seen neoconservative demagogues usurp the public discourse that divided the globe into a “coalition of the willing”¹⁰ and the “axis of evil,”¹¹ the world has also seen in recent years that divide widen with an equally divisive demagoguery spread on the far left seeking total control over the discourse and, by extension, the public’s sensibilities.

In latter sections of the book, Rectenwald subjects some of the more peculiar and extreme SJ claims to vigorous analysis. We learn how some adherents of this ideology jettison facts elemental to human biology, genetics, and psychology,¹²—bizarrely claiming that biological sex differences are no more than social constructs¹³ even while feeling the need to submit their bodies to experimental hormone replacement therapies or to surgeons trained to rearrange the reproductive organs signifying differences in gender.¹⁴ It rejects, in effect, empirical data collected by human experience and sense organs and the faculty of reason which concludes that sex characteristics (primary and secondary) are the result of naturally unfolding biological processes both *in utero* and out. Obstetricians who deliver babies are now accused of ‘assigning’¹⁵ binary labels (male or female) to newborns who, we are told, may mature and one day naturally question the category they have been ‘assigned’ at birth—even as the sex chromosomes (XY or XX) permeate every cell of their bodies.

This aspect of the SJ struggle may appear to observers to be part of a campaign to ignore, in effect, tens of thousands of years of fruitful human reproduction and the limited categories of sex difference that spring from it. As the river of reasoning flows that gender is no more than a social construction, observers may wonder why there exists such an obsession today with the human reproductive apparatus, its various parts and associated names. Further, if gender can be ‘fluid’, as the current system of faith holds, who cares what genitalia we carry on our person? Rectenwald discusses some of the answers offered to such questions: ‘Gender (or even sex difference) is determined by beliefs about sometimes inconveniently ‘non-conforming’ phenomena, and ultimately, by language, by names.’¹⁶

He elaborates on how such belief in the staunchest quarters of the SJ movement has emerged from post-structuralism and its claims that our perception of personhood is illusory, no more than the product of text. This dogma, we find, forms the theoretical foundation of transgenderism that says one’s gender identity hinges, at last, upon naming.¹⁷ If subjective experience, therefore, is no more than the effect of language, then language frees us to assume any name for ourselves at any given time. It matters not what objective reality apprises us of, nor what others with whom we share this existence report, however inconvenient to and detached from our whims or self-perceptions.

We see, too, that such belief carried to its logical conclusion necessitates the development and diffusion of neologisms that denote the idiosyncratic interpretations of any shifting identities SJ Warriors perceive about themselves given the ‘genitalia’¹⁸ they have or don’t have,

¹⁰ CNN. (2002). Bush: Join ‘coalition of willing’. *CNN*, 20 November. <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/europe/11/20/prague.bush.nato/>

¹¹ Bush, G.W. (2002). State of the Union, 29 January.

¹² Rectenwald, op cit., 106.

¹³ Palmer, N. (2016). Sex is a social construction, even if the Olympics pretends its not. *Sociology in Focus*, 10 August. Nathan Palmer at <http://sociologyinfocus.com/2016/08/sex-is-a-social-construction-even-if-the-olympics-pretends-its-not/>

¹⁴ Rectenwald, op cit., 107.

¹⁵ Milloy, C.S. (2014). Don’t let the doctor do this to your newborn. *Slate*, 26 June. http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/06/26/infant_gender_assignment_unnecessary_and_potentially_harmful.html

¹⁶ Rectenwald, op cit., 106.

¹⁷ Ibid., 62.

¹⁸ Ibid., 107.

desire or reject. For transgender men who ‘experience dysphoria’ and feel emotionally ‘triggered’ by language they believe excludes them from the norm, the term ‘front hole’,¹⁹ for example, has now been offered in lieu of ‘vagina’.²⁰ Why are such contortions of the language promoted? When genitalia are used not for reproductive purposes, but as ‘tools for accessibility’²¹ to sexual encounters, ‘like ramps for wheelchairs, ... —we can accommodate’²² those who feel offended, observes Lindsey Doe, by gender-exclusive terms. Such are the manipulations made by advocates for the new orders of linguistic, social, and political policy.

WHEREVER the most inspired supporters of such changes co-opt terms peculiar to America’s 1960s Civil Rights Movement and campaign for ‘social justice’, they appear to do so with the kind of commitment to foolishness described by George Orwell in the 1940s. In “Politics and the English Language,” Orwell observed that, “All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia.”²³ Where does this troubling mass of political language leave us today in societies whose structures and institutions are threatened by demagogues on both the extreme left and the extreme right?

In returning to the Socratic dialogue referenced in the opening, we perceive that democracy is good because the term connotes inclusion and invites the masses to participate in the process of political decision-making. Indeed, calls for greater inclusion are perfectly natural responses to injustices long visited upon marginalized groups. We sense that democracy is also part and parcel of

just societies. We, thus, perceive that democracy is necessarily for the social welfare and necessarily just. In light of what we have long perceived to be good and true for society as a whole, postindustrial societies face a virulent strain of demagoguery in the SJ movement. The extent of its destructive force can be seen in the war of words and administrative actions waged against a handful of voices brave enough to call for a return to discourse guided by reason.

Without free speech and the liberty to assess the quality of logic and validity of extreme speech acts whether from the far left or right, we risk forfeiting, as citizens, the very democracy we say we embrace. In forbidding (no-platforming²⁴) the free and fair trade of ideas (despite their potentially revolting nature), we are effectively submitting to totalitarian rule. Of note, the rulers at the University of Durham, for example, stepped into the public square to totally end potential debate about the questioned validity of certain biological facts. ‘Is it a crime to say “women don’t have penises”?’²⁵ asks Angelos Sofocleous. The heretical rhetorical question he posed on Twitter produced an immediate dismissal for Sofocleous from his job. The University totalitarian ‘policy-maker, arbiter of expression and inquiry, and censor’²⁶ offers, ironically, no safe space for the exchange of perspectives that depart from the ideology.

MICHAEL Rectenwald’s book is a clear warning to citizens that no matter our politics, we must all stand upon reason and demand the same of our fellow citizens—especially pretenders to power and those already holding seats in high places. His book is in some

¹⁹ Abrams M, and Kassel, G. (2020). LGBTQIA safer sex guide. *Healthline*, 31 August. <https://www.healthline.com/health/lgbtqia-safe-sex-guide>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Dalbey, A. (2018). An expert weighs in on the ‘front hole’ debate. *The Daily Dot*, 24 August. <https://www.dailydot.com/irl/front-hole/>

²² Sexologist Lindsey Doe quoted in Abrams and Kassel (2020).

²³ Orwell, G. (1946). Politics and the English Language. *Horizon*, April 1946. https://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit

²⁴ According to RationalWiki, ‘No platform’ is the practice of preventing someone—either through policy or through protest—from spreading their ideas through a particular event or website. The term is mostly used to refer to rescinding an invitation to someone asked to speak at an event (such as a guest lecture at a college). The concept apparently originates from a policy used by the British National Union of Students to prevent people they disagree with from giving speeches on UK college campuses.

²⁵ Bennett, R. (2018). Student editor Angelos Sofocleous fired in transphobia row. *The Times*, 21 September. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/student-editor-angelos-sofocleous-fired-in-transphobia-row-fww5ds6nj>

²⁶ Rectenwald, op. cit., 119.

ways an extended argument for the necessity of disobedience to the expanding far leftist cultural hegemony—though it also serves just as well to inform those resisting absurdities emanating from the extreme right. In reading Rectenwald's entire argument, one cannot help but be reminded of Howard Zinn's famous admonition in a debate at John Hopkins in 1970 during the previous culture war, 'Our problem is civil obedience. Our problem is the numbers of people all over the world who have obeyed the dictates of the leaders of their government and have gone to war, and millions have been killed because of this obedience.'²⁷ Today's culture war on speech will only further paralyze efforts to bring to an end the uninterrupted War on Terror, the prosecution of

which has demanded its own Orwellian manipulations of the language.

Springtime for Snowflakes is not merely a call for sincerity, objectivity, and reverence for facts, nor a critique of our frenzied quest for self-indulgence. The book is a dense critique of the postmodern infiltration of western culture that illuminates the darkest battlefields of the current culture war. Readers will see a welcome return to logic with the author in the end having filled with many holes the weak defenses of this new demagoguery. If the left, whatever its present impotent form, fails to engage with this work, it does so at its own peril. The left will have missed an opportune moment in the nation's history to resuscitate reason and wrest control of society from the hand of truly irrational extremism.

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²⁷ Howard Zinn, *The Zinn Reader: Writing on Disobedience and Democracy*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997, 405.