



Bourgeois Liberty and the Politics of Fear: From Absolutism to Neo-Conservatism

Marc Mulholland

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In 1842 Henrich Heine, the German poet, wrote that the bourgeoisie, 'obsessed by a nightmare apprehension of disaster' and 'an instinctive dread of communism', were driven against their better instincts into tolerating absolutist government. Theirs was a 'politics motivated by fear'. Over the next 150 years, the middle classes were repeatedly accused of betraying liberty for fear of 'red revolution'. The failure of the revolutions of 1848, conservative nationalism from the 1860s, fascist victories in the first half of the twentieth-century, and repression of national liberation movements during the Cold War - these fateful disasters were all explained by the bourgeoisie's fear of the masses. For their part, conservatives insisted that demagogues and fanatics exploited the desperation of the poor to subvert liberal revolutions, leading to anarchy and tyranny. Only evolutionary reform was enduring.

From the 1970s, however, liberal revolution revived on an unprecedented scale. With the collapse of communism, bourgeois liberty once again became a crusading, force, but now on a global scale. In the twenty-first century, the armed forces of the United States, Britain, and NATO became instruments of 'regime change', seeking to destroy dictatorship and build free-market democracies. President George W. Bush called the invasion of Iraq in 2003 a 'watershed event in the global democratic revolution'. This was an extraordinary turn-around, with the middle classes now hailed as the truly universal class which, in emancipating itself, emancipates all society. The debacle in Iraq, and the Great Recession from 2008, revealed all too clearly that hubris still invited nemesis.

Bourgeois Liberty and the Politics of Fear examines this remarkable story, and the fierce debates it occasioned. It takes in a span from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first, covering a wide range of countries and thinkers. Broad in its scope, it presents a clear set of arguments that shed new light on the creation of our modern world.

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