

returning to it, is the assurance with which it refuses to bend to conventional assumptions and how it creatively resists the pull of more comfortable discursive undertows. In doing so, its overall effect is a sense of intellectual opening.

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Phillip W. Gray: *Vanguardism: Ideology and Organization in Totalitarian Politics*. (New York: Routledge, 2020. Pp. viii, 218.)

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Hardly anyone would dispute the fact that the course of modern politics has been decisively shaped by the resolute pursuit of radical revolutionary projects whose leaders claimed to have understood the Truth about History and to have acted on behalf of emancipatory majorities destined to fulfill a two-pronged historical mission: destroy our rotten world and then usher in a salvationist New Era. It has also been widely acknowledged—at least since the publication of Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*—that these projects, disparate though they appear to be, share important characteristics. But what exactly are these characteristics? What is the proper way to conceptualize, classify, and analyze them?

It is to the literature devoted to this question that Phillip W. Gray has made a major contribution. The book consists of nine chapters. In the introduction (chap. 1), he announces his intellectual ambition, namely, to bring into sharp relief “the strong and uncanny similarities” evinced by “some of the worst regimes and movements of the 20th century” (1), and he presents an outline of “vanguardism,” the interpretative framework within which he situates his comparative account. In chapter 2, the “vanguardism framework” is forcefully and compellingly articulated, and chapter 3 traces its “prehistory”: the factors that made possible the transition from an era in which “vanguardism was not” to a world where it became “a reality in the political realm” (34). Chapters 4–8 offer innovative analyses of different types of vanguardist movements: those based on class (e.g., Russian Bolsheviks and the Chinese communists inspired by Marx, Lenin, and Mao), nation (e.g., the Italian fascists), race (e.g., the German Nazis), “subalterns,” or various populations “operating under systemic oppression by social institutions” (thinkers such as Gramsci and Fanon and movements such as the Palestinian Liberation

Organization, the Weather Underground and the Red Army Faction), and religion (especially various Islamist groups), respectively. In the concluding chapter, the author considers how vanguard activism might metamorphose in a world increasingly marked by heightened environmental concerns, the dissemination of new technologies, and “the mainstreaming of vanguardist forms of analysis” or the massive influx of the themes, rhetorical tropes, and political imaginaries associated with vanguardism into Western academia, media, and intellectual discourses.

In the centrally important chapter 2, Gray defends the argument that vanguardism is a phenomenon in which ideological credos and organizational form intermesh. The most important corollary of this contention is that all political movements that embrace vanguardist ideas display six common, mutually interdependent characteristics. The first characteristic is a “category-based epistemology”: “a specific mass population holds a uniquely important place in social-historical development,” and is thereby granted privileged access to Truth (13). While vanguardists disagree about what should count as the defining trait of the epistemologically privileged population, they unquestioningly embrace the view that only certain groups of people can acquire true knowledge of History, and that the others who cannot are consigned to what Trotsky once described as “history’s dustbin.”

This belief that History is not accidental but directional and hence that the outcome of the titanic clash between the oppressors and the oppressed is foreordained constitutes the second ingredient of vanguardism. The vanguardist *Weltanschauung* is by definition eschatological: grounded in the dogma that after the radical break that would destroy the present world, “the dynamics that have thus far pushed human society and existence [will] cease to operate, leading to some form of perfect existence” (15). The *third* component of vanguardism is the unshakeable conviction that there is “a ‘science’ to the understanding of history and society’s dynamics” (16). Unlike physics and mathematics, this science is not potentially accessible to anyone with the proper training: only members of the epistemologically privileged group, who are able to engage in its praxis, can plausibly claim that their knowledge is “scientific.”

The fourth component of vanguardism is a vision of totality—the uncritical acceptance of the a priori proposition that “there is no realm of human life outside of the dynamics of history” (18). Unlike religious fundamentalisms, vanguardist totalism is this-worldly: it does not conjure up transcendental powers. It posits that all human activities fall into patterns intrinsically linked to History’s immanent directionality. The fifth component of vanguardism is an image of the Enemy. The Enemy is shaped by the same socio-historical forces that molded the epistemologically privileged population, “but rather than suffer oppression under the irrational and unjust totality of the present, the Enemy is the totality’s main beneficiary” (20). Reconciliations or compromises with the Enemy are morally repugnant and practically impossible—which is why when speaking about the Enemy, vanguardists invariably deploy rhetoric “couched in the language of warfare.”

The fixation on violence is not accidental or secondary: the Enemy is responsible for “the total negativity” of a world that is “irrational, flawed and reactionary,” and created a system of multifaceted oppression harsher than anything humankind has known before (26). Its destruction is logically the most important element of the totalistic solution of the problems of the oppressed.

The sixth and final element of vanguardism is the notion of a vanguard party, the self-selected few who will lead the progressive masses into *la lutte finale*. These aspiring leaders’ attitude towards political power is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, it is just a means to an end—and the end is some version of what Marx called “social revolution” (27). On the other hand, they seem obsessively preoccupied with the idea of violent capture of state power, and construe it as both a defensive and an offensive measure. Gaining control over the coercive apparatuses of the state will deprive the Enemy of its capacity to browbeat the downtrodden into submission and will enable the vanguard to neutralize the Enemy’s “counterrevolutionary” effort to reverse the course of History through sabotage, “misinformation,” and hysterical appeals for “respect for fundamental rights.” Despite the fact that the Party is destined to fulfill important functions, however, vanguardists duly acknowledge that it is *not* the motor of the revolution—the desired revolutionary change will only materialize if and when the masses join the effort.

This book has many merits: the “vanguardism” framework is coherently presented and persuasively defended, the chapters are masterfully packed with sharp observations, the writing is lucid and reader friendly, and the author’s knowledge and erudition are abundantly on display. It is graced by compelling comparative comments, analytical insights, politically astute remarks, and intriguing predictions. For a sense of these, consider respectively the following: Whereas neo-Marxists’ belief in the historical triumph of the toiling masses is unshakeable, racists and nationalists are not necessarily sure that “History is on our side”; because they are painfully familiar with the past failures and humiliations of their favored “epistemologically privileged populations,” they are less patient and more prone to resort to radical “preemptive” actions (chap. 6). The global proliferation of groups claiming the status of “most oppressed constituency” renders the emergence of a broad alliance bringing together all “subalterns” less likely (chap. 7). The “mainstreaming” of vanguardist *ideology* actually hampers the emergence of mass-based vanguardist *organizations* because today the notion that some groups have a privileged access to Truth is championed not by obscure immigrants like Karl Marx or peripatetic intellectual nomads like Frantz Fanon, but by tenured professors, celebrity pundits, and generously funded “community organizers” who have little incentive to rock a boat whose most luxurious cabins they contently occupy (chap. 9). With the ascent of radical environmental activism, the legitimacy of vanguardism will be grounded not in a vision of a morally superior world but in “negative eschatology,” or the alleged

imperative to launch a “last-ditch effort” to stop the terminal decay of the planet (chap. 8).

Undoubtedly Phillip W. Gray’s name will be added to the list of twenty-first-century scholars—a list that includes the names of David Ohana, Richard Shorten, Emilio Gentile, and David Roberts—whose work has deepened our understanding of the extremities inherent in modernity’s radical politics.

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Daniel A. Bell and Wang Pei: *Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. x, 270.)

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The Warring States-era Chinese philosopher Xunzi warned that “if a lord of men [*renzhu*] is not impartial and just, then his followers will not be loyal.” But what do just orders look like, and what forms of “partiality” or self-interested behavior compromise their legitimacy?

Like Xunzi, Daniel Bell and Wang Pei argue that hierarchical relationships—between private individuals, members of political communities, and states (all of which early Confucian thinkers addressed in various ways) as well as between humans and animals or machines (rarely discussed in Confucian thought)—can be perceived as legitimate, even by people in subordinate ranks, if these relationships reflect certain values. Hierarchy as such is not illegitimate; only the wrong types are.

Their book examines such context-based justifications for hierarchy, often borrowing from or adapting Confucian ideas but also borrowing from a number of eclectic sources, including Daoist thinkers, Aristotle, Montaigne, Levinas, Bentham and other utilitarians, Karl Marx, and, in an early section, the *Kama Sutra*. The book’s origins are attributed in part to “crazy conversations fueled by fine wine and good food” (x), and the atmosphere of dinner party conversation is reproduced in the book by the sometimes cursory nature of these citations. For example, the authors state that “our target is the view that all social relations should be equal” (14), and cite Rousseau for this position with the only sentence in the book that mentions him. Rawls is disposed of with similar brevity, while