



Themed Book Review on Gender and Conservatism

Raised Right: Fatherhood in Modern American Conservatism.
By Jeffrey R. Dudas. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017. 224 pp.
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This is quite a novel book, and indeed almost a novel in itself. The (anti)hero is “modern American conservatism,” born (in Dudas’s account) in 1955 with the publication of William F. Buckley Jr.’s “Our Mission Statement” in the first issue of his own *National Review*. Dudas’s novel of education recounts the highs and lows, triumphs and tribulations, of this discursive character (i.e., “modern American conservatism”) through the Ronald Reagan era in state and federal politics, Clarence Thomas’s tenure on the U.S. Supreme Court, and on to Donald Trump’s presidential campaign as a concluding flourish. Crucially, though, we have a “figure” here, a discourse, a trope that is central to Dudas’s narrative, as opposed to the (apparently) real men — Buckley, Reagan, and Thomas — whose personalities are not really their own. As Dudas presents his conservative troika of titans, they are instead avatars of a paradox. The paradox is this: how do political actors embrace both the radical independence of “rugged individualism” *and* submission to the authoritarianism of “fatherly rule”?

This paradox is clearly of interest to political theorists, as it pits the moral and political individualism of rights discourse against the dependency and subservience of authoritarian and gender-hierarchical patriarchy. Dudas takes this opposition pretty much as read and formulates his

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guiding questions: how can such a contradiction be made to work politically, and who are the most influential actors and icons in this process? The book's three central chapters are thus on Buckley, Reagan, and Thomas, framed by Dudas's personal introduction together with a brief political history from the 1930s to the present. The slim volume concludes with an exhilarating movie riff featuring *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and its sequel, with Bing Crosby in a special guest appearance.

Readers of Dudas's book should thus be prepared for a study that locates itself, as indeed the published volume does, within the book series titled *The Cultural Lives of Law*. Methodologically, Dudas plants his work firmly within the zone where the literal/metaphorical distinction does not operate and national mythologies merge with a psychologized account of our all-American trio's lives, loves, and liberties. Thus, the Founding Fathers myths that American political discourse recycles merge with George Lakoff's "stern father" paradigm of parenting. And the somewhat more rigorous articulations of "private" property rights and "strict constructionist" judicial methodologies merge with the self-justifying and "Other"-demonizing narratives of wealth and poverty, the former conflating success with moral worth and the latter conflating poverty with moral turpitude. The ideological crunch comes when roll-back-the-state individualism demands and exercises authoritarian and often violent big-state actions, at home or abroad. Dudas duly notes the further hypocrisy that much corporate wealth derives not from buccaneering "free market" individualism but from tax-funded infrastructure, R&D "defense" spending, and business-preferential "tax breaks."

Ultimately, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Dudas resolves these paradoxes in terms of desire, trauma, and melancholia, viz., perversely, his subjects' desire to *relive* their traumas, which — in their memories and imaginations — derived from absent, abusive, or otherwise problematic fathers. They struggle with reimagining and revisiting the contradictions of the patriarchal paradigm of submission and domination. Indeed, the perverse enjoyments of these anxieties and desires (which Dudas clearly enjoys recounting) would have benefited from a self-conscious juxtaposition of patriarchalism with the homosocial masculinism and institutionalized BDSM (bondage and discipline [BD], dominance and submission [DS], sadism and masochism [SM]) that features when there are "no girls allowed." Simultaneously or successively, Dudas's troubled souls-within-bodies try to be upstanding and independent as "individual" rights holders, while requiring and/or being stern fathers, arbitrary abusers, and — in the end — inhuman slashers.

This approach to an important political phenomenon has its strengths and its weaknesses. For those unacquainted with the relevant political histories and personalities (and, rather briefly, key events of the last 70 years or so), the book represents an exciting and readable introduction rather than a hard-to-manage detailed study. Much the same applies to its interpretivist methodological moves and its praiseworthy unwillingness to engage in debates with those of the empirical persuasion.

For me, the Buckley chapter is the strongest, in that Dudas takes us through his copious run of sub–James Bond novels rather than his repetitive ideologizing. The interplay between author and character, as presented in both cases (i.e., Buckley and his “startlingly handsome” spy Blackford Oakes), is persuasive and detailed, ultimately to a point of (in my case) incredulous, side-splitting hilarity, so I will not spoil those moments here. The Reagan chapter relies on biographical studies, Michael Rogin’s film research, and copious archive papers to take us through a similarly intertwined account of childhood trauma, political posturing, and historical conjunctures (e.g., Berkeley People’s Park, Iran-Contra scandal, and other high/low spots). On Dudas’s own admission, the Thomas chapter represents a bit of a stretch, given its subject’s personal, institutional, and intellectual self-effacing stances. I was not convinced that Thomas represents such a popular and influential conservative icon, as Dudas claims, but nonetheless what Dudas presents is made to fit (and, you will gather, Dudas does not test his characterizations much with anything that does not fit).

Overall, this book has a thesis that it argues through, and it has a methodology that (for some) might be fresh, or at least intriguing. But it has the defects of its virtues. While focused and clear, it is somewhat repetitive; while informatively cultural, it is rather astructural. Following the myths is great fun, but I missed following the money.

However, my real worry about *Raised Right* is its transferability. Rights-based liberal-democratic individualism and religio-secular patriarchalist politics are not confined to America, nor were they invented there. And indeed, there are now century-old global projects to ensure that wherever they are not present, they should be PDQ (although certain wealthy countries buy their way out of this). While Dudas’s trio believed or believe in some version of American exceptionalism along these lines (as do many Americans), my problem here is not that this is historically wrong (which it is on evident facts) or that it is ideologically narrow (which it is by definition). Rather, I think that the book could do some useful work among non-American readers by flagging precisely the

contradictions and hypocrisies that it skillfully outlines and suggesting (even if briefly) that these theoretical insights and methods could be usefully deployed on similar (or at least analogous) cultural/political formations elsewhere.

The consequence of keeping this inquiry into rights and patriarchy an in-house American study is that outsiders might be left to pat themselves on the back for their un-American normalities and thus feel free to take yet another road trip into some all-American weirdness that is (supposedly) peculiar. It is not.

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