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A More Conservative Place

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A RETROSPECTIVE INTRODUCTION

I urge everyone to join in and not leave the field of values, definitions, and cultures uncontested. They are certainly not the property of a few Washington officials, any more than they are the responsibility of a few Middle Eastern rulers. There is a common field of human undertaking being created and recreated, and no amount of imperial bluster can ever conceal or negate that fact.

— Edward W. Said, *Al Ahrām*, August 30, 2003

»» The essays and papers collected here either emerge from and engage with some of the forces that made possible George W. Bush's regime in the United States during the first decade of this century or take up particular cultural and intellectual challenges posed by the regime to understand better their implications for life and thought in the United States and abroad. The events of September 11, 2001, did not themselves “change everything” for me or for most academic humanists I know. For many, and certainly for me, the Bush regime's reaction to those events changed everything. For some, the Bush era demanded strong critical engagement, the attempt to analyze, understand, and resist — often by providing alternatives to the imaginative death that regime desired and embodied. For others, the era offered the chance to challenge the still fragile if seemingly orthodox truths associated with multiculturalism, human rights movements, and the academic fields that studied, advanced, and responded to these movements.¹ Many academic leaders polemically stood up for the values, persons, and cultural efforts the right-wing politics of the Bush coalition threatened and deposed.² Yet others — and perhaps this was the norm — encouraged by the corporatism of university governance, politically motivated economic restrictions, and the needs of professional survival and advancement, immersed themselves in often apolitical, bounded research in traditional and modernized subfields

or committed themselves to teaching and service in ever more proletarianizing institutions.³

When the Bush regime began, I had several research projects on my desk, the chief of which was a study of Henry Adams. Hoping to build on earlier work on intellectuals, I had contracted for not only a book on Adams but also a book on Edmund Wilson and another on Richard Palmer Blackmur. I wanted to write accounts of American intellectual life in the literary humanities, hoping that these diverse figures would allow me to recall intellectual potentials represented by these figures. I had started out trying to answer Edward Said's question following the publication of my *Intellectuals in Power*⁴ — why don't you talk about American intellectuals? — within the larger context of U.S. transformation into an imperial and hegemonic power. What role did literary, humanistic intellectuals play in the process, and what critical potential, what capacity for alternative social political norms, might we find in these writers if we hoped to reimagine U.S. life and power?

Jimmy Carter's deregulation of the American transportation sector is an early mark of emerging neoliberalism. Movement conservatism and the intensified Cold War of the Reagan years followed rapidly.⁵ To grasp some of this required reading a wide variety of tendencies in various forms of knowledge production, language, academic practice, and finance to understand above all the roles played by intelligence and imagination in the transformation of the world into a world system. Generous offers to lecture and teach in Geneva, Vienna, and Spain had already started me reading across these fields, hoping to identify and somewhat clarify their constellations in the developments from Reaganism to Clintonism. Ironically, I gathered the research notes, talks, and papers emerging from this synthesizing effort under the working title "The End of Thinking."⁶ Simultaneously, I agreed to write a small polemical book on the "culture of theory," a study meant to clarify the transformations within the academic human sciences — especially in literature departments — consequent upon both the emergence and repudiation of the theory movement of the 1970s and beyond. I published some preliminary results of this research, including a piece that linked the academic antitheory movement to various projects within the Reagan coalition. Certain congruencies between U.S. policy and academic practice required exposition.

The papers and essays collected here all carry the traces of research done for these projects, many of which continue. The actions of the Bush regime, especially as they attempted to transform if not end many institutions of

liberal society, struck so hard that they demanded attention. The situation offered a chance to align oneself with the regime's efforts — and a number of well-recorded prominent intellectuals surprised their allies and colleagues by joining in its efforts. It also offered a chance for the clerks' treason, for a retreat into the apolitical professionalism of indifferent careerism or marketplace "necessities." Finally, it offered a chance to attend to its movements, its ideas, its practices, and a vast number of academic humanists engaged in a struggle against its politics and worldview, against the power — domestic and international — of its coalition. The Bush regime forced almost all intellectuals and academics onto a terrain shaped by its power and willingness to use it.

Even semipopular books of current events, of contemporary history and "analysis," note the Right's ability to set the agenda. "Among the elites, [the Right] has been making the intellectual weather for most of the past two decades; it is remarkable how far the best liberal thinkers have been reduced to reacting to conservative arguments."⁷ Several "public intellectuals" joined the Right, especially on war and empire.⁸ Prominent academic intellectuals, some serving public positions, provided conceptual and political support, especially for the Iraq War.⁹ My point is that the Bush regime profoundly inflected intellectual work during the first decade of this century. It forced a way to its own success in denying alternative visions of the world very much chance to emerge; in fact, the Bush administration aimed to obstruct and delegitimize all other views of the world — all other ranges of human experience that might tend to different visions of the future and human life.¹⁰

As a scholar of especially academic intellectual theory and practice, I worried that American academic scholars in the human sciences too much aligned our work with the interests of the Right that had drawn my attention and others' away from the projects they had in hand before 2002. Of course, Bush's election did not suddenly turn on this alignment. The materials gathered under the dreadful heading "The End of Thinking" in chapter 14 suggest that trends and fashions in the academic humanities were already either aligning themselves — consider the paeans to globalism and its "opposite," localism — or stepping aside, posing no serious alternatives to the emerging coalitions. I have not had the chance to write a careful study of how the rise of the political Right in America has effected changes among academic intellectuals. Such a systematic historical study would be hard but I believe would exceed the now well-established accounts of university corporatism.¹¹ Often, those accounts, properly focused on political economic forces and

agencies that make universities subservient to extramural demands, ignore the ideological and intellectual component that the work faculties, especially humanistic faculties, produce. Since the National Defense Education Act (1958) forcefully and obviously made the universities an element in state policy, in the *raison d'état* of the state, American academics have had to accept their dependence upon various funding sources with their own priorities and their own antagonisms to independent thought and critical imagination. During the culture wars, newspapers and magazines — mainstream and right wing — pilloried the humanities for their distance from the citizenry, from tradition, and from relevance. These attacks had their effects. Not only did they buck up the old boys, but also they encouraged the young sometimes in directions not so open to hostile caricature. It facilitated the seeming return to what is in fact a new emphasis on apolitical hyperspecialization in the research universities.¹² It also encouraged thinking that safely passed the tests of right-wing and media hostility. Compare, for example, the *New York Times*' favorable reporting on digital trends in the humanities with its not so long ago series of articles annually mocking the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention for the titles of its special sessions.¹³

The American conservative movement has worked hard to establish that the American university system is elitist and liberal, a secular home to private interests that obstructs right-wing plans and damages U.S. culture and politics. Often, academic human scientists accept and encourage this account, and levelheaded studies explain that universities, especially most advanced research centers and liberal arts colleges, are bastions of liberal thought, values, and lifestyles. The contrast between movement conservatism and the liberal academy metonymically appears as the difference between Boulder, Colorado (home of the University of Colorado), and Colorado Springs (home of Focus on the Family and the Christianized Air Force Academy).¹⁴ Of course, the metonymy collapses and the fact that the university is a more conservative place than it likes to admit came into view with the Ward Churchill controversy.¹⁵

For the moment, I have avoided discussing the forces that led to Ward Churchill's loss of tenure. Rather, I want to expose a potentially disturbing if complex truth perhaps best caught in an aphorism of Lichtenberg: "A book is a mirror: if an ape looks into it an apostle is unlikely to look out."¹⁶ How far can the academics in the human sciences define themselves as outside the rightist regime they often oppose? How far do they belong to the same

general project of political, cultural, and intellectual reaction? How should we criticize intellectual efforts that show no concern for or believe themselves safely immune to the enemy they think they see and oppose? How “counter” are these intellectuals and their efforts? What is the minimal sort of evaluative attention and self-regard required of humanistic intellectual work?

The academy and certain leading academics are far more conservative than they know or believe. I speak not of lifestyle or conscious intent but of the shape of work, the patterns of thought, and the forms of knowledge and discourse that take place on a terrain disconnected from serious tradition and struggling, ever so hard, to secure itself in a hostile world. Furthermore, and of course, my statements are polemical and do not apply to all. No doubt, others will propose important counterexamples to my claims. My point is that critical intellectuals should not allow this coalescence to occur as it does often in the work of those most identified with “resistance” and other such shibboleths.¹⁷ Social scientists have their ways of testing such hypotheses, but critics have their own devices that, sadly, might have less social authority but could still earn the tolerance of other critical readers.

Famously, Louis Althusser, perched at the École Normale Supérieure, taught critics to read symptomatically, to understand the markers of social, ideological, conceptual, and economic practices and structures.¹⁸ This technique, derived from a long history of psychoanalytic and critical practice — with its roots in Spinoza and his heirs — allows a reading of contextualized practices and statements that reveal more than a technological empiricism allows. I propose to adopt this Althusserian trope — for it is a figure as much as a method — in this book to suggest some of what troubles me about the mirrored relationship of important moments of academic practice and the Bush regime that so distracted me and many others from perhaps more creative projects.¹⁹ I hypothesize that the American humanistic academy not only rests in a derivative relationship to this right wing that it (mostly) opposes but also extends some of its basic desires, does some of its work, as it were. Of course, no such statement could be universally true, not right “across the board,” but symptoms suggest that academicians-assumed difference from movement conservatism is not always real, often not carefully examined, and most important not useful. The chapters contained in this volume hint at some family resemblances between certain humanistic academic modes and projects and the movement. I can do no more here than indicate a few of them and list a small number of others that indict us all.

I will stress that the postsecularism movement in the academy and, more broadly, the turn to and reliance upon the work of Carl Schmitt exemplify the unthought extension of right-wing opinions in the United States. Even to suggest that this claim has convincing foundation requires an elaboration of two key elements of movement conservatism: fundamentalism and a commitment to war — and so I will turn to each of them, not to say much that is new but to prepare the faces in which we academics might see some resemblance. The first belongs to the epoch's loud dissatisfaction with "the Enlightenment," and the second — hardly disconnected from the first — is a politics of hate that embodies itself in permanent war abroad and maximalist politics at home. Moreover, movement conservatism insists that such a vision is the only legitimate view of politics, the only mature sense of the political, and so gives itself a necessity that approaches a law of nature in its assumed authority while hiding its own historical origins. Academic repetition of its utility, of its "truth" in this narrowly pragmatic sense, is itself a crime against criticism and against human imagination. That academics embrace the project as insightful and useful should worry all concerned about criticism and intellectual life.

Throughout the last decade, I saw signs not only of the well-remarked presence of Leo Strauss in the minds and acts of the Right's state intellectuals.²⁰ More worryingly, I saw the brutal face of this Schmittian politics of hateful violence, of a presumption that state politics could only exist on the model of a tribal struggle to the death over ways of life. One loudly influential proponent of this Schmittian version of Hobbesian brutality put the matter this way: "The survival of the West depends on Americans reaffirming their Western identity and Westerners accepting their civilization as unique not universal and uniting to renew and preserve it against challenges from non-Western societies. Avoidance of a global war of civilizations depends on world leaders accepting and cooperating to maintain the multicivilizational character of global politics."²¹ What do we see here? First, we have a Schmittian form of tribal politics, of a struggle to the death. Then, we have a bizarre adaptation of multiculturalism to the international arena, seen as inherently conflict ridden. Finally, for domestic right-wing purposes, we have a reassertion of the European identity of America itself — a reheated leftover of the culture wars of the eighties.²² Perhaps, for my purposes, this citation reveals the crucial and characteristic right-wing gesture against the Enlightenment. At this point, in the attack on Western universalism, a link opens to the academic Left, secular

and postsecular, in the United States. As with Schmitt and Strauss, Right and Left stand against what they each call the “Enlightenment” and “modernity.” The Right also stands openly against liberal democracy and against science and reason. Of course, on the academic Left, we have multiple examples of similar gestures. Carefully, scholarship could differentiate these comparisons and should. Nonetheless, the coalescence should worry, especially given the incommensurability in power behind and in the interests of those who aspire to reverse the “Enlightenment” and “modernity.”²³

During the last decade, I tried to trace some of the political ambitions, some of the consequences of a *raison d'état* defined by a peculiar Schmittian/Straussian combination of tropes and fantasies. I wanted to illustrate their consequences and implications instantiated in and enacted by agents. To sharpen my understanding, I tried to proceed genealogically and comparatively, so several times in the chapters that follow, I discuss the familial relationship between Alfred Thayer Mahan, the “Father of the American Navy,” and Paul Wolfowitz, “the leading conservative foreign policy thinker of his generation.”²⁴ We know that American “intellectuals” played a major role in conceptualizing U.S. empire and providing tactical notions and ideological briefs to cover U.S. ambition. The U.S.-Philippines war and the costly disasters in Southeast Asia had genocidal elements that readers of Mahan — the president of the American Naval War College and the major U.S. strategic theorist and naval historian of the nineteenth century — see he accepted as a sometimes necessity in the work of great powers. Moreover, Mahan advanced the claim that American intellectual and policy elites have an obligation to instruct the American people that war is a necessary good and that state power is far more important than economic well-being.²⁵ Indeed, I argue that Mahan’s theories of logistics explicitly intended to make U.S. economic production subservient to *raison d'état* and established the structural relations of a militarized nation. Wolfowitz, as far as I have discovered, never asserts the necessity of genocide. Nonetheless, he elaborates and extends Mahan’s commitment to the United States as a war state and struggles publicly and bureaucratically to legitimize the necessity of war. While Mahan did so on the basis of great power politics, an enhanced form of Hegelian theories of the ethical state, Wolfowitz abandoned Mahan’s political realism and insisted on war as a natural expression of U.S. identity, principles, and exceptionalism. Wolfowitz and Mahan share a teleological view of the United States, albeit with differences: Mahan thinks historically and with Hegel believes the

United States of the late nineteenth century is the great power of the moment whose task is to carry the world to the next ethical level. Wolfowitz thinks messianically. More weirdly, he believes like many neoconservatives that the United States is somehow ahistorical. He acts and speaks as if it were founded on godly principles, capable of perpetual ascendancy, and warrior-like able to form the globe in the image of its own “principles,” which the rest of the world, especially since 2002 and 2003, see as nothing more than a really quite inconsistent set of desires and beliefs. Wolfowitz, the neoconservatives, and the conservative nationalists who represented dominant foreign policy elements in the Bush era all opposed political realism in foreign policy. They opposed Henry Kissinger, in particular, for his rationalist desire to achieve stability through peaceful negotiations, balance of power, and institution building. Reversing détente with the USSR implied reversing Richard Nixon’s plan to achieve an accommodation with China.²⁶

Wolfowitz matters to my story because normally his friends and critics describe him as an intellectual. He was an academic as well as a government employee; he served as dean of the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. Moreover, he grew up in an academic environment and trained in the shadow of Leo Strauss, in the popular shades of Allan Bloom’s persona and the tactical rigor of Albert Wohlstetter. My original concern with Mahan grew from my research into Henry Adams and the question of how the United States became an imperial power, how its political culture embraced the desires for war and state power. This research prepared me to take Wolfowitz seriously. He became an obvious figure for my analysis, especially given the common opinion not only that he is a man of high intelligence, which seems to me very doubtful, but also that he foreshadowed the most extreme foreign policy and state power positions of the right-wing coalition of George W. Bush. He succeeded in disarticulating the alliance between U.S. power and the pursuit of stability and balance of power. He articulated the conservative movement’s desire to abandon what it saw as accommodationist policies predicated upon false ideas of American decline and led the GOP away from a worldview held from George Kennan to Kissinger to James Baker.

Wolfowitz also played the role of intellectual sponsor, of pedagogue, producing ephebes. For example, he brought Francis Fukuyama into government and nurtured him, along with “Scooter Libby,” and although he did not agree with Fukuyama’s famous thesis on the “end of history,” along

with his intellectual and policy cohort, he committed an error similar to his young protégé's error. The end of history asserted that liberal market political economy alone had survived the contest of ideas and system, leaving the field free of competitors for wealth and hegemony. Like Fukuyama, Wolfowitz never considered the fundamental question so basic to Mahan's imperial thinking: what of the power of U.S. economy? The financial crisis of 2007 confirmed what many intellectuals and scholars who attended to U.S. competitive advantage had warned.²⁷ The United States could not survive as a great power if the primary source of wealth creation was finance. Even traditional conservatives and once powerful members of the GOP warned of this. Yet, Wolfowitz led the state and its purveyors of opinion to assert that U.S. military and political power would forever exceed the possible reach of any competitor or group of competitors. This axiom of right-wing fantasy reflected structures of desire consequent upon multiple inadequate ways to understand history and politics.²⁸

A respectable or rational Right would have invested in careful historical examination of imperial history, of the nature of power, and of the order of state systems. The Far Right of the Bush coalition instead adopted a closed, maximalist ideology. It committed the United States to violent exploitation rather than peace and well-being. It easily embraced and peddled a politics of permanent war, of endless militarization that parodied Mahan's theories of logistics, and of Straussian manipulation of popular fears and desires.²⁹ The endless "war on terror" was both an opportunity seized by a well-prepared cohort and the delusive face of its own desires.

Movement conservatism, the right wing that ruled during the Bush years and still dominates U.S. politics, is not respectable or socially natural. It neither produces new ideas nor meets existing needs among the nation's people. This movement consists of a minority attempt at a takeover of the United States and its government. James Madison and his allies feared power in many abusive forms but perhaps none more than that of a minority seizure of power.³⁰ Of course, the U.S. Constitution famously aspires to protect the rights of minorities from the power of the majority, but its authors also worried about antidemocratic, indeed, unrepugnant abuses by minorities that acquired control of power.

In *Democracy*, Henry Adams wrote the paradigmatic American novel describing the seductive, populist, and moral cover under which predatory, self-interested, and corrupt antidemocrats would destructively exploit U.S.

institutions and resources. Adams's creates a brutally frank picture of cynical corruption in the character of Senator Ratliffe and his governing coalition. Adams falls short, however, in not representing the nihilism of what became movement conservatism. Not until his two later and greater books *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* and *The Education of Henry Adams* does he present the full social and human danger embodied by nihilistic *ressentiment* that enlists fear and loathing in a politics of hatred and death. In the earlier novel, however, Adams has a character voice one of the strongest nineteenth-century expressions of faith in American democracy after Walt Whitman. His commitment to the American experiment reflected high ideals and desires, knowingly shadowed by the real and likely threats of groups that inverting language and the true meaning of words would destroy the democracy for their own visionary and material interests and desires.³¹ Adams appears at times prominently in these papers, but his example is always present because I judge him to help us better able to understand what we face and the world of forces in which we live.



Many critics of Far Right movement conservatism mischaracterize it. It is not an epiphenomenon of neoliberalism. In fact, the popular elements of this movement, of its electoral coalition, resent the economic and cultural consequences of neoliberalism and globalization in politics and culture. As I have suggested, the foreign policy elites in this movement paid little attention to economy except as a subsidiary of state power. Often, the movement counterpoised itself to various Clintonian initiatives of globalization. It also resented the first Bush administration's reliance on coalitions and accommodation. Of course, the corporate constituency, the central players in the crony capitalism of the Bush era, profit from the structural changes neoliberalism achieves. While attacking Iraq, Bush objections to the People's Republic of China's (PRC) policies quieted not only because of China's relative size and military strength but also because of China's place as a profit center for U.S. internationals. In essence, though, this right-wing coalition was Schmittian in politics and fundamentalist in vision. The combined vision trumped fragments of the coalition that pulled in other directions — as we saw in the diminishment of Colin Powell.

Popular discourse, journalism, and a good deal of academic writing de-

scribe the rising dominance of this Right and of movement conservatism in its own terms. The neoconservatives, for example, routinely describe their defection to the GOP as the fault of radicals seizing control of the Democratic Party. Books such as *The Right Nation* echo this meme and legitimize it. They add that the Right became the place of new ideas that met the needs of the American people. Somehow, even the Right's critics fear the truth that in consumerist societies all needs, including political desires, result from advertising as much as traditional educational and social practices. Considering the Right's well-funded institution building and its power in media, we should speak of how those "needs" met by conservative ideas and practices result from spectacles and daily barrages that create those needs. As literary scholars know from reading Baudelaire, commodities are vampires — and this is no less true of political commodities than it is of diamond bracelets. Too many of us now are Emma Bovary.³²

The late David Foster Wallace might have been thinking about similar matters before his suicide.³³ In *The Pale King*, riffing on the real IRS and projecting it as a cross between the bureaucracy of *Brazil*³⁴ and the enthusiasm of megachurch attendees, Wallace represents the moral disaster befalling those who happily become what Jonathan Raban calls "obedient drones" of the institutions they serve.³⁵ If it is true, as Wallace seems to imagine, that pained souls satisfy their ego and soothe their inadequacies by submerging themselves into a faith-based practice — no matter how "religious" — then what brings Wallace to near tragic comedy is the pain such self-erased humans can inflict on others.³⁶ Wallace realistically generalizes the moral and psychological character of contemporary resentment, of hateful tribalism, and the felt necessity for exterminating the so-much-needed other.³⁷

If the foreign policy essence, the *raison d'état* of the state, is war — permanent, preemptive war dependent upon a perpetually dominant military — the cultural emotion of movement conservatism is hate, and despite mischaracterizations, nostalgia, a combination we recognize as *ressentiment*. If as Lewis Namier once wrote, "What matters most about political ideas is the underlying emotions, the music to which ideas are a mere libretto, often of a very inferior quality,"³⁸ then the proper critical task should be twofold: to analyze the creation of those emotions and to produce a significant substitute for it. Each of these involves acts of much greater creativity, intellectual rigor, and human affection than anything offered by the right-wing elites or the movement conservatives. Moreover, each also involves a different intel-

lectual and political ethos than the types of academicians mentioned at the beginning of this introduction.

Movement conservatives produced a need fed by its product. That metaphor misses how the underlying need is itself a product no different in kind from the aroused desire inherent in any (self-consuming) consumerist fantasy. Like any such product, only fantastical, contradictory, unreal consumables offer the illusion of satisfaction. The intellectual workers of this movement interest me because in their expressive efforts we detect some of what motivates the processes that generate this product, this underlying emotion. In Wolfowitz, we see how a potentially interesting intellectual becomes a worker happily embracing the task of pleasing bosses and embracing power. That so many pundits and others call him an intellectual and brilliant does not make it so. The “ideas” he produced and circulated, to which he gave rhetorical and professional credibility and legitimacy, are mere beliefs, examples of the shadows any post-Platonic intellectual, as the heirs of Strauss claim to be, should distrust. Of course, it is not surprising that the student of an academic popularizer — Wolfowitz, the student of Bloom — would exemplify the clerks’ treasons. What interests, however, as Henry Adams would say, are the values for which he betrayed the clerks? Julien Benda insisted that intellectuals refused to serve power and interest so they might bring civilization into society, might honor the good in a sea of human evil.³⁹ While engaged intellectuals refuse Benda’s passivity in the face of evil, danger always lay in intellectual subservience to and alliance with evil. More troubling yet, of course, is the Faustian deal of faux intellectuals who practice their professionalized skills in scorn of the great tradition Benda voiced and in the service of evil they seem happy to serve.

The events of Iraq and the financial crisis have had one result for all not blindly committed to the evils of movement conservatism: the right wing and its elites showed a lack of character, of properly educated ethics, and they overreached during the Bush era, a fate familiar to those who study history or literature. Perhaps Bush himself and the other Christian fundamentalists in his coalition and movement had not absorbed the political wisdom of Shakespeare, for example, but surely the students of Allan Bloom and Leo Strauss would know the Henry plays, the fate of Richard II, and even that of Marlowe’s Edward. The great Harvard professor of the so-called liberal era, Harry Levin, sketched the ethical and political lessons Bloomians and Straussians might have absorbed — had they not suffered from intellectual

and ethical arrogance that kept their characters ignorantly apart from wisdom. Writing of Marlowe, Levin notes the difference between Othello and Edward in a way that might strike a supposed lover of the classics of Western tradition with some irony — especially when remembered against the end of Wolfowitz’s sad career. Edward, deposed, confronts something as near to the tragic as his persistent immaturity allows:

In the dark and muddy dungeon where he encounters his end, he pays the most ironic penalties for the frolicking prodigality of his kingship. Tortured physically and mentally, humiliated by the loss of his beard, shaved and washed in puddle water, he rises to a sense of his tragic role with his remembrance of a forgotten victory. . . . It is a far cry of triumph, more theatrical than chivalric; but Shakespeare must have borne it in mind when Othello, on the verge of suicide, remembered his victory over the Turk at Aleppo. The striking feature of Edward’s catastrophe is the total absence of anything spectacular. . . . We are left with a bare stage which pretends to be nothing more, and with a hero stripped of any claim to distinction.⁴⁰

Wolfowitz and Kagan, père, would have it that sufficiently violent preemptive action would preclude Edward’s fate, which even yet might be the fate of George W. Bush — if he were to know it — and the nation he led.⁴¹ Because resentment structures and motivates movement conservatism, its “intellectuals” dismiss truth and learning in the name of their desires, no matter the lessons history teaches. William Kristol, the editor of the *Weekly Standard*, notably doubled-down on the rightness of his own lies or errors, saying after the proven nonexistence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq that truth has little place in politics.⁴²

I believe that a careful reading of Wolfowitz and his allies would give us a clear grasp on some very disturbing truths. The undergirding value of movement conservatism is hatred, not love, and it rests on generating and exploiting fear. While it claims to be optimistic — as its pundits record and often believe — it is in fact nostalgic. It embodies politics as Carl Schmitt broadly understood them, which means as Schmitt understood the human to be. Movement conservatism threatens all that is not part of the tribe, and in the case of the well-being of others, it would rather will nothing than not will at all. This Nietzschean lesson highlights the structural motives of this prepolitical movement that has seized the political sphere so successfully

that it has made its own malformation and ambitions seem natural. It makes criticism of its modalities seem unreal and melancholic, either memories of a past not quite so partisan and riven or memories so unrealistic that Barack Obama appears to be naive for believing in the possibility of realistic politics of negotiation.

Carl Schmitt was the favorite philosopher of the Nazi Party for many reasons. One was his basic belief that politics must be aggressive, that it must rest on a strong sense of us versus them. For Schmitt, politics began and remained primitive, a tribal consciousness that sees an enemy as any other group of people or set of external ideas that might compel an alteration in the home tribe's sense of itself, its own ways of life, its own beliefs, its own privileges, and its own satisfactions.⁴³ Movement conservatives have raised to consciousness the tribal desire to be "left alone," without taxes, without government, without conflicting ideas, without experts, without the demands of truth, and without even the need to recognize competitive powers or legitimate other interests. Despite its loud idolatrous appeals to the Constitution, movement conservatives are surely not followers of Madison. Pundits note regularly how the right wing does not believe any other social grouping — any other political coalition — has the legitimate right to elect a president. With Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, the Right's politics rests on denying the legitimacy of those presidents and their coalitions, and moves consistently to support only those forces that refuse compromise with competing special interests. The Right always describes the Democratic Party as the party of special interests, a gesture that marks the overall foreignness of any competing aspirations to their own. Movement conservatism does not see itself sharing the United States with others. They see themselves as America and so as solely legitimate within its borders, to exercise its power, to shape its future, and to theorize or imagine its futures and even its pasts. The maximalism of movement conservatism is hateful, murderous, and exterminist. Interestingly, it is un-American, certainly illiberal, never secular, and if Christian, as intolerant as any other fundamentalism it dislikes and sees as a challenger.⁴⁴

Journalists have noticed the alignment between hate and fear in the movement's actions and emotions. "The Right Nation relies on rallying like-minded people around culturally charged questions of one sort or another. These questions sometimes seem opaque and sometimes downright silly but they all boil down to one bigger question: 'Are you one of us, or one of them?'"

How did the movement defeat Senator Max Cleland, a severely disabled U.S. war veteran in Georgia? It reminded “conservatives of the heart why they hate the other side.”⁴⁵ Tracy Strong makes the point that Schmitt’s resurgence has to do with not only his critique of liberalism but also his assertion that the state always needs enemies for its own legitimation. Strong also notes that this Schmittian position on friends and enemies has great implications for the conduct of domestic, intrastate politics that extends state violence, through the political apparatus, against otherwise established elements of the state itself.⁴⁶ This notion, relevant for an understanding of internal colonialism and the reaction against migration and immigration, in the United States especially, has established as authentic an unconstitutional political project for a minority to seize the state in a near dictatorial manner to suppress other ways of life and other forms of imagination.

Strong’s reading of Schmitt shows why thinkers who believe themselves to the left of the so-called liberal state, liberal society, and Enlightenment notions of reason — to the left of Lockean thought and Keynesian economics — have helped resurrect Schmitt. Although from a far-right position of his own, Schmitt makes a claim that left critics of liberalism seem to like, that politics is war by other means: “Fighting and possibility of death are necessary for there to be the political.”⁴⁷ Colloquially, we speak of the culture wars as we do the war on drugs or the war on cancer. Is the American public imagination so impoverished? However, human agents have made politics into a seeming war to the death behind which lies extraordinary opportunism, cynicism, and destruction — the ruination not only of accomplishments (marked by their imperfections) but also of human beings’ present lives. Moreover, ruination becomes the accepted norm in a society read as a battlefield, where at best one can hope for a privately secure space behind the battle lines, where like sees and hears like and no other.⁴⁸

Producing underlying emotions of fear and hatred, the agents and institutions of movement conservatism sicken the culture and society. Conservatives not only hate the other but also experience the other as not liking or respecting them — the essence of resentment. The haters feel unliked and threatened. In its extreme form, such a desire to be likable is narcissism and its politics is that of the mirror.⁴⁹ Jonathan Franzen reads consumer technology — the love for Apple products, for example — as a social allegory of contemporary desires to find oneself only in the world one sees as a process that makes love impossible, even as an expectation.⁵⁰ Franzen’s novels show

and his essays insist that the mirror deceives, that there is no other person as much “like” you are as you would “like” to believe. Affection and similarity do not elide, except as forced deception and self-deception, as the result of mechanically produced structures of affect or socially unfortunate tribal primitivisms. Stepping outside the repeating world of the self-same can lead to struggles and fighting, and when the encounter is between specific people, rather than abstracted groups, it might force a new experience — a “real choice.” Within the domain of the like, however, there can be no love. This is Franzen’s acute point. We think we know that enemies do not love. Schmitt and his scholars seem to miss the point that tribal members need not love either, not as a condition of war; narcissism will do as a motive. Homer gave us the comparison between Achilles and Agamemnon, on the one hand, and Achilles and Priam on the other. Tribalism, Schmittian politics, sees all encounters with the other as a threat. It encourages reproduction of the narrowest kind. Here is what Franzen says, in very popular language, about an alternative way of life, an alternative set of values that a better politics might nourish:

This is not to say that love is only about fighting. Love is about bottomless empathy, born out of the heart’s revelation that another person is every bit as real as you are. And this is why love, as I understand it, is always specific. Trying to love all of humanity may be a worthy endeavor, but, in a funny way, it keeps the focus on the self, on the self’s own moral or spiritual well-being. Whereas, to love a specific person, and to identify with his or her struggles and joys as if they were your own, you have to surrender some of your self.

The big risk here, of course, is rejection. We can all handle being disliked now and then, because there’s such an infinitely big pool of potential likers. But to expose your whole self, not just the likable surface, and to have it rejected, can be catastrophically painful. The prospect of pain generally, the pain of loss, of breakup, of death, is what makes it so tempting to avoid love and stay safely in the world of liking.

And yet pain hurts but it doesn’t kill. When you consider the alternative — an anesthetized dream of self-sufficiency, abetted by technology — pain emerges as the natural product and natural indicator of being alive in a resistant world. To go through a life painlessly is to have not lived.⁵¹

Franzen's popular romantic notion of love based on difference and his liberalism based on tolerance and learning from diversity — indeed, his classical and comedic desire to find the missing other that alone nourishes the self — recalls the Sermon on the Mount. While the Christian nation surely believes it prays for its enemies and might even practice charitable works for the enemy — other than wealth, what better way to prove one's own election? — it rarely turns the other cheek or asks secularists or Muslims to slap it, too (see Matthew 5:38–42). While the Beatitudes that precede this injunction in Matthew could feed the paranoia of close tribes — those who feel under threat always feel they are the righteous — more than peaceful suffering, it urges upon the tribes the highest value — peacemaking. Schmitt, Wolfowitz, Mahan, and movement conservatism cannot abide peacemaking.

The chapters in this book represent my effort to trace certain conjunctions and reinforced parallels between certain academic and conservative political tendencies. It would not escape anyone's attention that Schmitt played an important role on both sides of the conventionally understood political alignment.

A considerable and important part of the most critically or theoretically advanced elements of the humanistic academy have recently drawn on Schmitt. Surveying these figures would require a book of its own. Among early influential examples is work by Chantal Mouffe, who along with Ernesto Laclau had developed a liberalized version of Antonio Gramsci's thinking that helped establish the now authoritative mode of post-Lacanian political thinking on and beyond the left.⁵² Their work responded to both failures on the left, especially in Europe, and to successes on the right, especially Reaganism and global liberalization of markets and politics. Mouffe moved rather easily from this early work to a much more Schmittian position. By 1999, she was ready to collect, edit, and introduce *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*.⁵³ To her, his work seemed very much to meet the contingencies of Clintonian globalization and the neoliberal arrangements of the so-called end of history, which to some of her volume's contributors seemed also to usher in a postpolitical era — just on the verge of movement conservatism's intensified successes in the United States.

In essence, neoconservative and left Schmittian positions were related responses to the crises induced by the geopolitical economic transformations from national, regional, and imperial world orders to regimes defined as neoliberal. The latter, with their porous borders, the reduced costs of

international trade, the assault on national economic institutions (such as unions), and the free flow of finance capital, produced crises in government and political order to which some responded with more rather than less violent actions and theories.

In *A More Conservative Place*, neoconservatives are most likely to be Americans who, before and during the Bush era, combined ideological faith in U.S. exceptionalism, state power (especially military power), and elitist-driven mass politics of fear and desire as an aggressive antidote to the decline of U.S. power and priority. Shortly after the French, among others, had declared the United States the world's hyperpower following the events of 1989 and 1991, American neoconservatives turned a blind eye to new economic circumstances and the U.S. loss of comparative advantage, to reassert their own priorities through the United States' sole remaining dominant advantage, military force. Inherently distrustful of democracy, committed to a cynical electoral politics that rested on the exploitation of faith that they themselves did not share, the so-called neocons moved to assert their fantasy of U.S. domination outside history.⁵⁴

Domestically and intellectually, this set of actions reflected a worldview that contained elements of both Strauss and Schmitt, especially the latter's cynical, unproven, antiliberal, and antidemocratic definition of politics as conflict, which gives the state a "supervillant" role over civil society and authorizes its own illegality under the claim of a ubiquitous "state of exception." The neoconservative response to neoliberal transformation, so specifically but not uniquely American (see my citations of Irving Kristol), has appeared finally as a disaster. Its familial relation to the left, Schmittian position among critics and intellectuals, centered mostly on Schmitt and his repetition by various intellectuals, suggests the disaster that awaits that movement, too.

Fukuyama, the protégé of Wolfowitz, believed like Žižek that the world had entered into a postpolitical era, and although each of these intellectuals has a complex relation to Hegel, Žižek is closer in values and worldview to the Right than is Fukuyama. Žižek's extraordinary Schmittian efforts to force the political into a space understood to be without politics reflects the most bizarre lack of attention to the United States as a global power and to U.S. politics. Perhaps Žižek cannot think historically or cannot imagine the truth of U.S. exceptionalism, which topic has benefited from not only endless popular examination but also the highest possible theoretical reflection in the persistently creative work of Donald Pease. We should note that omit-

ting America from theoretical considerations of the political or postpolitical — except at the level of the worst abstractions and clichés — has become something of a norm among academics, with devastating intellectual and institutional consequences. (The problems reveal themselves with devastating clarity in some of the most often cited academic writing on postsecularism.) The politics of movement conservatism, the devices practiced by its elites in language, media, and institutions, exemplify precisely what Schmitt calls for as a self-conscious politics — and yet, creatures such as Žižek speak of the postpolitical. Perhaps this was true in and of Berlin or Amsterdam in 1999, but it was not true in America on the verge of Bush's election. Such self-discrediting lack of attention has consequences when academics carry this way of speaking into contexts where it clearly does not apply. The result is dangerous: as movement conservatism assaults liberal society with the brutalities of war, so-called theorists extend the assault from within the very heart of modern rightist hatred of liberal societies. If the putative left is indeed choosing a politics and aesthetics of destruction, then we should know just what we are choosing.⁵⁵ We can describe and experience the world of capital as permanent crisis and perhaps choose to meet that awareness with both a more complex assessment and with resources drawn from sources other than those of right-wing anticapitalism. Were there time, we might investigate the contemporary embrace of millenarian and utopian thinking on the left — with or without hope, as Jacques Derrida might say — just as we might worry the same intellectuals' embrace of Walter Benjamin's final metaphor of all history as ruin and of destruction as the proper aesthetic alternative to creation.⁵⁶

While the self-identified post-Marxist, post-Lacanian, and postpolitical ephebes of Carl Schmitt might well regret and feel some nostalgia for the days when politics involved the aspiration to collectivism on the left and the desire for consumerist atomism on the right, movement conservatives, despite their own collective identifications, aimed to halt both collectivism and secularism.⁵⁷ In the second of these, as in the first, they have found allies among especially theoretically inclined, (perhaps post-) humanist academics as well. Leo Strauss is a more revealing figure than is Carl Schmitt for understanding other aspects of this discussion, which is as much about overthrowing the Enlightenment and modernity as it is about the hateful politics of tyrants ruling through the manipulation of popular fears.

As I mention in the chapters following, the neoconservatives — certainly

among the premier propagators of opinion for the new Right — loathe Henry Adams, believing that his irony and secular democratic historical humanism threatens social order with anomie while advocating peace as a value for educated democratic populations. Norman Podhoretz specifically recommends that Henry Adams disappear from the nation's cultural memory and that his “baleful” advocacy of values the neocons loathe disappear into the trash bin of history. Adams had grave doubts about the path American power and civilization followed after the Civil War and during the first wave of overseas imperialism. More important, though, for Podhoretz — as I show within — Adams was a too powerful instance of the American intellectual who criticized American practices and values in the world, who stood opposed to the views of U.S. exceptionalism as the movement conservatives understood it — “Christian,” perpetual, entitled, and warlike.

Adams's avowed elitism, the same quality that has made him the object of considerable hostility and indifference in an era of right-wing pragmatism, a nationalist conservatism that Richard Rorty helped to refocus around William James, did not save him from the wrath of the anti-Burkean American Right. (See chapter 15, “Why the Neocons Hate Henry Adams.”) Far from interested in preserving useful and valuable traditions, this Right, like much of the anticapitalist, academic “Left,” rushed to banish all that had been to the category of ruination, to the spewn history of human defeat in fallen history. Irving Kristol, the so-called godfather of neoconservatism, in his son's magazine the *Weekly Standard*, then funded by Rupert Murdoch, openly embraced and committed the Right to a Straussian politics of tyrannical manipulation. In this politics, an elite political caste encourages religious — so-called Christian — faith for two reasons: to provide a homogenizing and mobilizing emotional frame the elite could lead and, as important, to ensure the stability of society against the anomie that might follow from criticism or irony — that is, any objection against the shortfall of U.S. achievement. Kristol makes explicit that the movement must deny all other groups and individuals, insofar as possible, the right to mobilize alternative visions of society and the future. The uniquely American Right, inhabiting American state power, must police the imagination not only of those it excludes from its own quarter and but also most especially the cadres upon whom it depends. Virulent militarism abroad was combined with a domestic war on the legitimacy of competing visions and institutions but, above all, war to control hegemonically or by violence the imaginative capacities of historical humanity itself. What could

the permanent state of war abroad against “others” have been about but denying those others their own un-American ways of life? Moreover, was it not congruent with the permanent war against un-American elements at home, especially those poor, immigrants, and unemployed who might have found their own ways of life? Of course, the academic Left opposes such barbarism emotionally and ideologically but often not effectively, because the left critique of the given world, once more given the incongruities of power, does the work of the Right often by legitimating the very devices of the Right’s violent fantasies.

For example, the assault on the Enlightenment that typifies so much “radical” academic work in the humanities elides perfectly with the antiseccular, antisecular, antimodern, and antirational ideas or beliefs propagated within and for the radical Right. In the simplest sense, as some of these chapters show, and in the spirit of Henry Adams’s inability to find a home on either side of his time’s politics — these academic intellectuals do the work of their most deeply entrenched and powerful enemies. The left Schmittians and the right Straussians agree in their aims to disintegrate the liberal state and increasingly in their assaults on the Enlightenment and secularism.

Henry Adams embodies a tradition of deep comparative, synthetic, and historical understanding that intellectuals now must practice to grapple with the current state of U.S. culture, politics, and power in a world increasingly unsettled by that power and its relative decline. Adams committed himself to careful study, to years of work and thousands of prose pages to illuminate sixteen years of American history. He gave his entire career to the literary tasks required to explore and voice the complex intersections of power, economy, political theory, and aesthetics not only to understand American modernity but also to propose models for its peaceful nurturing development. Above all, his thinking was comparative. His great study of medieval art and philosophy *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* was not merely historicist; in it, he shaped a strong comparison of periods and geographies, of cultures and histories. He produced a text that read the flows of power and movements of knowledge and creativity as a brilliant alternative to the extraordinary work of Mahan on sea power. Adams presented a clear instance of how historical humanist minds, attentive to the necessity of loving imagination, produce not only knowledge and form but also aesthetic experience for audiences that they summon into being. This instance contests its opponents not as enemies set for erasure but rather for their danger to humanity — as Mahan’s

portrait of genocidal war called out U.S. imperialism — that, challenged in the imaginary space of life, creative intellectuals must name as such and displace art, imagination, and thought.⁵⁸

When the Christian right and its allies in movement conservatism attack the Enlightenment and secular culture they aim to make such figures and such work as Adams illegitimate and impossible. The assault goes far beyond Adams himself, of course, but it frightens us away from our pre-2002 scholarship when we realize that the academic postsecular trend now so common in the human sciences augments that very right-wing movement. Of course, since many postsecularists see themselves as enemies of the Right, of imperialism, and liberal thought in general, they cannot imagine let alone assent to such complicity. What are we to say, however, when we look at instances of their work and cringe at its intellectual poverty? We cannot trust work that is as grossly simplifying as much of the postsecularist theory that, cowering in the shadow of post-Iraq righteousness, cannot make a good claim for its own intellectual capacities.

Journalism and pundits bring us news every day of movement conservatism's antagonism to science and reason. GOP political candidates publicly stand against Charles Darwin as they take oaths against tax increases. They call Jesus a philosopher and, on the model of all converted enthusiasts, appeal to their special relation to Christ or the Lord as the basis for their own conformity to tribal norms and political talking points. According to the Right, climate change is an elitist attempt to deny liberty to Americans, and health care for the poor is a socialist trap, not a way to care for the poor, the least among us.

Kristol makes clear the Machiavellian political stakes. The sort of tribal conservatism he led and endorses can only exist in America, he tells the readership of the *Weekly Standard*, because it is in the United States alone that the religiously created base waits to ground electoral access to state power. Within movement conservatism, hacks and politicians have instrumentalized the language of Christian texts — surprisingly often the language of the so-called Old Testament — into a discourse that legitimates power that supports a coherent elite governing from within the status quo based on a caricature of Calvinist notions of election. We have more than enough evidence to conclude that movement conservatism's ambitions are not democratic. At the points where the political elites and the fundamentalist base meet self-consciously in the instrumentalization of “faith” to gather power in a global

as well as national ruling cohort, democracy itself is a threat that a mobilized “Christianity” displaces and destroys.

C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy details the personal and institutional alliances the common emotional and cultural views that would put global power in the hands of those who do not bother to call votes. Once we enter the mirror world of movement conservatism, nothing is impossible. Jeff Sharlet presents a frightening and convincing portrait of the antidemocratic Christian Right by amassing large numbers of anecdotes and incidents in which we see their values at work and by studying in extended detail a few crucial instances of the violent cruelty of this Christian alliance, the virulent maximalism of which echoes Schmitt’s tribalist conception of politics.⁵⁹ The simulacrum of “humility,” in this nightmare world, involves accepting the burdens of power: who are we not to do whatever it is that God’s plan calls on us to do? We are, by virtue of being in power, always already the Lord’s servants and always necessarily accepting of our tasks. While academic postsecularists lambast the Eurocentrism of post-Enlightenment techniques of secular critique — and worse, criticism — the Christian Right makes no pretense to science or knowledge, yields not a millimeter to the demands of reason or evidence, and simply asserts its beliefs. Their standard practice is to quote out of context, to intone with proper solemnity, to pose their closed mindedness in the rhetoric of the open minded (here, the paradigm was Allan Bloom’s book *The Closing of the American Mind*, which demonstrates the immutability of orthodox ignorance).⁶⁰

A minimally attentive reader would recognize that these Christian Right elites practice the indirect discourse Strauss himself identified as the mode of tyrants. Jeff Sharlet nicely encapsulates the hypocrisy of the right-wing Christian elites and their apparently sincerely mouthed beliefs in his account of their abuse of women.⁶¹ Like any reader of newspapers, he noticed the strange actions of Mark Sanford, one of the elect prepared for high office by the movement’s political elites. Sharlet shows several things coalescing: chosen men may abuse women without being abandoned by their political supporters; rightist elites have a biblical account — an apology or excuse — that licenses their irresponsible behavior and values; and this account expresses the antidemocratic worldview they use to seduce political leaders and potential leaders to accept the privilege of unaccountable power. Sharlet carefully studies the language Mark Sanford and his supporters used to justify his decision to remain in power after lying to his constituents and betraying his

office. Sanford likened himself to King David who raped Bathsheba and killed her husband. Like David, Sanford said, God had chosen him for leadership, and he could not turn away from that burden simply because, like David, he had committed crimes and sins. “The key, Sanford declared, is humility. And he could do humility. He did some right there, apologizing to his cabinet, making clear he wasn’t going to resign. Like David, he had a calling. He was chosen. God had put him in office, and God would take him out; until then, Mark Sanford would remain governor of South Carolina.”⁶² What is the vision here? Sharlet cites John C. Maxwell, a Prayer Breakfast regular in Washington: “God appoints specific leaders to fulfill a mission; he doesn’t hold a popular vote.” Of course, Sanford and the others opine about David and Bathsheba in a completely prejudiced, self-interested allegory. There is no tradition for understanding David’s murderous acts and sexual violence as a justification of his kingship. God surely does not approve of his actions: David’s Lord punishes him brutally, killing his son, despite David’s power. The widowed and raped Bathsheba later bears him Solomon, whom she makes David’s heir by her own brilliance. All or none of this hinders the Christian narrative in its self-justificatory attack on democracy, the will of the people, moral responsibility, and liberty. Most important, within this microcosm of the Right’s ambition to totalitarianism, we see its planetary hatred for the idea of human responsibility, human historicality, human imagination, and human knowledge. In short, it hates and will destroy — make into ruins — by an aesthetic of destruction, all that the human species created as it came to consciousness of its own capacities and species ambitions.

To support this assault on secular historical humanism from within academically clichéd positions of cultural difference affronts the moral sense and the intellectuals’ responsibility to the historicizing of the human that the species struggled so hard to achieve.⁶³ We sense the same sort of conceptual reduction — the same sort of opinion substituting for complex comparative research and study — that the academy expects to find in the noise of political hacks and polemicists, on talk radio and in for-profit megachurches, in academic movements aligned with the Right.

Particularity is the only measure of historical grasp, but in an introduction, nothing more than instances can appear. So, compare two characteristic gestures, one on the Christian Right, described by Sharlet, and the other on the academic Left, in defense of postsecularism. Sharlet notices certain stylistic tics, certain commonplace verbal and behavioral gestures that typify

the intellectual contempt for truth and complexity that characterize movement conservatism: “‘What I find interesting’ — it’s an evangelical men’s movement phrase, *it is interesting to note, what I find interesting*, the almost casual, seemingly humble approach to a major claim based on a bit of scripture isolated from its text and put to work as a maxim, a law for leaders, an ancient justification for present-day authority. What Sanford found interesting about David was this: ‘The way in which he fell mightily, he fell in very significant ways.’”⁶⁴ These maxims are not consistent even with each other. They show no respect for thought but only for opportunistic cleverness. Their purpose is simple: create ideas that work on an audience well prepared emotionally to hear the strains of familiar lies. This is tribalist rhetoric; it aims not to seduce but to reassure. Seduction attaches only when power offers rewards in exchanges for accepting such memes without question. Literary intellectuals easily scorn, mock, and fear such language use but recognize it and perhaps too often disregard its seriousness. The production of memes echoes advertising, of course, and is the latest instance of what, since classical Greece, philosophers and critics worry about as the abuse of rhetoric.

Rhetoric works similarly even in self-described, progressive academic spaces. Speakers at a recent conference posed the question “Is critique secular?” and reportedly undertook the question to separate reason from secularism, or more exactly, critique’s ability to “unveil error” from its presumed reliance upon Enlightenment reason’s ability to make clear.⁶⁵ One error the speakers aimed to unveil was critique’s presumed reliance on secularism. For such minds as these, it seems, the habit of critique requires an endless sawing off its own planks, a project that importantly releases critique from its historical origins in Western reason.

The motives for this effort are many. One condition seems to be courage, for these academics set out to undermine the basis of their own institutional existence, presumably to make us freer. The gesture is characteristic. The critique of the institution will not overthrow it even if it does delegitimize its current forms, catching the humanists who practice this mirror work in the endless cycle of self-consuming artifice. More important, the gesture lacks careful analysis and proceeds quite happily from characterizations not much different in kind from those of Mark Sanford on King David: “Those who posed this question [is critique secular?], the conference organizers, knew its terms would not stay still and are among the scholars who have problematized such terms extensively in their own work. But they knew as

well that the Western academy is governed by the presumptive secularism of critique, and that it is with this governance that we must begin. Unseating governance of this sort is the very signature of political, social, and cultural critique; it targets what is presumptive, sure, commonsensical, or given in the current order of things” (8).

Allowing for the fact that academic audiences expect different rhetorics than Mark Sanford’s, the similarities of this way of speaking to his are striking. Scholars who have problematized this work — a professional cohort with an already established position within an academy — oddly enough characterized uniformly over time and space as homogenously Western. It asserts as commonplace and sure something unproven as such and then supports its own importance as an unveiling of the unproven foundation. It works for the believers: it is not seductive but aims to make coherent. If it can seduce or convert anyone, it could only be by offering rewards — not power, perhaps, but places within the cohort, which might mean places within jobs and recognized new ways of speaking — more tribalism.

Put these two next to each other, and their conflicting desires stand out. Look more closely at their similarities, and the situation becomes disturbing. Intellectuals should be more aware of their neighbors, and academics who claim to understand the forces of history and the power of structures and discourses should attend to family resemblance. Moreover, these two examples, placed side by side, show us how deeply embedded we are in the tribal politics of Schmittian hate. What motivates this assault on secularism and critique other than demographic change in the U.S. university and professionalism’s requirements for new products and positions? The political sincerity of the conferencers’ motives stands out as immediate and as partially blind: “The question, is critique secular? is also posed at a political-historical juncture when intellectuals face something of a choice between complicity with imperial and unreflexive Western civilizational discourses of rationality and secularism on the one hand, and with challenging Western presumptions to monopolize the fact, meaning, and content of secularism, rationalism, freedom, and even democracy on the other” (13). Schmitt would be happy with this formulation: it is tribal and claims politics is a matter of life and death, or at least, of lifestyle and competing rhetorics. Like Sanford’s speech, it does great violence to the case it claims to know, to the demands of thoughtful political engagement, and to the inherited standards of rigorous secular humanistic scholarship that it admits grounds the university. Surely,

no serious mind would rest on such baldly reductive binaries. Simple fact checking, for example, would blast such abstract fantasies to smithereens. It would turn up such books as Anthony Bogues's *Empire of Liberty*.⁶⁶ It would discover a text written by the heir to the great tradition of colonial and post-colonial Caribbean intellectuals, educated in the West Indies and the U.K., informed by secular critique along with the complex human specificities of radical black ways of knowing and doing critique. It would know that figures like C. L. R. James and Edward W. Said — names anathema from the start of such counterfactual fantasies as we see in this abstract meme — would, if accounted for, make these conferees' statements as impossible as rabbinical knowledge would make Sanford's remarks.

Behind this question about secular critique lies, of course, the great wars of aggression waged by the Bush coalition for movement conservatism. We can see once more how their power distorts and weakens intellectual work. These conferees find themselves, admittedly, on the terrain posed by the Right presumably in an effort to delegitimize it. However, these conferees have the wrong targets: the Right has no investment in secular critique, in the liberal university, in truth-based governance, in history, and in the conundrums that mire these left academics. On the contrary, their own memes, professionally successful and self-assuring, that close the academy into its own version of tribal difference — the ways they work as well as what they produce — help the Right.

Consider the critical shoddiness of one famous postsecularist in his assaults on Western Enlightenment's secularized oppression of the "other." It would take endless citation to make the point convincingly, but one or two instances must stand to characterize the carelessness that damages the standards of intellectual work. What are we to make, to take one simple case, of a postsecularist who offers a statement by a clearly reactionary Pope Benedict as a representative instance of the values of "the modern secular condition we all inhabit."⁶⁷ Note the tribalism of the "all" in this quotation. How is this different from the rhetoric of the Right? I correct my first-year honors students for excessive reliance on the passive voice, for their tendency to characterize without specifics. I would ask them what they mean when they say "all inhabit." I would ask them for evidence and proof as well as a statement that is more careful. When they characterize the attitudes of "many," I would ask more questions of the same kind. When they write prose like the following, I require revision to show them the standards that rigorous secular

research and expressive communication requires. I would not allow them to advance their presumptions so carelessly and in so unspoken a manner: “Free speech, it is said, is central to democracy. Consistent with the standpoint of Pope Benedict and many of the defenders of the Danish cartoons, it is often claimed that democracy is rooted in Christianity and is therefore alien to Islam. There is a widespread conviction that Christian doctrine has been receptive to democracy because in Christendom (unlike Islam) church and state began as separate entities. The notion of historical origins is more problematic than is popularly supposed” (21).

Academic Left, neoconservative, and Christian Right — all players on the terrain of the Bush era — share so many characteristics that a Henry Adams might well let us see. Moreover, he would insist that intellect has obligations that cannot settle for a place on the terrain power has constructed. He would insist on comparison of space and time, on knowledge available for the creations needed by life and enabled by strong memory and desire, not by weakness and amnesia. (How astonishing that, although the conference about critique clearly emerges from Bush’s wars, the badly written and conceived chapter I have cited spends all its time on Europe. Where is America in the story it wants to tell of liberal secular Christian society?)

Intellectual work should not remove itself from work and struggle. When serious, it tries for lucidity. It will look carefully at who sets terms and how and then decide if it should refuse them or engage them. Among other things, it will weigh the balance of power. The critical tradition has taught how hard it is to know one’s own time, but difficulty does not excuse the ignorant repetition of the powerful. Scholars and teachers should never celebrate the political desires behind the careless writing and scholarship we see among the intellectuals. Professors’ responsibility is not to their passions but to the imagination, to discrimination, to comparative knowledge — and to the patience required to know, think, and teach. The chapters that follow do not meet this standard because circumstances and a lack of will too often swept them away; nonetheless, they offer a complex lesson.