

George Grant and Modern Justice

Gregory S. Butler

IN THE POPULAR PRESS one is increasingly presented with the common opinion that the modern political world is characterized by an ongoing struggle between the forces of totalitarian socialism and the forces of enlightened democratic liberalism. Recent events in Eastern Europe and the Far East have fueled the perception that the two forces are essentially contradictory and imply vastly different interpretations of man, politics, and society. This perception is perhaps understandable since the decline in power of the two great totalitarian empires of the twentieth century has been attended, in each case, by the strong and vocal presence of liberal democrats. Therefore the choice between totalitarianism and liberalism would appear as one of the most fundamental political issues of our time. Indeed, some have gone so far as to suggest that on one level the choice has already been made in decisive fashion. Francis Fukuyama's recent essay entitled "The End of History?" has sparked lively debate over the possibility that the age of the ideological and totalitarian interpretation of man in history is over and that democratic liberalism has won the war on the level of political theory if not yet actual political practice.¹ It is only a matter of time, it is argued, before the Marxist world finally collapses and recognizes once and for all the truth of the liberal understanding of justice.

While I believe such ideas are thought-provoking and worthy of study, I also believe that they indicate a basic misunderstanding of the nature of modern liberal justice. My aim in this essay is to question the common opinion that totalitarianism and liberalism are essentially contradictory interpretations of man and society. Drawing on the work of George Grant, I shall argue that the contradiction is really within liberalism itself, and ultimately the contradiction is one that encourages liberal regimes to act as unwitting

theoretical accomplices in totalitarian politics. If valid, this argument would call into question the value of the persistent liberal rhetoric concerning freedom and human rights, and would cast doubt on the notion that the two ideologies are meaningful alternatives to one another in anything but the short term. It may turn out that liberalism and its assumptions about justice are not sufficiently independent of the assumptions of totalitarianism to justify the late death sentence of modern ideological politics. Such a proposition would certainly carry with it some far-reaching implications. Are we further away than we thought from a resolution of the crisis of modernity? How well prepared is the West to deal with the collapse of Marxist ideology? And, perhaps most importantly, how close is the West to undermining the claims of its own liberal ideology by participating in the

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same systematic denial of equal justice that it has historically deplored?

George Parkin Grant is a contemporary Canadian political philosopher who has written extensively on the subject of modernity, and has done so in terms which help clarify the complex relationship between totalitarian and liberal varieties of modern justice. Part of what makes Grant a useful figure is his practice of understanding the modern world in terms of its philosophical and spiritual origins, or its root premises about what human beings are. For Grant it is a mistake to overemphasize the differences between liberal and totalitarian political thought precisely because they have a common philosophical patrimony. The reasoning process that produced the contractarian view of justice

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