

## BOOK REVIEW

*Ancient Greece and American Conservatism: Classical Influence on the Modern Right.*  
By JOHN A. BLOXHAM. London, UK and New York, NY: I. B. Tauris, 2018. Pp. x  
+ 284. Hardcover, £72.00. ISBN 978-1-78831-154-0.

In such politically divisive times, it is refreshing to read a balanced discussion of American political ideologies. John Bloxham's *Ancient Greece and American Conservatism: Classical Influence on the Modern Right* is an admirable example of scholarly detachment and penetrating analysis, which looks at how many conservative intellectuals in the United States from the late 1940s to the early 2000s selectively used authors such as Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle and Thucydides to advance their particular worldviews. The book is based on a PhD thesis, but it is highly readable and accessible. One of the most important contributions of Bloxham's monograph is to illuminate the diversity of conservative approaches to ancient and modern history.

In the Introduction, Bloxham explains that his work draws on three separate fields of study: classical reception studies, the classical tradition and intellectual history. He explains that the relativistic nature of reception theory "is fundamentally antithetical to the commonly held conservative belief in absolute truths" (3). But as Bloxham demonstrates throughout his work, conservative authors frequently attacked relativism without providing any rigorous and sustained arguments for absolute truths. The history of the classical tradition, which focuses on the transmission of texts and ideas from classical antiquity, provides Bloxham with a counterbalance to classical reception studies because it tends to be a more traditional approach to the canonical authors of ancient Greece and Rome. "In this older approach," Bloxham writes, "much more emphasis is placed on the illustrious and revered aspects of Antiquity, which is also the attitude that conservatives have tended to adopt" (3). Finally, by adopting the approach of some intellectual history and examining the political contexts in which conservative intellectuals wrote, Bloxham shows how contemporary issues played a key role in many of the conservative appropriations of classical ideas (4). There are five

chapters that proceed roughly in chronological order, but each is primarily thematic.

Chapter 1 focuses on how various conservative writers, especially Richard Weaver and Willmoore Kendall, used Plato to argue for moral absolutism. Although certain ideas in Plato's works – such as the *Republic's* gender equality and prohibition on owning property among the guardian class (20) – ran counter to much conservative ideology, Richard Weaver believed that Plato's theory of Forms was essential to combat the corrupting influence of modern relativism (15). Bloxham explains that in certain respects Aristotle would have served Weaver's purpose better: "Weaver was well-versed in a southern intellectual tradition in which Plato was interpreted as a dangerous egalitarian and Aristotle was the philosopher of small-scale farming and a non-specialized gentleman ruling class" (24). But Weaver had a strong antipathy towards Aristotle because he viewed the philosopher as foundational to the development of modern science and materialism. Willmoore Kendall, the other major conservative writer Bloxham discusses in Chapter 1, employed Plato to defend McCarthyism. Kendall argued that at times it was necessary for a society to silence its critics, as the Athenians did to Socrates, to maintain order and stave off anarchy (52). Bloxham does a particularly good job of analyzing how Kendall's arguments were formulated in opposition to the work of John Stuart Mill and Karl Popper, who portrayed Socrates as a beacon of freedom and liberalism.

Willmoore Kendall was particularly influenced by the work of Leo Strauss, who is the main subject of Chapter 2. As Bloxham points out, Strauss used ancient thought to critique modernity, especially its supposed moral relativism and liberal democracy. Despite widely divergent views among his supporters and critics, Bloxham states that "Strauss was neither the champion of democratic freedom described by his supporters, nor the closet Machiavellian portrayed by his critics, but something more interesting between these poles" (56). One of the main reasons Strauss's work can be interpreted in diametrically opposed ways was because he wrote esoterically – to protect society, Strauss believed philosophers and scientists should not express their dangerous truths publicly but make them accessible only "to a small group of intelligent and well-trained readers" (60). Thus, Strauss's readings of ancient Greek authors, particularly Plato and Xenophon, can operate on two different levels: one relying on a superficial exoteric understanding of a text, and the other expounding a deeper esoteric meaning.

Chapter 3 deals with the rise of neoconservatism in the 1960s and 1970s and its engagement with the work of Aristotle. This chapter consists primarily of summaries of neoconservative writers from this period; however, as throughout the book, Bloxham provides keen insight into the ways in which ancient Greek thought served to bolster important neoconservative ideas, such as seeing inequality as good and natural, antipathy to utopian thinking and the need for civic virtue to stem the tide of moral decline in America. Strauss and his disciples have often been seen as foundational to neoconservatism; but as Bloxham clearly shows, initially this was not the case. It was only in the 1980s that Straussians and neoconservatives “became largely indistinguishable” (130).

In Chapter 4, Bloxham analyzes this melding of ideologies by focusing on the work of William Bennett and Allan Bloom. After providing background to the culture wars of the 1970s and 1980s, Bloxham examines William Bennett’s work as chairman of the NEH and later as Secretary of Education under Ronald Reagan. Bennett ultimately sought to revive what he saw as traditional values and methods in education, often relying on examples from ancient Greece. As Bloxham explains, “In each case, the words of a Greek writer were cherry-picked and used as a stamp of authority with which to certify what were really very conventional ideas. Rather than learning about Socrates’ intellectual scepticism, we learn from Socrates’ discussion with Crito ‘about respect for the law’” (148). In a similar vein, Allan Bloom sought to reform liberal education through a sustained attack on relativism; however, as Bloxham observes, “Critics like Allan Bloom used Greek thinkers to forcefully critique American culture in ways that, if fully understood, would have shocked the conservative rank and file” (133). Unsurprisingly, as a student of Strauss, Bloom read Plato’s works esoterically. Yet, this subjective approach could also be viewed as embracing relativism (167–168). Ultimately, Bloom believed philosophy should be the highest goal for university students; but the modern American focus on equality, lowering of academic standards, professional specialization, middle-class values and even rock and roll made it almost impossible for university students to pursue philosophy.

Finally, Chapter 5 reveals the range of theories and interpretations adopted by conservative writers in the 1990s and early 2000s. In this chapter, Bloxham discusses the application of Greek ideas, especially those of Thucydides, to American foreign policy debates. One of the most interesting sections focuses on competing ideas about American imperialism, hegemony and exceptionalism. As Bloxham states, “Exceptionalism is the belief in the uniqueness of the American

experiment, usually in terms of the principles underlying it. The concept of exceptionalism is thus imbued with moral superiority, which at first glance makes it antithetical to imperialism, which seems to represent old world domination of the weak in the foreign policy arena” (185). In fact, many conservative writers preferred not to speak of imperialism, focusing instead on concepts like hegemony, deterrence, freedom, democracy and regime change. As Bloxham makes clear, there were fundamental problems with these rhetorically powerful but misleading conservative narratives that relied on comparisons between ancient Greece and modern America, not the least of which was the tendency to oversimplify cultures and complex historical processes. Many conservative writers at the time tended to compare America with democratic Athens “because imperialism, associated with Rome, was a discredited concept” (226). But as Bloxham rightly points out, “In reality, Athens and Rome were both aggressive powers: what mattered was the perception of these states in the conservative public’s consciousness. In that sense, American foreign policy debates tended to follow American education debates in depositing Athens upon a pedestal to be revered” (228).

In the Epilogue, Bloxham shows how Greek ideas have continued to inform political ideology in the era of Trump. Again, Bloxham offers an even-handed discussion of an extremely divisive topic, explaining how ancient Greece continues to be both “a powerful tool to think with” and “a shield with which to defend traditionalism without needing to think through the assaults upon it” (235). Bloxham shows that despite superficial similarities among many of the conservative writers he discusses, there was tremendous diversity in how they approached and employed ancient Greek authors. By combining classical reception studies, the classical tradition, and intellectual history, Bloxham clearly illustrates the dynamic nature of classical texts and many of the underlying theories of American conservative authors. Without a doubt, this book is a valuable contribution to the study of Classics and History and serves as a model for sound and well-reasoned scholarship.

NICHOLAS ROCKWELL

*Independent Scholar*, nicholas.r.rockwell@gmail.com