

Lament for a Nation and Chauvinism of the West: Affinities and Parted Paths

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Abstract: This paper brings into conversation two important but quite different voices—George Grant in *Lament for a Nation* and Shadia Drury in *Chauvinism of the West: The Case of American Exceptionalism*. Both take issue with the imperial drift of American liberalism, yet they do so from distinct intellectual traditions: Grant, shaped by his High Tory inheritance and a deeply rooted Canadian nationalism; Drury, through a sharper critique of neoconservatism and American exceptionalism. There are clear affinities in their diagnoses, particularly in their concern over the loss of order, the misuse of liberty, and the theological-political undercurrents of modern liberalism. But their philosophical sources and tone differ markedly—Grant’s reflections being more rooted in classical and Christian traditions, Drury’s more aligned with critical theory and political realism. The paper traces the shared ground and divergences between the two, arguing that both offer important, if contrasting, insights into the longstanding and ongoing tensions between Canada and the United States. Their differing perspectives help illuminate not only the political debates of their own times but also the deeper currents shaping our current moment.

Keywords: American exceptionalism, Shadia Drury, Neoconservatism, Political theology, Imperialism, George Grant, Realism, Enlightenment, U.S. foreign policy, Democracy promotion, Fascism.

The view of traditional philosophy and religion is that justice is the overriding order which we do not measure and define, but in terms of which we are measured and defined. The view of modern thought is that justice is a way which we choose in freedom, both individually and publicly, once we have taken our fate into our own hands, and know that we are responsible for what happens (Grant 2009, p. 248.).

The modern account of human nature and destiny was developed from a profound criticism of what Plato and Aristotle had written. The modern thinkers believed that they had overcome the inadequacies of ancient thought, while maintaining what was true in the ancients (Grant 2005, p. 93).

INTRODUCTION

I have, sitting before me, the 1997 edition, in The Carleton Library Series of *Lament for a Nation*, Grant's bearded face and graying hair featured on the front cover, a lighthouse on the rocks the backdrop. Sheila Grant, appropriately so, wrote the "Afterword" in which she questioned the more political "New Left" misread of Grant, those who defined Grant as a pessimist or read his reflection from Virgil that ended *Lament*: "They were holding their arms outstretched in love toward the further shore (Grant 2005, p. 95).

I have spent many a splendid moment with Sheila when she came to the West Coast (lingering lunches in Fort Langley) and when in Halifax spent time at the Grant home. It is significant that Sheila linked the quote from Virgil with George's deep grounding in their cabin at Terence Bay. Sheila summed up, by way of conclusion in her "Afterword", the connection between the passage from Virgil and their cabin retreat in Terence Bay. It was the "coast, all sea and rock. Its austere and unchanging beauty became for him an image of the timeless: a holy place. From a cabin he built on a hill, he would look across the ocean inlet to the towering rocks on the further shore, and quote the line that ends *Lament for a Nation*" (Grant 2005, p. 99). I have spent some splendid time at Terence Bay, sat by his tombstone and, gratefully so, hold in my possession (which was used as the cover of my book, *George Grant: Spiders and Bees* (2008) a copy of the large painting by Barbara Christian of Grant (the background Terence Bay). This painting has been reprinted on the cover of this issue of *Cosmos + Taxis*.



Ron Dart and Sheila Grant

There is, of course, much that could be said about *Lament for a Nation* (both then and now, now being the 60th anniversary since it was published: 1965-2025). I would, though, like to linger with some of the deeper philosophical ideas in *Lament*, highlight affinities with *Chauvinism of the West: The Case of American Exceptionalism*, the recently published book by Shadia Drury (who would, in some ways, seem to be at odds with Grant) and, also, reflect on why and how paths might be parted.

I launched this reflection by referring to the same core point in three different ways: 1) the philosophical differences between the ancients and the moderns, Grant often contrasting Plato and Hegel as reflecting such realities, 2) the image of the lighthouse on the front cover and 3) the quote from Virgil that Sheila ends her "Afterword" with—the underlying theme being permanence and flux both in thought and deed, human creation and nature, unsettled water and solid rocks, liberty and order. The ancients, Plato, lighthouse, Virgil's longing arms and solid rocks embodied the ideal vision and order by which we can know and attune ourselves to, Hegel and ever-changing restless water and waves the modern ethos.

Grant sought, in his thinking, to enucleate the core of liberalism as certain principles were enfolded within such an ideology and then, as history went from century to century, articulate how the enfolded seed unfolded into a fully developed cultural and civilization worldview—such a worldview or tradition, then, became its own imperial ideology. There are some significant affinities between Grant and Drury in how they telescope in on the genealogy of liberalism as a defining ideology that has, at a substantive level, defined and shaped the United States' founding fragment and manifest destiny. Canada has had to, with its Tory touch (a more complex fragment), engage such an imperial approach in thought, word and deed—such is the core and thesis of *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* and in a different way of Drury's *Chauvinism of the West: The Case of American Exceptionalism*. I might add that both have their arrows fixed on the bull's eye of the American empire, Drury less focused on Canada than Grant, her academic publications rarely engaging the Canadian political ethos and tradition in the way Grant did in his writings and life.

THE GENEALOGIES OF THE FRAGMENT

Grant, from the suggestive arguments in *Philosophy in the Mass Age* (see chapters 4 “History as Progress” and 7 “American Morality”), points to the Reformation in the 16th century (Luther and Calvin, Calvin in time more than Luther) as the birth of the modern liberal project. It was this focus on human liberty and choice, the idea of Divine Sovereignty and election, the complex intermingling of the two that birthed the Calvinist Puritans (both English and Dutch). It was this sense within the Calvinist psyche that they were a chosen people (harkening back to the Jewish past) that brought into being the notion that God was moving a people from the oppressive nature of the past (decadent European religion, culture and civilization not able to be reformed) into a notion of history that was to be better than what was left behind. This leaving behind of the past, liberty bringing into being a finer world, guided by Divine Providence, that, when secularized, birthed the liberal ethos of an open-ended notion of liberty, choice, history as progress and “American Morality”. It was, in short, Puritanism that brought into being the purer vision of the future forward. There has been, perhaps, an inaccurate tendency to see thinkers such as Smith, Locke, Hobbes and Burke as the originators of the modern project but Grant, rightly so, argues it is the Protestant Reformation (Calvinist Puritans more than Luther and the Anabaptist-Mennonites) that are the real source of the modern liberal project, notions of the past, classical notion of *telos* the Good marginalized by a selective read and application of the Bible.

I should mention, though, that although Grant argued that it was Luther and the Reformation that birthed, in a formal and material way, the modern notion of freedom versus authority-order that it was the Jewish Biblical Tradition that birthed the notion of time as history, time as unique movements forward (unlike a cyclical notion of history—eternal recurrence of the same). Christianity and the incarnation continued such a trajectory of history as a bringing into being of something new and unrepeatable, something better and more developed. So, in many ways, the Reformation Luther initiated with his turn to the Bible was a turn to the biblical notion of time as history. It is this interpretive approach by Grant that, when fast forwarded, explains a genetic code of Puritan America.

It is significant to note that Shadia Drury treks the same pathway in her recent book, although she tends to focus almost exclusively on the historic roots of the American journey and its contemporary outworking in the areas of manifest destiny and the notion of being an exceptional state and people. But Drury, like Grant, does ground such an emerging political matrix within the puritan ethos of the 16th-17th centuries that did much to inform and define the American ethos. Thus, in chapter 1 in *Chauvinism of the West*, Puritan theology is linked with their historic and political outworking with the founding of the United States. The notions of “political theology of the covenant”, “manifest destiny”, “exceptionalism as a civil religion”, “millennial expectations”, “exceptionalism as nationalism”. “Ideals or Delusion?” and “the end of history” are judiciously unpacked to reveal the founding principles of the American way and soul. Grant would certainly have been fully on board with this genealogy as the Hartzian fragment, although Hartz

never drew from the Puritan ideology in his read of the liberal American fragment. Grant and Drury were much more astute and historically accurate in landing on the American Puritans as the source of liberalism and principles, once secularized, that shape and define the American way. It is significant to note though, as mentioned above, that Grant suggests that the unfolding of the American way needs to be understood as an unpacking of the Jewish-Christian Biblical notion of time as history—Drury never really follows this deeper source that Grant draws from and Luther-Puritans embody in their approach to Christianity and, for the Puritans, their founding vision of the United States.

Chauvinism of the West moves at a hasty pace from the Puritan origins of the American soul to 20th-21st century issues and ideas of American and foreign policy: 2) Manifest Destiny Goes Global, 3) What's Wrong with Spreading Democracy, 4) Neoconservative Realism, 5) Fascist Elements in Neoconservative Realism and 6) The Political Theology of the West. There is a decidedly and definite sense in which Drury has unconcealed the American imperial origins and history in a manner that does go deeper and further than Grant does in *Lament for a Nation* and yet their affinities are obvious in their interpretation of the aggressive and imperial way in which liberty-willing are at the core of a form of liberalism once the prettied up jargon of democracy are enfolded-unfolded. Drury does not deal with the Canadian-American way and tensions as does Grant in *Lament for a Nation* but there is little doubt Grant would applaud her ever deepening diagnosis of how a type of liberalism at the core has disturbing and aggressive tendencies.

I might add that Drury would also share some of Grant's critique of Kant although Drury probes the political ideas and implications of Kant's thinking in a way Grant never did in the same way—in this way, Drury can come as a kindly corrective to some of Grant's omissions. And, although in *Lament for a Nation* Grant does not delve as deeply or thoroughly into the classical and Platonic tradition as he hinted at in *Philosophy in the Mass Age* and more substantively in later writings, crumbs are on the trail for those who have eyes to see. Even his turn to Hooker to initiate *Lament* and ending with Virgil are most suggestive and not to be missed. But, Drury, being as much interested in political philosophy as in history, with intellectual and historic events integrated and organic in her thinking, she does in chapter 4, "Neoconservative Realism" do a detailed read on Thucydides and how the Neoconservatives have misread his more nuanced read of his times and the consequences of doing so. Grant, for the most part, tended to linger with classical philosophy and not dive too deeply into the mother lode of the significant writings of Thucydides, Herodotus and the Greek Tragedians in the more meaningful way that Drury has in her past publications and in *Chauvinism of the West*. Again, I think, her turn to often ignored aspects by Grant of Greek thought, culture and history can and does come as a corrective to Grant's Achilles' heel.

There is, therefore, a sense in which Drury has probed the genealogy of the American liberal fragment both a turn to Athens and Jerusalem, the Greek historians, their neoconservative American interpreters and the Puritan founding ethos. There can be no doubt that both Puritan theology-politics and selective interpretations of Greek thought did and do play a role in Americans' self-understanding and Drury has done a judicious read of such reads and the consequences of them. I think, in some ways, it might be accurate to suggest that Drury's more nuanced read of the American way is more detailed than Grant's but Grant in *Lament for a Nation* is, obviously, more integrated in his read of Western political philosophy and how it has been worked out in a different way between the more liberal ideology read and fragment in the United States and the more layered Canadian read of Classical thought-English and European political within the Canadian culture context. Both Grant and Drury would walk side by side in their questioning and critique of the dominant ideology of Hegel and its impact on liberal progressivism that has done much to shape and define the liberal modern project (and played a significant role in Canadian thinking, also, Charles Taylor, for example, an embodiment and apologist for such a Hegelian ideology and centrist liberalism).

It is essential to note, though, that although Grant does not delve as deeply as did Drury into the genealogy of the American liberal way, he does, in a suggestive and thoughtful manner, highlight how, in chapters 3-5 in *Lament for a Nation* the modern liberal project has taken thick roots in the American journey. The fact that Grant draws from Strauss in such an interpretation and Strauss's read of the waves of modernity via Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Smith, Hume, second wave Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and their im-

pact on Washington, Madison, Hamilton and Adams (noting the complex forms of liberalism, Paine given the nod also—see chapter 5) means Grant has some affinity with Drury, although Grant tends to be, in a limited and critical way, more attentive and supportive of Strauss than Drury (who argues against Strauss both in *Chauvinism of the West* and even more so in *Leo Strauss and the American Right*) whose eyes and arguments are set steadfastly and solidly contra Strauss. Grant would certainly question how Strauss has been used by the American neoconservatives but he sees some limited and thoughtful appropriation of him whereas Drury sees a direct connection between Strauss and a direct connection between Strauss and the political far right. It is significant to note that Drury does much the same thing with Socrates in *The Bleak Implications of Socratic Religion*—significant followers of Socrates were on the reactionary right therefore he is implicated in their thinking and actions. There is a point where Grant and Drury part paths on their read of the classical and modern past and how such a read within the layered American ethos has led their notions of manifest destiny and exceptionalism. Grant would see in a read of the classical vision as embodied in High Toryism a distinctive Canadian fragment north of the 49th whereas Drury sees in the classical Homeric-Greek tragedians and historians a fount of cultural and political perennial insights we ignore to our peril.

GRANT AND DRURY: PARTED PATHS

Lament for a Nation is thoroughly immersed in, initially, the historic election of 1963 in which Pearson defeated Diefenbaker. But the historic and political choices of 1963 were but a portal and door for Grant into larger issues of political philosophy and theology. The literal lament was but the lament of the liberal Kennedy-Pearson duet defeating the Progressive Conservative Diefenbaker (and Grant was more than aware of the multiple gaffes and inept tendencies of Diefenbaker, well-articulated in chapter 2 of *Lament*). But the lamentation of sorts (reflecting in many ways the lamentation genre of the Jewish prophet Jeremiah) was much more about the passing away, the dying (so well described by Grant as the death of a much loved child) of a vision of the good, true and beautiful (increasingly eclipsed since the Reformation and secularized with the modern notion of the merging of liberty-willing-techne as a way of being). This progressive and Hegelian dialectical notion of the “cunning of reason” moving history ever onward and for the better was the very ideology Grant questioned and how much of the best and wisest of the past was now forgotten, hidden and concealed from the liberal ideologues. It is in chapter 7 of *Lament* that Grant reflects on the difference between “necessity” and the “good,” the former seemingly so, the necessary agenda of liberalism in all its guises, internal differences and agendas. But, is “necessity” the “good” and how do the thoughtful think and live within such a cyclopean cave, shadows more real than the greater good?

Some of the deeper philosophical and theological questions and the classical versus modern issues do not hold Drury in quite the same way as they do Grant. Grant has a deeper sense and feel for the layered texture of Christianity in a way Drury does not although both are drawn to the classical ethos but differ on where they turn and why. The Athens-Jerusalem tension that Grant sought to understand and parse does not hold Drury in the same trying and challenging way as it does Grant. Drury tends to be consistently critical of classical and modern Christianity (her criticisms of Augustine and Aquinas for example) in a way that Grant and others would be more nuanced just as her read of Strauss and Kojève, Grant would have some affinity with but not be as dismissive. But both Grant and Drury do walk the same path (reasons similar and different) for the imperial nature, in thought and deed, of the American empire, Grant often seeing it as the new Rome (even greater in reach and power than classical Rome)—Drury would certainly nod an Amen to such a perspective.

The fact that Grant saw through the imperial nature of the United States, his High Tory inheritance a layered and complex one, meant his critique of the American context drew from significantly different sources than Drury. This means that there are many diagnostic affinities between Grant and Drury but their prognosis and means of acting on the dilemma of the chauvinism of the west would be different. *Lament for a Nation*, as mentioned above, is much more about the dilemma of being a Canadian with a

Tory touch in relationship to the United States that lacks such a touch and sense. Drury has tended not to draw from the Tory touch tradition and it is significant that Grant is not even mentioned in *Chauvinism of the West* even though Grant, if alive today, would applaud much that Drury has insightfully articulated.

The ongoing tensions between the United States and Canada are not new, Sir John A. Macdonald faced them, Diefenbaker's clash with Pearson yet another version, Trudeau contra Nixon, Turner contra Mulroney-Reagan much the same dilemma as is the Trump-Trudeau/Carney clash. Grant, like Drury, would definitely and decidedly lean in the direction of Macdonald, Diefenbaker, Trudeau, Turner and Carney in the contemporary tensions although she would have legitimate questions to ask Macdonald, Diefenbaker, Trudeau, Turner and Carney. And there can be no doubt both Grant and Drury would have serious and substantive philosophical and political doubts about Carney's 2022 book *Value(s): Building a Better World for All*—the presence of Kojève breathes on almost every page. But, to Grant's credit, in the Federal election of 1988 (Grant died September 27, 1988, election November 21, 1988) Grant weakening and near the end, voted for John Turner (more the Canadian nationalist) contra Brian Mulroney, Mulroney much more the free trade Reaganite pro-American. So, I suspect, although Grant would find much of Carney's philosophic thinking rather thin and dubious, he would certainly give the nod to Carney contra Pierre Poilievre in the 2025 Federal election, Poilievre a somewhat shrunken and more reactionary version of Mulroney.

It is important when reading *Lament for a Nation* to have, as a backdrop, Grant's earlier book, *Philosophy in the Mass Age* (lectures delivered in the late 1950s, book published in 1960). Many of the main themes in *Lament* are amply covered in *Philosophy in the Mass Age*—clash between the ancients and moderns, the Reformation and more to the historic point the Biblical ethos as time as history-Puritanism as significant founding vision of the United States, appeal yet limitation of Marx-Marxism and the seeming limitless notion of liberty contra order within the United States. Most of these themes are developed within the Canadian context in *Lament for a Nation*, the ideas more nuanced and developed. But in the closing pages of *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, Grant sees clearly how limitless notions of liberty—especially as embodied by the corporate class—wreak havoc on nature. These same notions lie at the core of the American imperial ethos, something both Grant and Drury saw, understood, and critiqued—an ethos that Trump and his uncritical disciples, to some degree, have further flaunted.

CONCLUSION

There can be no doubt that Grant and Drury walk the same path on many substantive issues in their read of the origins, development and contemporary situation in the United States (obviously Drury rather than Grant) but they do part paths in their approach to a variety of political philosophers—the deeper and more thorough reasons could be the core of another essay. But, there is no doubt *Lament for a Nation* and *Chauvinism of the West* have much in common and the latter reflects, in some important ways, the line and lineage of Grant and Grant's *Lament for a Nation*. It's regrettable, in some ways, that Drury never engaged Grant in her recent tome—the connection between a Canadian classic of political philosophy and a more updated approach would have enhanced the insights of both books, lament a dominant theme in both insightful and incisive books.

APPENDIX: REVIEW OF DRURY, *CHAUVINISM OF THE WEST: THE CASE OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM*.

Palgrave Macmillan, 2024.

Each year a few fine and must-read books are published (others not worth more than a passing glance), but there can be little doubt that Shadia Drury's *Chauvinism of the West* is a ten bell book. There is much packed into this historic read of the West and its impact on the notion and ideology of American exceptionalism—the origins, history and contemporary reality of American politics, foreign policy and global politics are parsed and exposed well and wisely.

Chauvinism of the West is divided into 6 compact, probing and arrow hitting bull's eye well chapters:

- 1) The Roots of American Exceptionalism,
- 2) Manifest Destiny Goes Global,
- 3) What's Wrong with Spreading Democracy,
- 4) Neoconservative Realism,
- 5) Fascist Elements in Neoconservative Realism, and
- 6) The Political Theology of the West.

Each of the well-paced and tightly argued chapters are divided into smaller sections that hold the reader as Shadia's argument unfolds and develops. The almost 50 pages of the "Annotated Bibliography" convert elevates the book, which challenges the prevailing way of viewing America, into a spacious library that highlights further reading for those interested in following the pathway and trail that Shadia organized and constructed.

The cover of *Chauvinism of the West* speaks its own evocative and convincing message: a metaphor of Statue of Liberty falling into the sea, foaming waves soon to bury and drown it, city in the distance soon to suffer the same fate.

The West has a long history, at the highest level, of seeing itself as the embodiment and bearer of Jewish, Greek, Roman and Christian religious, political and philosophical thought and action. But, much hinges on whose read of these Traditions is to be mined—a timely and timeless question. Shadia does a detailed read of how a form of Puritanism shaped the early American culture and ethos; how, yet again, a read of the Enlightenment magnified such an inflated sense of uniqueness; then how a selective read of Athens and Sparta defined significant domestic and foreign policy. Shadia, to her credit, highlights how a crude form of aggressive realism (read a selective approach to Thucydides on this) is counterproductive and how/why it is held high by many American neoconservatives (inching alas towards fascism—obvious to most except the most blind these days). This use/abuse of the broader and fuller Western Tradition is both counterproductive and distorts the more complex and layered notions of such a Tradition (and the lessons to be learned from it). And, again, to Shadia's credit, she lingers long with Homer and the Greek tragedians as wise and insightful political philosophers, historians and philosophers. This going back of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle seems to have some affinities with Nietzsche and Heidegger but Shadia is no uncritical fan or cheerleader of either of the German recoverers of the pre-Socratic way and its relevance for the West (and American thought, culture, former policy and politics). I might add that Shadia's read of *The Persians* by Aeschylus is worth many a meditative read, the message not to miss for our ethos, Aeschylus probably the best of the three prominent Greek tragedians. There is much to Shadia's turn to the Homeric tradition, historians and literary (tragedians) ethos of classical Greek thought that gives her read of the ancients a unique approach that differs from those who mostly linger with Plato and Aristotle.

I was reminded of George Grant's *Philosophy in the Mass Age* and *Lament for a Nation* when sifting through how Shadia has interpreted such an intellectual, political and applied approach to the chauvinism of the West and the imperial (new Romans) genetic code of the United States, but Shadia goes much deeper than Grant in her approach and should be applauded for doing so.

Many a moment in *Chauvinism of the West*, Shadia pulls bow tight and takes aim at certain forms of Western Religion and the way they distort a more complex reality with their unhelpful and unhealthy notions of certainty and their equating of Jehovah, God, Allah with our all too human reads, interpretations and applications of such approaches. Needless to say this has had a dire impact on peoples, states and communities. The merging of theology and politics brings *Chauvinism of the West* to a fit and fine conclusion, Christian and Structural Realism pondered and a questioning whether a war with China is inevitable.

Shadia has been a Cassandra of sorts to the larger academic community, her books on Aquinas, Socrates, Strauss and Kojève often at odds with those who slip into subtler forms of hagiography of such icons in the West. The intellectual Sanhedrin has certainly not been minimally on board with Shadia's read of the West and, I suspect, this summa of sorts will be no different.

I might add, by way of a parting fini, that *Chauvinism of the West* is most timely given the fact Donald Trump is again the President of the United States and such a Pied Piper (and his many naïve acolytes) embody yet the newest and yet older form of chauvinism. We should be grateful that Shadia, like the earlier George Grant in *Lament for a Nation* or Al Purdy's edited *The New Romans* or John Redekop's edited *The Star Spangled Beaver: 24 Canadians Look South* stand on guard for a distinctive Canadian vision of a different way than the empire to the south. And, may she not be treated as was Hypatia of old.

Fiat Lux
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