



“Equality, Not Ideology”

A 5 star Review by Dick Burkhart of

“Last Best Hope:

America in Crisis and Renewal”

by George Packer (2021)

In this amazing popular nbook, Atlantic writer George Packer cuts to the chase: Economic inequality is destroying America, but this devastation has driven the activist population into four ideological camps, each feeding the others and paralyzing the nation through dubious theories of blame and redemption. Two of these camps are *Smart America* (the meritocracy) and *Just America* (social justice youth), both driving the Democratic Party. The other two are *Free America* (libertian types) and *Real America* (traditionalists), driving the Republican Party.

This is a tale of narcissism and classism run amok, but carefully hidden behind barriers of privilege. Of grinding inequality destroying communities while zealots demonize “the other”. As Packer puts it, “The American people have grown used to parasites attaching themselves at the top of our democracy and sucking its lifeblood.” Meanwhile “Sexting with a staffer does more harm to a politician than profiteering in a national crisis” (p 22).

But the real damage is much deeper: *Real America* hates the hypocritical and condescending elites of *Smart America* and *Just America* so much that they love

Trump even for his lies, just for sticking it to the elites. Even when “Trump saw the federal government as property he’d acquired by winning the election” (p 26) they didn’t object. Trust in the system had broken down. The same was true for COVID-19: “It didn’t matter what the experts said. The populists refused to believe them *because* they were experts” (p 31).

Thus “destruction of a shared reality does more damage than economic decline or impeachable acts” and “once politics becomes an identity clash or tribal war, a death spiral can set in” (p 32). Yet Packer sees hope in US history. We’ve been here before – the Civil War, the Gilded Age, the Great Depression, Vietnam and Civil Rights. In his later chapters he narrates the captivating stories of three activists who accomplished big things but kept their balance - their desire to reconcile the ideological camps of their day. These were Horace Greeley (anti-slavery publisher), Francis Perkins (architect of the New Deal), and Bayard Rustin (strategist of the Civil Rights era).

Packer takes issue with all four of the ideological “Americas” but especially with the most recent addition, now sweeping the country – *Just America* – in an attempt to bring it back to sanity before it causes more damage. The proximal cause has been the Black Lives Matter protests, especially over the death of George Floyd. But Packer puts this in an historical context, “at once utopian and nihilistic”, going back to our Puritan ancestors: “These awakenings can take on the contours of religious experience, a particularly American one – sin, denunciation, confession, atonement, redemption, heresy hunting, book burning, and the dream of paradise” (p 53).

I note that the black public intellectual John McWhorter actually sees Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a kind of religion. And Packer cites the key dogma of CRT - that students are now being taught that “racism is not a matter of individual wrong but a system in which everyone is enmeshed regardless of conduct or intent.” Then the CRT experts revived the phrase *white supremacy* and “applied it to liberal newspapers and foundations” (p 54).

I note that the underlying purpose here was to weaponize these words, which, as commonly understood, describe a reality in terminal decline. Now any person identified as “white” could be attacked and beaten down with the clubs of *racism* and *white supremacy* if they did not abide by the latest linguistic or doctrinal orthodoxies of CRT. The immediate effect has been a cancel culture reminiscent of fundamentalist / totalitarian / fascist / McCarthyite thought control but the bigger political effect has been to throw gasoline on the fires of the cultural wars with *Real America* – especially the white working class. At one point Packer

even uses the phrase “cultural revolution” (just think what that meant in Maoist China).

But why this craziness? Packer’s first answer is that our meritocratic youth had justifiably lost faith in the system due to the foreign policy debacle of the Iraq War, followed by the financial crash of 2008. But they also saw “below them, lousy schools, overflowing prisons, dying neighborhoods”, while themselves being “loaded with debt”, with meager opportunities, while “planetary destruction bore down” (p 119). The result has been a deep cynicism, with America “less a project of self-government to improved than a site of continuous wrong to be battled” (p 120).

And, after-all, they had been taught the tenets of Critical Theory for a generation, upending “the universal values of the Enlightenment: objectivity, rationality, science, equality and freedom of the individual”. Instead it is assumed that “these liberal values are an ideology by which dominant groups subjugate other groups”. Here “all relations are power relations” with the focus on “language and identity more than material conditions”, centered around subjectivity “in place” of objective reality” (p 121), especially the “lived experienced of the oppressed”.

Packer concludes that “the fixed lens of power makes true equality, based on common humanity, impossible”. This locks us into a caste system where it’s not about physical suffering, but purported “psychological trauma, harm from speech and texts, the sense of alienation that minorities feel in constant exposure to a dominant culture” (p 123). People are reduced to acting in “performance spaces” when “it would be far better to have real conversations between two people” (p 128) about objective reality, not theatrical poses and slogans.

Instead in organizations we get “monolithic group thought, hostility to open debate, and moral coercion”. The sad result is that “grand systemic analysis usually ends up in small symbolic policies” (p 130) instead of the slow, hard work of productive change. To top this off, “*Just America* is a narrative of the young and well educated, which is why it continually misreads or ignores the Black and Latino working classes” (p 131).

While CRT is nominally a “repudiation of the meritocracy” it is blind to how “confessing racial privilege is a way to hang on to class privilege” (p 132). Meanwhile the key to its success is white, meritocratic guilt: “Achievement is a fragile basis for moral identity, [so] when meritocrats are accused of racism they have no solid faith in their own worth to stand on”. That is, “*Smart American* abdicated to *Just America*” (p 133). The result is that we are now in a

post-liberal era where “justice is power” (p 134), a zero-sum game of power plays rather than justice for the least among us, ennobling all.

Packer’s final verdict is that *Just America* is a “dead-end street. Its origins in theory, its intolerant dogma, and its coercive tactics remind me of left-wing ideology in the 1930s. Liberalism as white supremacy recalls the Communist Party’s attack on social democracy as ‘social fascism’ (p 137). But *Smart America*, *Free America*, and *Real America* are also dead-ends, so we see a pitting of “tribe against tribe” with each narrative cramped into “an ever more extreme version of itself” (p 138). All of these tribes “anoint winners and losers” but the reality is that without equality, of at least dignity, “America doesn’t work” (p 139).

Thus in his final chapters Packer outlines some of the measures that will restore a more egalitarian society. There are no miracle cures here, just the hard work of things like universal health care and voting rights. But it will require giving up both American exceptionalism and its mirror image – American moral defeatism. He even suggests restoring a sense of patriotism in good government to find common ground between *Real America* and *Just America*.

Sectoral unions could restore the dignity and power of our essential workers. But a new national identity is needed based on the restoration of our liberal values - in the context of celebrating our ever evolving multi-cultural roots – European, Indigenous, African, Asian, and Hispanic, of myriad varieties. Packer proclaims that “the solution to individualism is not religion or human fellowship or central planning – it’s self-government” itself, yet without equality “there is no longer any basis for shared citizenship” (p 161).

Fortunately, America is now headed in the right direction – with rising wages in many sectors, a sudden increase in job mobility, and a Green New Deal on the horizon. But governance remains in precarious, still blocking needed socio-economic reforms that privilege the few at the expense of the many. On the plus side bipartisanship is starting to emerge in unlikely places, such as ending Middle East wars and revival of anti-trust laws.

The growing backlash against the excesses of *Just America* is forging new alliances across old party lines. Moral integrity and critical thinking skills are now being energized against unhinged ideologies, both new and old. Packer also hints at how this will help restore the international standing of the US, but a new global order remains to be envisioned.