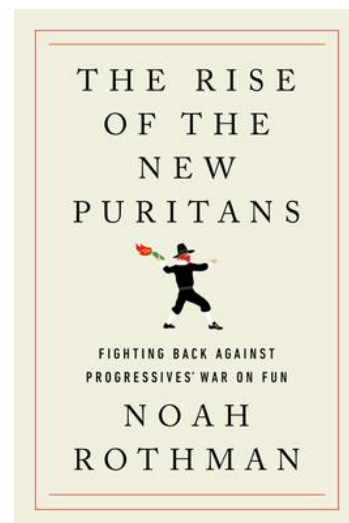


“Makes Fun of the Woke as the New Puritans”

a review from Dick Burkhardt of

“The Rise of the New Puritans: Fighting Back Against the Progressives’ War on Fun”

By Noah Rothman (2022)



Many observers of the “Woke” phenomena, such as John McWhorter, have challenged its religious moralism and hypocritical self-righteousness. Rothman has decided to make fun of it, likening the Woke to the new Puritans. He makes a good case, noting that “imposing a moral framework on every aspect of life” (p x) used to be a conservative mindset. But those “preachy and prudish impulses” have now been usurped by fanatical “puritanical progressives”(p 6).

“The New Puritans also follow a totalistic moral code”, just like their namesakes. “Given the broad array of threats to social probity, practitioners of this unrelenting creed have no time for patience, leniency, or kindness”. Instead their tools are “shaming and humiliation, transparently forced confessions, and public displays of labor in pursuit of atonement”. Thus “no person or profession can exist outside politics anymore”. (p 11).

The contradictions of woke ideology, as McWhorter observed, are “the whole point”: “These contradictions represent a test of faith”. To make this easier, wokism “establishes a simple historical narrative that sorts past, present, and future generations into oppressed and oppressor camps – good and evil – and prescribes manners of public and private methods by which the faithful and receive penance” (p 9). H.L. Mencken said that puritanism is “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy” (p 19). Many stand-up comedians will no longer perform at college campuses because “the pursuit of the perfect is also the enemy of joy”.

Far from a Left / Right thing, it has become “progressive-on-progressive savagery, a form of intracommunal policing” to enforce a new homogeneity and conformity. “Once celebrated virtues, [intellectual] diversity and dissent are today regarded with

suspicion”. (p 12). Even the flower child ethic of the 1960s was soon undermined by puritanical feminists like Andrea Dworkin, obsessed over pornography, and neo-Marxists like Herbert Marcuse, advising “repressive tolerance” – inspiring today’s “deplatforming”, even of principled and progressive dissidents

The result is a phalanx of “zealots dedicated to a cultural hegemony” (p 18)- that lambasts humor as microaggression, that can’t stand TV cop shows, yielding “performative sanctimony” that comes across as “moral panic” to the uninitiated. “Piety is the point” (p 22), with “whiteness” playing the role of a “stern philosophy”, requiring obsequious submission, like the “predestination” of the original Puritans.

Robin DiAngelo’s “doing the work” is a “project without end”, a kind of “spiritual quest”, necessary to maintain your “saintly status” (p 25). In practice it resembles “theological indoctrination” and casts any practice of European heritage as a product of “white supremacy”, hence to be “dismantled”. Books that use politically incorrect language or narratives are to be banned, even those that expose moral dilemmas and injustice, like Huckleberry Finn. “It is hard to avoid the conclusion that stigmatizing certain forms of art and driving them underground is the intended result” (p 49), with shades of totalitarian censorship.

“Meat consumption is revealed as a sin” (p 60), even though total US conversion to veganism would likely “produce just 3% fewer emissions”, while rendering many healthy diets difficult or impossible. Likewise, healthy cultural fusion is blocked by bromides against cultural appropriation, even in cooking. The new taboos have emerged from elite university settings and often come across as classist, worthy targets of the satires of earthy comics who have traditionally lampooned aristocratic sensibilities.

Some sports, such as NFL football, have become an arena of conflict between fans, seeking fun, not politics, and the new Puritans, seeking politics, not fun. The temperance movement of a century ago was a perfect example of a moral crusade gone awry, even though it was well supported and financed by elites. Moralizing sexual crusades have a long history of failure, which continue today. The nuclear family has been branded as racist, sexist, etc., - opening the door to authoritarian intrusion, again, despite the long history of the failure of such endeavors, the Bolsheviks being a prime example.

The original Puritans were thoroughly discredited by the Salem witch trails. Their austere Calvinist churches “fell victim to a generational backlash” and the emergence of religious and social liberalism. “This is a cautionary tale – one that today’s New

Puritans would do well to heed ...a movement that has festooned itself with all the trappings of a religious cult” (p 233) -“judgmental and sanctimonious, snobby and classist”. Yet “this is as much a power play...as it is a moral crusade lashing out at its allies as much as its adversaries” to create the illusion of unified front.

The New Puritans are “fastidious busybodies...worth of mockery”. They play “a morally bankrupt confidence game” (p 237). They are already losing moral authority, not understanding the lessons of history – that “top-down imposition of culture” will fail. Rothman is convinced that “when future historians look back on our time, they will do so with condescension and pity”.

Yet Rothman’s entire focus in this book is on incremental and cultural change. Existential threats to natural resources and ecosystem, to geopolitics and much more, are never broached. However these threats can be expected to impose drastic changes of some sort, however speculative, regardless of how we moralize or don’t moralize things. Are there better ways to mobilize populations to prepare for escalating disruptions and disasters?