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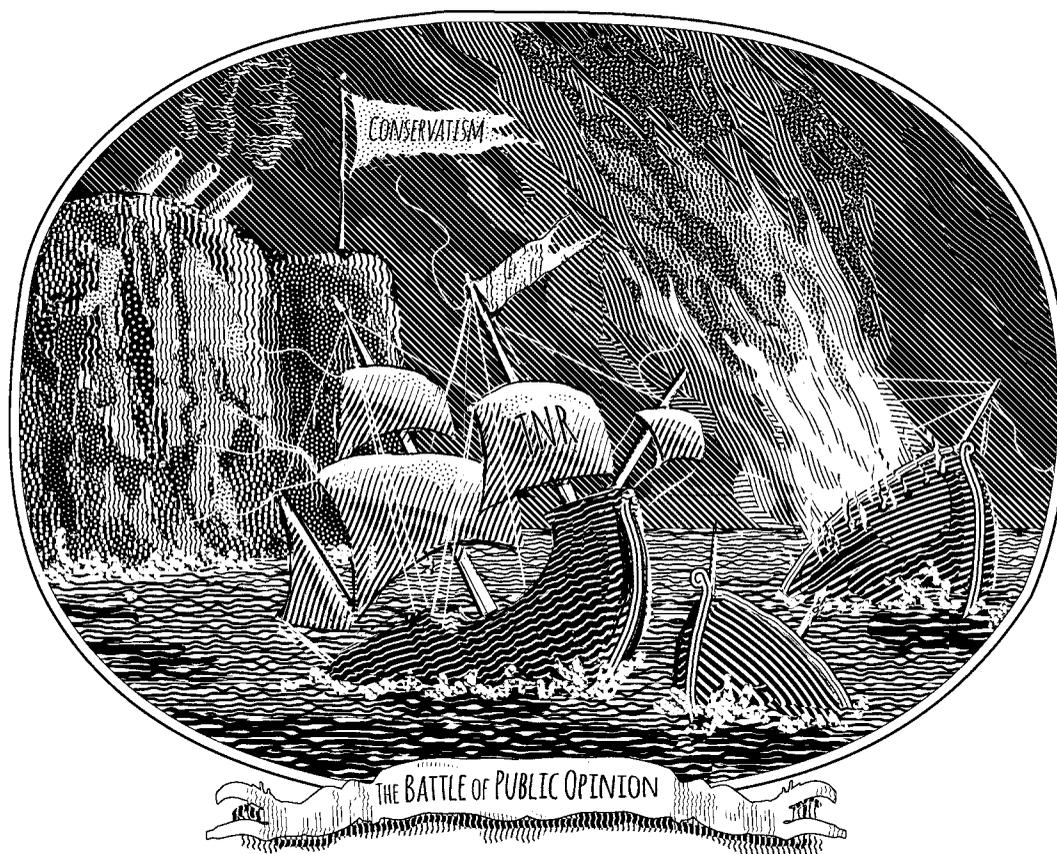
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Book Review by Benjamin Balint

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE *NEW REPUBLIC*

Insurrections of the Mind: 100 Years of Politics and Culture in America, edited by Franklin Foer.
HarperCollins, 608 pages, \$27.99 (cloth), \$17.99 (paper)



“SEVENTY YEARS IS A LONG TIME FOR a magazine to survive,” AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland said in 1984 at the 70th anniversary celebration of the flagship of American liberalism. The “survival of the *New Republic* for that long is a sign that clean living, intellectual consistency, and uniform good judgment are not essential keys to a long life.”

Thirty years further on, to mark its centennial, the magazine’s most recent ex-editor, Franklin Foer, has put together an anthology of political and cultural comment that amply confirms Kirkland’s quip. *Insurrections of the Mind* includes more than 50 passionately argued essays culled from the pages of the *New Republic*. They range across the rise and fall of Communism; religion and race; poverty and education; the women’s movement and gay rights; the economy and the future of democracy.

Unlike *The New Republic Reader* assembled 20 years ago by Dorothy Wickenden, organized by theme, Foer groups the pieces chronologically by decade. This invites us to

read his book as a map not only to the topography of a venerable magazine, but also to the peripatetic pathways of American liberalism.

HERBERT CROLY, AUTHOR OF A PROGRESSIVE manifesto much admired by Teddy Roosevelt, founded the magazine in 1914. As future contributor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., said, it was a year that “marked the high noon of American progressivism.”

Croly and his colleagues seized the moment to join a strong defense of civil liberties to calls for social equality. Taming the excesses of unbridled capitalism, they argued, required a strong, efficient federal government guided by a vision of social progress. Attaining such purpose entailed a pragmatic, disinterested, even scientific cast of mind. A 1915 editorial pledged to cultivate “a social and political opinion which, free from moral prejudice, strains toward scientific proof, as the hypotheses of the physicist strain toward physical laws.”

The editors placed great faith in such purposeful progress. As a 1916 piece boasted:

When historians of the future come to examine the origins of the movement for social advance that gives the present its distinction, they doubtless will be impressed by the antithetical impulses that generated our enthusiasm for reform. They will find the passion of the humanitarian yoked with the zeal of the scientist; the sentimentalist and the rationalist fighting side by side against the established order.

Such impulses were crucial to expanding the federal government’s social and economic responsibilities, culminating in the New Deal.

Yet this faith was even then testing itself against foreign pressures that were altering the older view of America’s relations with the world. If progressivism was the American language during the first two decades of the 20th century, liberalism would become the trans-

Atlantic vocabulary, one in which the *New Republic* early on voiced the view that establishing liberalism at home would be inextricably linked with its achievement abroad.

On the eve of the First World War, the editors' recognition that American isolation had ended only intensified their hopes for the spread of liberal ideas. They argued for "benevolent neutrality" in favor of the Allies, and insisted on "peace without victory"—a settlement that would neither impose vengeful terms on the vanquished nor exclude Germany as a full and equal party to the peace.

The Versailles settlement at war's end dashed their faith both in Woodrow Wilson (with whom the magazine had enjoyed especially close relations after the election of 1916) and in the scientific approach to politics. In "consenting to a vindictive Treaty," Croly wrote in the magazine in 1920, Wilson had both "rendered future inter-class and international wars inevitable" and "shattered what was left of American progressivism as a coherent body of conviction."

AFTER CROLY'S DEATH IN 1930 THE magazine, in pursuit of a new coherence, swerved harder to the left. Foer concedes that between the wars the magazine "willfully glanced past the horrors of the Soviet Union," and too often apologized for its show trials and purges. (Foer devotes only 19 pages of the anthology to the 1930s, compared to 124 pages for the 1990s.)

Longtime contributor Irving Howe noted in *Literature and Liberalism* (1976), yet another *New Republic* anthology, that during the 1930s "the passions of politics became the obsessions of literature." The "back of the book," devoted to literary and cultural criticism, reflected just such a sensibility: literature as sublimated politics.

Under the influence of literary editor Edmund Wilson, the back of the *New Republic* had helped introduce modernist writing to America. But with the arrival at the magazine of Malcolm Cowley three weeks before the Wall Street crash, the tone shifts. Cowley, a Communist fellow-traveler, believed that political and literary radicalism were two forms of the same hybrid commitment. The magazine had earlier backed the Russian Revolution. An April 1918 editorial defended the revolution on liberal grounds and anticipated that it would result in "an incalculable improvement in the chances of human progress." But as his successor, Alfred Kazin, said, Cowley now bent the trajectory of the magazine "in the direction of a sophisticated literary Stalinism."

The magazine's batting average would not improve much against the fascist threats to human progress. In early 1933, it dispatched CBS radio commentator H.V. Kaltenborn to Germany. He offered readers this assessment of Hitler: "He is sworn to obey the Constitution and is likely to do so. The time for a Fascist coup d'état is past. Hitler himself had definitely lost prestige and power before he won the chancellorship." Bruce Bliven (Croly's successor) later noted that "the old liberal tradition in America had been isolationist and pacifist, and the editorial board of that day [the late 1930s] suffered from a cultural inertia that made its members slow to recognize the world changes which necessitated a new approach." During the Second World War, Foer says, the *New Republic* "devoted more pages to the impending doom of European Jewry than almost every other American publication." He includes here Kazin's bracing piece from January 1944 excoriating those "who think that you can dump three

The *New Republic*, founded on faith in technological progress, foundered on a Silicon Valley version of that progress.

million helpless Jews into your furnace, and sigh in the genuine impotence of your undeniable regret, and then build your Europe back again."

AFTER THE WAR, THE *NEW REPUBLIC* was taken over by Michael Whitney Straight, a son of the magazine's genteel early funders. During his student days at Cambridge University in the mid-'30s, Straight had been recruited as a Soviet agent alongside Anthony Blunt, Guy Burgess, and Kim Philby. (When he learned in 1963 that President Kennedy wished to nominate him as chairman of the newly formed Advisory Council on the Arts, Straight unburdened himself to the FBI and MI-5, but his role was kept from the public until 1981.) Incredibly, in 1957 and 1958 the magazine would commission Philby to write nine pieces about the Middle East.

In 1950—the year Lionel Trilling said that "in the United States at this time, liberalism is not only the dominant but even the

sole intellectual tradition"—Straight moved the magazine from New York to Washington. There it adopted the confident "inside the beltway" style that has marked its pages ever since. Not that the *New Republic* had much suffered from a sense of alienation from political power. At one time or another, the magazine's editors had cozied up to Woodrow Wilson and to Henry Wallace, Franklin Roosevelt's second vice president and *TNR* editor from 1946 to 1948, as they later would to Eugene McCarthy, Hubert Humphrey, and Al Gore. But under Gilbert A. Harrison, owner and editor from 1953 to 1974, the early sense of being on the periphery entirely gave way.

MARTIN PERETZ, A HARVARD LECTURER married to an heiress of the Singer Sewing Machine fortune, bought the magazine in 1974. Over the next decades Peretz displayed a talent for mentoring bright young men like Michael Kinsley, Hendrik Hertzberg, Charles Krauthammer, Leon Wieseltier, Andrew Sullivan, Michael Kelly, Peter Beinart, and Franklin Foer. Under their editorships, the magazine swung toward liberal interventionism in Bosnia and Kosovo, and then in Iraq, and toward a liberal hawkishness on behalf of Israel. (To demonstrate that the magazine's Zionist credentials predate Peretz, Foer includes a 1957 essay by Reinhold Niebuhr called "Our Stake in the State of Israel.")

The autonomous "back of the book," long since liberated from its Stalinist fetters, meanwhile flourished. Foer's judicious selection includes superb pieces of literary criticism (James Wood on Norman Mailer); art criticism (Jed Perl on Gerhard Richter); and film criticism (by Stanley Kauffmann, who reviewed movies for the magazine for more than a half-century).

But several of Foer's selections from the front of the magazine illustrate a more recent tone of liberal sneering: animus for Ronald Reagan (Hendrik Hertzberg's diatribe "The Child Monarch") and for George W. Bush (Jonathan Chait's piece "Mad About You: The Case for Bush Hatred").

In 2012, Chris Hughes, a co-founder of Facebook, bought the financially imperiled publication. (He contributes a bland afterword to *Insurrections of the Mind*.) Shortly thereafter, Peretz wrote that he no longer recognized the magazine he ran for 35 years: "The *New Republic* has abandoned its liberal but heterodox tradition and embraced a leftist outlook as predictable as that of *Mother Jones* or the *Nation*."



Last fall, Guy Vidra, formerly of Yahoo, joined the *New Republic* as its first-ever chief executive, and hastened to announce plans to recast the magazine “as a vertically integrated digital media company.” In early December, Foer, Wieseltier (literary editor for 32 years), and nearly all of the staff and contributing editors resigned en masse. Foer was replaced by a former editor of the *Atlantic Wire* and *Gawker*, Gabriel Snyder. “The *New Republic* has always been both in love and at war with its prior self,” Snyder wrote in his first editor’s note. “The best way for any new editor of this magazine to respect the spirit of the institution is to first recognize its defining characteristic is a habit of reinvention.”

Yet much eulogizing ensued. A group of former editors and writers lamented that “liberalism’s central journal should be scuttled with flagrant and frivolous abandon.” The *New Republic*, founded on faith in technological progress, now foundered on a Silicon Valley version of that progress.

THE MOST RECURRENT REFRAIN IN THIS collection-cum-epitaph is the liberal reckoning with the failures of liberalism. The most insurrectionary piece in *Insurrections*, for example, is Lewis Mumford’s essay from 1940, “The Corruption of Liberalism.”

Continually hoping for the best, the liberal remains unprepared to face the worst.... Liberalism has been on the side of passivism, in the face of danger; it has been on the side of appeasement, when confronted with aggressive acts of injustice; and finally, in America today, as in England yesterday, liberalism has been on the side of “isolation” when confronted with the imminent threat of a worldwide upsurge of barbarism.

Similarly, Alfred Kazin’s 1944 piece remarks on “some very elemental things which liberals especially have not always cared to face,” including the tragedy of a “desperate and unreal optimism.”

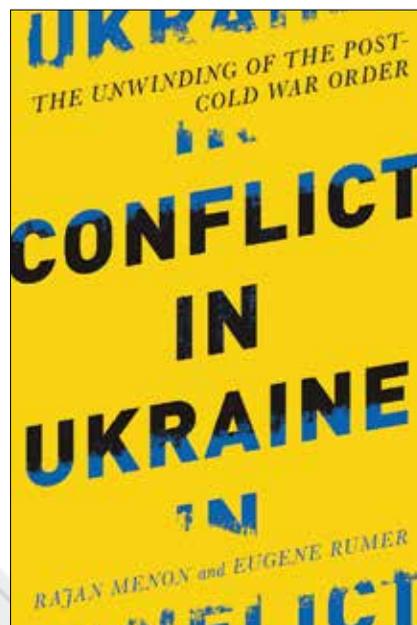
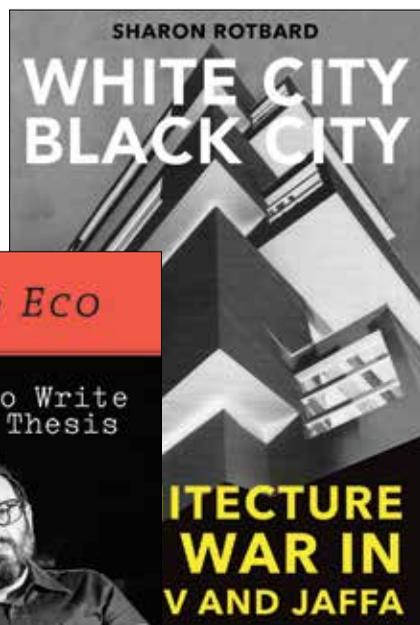
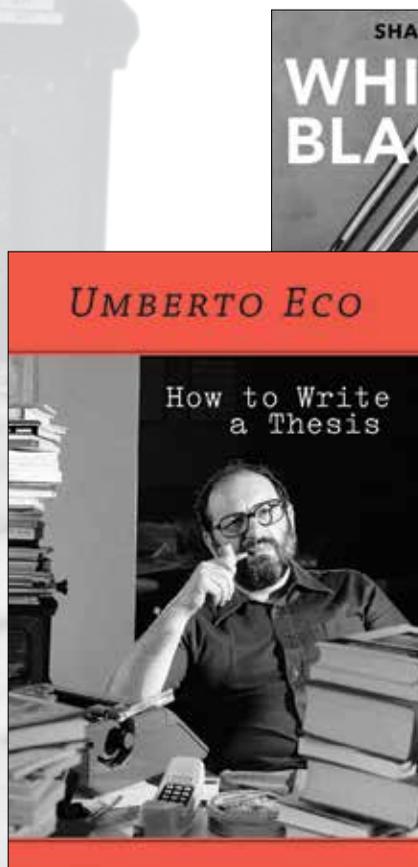
In fact, each decade lends this self-questioning a new resonance. In the 1950s, Reinhold Niebuhr warns readers of “the danger of abandoning strategic fortresses in the interest of ‘peace in our time’ only to be forced to fight in the end without those fortresses.” In the ‘60s, Christopher Jencks takes on the failures and frailties of the New Left. Michael Walzer worries in 1975 that we have “lost the courage of our loathing.” Paul Berman, in 2003, takes war-weary European liberals to task because “they cannot imagine how to be liberal democrats and wield power at the same time.”

Three years after Berman’s complaint, a disheartened *New Republic* editorial acknowledged that “liberals have grown chastened and confused, afraid to think big ideas.” If, despite its landmark achievements, liberalism has—along with its once eminent magazine—lost its sway over American politics, if its progressive impulses have lost their steam, if “liberal” has become a term of opprobrium, this book’s sampling of the last hundred years of liberal thinking goes some way to explaining why.

For almost despite itself, *Insurrections of the Mind* illustrates how the liberal promise has been corroded not only by lapses in what Kirkland called “intellectual consistency and uniform good judgment,” but by the gaps between liberalism at home and illiberalism abroad. Perhaps liberalism has suffered above all from its inability—most acutely felt by liberals themselves—to come to grips in a century of unprecedented barbarism with what Mumford searchingly but not very scientifically called “the crucial problem of evil.”

Benjamin Balint is the author of a cultural history of Commentary magazine, Running Commentary: The Contentious Magazine that Transformed the Jewish Left into the Neo-conservative Right (PublicAffairs).

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