

VOLUME XIX, NUMBER 4, FALL 2019

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REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95

IN CANADA: \$8.95



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Brexit's Stakes

Christopher Caldwell's "Why Hasn't Brexit Happened?" (Summer 2019) is one of the best accounts of the shameful blocking of Brexit that I have read. He might have made more of the clear and present danger to democracy in the U.K. as the result of this spoiling action. Caldwell rightly notes: "The 17.4 million people who voted to leave the E.U. were the largest number of Britons who had ever voted for anything." But this is only one part of the democratic process that has been thwarted.

When Parliament passed the referendum bill in 2015 by a majority ratio of 10 to 1, David Cameron, prime minister at the time, promised that the government would carry out the wishes of the referendum vote. The next year, the referendum result was for leave, by 52% to 48%. A year later, in 2017, Parliament passed the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act—the legal trigger for initiating the formal process of leaving the European Union by March 29, 2019—by

a majority ratio of 4 to 1. In the 2017 general election, some 85% of votes went to parties explicitly and unequivocally promising to honor the referendum result and to leave the European Union. Thus, both through the mechanisms of direct democracy and representative democracy, there has been a clear expression of the electorate's wishes.

What is happening in the Parliament today is remarkable: the complete refusal of over half of its members to accept the verdict of the electorate. What's more, on three occasions they have voted to overturn three supposedly legally binding exit deadlines for which they had previously voted. In this way, they can simply circumvent elections and previous laws by repeatedly passing new ones as, and when, they please in a continuous loop. That is not democracy: it reeks of legislative dictatorship.

Sean McGlynn
Monkton Farleigh
United Kingdom

Christopher Caldwell's assessment of Brexit is easily the most thoughtful and accurate review of the issue I have read to date. Simply excellent. Let me add that, as a continental European living in an E.U. member state, I envy Britain for having had the fortitude to cast off the Brussels yoke. At the same time, I fear that with the United Kingdom leaving there is no longer a strong voice speaking up in support of individual liberty and free-market capitalism in Brussels. This cannot be good for the citizens of the rest of the European Union. Then again, I fervently hope that Ms. Merkel's greatest fear will become reality: namely, that the U.K. will become a fierce regulatory and tax competitor at the E.U.'s doorstep, "à la Singapore," as she herself

said. That may hold in check to some extent the over-ambitious tax-and-regulate-everything-to-death politician-bureaucrats running the continent.

Pater Eusebius Tenebrarum
Perchtoldsdorf
Austria

Conservatism, Young and Old

What editorial genius to place Steven Hayward's review of George Will's *The Conservative Sensibility* ("Sensibility as Soulcraft," Summer 2019) right next to Michael Anton's review of *Bronze Age Mindset* ("Are the Kids Al(t)right?"). Reading the two reviews consecutively created a more refreshing cognitive dissonance than any I can recall since reading an article about Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

George Will in his bow tie at 80 telling conservatives one last time who they are and how to think, sidling up to Bronze Age Pervert (BAP), the eternally pimply and angry "kid," telling conservatives, like their liberal counterparts, to do to themselves the anatomically impossible. But it was the similarities between the young Will and BAP that were most interesting. The young Will, like BAP, thought America "ill-founded." Not enough virtue! Not enough hierarchy! Like BAP, he turned to Europe for something more stimulating and hierarchical.

In the course of a lifetime, and apparently with the help of the Claremont Institute (Hayward says Will quotes Ronald J. Pestritto more than any other scholar in his new book), Will learned better. He now sees that American conservatism—and the right and necessary way to understand

politics in our time generally—arises from the principles of the American Founding, specifically the principles most famously articulated in the Declaration of Independence. BAP, and the other "talented kids" Anton is worried about, think those principles are the source of the greatest degradation of our time. Well, BAP, forgive the yawn. With luck, and maybe a little help from sympathetic old fogies like Anton, you too may grow up and become the patriot you want to be. But it would be amusing to attend the conversation between you and Will on atheism and Donald Trump!

Maureen Berenthal
Austin, TX

Sticking by Darwin

David Gelernter's essay "Giving up Darwin" (Spring 2019) contains numerous misunderstandings of 21st-century evolutionary biology.

For one thing, there is no single definition of species that applies to all organisms; nature is too diverse. What exists in nature are populations of individuals with genes (DNA, or RNA sequences) that influence each individual's characteristics. Typically, individuals exchange genes to reproduce new organisms. For our purposes, a species is a reproductively isolated population of organisms—i.e., one whose individuals exchange genes to produce fertile offspring, but which cannot reproduce with other populations. Evolution within populations, often called "microevolution," is a matter of changing frequencies of genes (more properly, gene variants called "alleles"). The intelligent design (I.D.) tracts from which Gelernter draws overlook

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the fact that natural selection isn't the only evolutionary force. Biologists have since found microevolutionary mechanisms in addition to natural selection. These include non-random mating, mutation, genetic drift (statistical fluctuations in allele frequencies) and gene flow (migration between populations). Natural selection combined with genetic shuffling explains Gelernter's "fine-tuning of existing species."

Speciation, then, is the origin of reproductive isolation between populations. Since Darwin we have observed the origin of new species many times in both the lab and the field. We have identified many ways it can happen, some of which don't involve natural selection *per se*. Such speciation mechanisms include processes that may be genetic, geographic, ecological, and behavioral. Non-biologists like Gelernter (and some biologists) often are caught in a false dichotomy of microevolution versus "macroevolution," the evolution of higher taxonomic groups above the species level. Once two populations no longer interbreed, they take separate evolutionary paths. As differences between populations accumulate, we classify them into different genera (e.g., *Homo*, humans; *Pan*, chimpanzees), which are grouped into

families (e.g., Hominidae includes both *Homo* and *Pan*) and on up the taxonomic levels. There is no real dichotomy between micro- and macroevolution. What is perceived as macroevolution is human imposition of categories on what was a spectrum of population-level changes over long time periods. Gaps in the fossil record mean we don't see the full microevolutionary spectrum and make it seem as if some groups suddenly appear.

Gelernter relies on several false I.D. claims about the fossil record, including the "problem" of the Cambrian "explosion." This is an argument from incredulity that fails to appreciate the geological perspectives of time and fossilization, as well as rates of evolution. The "explosion" took around 70 million years. It's hard for humans to grasp such time spans. Seventy million years is 35 times longer than anatomically modern humans have existed and 115 times longer than behaviorally modern humans. Given that plate tectonics constantly recycles rock formations, fossils of that age and older are rare. Fossils of soft-bodied forms are rarer still and fail to preserve many characteristics needed to classify organisms. Although I.D. proponents are right that Darwin thought

evolution was gradual, we now know Darwin was wrong. Speciation can occur in a few years—even one reproductive event in the case of polyploidy (duplication of entire chromosome sets in an egg or sperm). Major change can be very rapid in geological time. In recent decades, study of mutation rates of biomolecules has allowed us to estimate how long-ago evolutionary lineages diverged. Nowhere do we see discontinuities that might mark intervention by an intelligent designer—including around the time of the Cambrian "explosion."

Contrary to the authors Gelernter cites, molecular biology is not "Darwin's main problem." In reality, molecular biology has confirmed evolution and allowed us to elaborate on its history and mechanisms. I.D. proponents mischaracterize the nature and frequency of mutations that produce major evolutionary changes. For example, Gelernter accepts Douglas Axe's flawed model of randomly picking nucleotides to make up a gene from scratch that produces a 150-amino acid protein. Axe did no experiments, just back-of-the-envelope probabilistic calculations.

On the genetics of body plans (basic body architecture like segmentation), Gelernter likewise

uncritically accepts Stephen Meyer's out-of-date information on Eric Wieschaus and Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard's "Heidelberg screen" of body plan mutations in *Drosophila melanogaster*. He then repeats Meyer's quote of Wieschaus saying none of the mutations they studied is "promising as raw materials for macroevolution" because all the mutations killed the flies before they could reproduce. But—as with many I.D. claims—that hasn't been true for decades. "Homeobox" genes, discovered in 1983, are examples of such genes and regulate development in most organisms with nuclei. One well-studied example, bithorax, produces flies with two thorax segments and four wings when normally flies have one thorax and two wings.

David Gelernter is a well-respected computer scientist and something of a polymath. Unfortunately, he evidently lacks sufficient understanding of biology to see most of the flaws in his unreliable I.D. sources, which misunderstand basic population processes, biological classification, the fossil record, the nature of mutations, and the nature of science.

Frank Price
Clinton, NY

Claremont Review of Books, Volume XIX, Number 4, Fall 2019. (Printed in the United States on November 27, 2019.)

Published quarterly by the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy, 1317 W. Foothill Blvd, Suite 120, Upland, CA 91786. Telephone: (909) 981-2200. Fax: (909) 981-1616. Postmaster send address changes to Claremont Review of Books Address Change, 1317 W. Foothill Blvd, Suite 120, Upland, CA 91786.

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