

VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2021

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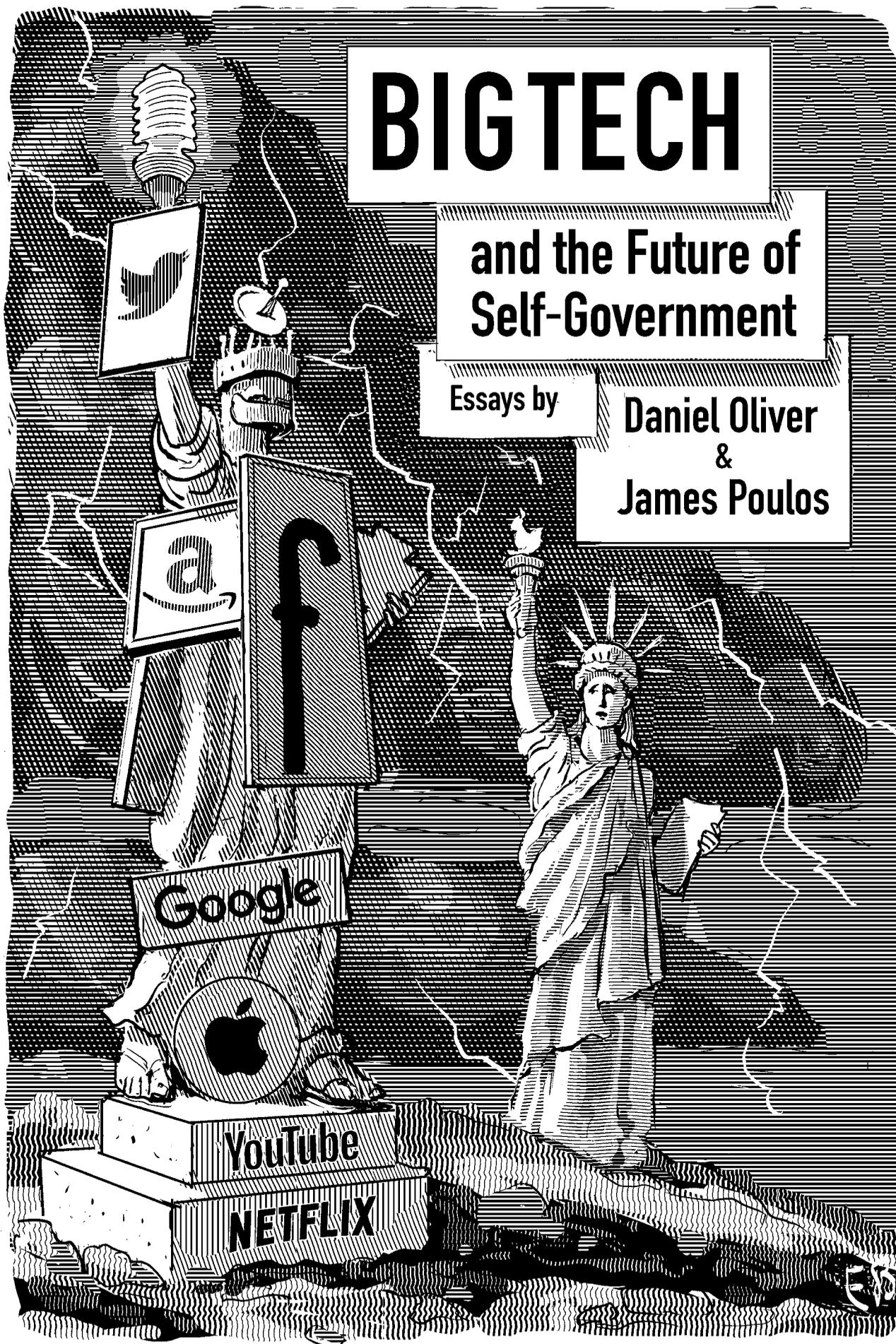
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Book Review by Robert Royal

THE TRUTH OPTION

Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents, by Rod Dreher.
Sentinel, 256 pages, \$27



ROD DREHER IS WORRIED. VERY WORRIED. And who can blame him? The world is a boiling cauldron of troubles. We in America, and the West generally, face a crisis like nothing seen in ages. Yet even Dreher's loyal readers at the *American Conservative*, where he is a senior editor, have described him as having his hair perpetually on fire over the "woke" outrages so common today. Dreher—whose popular 2017 book, *The Benedict Option*, was read by many as advocating withdrawal from public life into isolated, monastic enclaves—writes with unflagging energy, passion, and insight about such outrages. But is he overheated? Or ought the rest of us to get more stoked up?

It's relatively easy to limn our present crisis: a new, radical, aggressive progressivism deplors even the liberalism of just a few years ago, which was somewhat tolerant of views that fell outside its orbit. Solutions, however, are much harder to specify, let alone implement. Social media, the internet in general, and the restless social activism they foster—to say nothing of surveillance technologies—reach deep into society in ways older totalitarians only dreamt of. And

this new threat has arisen primarily in dominant cultural institutions such as the university and the media, reinforced by a progressivist convergence with the capitalist corporate world. As Dreher admits early in his latest book, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*, "There is virtually nowhere left to hide."

DREHER BORROWS HIS TITLE FROM AN essay of the same name by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, written as Solzhenitsyn was being exiled by the Soviet Union in 1974. Like Solzhenitsyn, Dreher insists that totalitarianism—whether the hard 20th-century variety or our current "soft" form—can be resisted by ordinary people. To be sure, it takes great virtue. But the principle of resistance in both cases is similar. Because both depend on a tissue of lies, the deceptively simple remedy is: "Never knowingly support lies." An important corollary follows: whatever others—even a large number of others—may do, "Let their rule hold not through me."

Dreher believes that many who lived under Communism in the last century have a sharp sense of what's beginning to emerge in

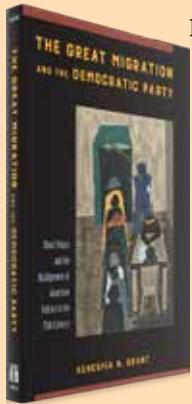
the West. Some who have moved to America tell him they're "angry" at what's happening here and believe we're "hopelessly naïve." His friends in central and eastern Europe are shocked that we have installed—for "convenience"—devices in our homes that listen in on our conversations. And that we carry mobile phones that not only listen, but track our every movement. You may say, "So what, I've nothing to hide." But the experience of many under Communism is that political crimes can be conjured from nothing at all.

As he did in *The Benedict Option*, in the second half of *Live Not by Lies* Dreher sketches ways to resist the present, and future, soft totalitarianism. The book, after all, is a "Manual for Christian Dissidents." But it's not only for Christians and—though Dreher argues religion is the "bedrock of resistance"—includes many things that *any* decent person, aware of current threats, could practice: "Value nothing more than truth," "Cultivate Cultural Memory," recognize the family as a "resistance cell." His remedies are described with great lucidity and a calmness sometimes missing from his journalistic forays.

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BUT THERE ARE SEVERAL PROBLEMS with his remedies. A religious revival sophisticated enough to deal with our technological, intellectual, and cultural challenges is a consummation devoutly to be wished. But how will it catch fire? Various groups both here and abroad actively work at promoting just that, along with family, civic education, and moral and intellectual rearmament. But we've been losing the culture regardless. And though we may dispassionately dissect what's happening to us, the dominant "correlation of forces" and the "commanding heights of the economy"—as the Soviets used to call them—not only set limits on these initiatives but actively seek to destroy them.

A further problem is that many religious groups have joined the very forces that will, sooner rather than later, render them impotent. Some denominations and their leaders have already surrendered. Others—like Pope Francis, head of the largest Christian church in the world—are more than willing to meet large swaths of the new international progressivism halfway, and make dubious deals with regimes like China's that are hell-bent on subjugating religion. In this, the Western churches resemble nothing so much as the collaborationist churches in Russia and elsewhere that went along with Communism to get along.

The heroic exceptions, of course, ultimately triumphed and their memories remain an inspiration. But how many will need to go through prison, like Solzhenitsyn, to understand the nature of the new totalitarianism and come out on the other side unafraid of what tyranny and lies can do to us? Cancel culture, for now, means losing a job or reputation and public presence. How long before we have a Chinese Communist-like "social credit" system? Or harsh legal punishments for crossing "woke" lines? For most Americans, these sorts of things are hard to imagine. For Solzhenitsyn, writing in *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), not so much: "There always is this fallacious belief: 'It would not be the same here; here such things are impossible.' Alas, all the evil of the twentieth century is possible everywhere on earth."

Some of Dreher's examples from Eastern Europe are truly frightening—and inspiring. They remind us that there are heroes and saints in every age who not only stand up to terrible suffering but grow stronger under torture and imprisonment and the threat of death. Soft totalitarianism, however, presents a more difficult target to engage because of its lack of overt violence. It produces devastation all the same. We can only hope it also produces sufficient numbers of what Czech philosopher and dissident Jan Patočka called "the solidarity of the shattered."

DREHER FOLLOWS HANNAH ARENDT in distinguishing between dictatorship (or tyranny), which is common in history and limited in scope, and totalitarianism, which is less common and limitless in its aims. Mussolini coined the term "totalitario" to mean "Everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state." There's no mistaking the nature of such a regime. The soft totalitarianism Dreher identifies, however, "masquerades as kindness" and enters our world by a different way—one Arendt was aware of a half century ago:

What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world, is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience, usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our country.

This phenomenon is far more worrisome than "bowling alone" or other euphemisms suggest. Large numbers of isolated individuals—still larger under pandemic lockdowns—are susceptible to very different mass identifications than in the past. The old markers of identity—family, religion, nation—have given way to the unholy trinity of identity politics—race, class, and gender. Fueled by critical legal theory and critical race theory, these latter markers have given lonely masses a different, if illusory, set of concepts and institutions with which to concoct an "identity."

It's precisely here that debate over Dreher's argument should occur. Are these new markers powerful enough that they can function in an analogous way to pre-revolutionary conditions in Russia? Will they even persist long enough to launch a true revolution? Or are they—as Mary Eberstadt has brilliantly argued—"primal screams" by rootless people who may in time see through the false harbors offered by identity politics and react by returning to something like sanity?

There's no way to tell. Early 20th-century Russia and early 21st-century America are such different places that history may not be a good guide to where we will soon find ourselves. And as Americans, we should not simply accept that anything is our "fate." We're free. Many of us still know that both great leaders and ordinary people can change the future. That future depends on many more of us understanding what's at stake and, as Rod Dreher argues, refusing to live by lies.

Robert Royal is president of the Faith & Reason Institute in Washington, D.C.

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