

Puritanism of the rich

Bush's ideology has its roots in 17th century preaching that the world exists to be conquered

If Bush wins," the US writer Barbara Probst Solomon claimed just before the election, "fascism is possible in the United States." Blind faith in a leader, she said, a conservative working class and the use of fear as a political weapon provide the necessary preconditions.

She's wrong. So is Richard Sennett, who described Bush's security state as "soft fascism" in the Guardian last month. So is the endless traffic on the internet.

In *The Anatomy of Fascism*, Robert Paxton persuasively describes it as "... a form of political behaviour marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy and purity". It is hard to read Republican politics in these terms. Fascism recruited the elite, but it did not come from the elite. It relied on hysterical popular excitement: something which no one could accuse George Bush of provoking.

But this is not to say that the Bush project is unprecedented. It is, in fact, a repetition of quite another ideology. If we don't understand it, we have no hope of confronting it.

Puritanism is perhaps the least understood of any political movement in European history. In popular mythology it is reduced to a joyless cult of self-denial, obsessed by stripping churches and banning entertainment: a perception which removes it as far as possible from the conspicuous consumption of Republican America. But Puritanism was the product of an economic transformation.

In England in the first half of the 17th century, the remnants of the feudal state performed a role analogous to that of social democracy in the second half of the 20th.

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It was run, of course, in the interests of the monarchy and clergy. But it also regulated the economic exploitation of the lower orders. As RH Tawney observed in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926), Charles I sought to nationalise industries, control foreign exchange and prosecute lords who evicted peasants from the land, employers who refused to pay the full wage, and magistrates who failed to give relief to the poor.

But this model was no longer viable. Over the preceding 150 years, “the rise of commercial companies, no longer local, but international” led in Europe to “a concentration of financial power on a scale unknown before” and “the subjection of the collegiate industrial organisation of the Middle Ages to a new money-power”. The economy was “swept forward by an immense expansion of commerce and finance, rather than of industry”. The kings and princes of Europe had become “puppets dancing on wires” held by the financiers.

In England the dissolution of the monasteries had catalysed a massive seizure of wealth by a new commercial class. They began by grabbing (“enclosing”) the land and shaking out its inhabitants. This generated a mania for land speculation, which in turn led to the creation of sophisticated financial markets, experimenting in futures, arbitrage and almost all the vices we now associate with the Age of Enron.

All this was furiously denounced by the early theologians of the English Reformation. The first Puritans preached that men should be charitable, encourage justice and punish exploitation. This character persisted through the 17th century among the settlers of New England. But in the old country it didn’t stand a chance.

Puritanism was primarily the religion of the new commercial classes. It attracted traders, money lenders, bankers and industrialists. Calvin had given them what the old order could not: a theological justification of commerce. Capitalism, in his teachings, was not unchristian, but could be used for the glorification of God. From his doctrine of individual purification, the late Puritans forged a new theology.

At its heart was an “idealisation of personal responsibility” before God. This rapidly turned into “a theory of individual rights” in which “the traditional scheme of Christian virtues was almost exactly reversed”. By the mid-17th century, most English Puritans saw in poverty “not a misfortune to be pitied and relieved, but a moral failing to be condemned, and in riches, not an object of suspicion ... but the blessing which rewards the triumph of energy and will”.

This leap wasn’t hard to make. If the Christian life, as idealised by both Calvin and Luther, was to concentrate on the direct contact of the individual soul with God, then society, of the kind perceived and protected by the medieval church, becomes redundant. “Individualism in religion led ... to an individualist morality, and an individualist morality to a disparagement of the significance of the social fabric.”

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To this the late Puritans added another concept. They conflated their religious calling with their commercial one. “Next to the saving of his soul,” the preacher Richard Steele wrote in 1684, the tradesman’s “care and business is to serve God in his calling, and to drive it as far as it will go.” Success in business became a sign of spiritual grace: providing proof to the entrepreneur, in Steele’s words, that “God has blessed his trade”. The next step follows automatically. The Puritan minister Joseph Lee anticipated Adam Smith’s invisible hand by more than a century, when he claimed that “the advancement of private persons will be the advantage of the public”. By private persons, of course, he meant the men of property, who were busily destroying the advancement of everyone else.

Tawney describes the Puritans as early converts to “administrative nihilism”: the doctrine we now call the minimal state. “Business affairs,” they believed, “should be left to be settled by business men, unhampered by the intrusions of an antiquated morality.” They owed nothing to anyone. Indeed, they formulated a radical new theory of social obligation, which maintained that helping the poor created idleness and spiritual dissolution, divorcing them from God.

Of course, the Puritans differed from Bush’s people in that they worshipped production but not consumption. But this is just a different symptom of the same disease. Tawney characterises the late Puritans as people who believed that “the world exists not to be enjoyed, but to be conquered. Only its conqueror deserves the name of Christian.”

There were some, such as the Levellers and the Diggers, who remained true to the original spirit of the Reformation, but they were violently suppressed. The pursuit of adulterers and sodomites provided an ideal distraction for the increasingly impoverished lower classes.

Ronan Bennett’s excellent new novel, *Havoc in its Third Year*, about a Puritan revolution in the 1630s, has the force of a parable. An obsession with terrorists (in this case Irish and Jesuit), homosexuality and sexual licence, the vicious chastisement of moral deviance, the disparagement of public support for the poor: swap the black suits for grey ones, and the characters could have walked out of Bush’s America.

So why has this ideology resurfaced in 2004? Because it has to. The enrichment of the elite and impoverishment of the lower classes requires a justifying ideology if it is to be sustained. In the US this ideology has to be a religious one. Bush’s government is forced back to the doctrines of Puritanism as an historical necessity. If we are to understand what it’s up to, we must look not to the 1930s, but to the 1630s.