

Michael J. Thompson

Beyond the Vote: The Crisis of American Liberalism

by
Michael J. Thompson

It almost goes without saying that one experiences a profound sense of bewilderment with each reading of the polls for the 2004 Presidential election. The statistical dead heat may have come as little surprise to some, but the unshakable anxiety that it invokes in those on the left is unquestionable, and the reasons are obvious. Here we have perhaps the most ruthlessly conservative and, indeed, most radically right wing administration of the 20th century. But even after the endless war against the environment and public assistance programs, the implementation of regressive tax cuts and a ballooning national debt, and finally the morass in Iraq with its endless errors—whether it be the invasion itself, Abu Ghraib, or its gradual descent into social chaos under the American occupation—the numbers have remained stubbornly fixed.

Even if the Democrats win, however, the result will reflect a sentiment that is less pro-Kerry than anti-Bush. Amazing is not simply the radical nature of the current administration, but the inability of the Kerry campaign—and the Democrats in general—to embrace more progressive, liberal themes and, in the end, respond to what are the most obvious needs of most Americans from jobs, social programs, the environment and international affairs. Critique exists in abundance, but the Democratic Party's paucity of vision, its ideological bankruptcy and inability to develop dearly needed political alternatives, is cause for genuine concern and exasperation. Claims that the American people are simply too populist, too disinterested and even too stupid are not really sufficient, even if there are partial truths to each of the charges. The problem is that the ideas that dominated American liberalism during the Progressive and New Deal eras—and which were decisively defeated by Ronald Reagan in 1980—have been abandoned by the Democratic Party. This has led to a kind of ideological and political paralysis: Democrats have found themselves courting not merely the middle class, but a five to ten percent sliver of undecided voters.

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The Kerry campaign, in this sense, is suffering from a problem similar to that of the Gore campaign in 2000: namely, the inability to counter the political momentum of the neoconservative shock troops and, although they are not completely distinct, the wizards of economic neoliberalism. This inability has sprung from a crisis in American liberalism; from the degeneration of liberal political ideas into little more than mere market relationships and the worst forms of consumptive individualism. This revision of the liberal ethos has eroded the foundations upon which the Democratic Party once stood. No longer is it willing to emphasize social welfare, confront inequality through the state, or stave off anti-democratic threats to civil liberties. The result has been an abandonment of progressive social policy at a time when it is needed most.

Writers such as Thomas Frank in his recent book *What's the Matter with Kansas*, have drawn attention to this phenomenon. They speak of a "Great Backlash," a conservative-populist revolt against liberal culture which goes against the most basic economic and political interests of the people who support it most. But the real cause lies in the political unwillingness to renew and reinvigorate the vision of the Democratic Party and its fear of a politics of confrontation. Reversing this trend of unpragmatic pragmatism, in the first instance, requires a look back to the way that liberalism was understood in the early part of the 20th century so as to ground a renewed project of social democracy in American politics.

Transforming Liberalism

THE MOST SALIENT ASPECT OF THE MODERN CRISIS OF POLITICAL life in America has been a gradual shift from liberalism to populism. What writers such as Robert Putnam have described as a society suffering from a lack of "social capital" quite simply misses the larger context of the problem. The disappearance of the political, the erosion of civil society and the degradation of the public sphere all spring from the gradual colonization of society by what has been called "possessive individualism" and the logic of the market.

The Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács, as far back as 1923, called the phenomenon "reification." The insight was that as market capitalism

continued to develop, and deepen its impact, its mathematical, instrumental, and egoistic logic would increasingly shape all elements of culture and society. Relations between people would become akin to market relationships; the entire way that individuals approached their world would be cast in market form, defined by the matter-of-factness of the cash nexus. The individual would increasingly turn his or her back on political or moral obligations and concerns, and would be recast as a consumer facing an endless fabric of commodities in a world without meaning or spirit. Reification has in this way come to define American culture and politics and it has had a serious effect in transforming our current understandings of liberalism as well.

In America, the transformation of liberalism began in the 20th century with the attempt to redefine liberalism wholly in economic terms. It placed emphasis on libertarian ideas of individualism and market coordination, something that would effect a reversal in the understanding of American liberalism as a political doctrine and the political self-consciousness of American political culture. Influential thinkers during the 20th century such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, among others, gave voice to the idea—one that would become central in American political life—that economic freedom was a precondition for political freedom. Society was no longer seen as an entity in itself—as prominent thinkers of the 19th century such as Emile Durkheim had argued—it was now considered little more than an assemblage of individuals, tied together by contract enforced by the laws of a minimal government. But the main aim of thinkers ranging from Hayek to Friedman was, essentially, to redefine what American democratic culture and politics had, by the time of the end of the Second World War, become: not a democracy that was privileging individualism and liberty but, rather, what these thinkers saw as a society bent upon “collectivism,” socialism, and, in time, totalitarian communism. The future was a road to serfdom.

Understanding the conservative attack on these older themes of American liberalism is crucial for comprehending the current state of American politics and its drift rightward. This sustained attack has not only been political in nature, but ideological as well. It has been against what I will call here, after John Dewey, the “social liberalism” of the first several decades of American political thought and policy which emphasized a new

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conception of political and economic life and steered American democratic ideas down the path of social democracy.

What the contemporary manifestation of liberalism has been unable to provide is an ethical foundation for fighting the unrestrained dynamics of the market that have fragmented and reified the public life, alienated whole swaths of the middle class and working people from their most salient political interests, and contributed to an overwhelming breakdown of the public sphere. Social liberalism was the response to this same tendency in American life in the early 20th century, and looking back is useful. One thinks of the influential figures of the Progressive and New Deal eras—now sadly forgotten but, without doubt, just as relevant as ever in the current context—such as Herbert Croly, Walter Weyl, Thurman Arnold, Rexford Tugwell and Nathan Straus, to name only a few. The new interpretation of democracy and liberalism they set out to construct was one that emphasized the social nature of individual and political life as opposed to the laissez faire individualism of the 19th century. Placing emphasis on the social dimensions of political life and the mythology of laissez faire capitalism meant that what Marx had called man's "communal essence" became for thinkers like Dewey "social liberalism": individuals were not autonomous entities, they were socially constituted; each of us relied on complex systems—from the division of labor to bureaucracy—to survive and flourish under the conditions of modernity and especially under capitalism. This was set against all previous understandings of liberalism, of "classical liberalism" specifically, which saw individualism in simplistic, atomistic terms more akin to Newtonian physics than to the complex realities of modern life.

As a major shift in the understanding of American political, social, economic and cultural life social liberalism was a vigorous assault on the destructive laissez faire ideology and politics of its time. It reoriented the political discourse and changed, deepened the understanding of democracy. It responded to the needs of huge segments of the population—specifically working people—and allowed the Democratic Party of the time to advance an alternative political vision against the provincial views of America firsters and the authoritarian racism of figures like Huey Long. And, indeed, it was seen at the time that this reorientation of political ideology possessed an *evolutionary* character: the social ills of the 19th century with its massive social disorder, disastrous levels of

unemployment, and massive economic inequality would all be overcome. For this new generation of thinkers and social scientists, liberalism had evolved; it had shed the skin of crude individualism and now faced the complexities of the modern world with a new, progressive outlook toward social integration, material equality and distributive justice.

But what we have seen in the last two and a half decades is the degeneration of social liberalism and, as a consequence, its gradual inability to provide vigorous alternatives to the current neoconservative project, which itself has appropriated the old individualistic and Social Darwinist version of economic liberalism. It is an interpretation of liberalism that emphasizes the rights to property and economic liberty and conservatives have been successful in meshing this with populist concerns about big government—one can think of the political potency of tax cuts in this regard. This transformation of liberalism has led to the timidity of the Democratic Party, the rightward drift of organizations such as the DLC and the inability of Democratic candidates at all levels to connect the interests of the majority of Americans with their own agenda. Democrats have seen the erosion of their traditional political base and it has been unable to respond to the neoconservative attack on its traditional policy aims and prescriptions.

A post-industrial context has indeed eroded the older forms of class organization and labor politics; but it is absurd to think that the fundamental interests of working people and the economic issues of everyday life are no longer relevant to the Democratic Party; but there has been the dual effect of a cultural movement toward consumptive individualism and, at the same time, the formation of libertarian liberalism. The social democratic tradition that was emerging in the early decades of the 20th century therefore constituted the beginnings of a new political tradition in American politics, one that the Democratic Party had been instrumental in translating into practice. It is a matter of refashioning this tradition, adapting it to contemporary needs and problems that requires attention lest the neoconservative vision continue to rearrange our institutions and reorient the ends of social policy.

The importance of social liberalism should therefore be seen for what it is. The Democratic Party's move away from these older themes and commitments is only in part the result of an ideological shift. There can be

little doubt that what Thurman Arnold had called the “folklore of American capitalism” in 1937 has now become a resurgent religion that has overtaken American political and cultural life. Since American liberalism has been largely stripped of its previous political content and has returned to the atomistic understanding of individualism of the past, it has undermined what Walter Weyl—as far back as 1912 in his book *The New Democracy*—called America’s “socialized democracy”: a kind of democracy that would place public interest over that of the individual; use the state to harness economic means for human ends; and end the long drift toward social atomism and political fragmentation that the 19th century had witnessed.

Although it is important to discuss ideology, there is also a material component to the story. The ideological transformation of liberalism has found fertile soil in the sociological shifts of the last several decades in American capitalism. From the decline of the industrial working class, the dissipation of unions, the rise of a post-industrial working culture—all have eroded the former political base of the Democratic Party. It has also effected a move away from collectivist approaches to solving economic and social problems. This should be seen in tandem with the gentrification of huge segments of working people—almost entirely the result of the policies that social liberalism had made possible—and the overall erosion of class consciousness. This has allowed a situation to emerge where Republicans and their conservative project have been able to merge the interests of capital with a market populism that uncritically accepts the consequences of markets and which has legitimized the market as the most rational, democratic and fair institution to distribute the “fruits of labor.”

Indeed, the New Deal may have been able to translate many of these ideas to the needs of a workers’ movement that was on the move and organized, but both are situations that have eroded leaving what we could call “establishmentarian” liberalism with little more than moderation in the face of the relentless onslaught of a renewed conservative political, economic and cultural agenda, and there should be no mistaking that it is precisely this radical project which has gained support from this redefinition of the majority of liberal ideas and values. The culture of consumption—the real basis of American capitalism—could only become possible once reification had set in to present levels. Once individuals were transformed from political citizens to citizen-consumers, the public

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square transformed into the shopping mall, only then did this older, atomistic form of liberalism resurface and finally colonize the mindset of American thought.

The Resilience of Reaction

EVERY REVOLUTION PRODUCES ITS OWN COUNTER-REVOLUTION; each progressive move toward embracing a more just social order suffers from reaction. In this respect, the virtues of social liberalism still need to be understood in order to understand the nature of the backlash and what this means for American politics. Indeed, social liberalism was able to merge the concerns of economic inequality as well as the assimilation of ethnic minorities and cultural difference. It did not see liberalism as a doctrine of simple toleration, but of the dissemination of civic education and public values. Universalism was privileged over particularism, and the ideal of “social liberalism” was to promote individualism in thought but solidarity through rational laws and universally recognized moral ends. Indeed, religion and ethnic identity in America were never small parts of everyday life, but the religious populism that has underpinned Republican elections since the ascendancy of groups like the Christian Coalition in the early 1990s, has not been the only evidence of the return to religion and its more pernicious effects. The decay of social liberalism—which began with the white backlash against the civil rights movement—has also seen an increased tribalism among religious and ethnic minorities and groups, given rise to a renewed white backlash, called the value of diversity into question, and has made social bonds between different groups and individuals more tenuous, more distant and less conducive to the universalistic dimensions of democratic political life.

We have become accustomed to seeing politics in broad geographic terms. The 2000 election saw the emergence of a new pattern of political geographic voting patterns: a division not simply between red and blue states alone but between urban and metropolitan areas on the one hand and suburban and rural ones on the other. This was a reflection of an emerging split that had been decades in the making. Whereas Kevin Phillips had seen an “emerging Republican majority” rising out the Southern and Southwestern “Sunbelt,” the economic shifts toward mass suburbanization

and the cultural divides that this shift entailed made the split between conservatives and liberals ever more acute. It was a shift that began to move the geographical and cultural hegemony of the Northeast to the South and Southwest where everything from labor laws to attitudes toward religion and secularism were in radical contrast.

It was with this shift in the early 1970s that the liberal consensus began to break apart. Unleashed by the populist white backlash to the Civil Rights movement—as well as the shift of economic dominance from the Northeast to the South and Southwest—conservative politics also fused the imperatives of pro-business entities to form the pivotal turn in American politics and ideology since the end of the 19th century. The terrain for this political conflict has been regional and widespread. It has sparked a clash of cultures in America: a serious divide between the interests and cultures of two different Americas, largely divided between urban, liberal, cosmopolitan and metropolitan areas and the massive suburbs and rural areas that dominate the periphery and, in some states, the very heartland of America. This is not simply the classic opposition between what Marx called “the town and the country”; the significance of this divide is meaningful since it reinforced a spatial, racial and ideological divide between working people, severing their common interests.

But it is only by linking the concerns of working people together in class terms that a kind of social liberalism can once again reemerge. And this requires an emphasis on class interests: on the inability for working people of all kinds—from the working poor to those solidly within the middle class—to afford basic healthcare, to afford housing, have access to quality education, and so on. Only by remaking the kind of anti-aristocratic discourse that has dominated American political thought and rhetoric can Democrats steer a conservative populism to the social democratic ends and universal themes of economic citizenship and more robust forms of democratic politics. Without question, the radical critique of capitalism and inequality was moderated by the New Deal, but there is no questioning its progressive implications. Only by emphasizing the flaws of the market, the asymmetrical relationships of power it has created, and the various ways that the interests of capital have shattered the foundations of modern democracy and the lineaments of the American social contract can

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the Democratic Party hope to regain its previous political commitments and begin forming a renewed political base.

Ideology—banished to the periphery of America’s “pragmatic” politics—therefore needs to be brought back into the spotlight. A renewal of politics can come only from the renewal of vision, albeit one grounded in material interests and concerns. And no matter how we choose to characterize the politics of the present, the need to transform American political culture has as its centerpiece the need to confront and reorient the contemporary liberal discourse. As Louis Hartz acutely pointed out in the 1950s, America’s political culture was wholly defined by the doctrine of liberalism. Irrespective of this is, America has also been able in the past to transform its liberal doctrine into something more progressive and more deeply democratic, “socialized,” than what we know at present as “liberalism.” Without an alternative understanding of American political life, the commitments of government, and the articulation of the moral needs of society over that of rampant individualism, the Democratic Party will scarcely be able to do more than work in the shadow of the machinations of the Republican Party. And the Democrats cannot spark renewal without themselves looking to the rational left, to the social democratic tradition that was itself emerging with the influential ideas of the New Deal and the Progressives and reformulating and rebuilding the one true intellectual and political movements in American political history that would bring any semblance of real equality and social justice to fruition.

Michael J. Thompson is the founder and editor of Logos. He teaches Political Science at William Paterson University.