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National Review

April 05, 2010

## **The Descent of Liberalism - Having repudiated classical liberty, which once counterbalanced their politics of social reform, the Left today confronts the abyss**

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**LENGTH:** 4504 words

In his 1950 book *The Liberal Imagination*, Lionel Trilling said that "in the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition." Liberalism was no less the dominant political tradition; a coherent conservative opposition had yet to emerge. Over the next 60 years, however, the liberal imagination lost its hold on the American mind. In October 2009 Gallup found that just 20 percent of Americans described themselves as liberals; twice as many called themselves conservatives.

What happened? Part of the answer lies in liberalism's loss of an element that was essential both to its intellectual vitality and to its popular appeal. Liberalism in the middle of the 20th century maintained an equilibrium between the antagonistic principles within it. The classical liberalism that descended from Jefferson and Jackson survived in the movement; the social liberalism that derived from the theories of 19th-century social philosophers, though it was steadily gaining ground, had not yet obtained a complete ascendancy. Liberalism today has lost this equipoise; the progress of the social imagination, with its faith in the power of social science to improve people's lives, has forced liberals to relinquish the principles and even the language of the classical conception of liberty.

The two philosophies that animated liberalism in its prime were widely different in both origin and aspiration. Classical liberty is founded on the belief that all men are created equal; that they should be treated equally under the law; and that they should be permitted the widest liberty of action consistent with public tranquility and the safety of the state. The classical vision traces its pedigree to Protestant dissenters who in the 17th century struggled to obtain freedom of conscience. Their critique of religious favoritism was later expanded into a critique of state-sponsored privilege in general.

The American patriots who took up arms against George III thought it wrong that some Englishmen were represented in Parliament while others were not. This sort of privilege, in the Old Whig language of liberty from which classical liberalism descends, was known as "corruption." The revolutionary patriots, it is true, countenanced their own forms of corruption; when they came to write a Constitution for their new republic, the charter tacitly recognized slavery and other forms of discrimination. The country, in Lincoln's words, was "conceived in liberty," but not until it experienced various "new" births of freedom was the promise of its founding ideal extended to all of its citizens.

Unlike classical liberty, social liberty is formed on the conviction that if a truly equitable society is to emerge, the state must treat certain groups of people

differently from other groups. Only through a more or less comprehensive adjustment of the interests of various classes will a really democratic polity emerge. The social vision traces its origins to thinkers who in the 19th century argued that the close study of social facts would reveal the laws that govern human behavior, much as physics and biology reveal the laws that govern nature. Auguste Comte, for example, believed it possible to elaborate a "social physics" (*physique sociale*); Karl Marx purported to discover the dialectical laws of human history.

Rulers skilled in the social sciences would translate the new knowledge into codes of behavior that would organize man's activities in a more efficient and coordinated way than had hitherto been possible. (The classical liberal believes that however much the lawgiver knows of the innumerable factors that create desirable patterns of social order, he never knows enough to undertake an extensive renovation of society with any hope of success.) The new social technic, it was thought, would produce more equitable forms of social order than those created by the "invisible hand" of voluntary, spontaneous cooperation. A new communal life would overcome what Comte called the "perennial Western malady, the revolt of the individual against the species." Man would be liberated from the biological or class-inspired rapacity that too often made him an "asocial" being. Yet although they dreamt of a more perfect human union, the social reformers made a fetish of the very distinctions they sought to overcome. The wolf will eventually lie down with the lamb, but in the meantime there is enmity between the rich man and the poor man, the white-collar worker and the blue-collar worker, the bourgeois and the proletarian.

The American liberals who in the last century embraced the social imagination looked, not to its most extreme forms, but to the more modest permutations associated with the Fabian socialists of England and the adherents of Otto von Bismarck in Germany. Yet mild as the social idealism of the liberal reformers was, it was, like the more rigorous theories of Comte and Marx, premised on the efficacy of discrimination between groups and classes of men, and on the need for extensive codes of commands that would realize the reformers' vision of fairness -- what in Europe is called *dirigisme* or *droit administratif*.

Theodore Roosevelt, who in his 1910 "New Nationalism" manifesto lamented the "absence of effective State and, especially, national restraint upon unfair money-getting" in America, called for a paternal form of government that would "control the mighty commercial forces" of the Republic. Under the system of social administration proposed by liberals, experts trained in the social sciences would determine the needs of particular groups and oversee the allocation of resources. George F. Kennan, in his memoirs, sketched the social dream of a powerful administrative magistracy that "would not demean or deceive [the people], would permit them to express freely their feelings and opinions, and would take decent account of the feelings and opinions thus expressed, and yet would assure a sufficient concentration of governmental authority, sufficient stability in its exercise, and sufficient selectivity in the recruitment of those privileged to exert it, to permit the formulation and implementation of hopeful long-term programs of social and environmental change." A similar administrative ideal is found in the 1912 novel *Philip Dru: Administrator*, written by Woodrow Wilson's *éminence grise*, Col. Edward House.

The privileged class of experts favored by liberals like Kennan was itself grounded in discrimination. It had something of the complexion, Milton and Rose Friedman observed, of an aristocratic caste:

Believers in aristocracy and socialism share a faith in centralized rule, in rule by command rather than by voluntary cooperation. They differ in who should rule: whether an elite determined by birth or experts supposedly chosen on merit. Both proclaim, no doubt sincerely, that they wish to promote the well-being of the "general public," that they know what is in the "public interest" and how to obtain

it better than the ordinary person. Both, therefore, profess a paternalistic philosophy. If the object of American liberals who embraced the social imagination was to promote the well-being of the commonwealth, they could do this, they believed, only if they first promoted the well-being of particular groups within it. The result was a preference state. Although the reformers justified the new regime with various technical arguments, it was in many ways a rationalization of the informal preference politics and group sensibility of the old Democratic machine. In *The Age of Reform* (1955), Richard Hofstadter showed that "it was the boss who saw the needs of the immigrant and made him the political instrument of the urban machine. The machine provided quick naturalization, jobs, social services, personal access to authority, release from the surveillance of the courts, deference to ethnic pride." The "boss, particularly the Irish boss," Hofstadter wrote, ". . . became a specialist in personal relations and personal loyalties."

Social liberals, both Republicans and Democrats, sought to make the machine more accountable by transferring its operations from the party to the government. Favored groups were given special deals fitted to their needs. Labor unions were endowed with new privileges under the Norris-La Guardia Act of 1932, which placed them, the Harvard scholar Roscoe Pound noted, in a protected legal category. Farmers were subsidized under the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933; the New Deal's Federal Theatre Project, Federal Arts Project, and Federal Writers' Project assisted struggling thespians, painters, and literatures.

In establishing new systems of privileges and immunities for particular groups, the social reformers believed that they were mitigating the unjust privileges and immunities of market capitalism. And it is true that when E. L. Godkin or Louis Brandeis opposed protective tariffs, or when Woodrow Wilson opposed combinations in restraint of trade, each was fingering a genuine instance of unfair privilege. The struggle against monopoly, Wilson said, was "a second struggle for emancipation. . . . If America is not to have free enterprise, then she can have freedom of no sort whatsoever."

Others in the social-preference school went further and asserted that the free market was itself an unfair bulwark of class privilege and corruption. Hofstadter, for example, argued that the Founders' rhetoric of liberty and private property concealed a desire to preserve their own economic power. Their status as members of the rich, propertied classes determined their politics and explains what Hofstadter called their "rigid adherence to property rights."

Whatever one thinks of these arguments, they were a departure from the classical theory of liberty. Andrew Jackson condemned the second Bank of the United States not because he believed that private property or money made in the market was objectionable, but because he believed that money made with special help from the government was objectionable. He portrayed his attack on the bank (a private corporation with proprietary access to public funds) not as an attempt to regulate a corrupt private sector but as an attempt to abolish the "exclusive privileges" the bank had been granted by the state. In the "full enjoyment of the gifts of Heaven and the fruits of superior industry, economy, and virtue," Jackson said, "every man is equally entitled to protection by law." The "gifts of Heaven," for the classical liberal, were legitimate; the gifts of the state were suspect.

In spite of the challenge posed by the social imagination, the classical element survived in mid-20th-century American liberalism. A political movement, unlike a political theory, does not necessarily suffer from its internal contradictions; the lack of doctrinal purity that degrades a paper philosophy often strengthens a program that aims at practical results. Even as liberals in the last century promoted social policies, the classical countercurrent within liberalism mitigated the hubris that the new social ideal might otherwise have bred in its disciples.

Bliss there was in that social dawn, and the temptation to overreach was strong. "American socialists and liberals," Edmund Wilson wrote in the 1971 edition of *To the Finland Station*, believed that it was possible "to get rid of an oppressive past, to scrap a commercial civilization and to found, as Trotsky prophesied, the first really human society. We were very naïve about this." Liberalism's leaders were less naïve. Classical liberalism formed part of their standard intellectual equipment, and it acted as a corrective to utopian arrogance. Woodrow Wilson, although he presided over an expansion of the powers of the federal government, counted such classical liberals as John Bright and Richard Cobden among his heroes. In 1924 John W. Davis, an unreconstructed Jeffersonian, headed the Democratic ticket. In *The Liberal Tradition in America* Louis Hartz argued that even such "Comtian" social planners as Lester Ward and Herbert Croly could not bring themselves to "transcend" America's classical-liberal or "Lockian" consensus.

FDR himself, observing that government spending had risen dramatically under Hoover, campaigned in 1932 on a balanced-budget platform. Hofstadter argued that Roosevelt afterwards broke with the Jefferson-Jackson tradition of classical liberalism: The New Deal, he wrote in *The Age of Reform*, represented a "drastic" departure from the older tradition. It would be more accurate to say that FDR adjusted the balance between liberalism's competing elements. In *The End of Reform* (1995), Alan Brinkley showed that the New Dealers' faith in "statist planning" waned during the course of the Roosevelt presidency. Hartz believed that even the most radical New Deal reforms were made "on the basis of a submerged and absolute [classical] liberal faith." If Roosevelt embraced the public-assistance measures of the Social Security Act of 1935, he also warned that the dole advocated by champions of the Sozialstaat was "a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit."

Federal spending under the New Deal tells a story of what in our day would be called fiscal restraint. Spending rose to just over 8 percent of the gross domestic product in 1933, the first year of Roosevelt's presidency, an increase of slightly more than one percentage point from Hoover's last year; it reached a pre-World War II high of 10.7 percent in 1934. (By comparison, federal spending in 2009 accounted for 24.7 percent of GDP, and is expected to exceed 25 percent in 2010.) Total government spending -- federal, state, and local -- in 1934 did not exceed 20 percent of GDP; in 2010 it is expected to approach 45 percent.

If the social element in liberalism spoke to the electorate's hopes and its generous idealism, the classical-liberal element spoke to its desire for continuity and its attachment to America's founding inspirations. Maintaining a balance between the two contending philosophies required considerable statesmanship on the part of liberal leaders. The social doctrines held the promise of a brave new world, yet the classical-liberal element, though it had less intrinsic appeal for visionaries, survived the New Deal and contributed to liberalism's post-World War II appeal. The old antipathy to state-sanctioned privilege led Truman to desegregate the military and Lyndon Johnson to sponsor civil-rights legislation. If Roosevelt had, until Yalta at any rate, made it his policy to vindicate the liberties of Europe, Truman laid the foundation for the Cold War struggle against the socialism of the USSR.

John F. Kennedy not only filled a number of posts in his administration with Republicans -- among them C. Douglas Dillon, Robert McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy -- he was willing to be guided by the advice of classical liberals. In 1962 he overruled economist Paul Samuelson and proposed tax cuts. Rejecting Keynesian spending models that are closely tied to the preference regime and enable politicians to distribute money to favored groups, Kennedy resolved instead to promote growth through private investment in the marketplace. He brushed aside those in his administration, such as Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., who wanted to enlarge the preference architecture of the social state. Schlesinger, Kennedy said,

"couldn't get it through his head" that this was "1963, not 1933." The president was quoted in Newsweek as saying, "Boy, when those liberals start mixing into policy, it's murder." To the dismay of his critics on the left, the balancing act Kennedy performed made him popular. When his approval rating rose in April 1962, he told Newsweek's Benjamin C. Bradlee, "What really breaks their [the Left's] ass is that 78 percent. That really gets them."

Kennedy was the last liberal president to make classical liberalism an important part of both his policy and his rhetoric. In the half-century since he entered the White House, the social imagination has become, if not the sole element in liberalism, certainly the dominant one. Lincoln argued that the state should eschew the group politics of "classification" and "caste," yet liberalism's signature initiatives over the last 40 years require us constantly to classify people according to the particular social and even racial and sexual groups to which they belong: Both affirmative action and hate-crime legislation grow out of a faith in the discriminating power of classification.

"Today it is the Right that speaks a language of commonalities," the sociologist Todd Gitlin has written. "To be on the Left, meanwhile, is to doubt that one can speak of humanity at all." Schlesinger himself, in one of his last books, *The Disuniting of America* (1991), lamented the effect of social, racial, and sexual preference politics on liberalism, and he condemned the spread, in the Democratic party, of a "plague of institutionalized 'caucuses' representing minorities concerned more with ventilating their own grievances than with strengthening the party" as a whole.

The liberal who is committed to social classification counters that his preference criteria are a reaction against an unofficial culture of preference, the bigotry that has led to discrimination against blacks and gays and women. Yet if this really were the crux of the matter, surely the solution would be to insist even more passionately on the principle that all people are created equal and that the laws of the state ought to apply equally to all. Instead the liberal's vivisectionist politics exalt, not the common humanity of the species, but the various social and genetic barriers that separate its specimens.

It is true that some of the groups the modern liberal seeks to protect constitute fluid classes rather than fixed ones, and therefore do not in a strict sense violate the equal-protection principles of classical liberalism. The 20th-century welfare state, for example, was designed to help the poor, and any citizen might fall into poverty. But even here the liberal's social policy tends to exacerbate divisions within the body politic, or so the classical liberal argues. By subsidizing poverty, welfare-state policies perpetuated it. The public-assistance measures of the Social Security Act made barriers that are permeable in a healthy society harder to penetrate for those bred up in the culture of the dole. The policies widened the chasms they were intended to bridge and checked the upward mobility that Lincoln thought characteristic of a free society.

The classical liberal argues, too, that social-welfare codes -- which give current beliefs about social problems the force of law -- tend to forestall innovation. The pressing problems of earlier generations have often been simply outgrown, and the obstacles they confronted have been surmounted (with little or no government intervention), through the spontaneous progress of society, and through the emergence of new and unanticipated ways of doing things. The social reformer, far from embracing this voluntary, unplanned species of social regeneration, too often compels people to stand still: He institutionalizes problems that might otherwise be transcended. This is seen most clearly in societies where the social imagination has been carried the farthest. There one finds, not growth and change, but morbidity and stasis, the petrification of the social organism.

Preference politics is nothing new. It underlay the master-slave distinctions of

the ancient world and the feudal distinctions of the medieval one. No political movement, it is true, can entirely escape such politics: Every party has its under-  
texture of tribalism and its cherished constituencies. But the preference politics of social liberalism transforms what ought to be a matter of embarrassment into an instance of virtue; there is no longer even an aspiration to purity. The damage has by no means been limited to Democrats; Republicans, too, trade in the pander-politics of group favoritism. The tax code is swollen with giveaways to favored groups. One instinctively applauds when a group that one happens to like, or to which one happens to belong, obtains grace and favor. But each extension of privilege erodes a little more the idea that all men are created equal and should be treated equally under the law.

The preference state is now so closely associated with the politics of group favoritism that the classical ideal of equal treatment has become untenable for liberals. To tout the classical vision in the teeth of such exercises as the "Cornhusker Kickback" -- the provision of the Senate health-care bill subsidizing Nebraska's Medicaid costs on terms given no other state -- would be too palpable an imposture. In December, 13 states' attorneys general threatened a legal challenge to the Cornhusker provision precisely because, if enacted, it would violate the equal-protection and privileges-and-immunities clauses of the Constitution. Whatever the constitutional status of such preference legislation, there is no doubt that it is incompatible with the classical ideal. Liberals themselves sense this. The classical motifs have ceased to form even a merely verbal element in liberal discourse; the note of freedom that President Kennedy sounded so often in his oratory is scarcely heard at all in President Obama's.

Americans are alive to the change; their suspicion of state-sponsored privilege and their apprehension of the corruption it fosters have led to the revival of the "tea party" language of the Revolutionary patriots. A CNN poll conducted in February found that 56 percent of those questioned think the federal government has "become so large and powerful that it poses an immediate threat to the rights and freedoms of ordinary citizens." The social reformer inspires in many Americans today the same dread he once inspired in John Stuart Mill, who in 1855 wrote that almost "all the projects of the social reformers in these days are really liberticide -- Comte particularly so." Such projects, Mill predicted, would lead to "a despotism of society over the individual, surpassing anything contemplated in the political ideal of the most rigid disciplinarian among the ancient philosophers," and stood "as a monumental warning to thinkers on society and politics, of what happens when once men lose sight in their speculations, of the value of Liberty and Individuality."

Liberals dismiss such fears as mere right-wing hysteria. They have left the work of maintaining the integrity of the "Lockian" safeguards of freedom in America to Republicans and conservatives; it is no longer their responsibility or their shtick. Rather than try to revive the classical-liberal strain in their politics, they have devised new justifications of the managerial authority of the social expert, the master planner of public privilege. In their book *Nudge*, Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein "show that by knowing how people think, we [i.e., the social experts] can design choice environments that make it easier for people to choose what is best for themselves, their families, and their society." Thaler and Sunstein do not propose to push people into doing what is good for them, as the social managers of old did; they propose only to manipulate their "choice environments." It is nonetheless a departure from the liberalism of Mill, who believed that people must be free to choose badly. The cover of *Nudge* is revealing: It shows a mommy elephant nudging a baby elephant. The citizen is a child. The social expert, armed with the power of the state, is his benevolent mother.

Why, after kindred social movements have been discredited abroad and faith in the social school of political economy has waned at home, do liberals persist in their romance with the social imagination? A number of liberal leaders have

attempted a reformation; Bill Clinton, after his party's defeats in the 1994 elections, sought to establish a middle or "third" way between the social imagination and the classical-liberal one. But his attempt to find a via media was rejected by the protected classes that liberalism's preference politics has created, and was repudiated still more vehemently by the social managers and public-sector workers whose prosperity is intimately bound up in the preference state.

These groups exert a disproportionate influence in Democratic-party councils. Champions of public-sector workers commend their commitment to public service in the language of republican virtue. But in offering their political support to sympathetic candidates in exchange for lucrative compensation packages, a number of the public-sector organizations have engaged in a politics that savors of corruption. Their allegiance, like that of the Praetorian Guard in Gibbon's Rome, can be purchased only by those contenders for power who are willing to bestow what Gibbon called a "liberal donative" out of the public purse.

Liberal the donatives certainly are. The average salary of federal workers rose in 2009 to \$71,206, a figure that does not include bonuses, overtime, fringe benefits, pension accruals, and the priceless gift of all-but-absolute job security. Some 19 percent of the civil service received salaries of more than \$100,000. (The average private-sector wage in the same year was \$40,331.) The federal government, **Cato Institute** scholar Chris Edwards observes, has become an "elite island of highly paid workers." Liberalism is being devoured by the monster it created.

There is something else to be feared now that the dreams of the social imagination alone seem to inspire enthusiasm in those who identify themselves as liberals. The social philosophy that has become the essence of one of the great political movements of our age is, even in its mildest forms, tainted by a subtle tincture of compulsion, one that mocks the idea of freedom. The deepest thinkers in the social line suppose that man's actions are determined by matter, or nature, or history; they claim that their own proposed commands are merely expressions of an overpowering necessity. The social realm is preeminently the realm of physis, of nature: it has no place for meta-physis, or that which is beyond nature. "Necessity is the kingdom of nature," Schopenhauer says, "freedom is the kingdom of grace." By "grace" he means the state of having got over nature. In *The Human Condition* (1958) Hannah Arendt contended that the idolatry of nature and necessity that is characteristic of the social dispensation might yet, if unchecked, "reduce man as a whole, in all his activities, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal." In sacrificing the classical imagination of liberty on the altar of social necessity, liberals have brought us a little closer to the realization of that dark prophecy.

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**LOAD-DATE:** March 19, 2010

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Magazine

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