
CURRENT BOOKS

Is Liberalism Dead?

THE ANATOMY OF ANTILIBERALISM. By Stephen Holmes. Harvard. 330 pp. \$29.95

THE LOSS OF VIRTUE: Moral Confusion and Social Disorder in Britain and America. Ed. by Digby Anderson. *The Social Affairs Unit and the National Review*. 258 pp. \$22.95

There is much to be said for the thought that liberals are happiest when under fire. As a positive doctrine for the good life, liberalism—especially American liberalism—can look pretty thin. Its deference to the principle of freedom of choice sometimes reduces liberalism's moral vocabulary to "you choose, dear." Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel has achieved fame and fortune by complaining that this "voluntarism" is, indeed, all that liberalism amounts to and that something sterner, more "republican"—with a small *r*—is needed for liberalism, both as a theory of political freedom and as a theory of how to motivate the citizenry. Yet when liberals try to escape this communitarian complaint by claiming that they have a positive vision of this good society, they find themselves assailed by libertarians such as Robert Nozick, who espouse precisely rip-roaring voluntarism. Happier, then, the liberal who finds him- or herself assailed by the Right, whether in its lugubrious, moralizing, or counterrevolutionary guise. If liberals do not know quite what they are for, they are pretty clear about what they are against.

This is not a frivolous point. The late Judith Shklar wrote a memorable essay on the "liberalism of fear," in which she argued that the beginnings of liberalism lay in the need to avoid the horrors of the religious wars of the 17th century. An antipathy to cruelty, and a strong suspicion that all of us are capable of it when under the influence of religious or ideological passion, underpins a basic liberal response to politics. In *Political Liberalism* (1993), John Rawls argues for the virtues of the liberal separation of the political and the theological

that our forebears contrived in the late 17th century. Liberals of Rawls's stripe are keenly aware of the nasty potentialities of the human race. When others speak of religious conviction, they see the fires of Smithfield, and when others speak of communal ties, they see ethnic cleansing. Thus Stephen Holmes, a political scientist at the University of Chicago, can argue here that it is very far from true that liberals are absurdly optimistic about human nature—a familiar charge ever since the days of Joseph de Maistre. Indeed, Holmes argues, liberals have taken over and even generalized their critics' pessimism.

Elitists of all kinds are ready to agree that humanity has fallen, but they invariably exempt their favorite ruling class from the worst effects of original sin. Liberals, by contrast, think that we have no reason to suppose that anyone is exempted from the corrupting effects of power, the blinding effects of vanity, and the human disposition to wishful thinking, impatience, and imprudence. Chastened Madisonian liberalism, according to Holmes's account of it, needs no lectures from anyone on the need to defend ourselves against human imperfection.

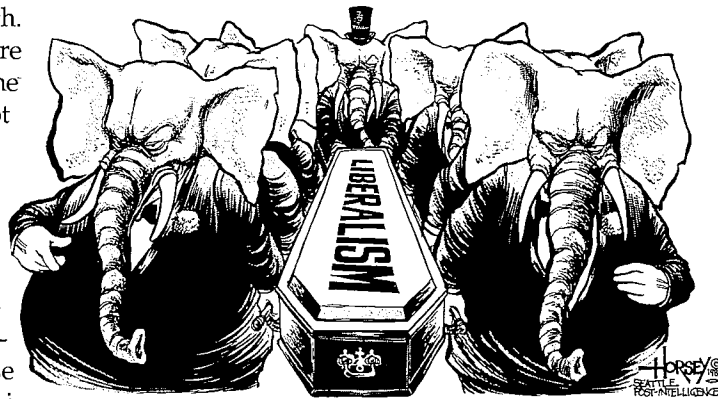
Instead of composing a defense of liberalism, however, Holmes analyzes those who attack it, those who have made liberalism, in certain political circles, almost a dirty word. In exposing the philosophical underpinnings of antiliberalism, Holmes examines the theoretical doctrines associated with some great (and not so great) names in modern political thinking. The names are those of de Maistre, Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, Alasdair MacIntyre, Christopher Lasch, and Roberto Unger, all of whom become targets of his wonderfully uninhibited assault. (Readers who like their uninhibition really raw can chase down early versions of several of these chapters in the pages of the *New Republic*.) Underlying what these figures have in common is what Holmes calls the "permanent structure of antiliberal

thought." Not putting too fine a point on it, Holmes finds that antiliberalism usually combines elements of mythical thinking, ethical anti-individualism, and the diluted American version of *völkisch* thought generally labeled "communitarianism."

Antiliberalism varies a good deal according to the antiliberal who is writing. Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821) wrote in the aftermath of the French Revolution, and the salient feature of his hatred of the modern world was its sanguinary quality. He could never be quite sure that he was opposed to the French Revolution, since the very things he loathed about it—its destructive, violent quality, its resort to regicide and mass murder—might, he thought, be a particularly emphatic demonstration of God's justified wrath. The execution of Louis XVI bore several possible meanings. One might be that Louis XVI got what was coming to him for his folly in compromising with the forces that overthrew him.

Holmes admits that de Maistre had rational moments and that in those rational moments he made the case against wholesale social engineering that Burke had made and that good liberals like Karl Popper would make 150 years later. It was absurd to think that one could uproot habits that had taken centuries to instill and demand that people forget them overnight. Social custom became second nature, and although it was only second nature, it was no easier to alter than first nature. This insistence on tradition could easily tip over into the thought that no new beginnings were possible. And that was precisely de Maistre's thought when he announced that it was extremely unlikely that the United States would survive at all, while the odds against anyone building a capital city called *Washington* were 1,000 to one. It all smelled too much of human contrivance.

Nobody in the 20th century goes quite so far. Still, Holmes has a good time tearing Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss to pieces. Schmitt in particular was a very peculiar case. Although he seems to have behaved well enough to individual Jewish colleagues, he was a fierce anti-Semite even before the Nazis came to power. A ferocious opponent of the Weimar Republic, he later became a loyal servant of the Nazis. Doctrinally, he held that liberal democracies were incapable of governing themselves, of producing leaders, and of making decisions. Schmitt's antiliberalism rested on the conviction that the Weimar Republic was, you might say, wimpishness expressed as politics. As a theory, Schmitt's suffered from



a terrible flaw: It could not explain why the British and French had emerged victorious in the First World War.

The more local brands of antiliberalism offered by Leo Strauss, Alasdair MacIntyre, Christopher Lasch, and Roberto Unger are dealt with more delicately but not much more kindly. Holmes is, in fact, in the happy position of being able to play off the critics against one another, and, in the case of Lasch, against himself. Unger criticizes liberalism for breeding conformity; MacIntyre for breeding a lack of authority. It seems unlikely that both can be right, and perhaps unlikely that both are looking at the same thing. Lasch invokes Georges Sorel to complain that

liberalism is too peaceful and Edward Bellamy to complain that it is too *mouvementé*, too unsettling. Holmes nicely characterizes Lasch's various points as "disheveled eclecticism."

In general, of course, liberalism is likely to look a lot like an unsatisfactory compromise to an awful lot of people—too secular to the religious and too accommodating of the susceptibilities of the religious to the friends of Bertrand Russell, too sociable to the disciples of Nietzsche and too anomic to Robert Bellah and his friends, and so on indefinitely.

It is, however, no use just saying that. Something may be attacked from all directions and still be quite other than a good thing in itself. Because Stephen Holmes has such a good time smiting the assailants of liberalism, his positive defense of liberal values, the liberal polity, and the liberal worldview has to be gleaned from the edges of the field of battle. Holmes's liberalism, in fact, is not relentlessly high-minded like John Stuart Mill's; it more resembles the liberalism of Benjamin Constant (1767–1830), about whom Holmes has written a good deal elsewhere. Mill thought, as Socrates had, that the unexamined life was not worth living, and he often wrote as though anyone not constantly engaged in public-spirited good deeds was wallowing in piglike insensibility. You would be safe enough from coercion in the society Mill imagined, but you would not be safe from censorious philosophers.

Constant, a Franco-Swiss novelist and political writer, defended a more relaxed liberalism. One of the blessings of the modern world, he thought, was the variety of things it offered for our enjoyment. Although he agreed that the liberal state needed a good deal of public-spirited activity to keep it going, he did not give political activism the highest place among the human virtues. In his famous *Essay on the Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns* (1819), he defended modern society's emphasis on the pleasures of private life against the ancient belief that freedom consisted *only* in active citizenship. In part,

Constant's argument was that ancient society depended on slavery for many in order to give citizenship to some; in part, that the ancient world was rather boring, so naturally politics bulked larger. Constant's neatly deflationary account of why we mind about privacy he balanced by the observation that, unless we mind enough about politics also, we shall be governed by crooks and tyrants. Like Constant's, Holmes's liberalism is a defense of private happiness, not privatized indifference to public affairs. And this is a defense of the modern world against its detractors, and thus exactly what you would expect to find Stephen Holmes offering.

The authors of *The Loss of Virtue* are perhaps fortunate to have published their work too late to have come within range of Holmes's guns. Their contributions add up to an odd little volume. Its oddity begins with the striking disparity between the claims the book makes for the bracing and unorthodox attitudes of its sponsors—the Social Affairs Unit in Britain and the *National Review* here—and its editor's obsessive insistence upon the doctoral and professorial status of his contributors. It used, indeed, to be true that some Thatcherites were rather lively and aggressive critics of liberal good causes, and the *National Review* is famous for the jokey antiliberalism of its founder, William F. Buckley, Jr., but this volume is not antiliberal. It is merely wet and gloomy.

The drift of the volume is indicated by its subtitle: *Moral Confusion and Social Disorder in Britain and America*. (The "America" is a bit of a fraud, since all the authors are British and most of the moral confusion and social disorder under review is either British or located somewhere in the imagination of the writers.) The general line taken here is familiar enough. Theft, violence, fraud, illegitimacy, family breakdown, illiteracy in school, and many other gloom-inducing phenomena seem to have risen inexorably over the past 40 years. Their rise, according to the authors, has nothing to do with the objective conditions of those who lie, steal,

murder, speak back to their teachers and occasionally beat them up into the bargain, and thereafter break their marriage vows, neglect their kids, and otherwise contribute to social breakdown. Life has grown nastier as prosperity has increased.

What accounts for the rising rate of assorted misbehavior? The only plausible view, or rather the only view offered here, is that we have abandoned our traditional moral codes. The various contributors do not, however, focus on *all* traditional morality. Their common theme is that we set too little value by self-control. Too many people have ceased to believe that they *must* control their own behavior. Too many others have ceased to believe that they *can*. This is not a theme that liberals are altogether likely to resist. Certainly one strand in modern liberalism is an antipuritan strain of thought that resists the repressive, life-denying overtones of terms like "self-control." That is not the only strand, however. Liberalism developed out of Protestant Christianity as well as in opposition to it. The liberal defense of toleration, for instance, has never been a defense of mere intellectual *laissez faire*. It has always been a defense of the individual's right (and duty) to find his or her *own* way to salvation.

Indeed, one of the easier conservative criticisms of liberalism has always been that it places too much weight on the individual's capacity for moral reasoning and self-control. Edmund Burke feared to set each man to trade upon his own stock of reason because the individual's resources are small. *The Loss of Virtue* is un-Burkean, however. Its authors content themselves with bemoaning the low moral state into which we have fallen, without saying much about how we might lift ourselves out of it.

What they do have to say usually has to do with the family, about its importance in teaching its members how to behave decently. The thought that the family is the most important socializing agent we encounter, and that any weakening of its authority will result in

children who range from idle to thoroughly antisocial, is not only plausible in itself but the common coin in discussions among current liberals, too. William Galston's *Liberal Purposes* (1991) is only one of several recent attempts to show that a sensible liberalism is not to be identified with a wild Nietzschean individualism but with the politics of a pluralist society. Galston was one of Bill Clinton's campaign advisers on family policy and now works in the White House on the civilian national-service program. He is a liberal who shares the anxieties of many of the authors of *The Loss of Virtue* and is now trying to reverse that loss by instilling in teenagers some sense that they are entitled only to ask from society a return commensurate with what they are ready to contribute.

One curious thing about the contemporary debate among liberals, as well as between liberals and their opponents, is the extent to which *everyone* is in favor of community, family, and individual virtue. The two figures who are wholly in disrepute are those arch-individualists, the bearded hippie of the 1960s mumbling "do your own thing" and the bond trader of the 1980s shouting "greed is good." Of course, liberals disagree with conservatives over the extent to which community, family, and the pursuit of individual virtues license the state to invade our bedrooms, censor our reading, and encourage prayer in the classroom. Nonetheless, it has become increasingly clear that the "communitarian" critics of liberalism have mostly been internal critics, liberals themselves.

It is no wonder that so many writers have rediscovered the virtues of John Dewey and the arch-communitarian liberals of the 1920s and '30s, while John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell are relatively in decline. Professor Holmes, however, usefully reminds us that the accommodation between liberalism and communitarianism can go only so far. A community attached to liberal values is, as they say, nice work if you can get it. When you can-

not, the familiar division between conservatives backing loyalty and stability and liberals backing individuality and imagination simply reappears. That is hardly surprising. If any cleavage is a permanent feature of the

political landscape, this is it.

—Alan Ryan teaches politics at Princeton University and is the author of *Bertrand Russell: A Political Life* (1988).

Preaching to the Converted

RACE MATTERS. By Cornel West. Beacon Press. 105 pp. \$15

No one would likely dispute the claim that coming to grips with "race matters" is fundamental to understanding American politics, history, or culture. But an argument is certain to arise if one ventures to be more specific. There is no common definition of the problem, no consensus on a historical narrative explaining how we have come to this juncture, no agreement about what now should be done. Perhaps most important, Americans lack a common vision of the future of our racial relations. We seem no longer to know what it is we are trying to achieve—with our laws, through our politics, in our classrooms, from our pulpits—as we struggle with the legacy of African slavery. Indeed, Americans of all races seem to be confused about who "we" are.

In *Race Matters*, Cornel West, professor of religion and director of Afro-American studies at Princeton, tries to bring order to our collective intellectual chaos on this vexing question. Sadly for all of us, he does not succeed. A philosopher, theologian, and social activist, West has emerged in the last decade as an important critical voice on the Left in American public life. Though it may be an exaggeration to say, as one admirer boasts, that he is "the pre-eminent African-American intellectual of our generation," there is no arguing that he is a thoughtful, articulate, and quite influential social critic. His analyses of our "American dilemma" are studied in universities and seminaries across the country. His opinions on social and cultural policy were

solicited by then President-elect Clinton just after last year's election. And shortly after his installment at Princeton, West acquired official academic celebrity status when he was profiled in the *New York Times Magazine*.

This new book is a collection of eight short essays. Taken together, they sketch the outlines of an interesting if problematic vision of race in America. West offers a stunning array of propositions about our economy, politics, and culture, each one elegant and provocative, and some possibly true. But because West writes more in the manner of the prophet than of the analyst, he never stays long enough with any one point to convince us that he has got it right.

West believes the public discourse about race matters in this society is pathetically impoverished. In this he is surely right. But his explanation is a good deal more controversial: The absence of an effective public dialogue on the race question, he believes, derives from the fact that not all Americans are equal members of the national community. This is a failure for which he holds both liberals and conservatives responsible. Both mistakenly define the "racial dilemma" in terms of the problems that black people pose for white people. Liberals see poor blacks as the historical victims of American racism, needful of government assistance, while conservatives see in the behavior of the black poor the need for moral reform. Both, however, look upon lower-class urban blacks as a people different in some elemental way from themselves. The problem for both is how to transform "them" so they will be more like "us." But this, West believes, tragically misconstrues the problem: