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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gareth Davies. *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996. xii + 320 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0757-0.

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Published on H-Pol (July, 1997)

Welfare Reform and the Liberal Tradition in America

Gareth Davies has written an unusual book. Unlike most histories of the American welfare system, his is not an ideological critique from the left, such as that of Piven and Cloward,[1] or from the right, such as Marvin Olasky's.[2] Instead, it is an ideological critique from the fat middle of the political spectrum. More than most writers on this topic, Davies is respectful of liberal individualism as an animating ideal of the American people. His history of welfare reform since the 1960s shows how this ideal has driven, but also constrained, American efforts to fight poverty.

As with any social problem, policy makers' responses to poverty will depend on the way the issue is defined. If the root problem is social and political inequality, then the proper policy may be to equalize wealth. If, however, poverty involves the breakdown of the system of moral obligations among social strata, the solution may be to extend charity toward the worthy poor while correcting the behavior of the unworthy. Finally, if poverty is about the loss of individual autonomy, the focus will be on increasing the independence and personal responsibility of each poor person. These alternatives, sometimes overlapping but often conflicting, encapsulate respectively the socialist, conservative and liberal views on poverty. Davies' book is a historical analysis from a member of the latter camp.

Davies contends that the roots of the American welfare system were liberal and individualistic, and that LBJ's War on Poverty was an attempt to realize this ideal. His story is about the ill-fated flirtation of some policy makers and politicians after LBJ with a somewhat more socialistic, egalitarian ideal. His analysis of the underlying ideological bases of these competing visions is the least satisfying part of the book, and his own terms for this conflict–"opportunity liberalism" versus "entitlement liberalism"–reflect the looseness with which the word liberal is often used, especially among Americans. Davies makes his readers work rather hard to put together the ideological context, but otherwise his story is compelling.

The doctrine Davies calls entitlement liberalism was embodied in the guaranteed income movement, which held that "the federal government had an immediate obligation to raise all poor Americans above the poverty level by guaranteeing them an income, no questions asked....This book asks how American liberals came to repudiate a venerable and politically valuable individualist tradition, in favor of radically 'un-American' definitions of income entitlement" (p. 3). Some may object that this is an unfair way to frame the discussion, since egalitarianism has been part of the American way since Tocqueville described it. But Davies' point is that American egalitarianism traditionally was about the presumption of equality between autonomous individuals, in contrast to the idea that people become equal through the actions of the state. For liberal individualists, each person should be the author of his or her own fortune or misfortune, so a state that acts to equalize fortunes will be viewed as infringing upon the rights and responsibilities of the individual. Davies points out that the more thoroughgoing form of egalitarianism is not an extension of the liberal ideal but its contradiction. Welfare historians who fail to recognize this tension have missed, he argues, a central part of the story.

After a brief overview of the liberal foundations of the early welfare state, Davies begins his story with the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. This cornerstone of the War on Poverty similarly was based on the individualist ideal. "The apparent political genius of the Economic Opportunity Act lay in its congruence with the individualist ethos. The War on Poverty promised a hand up, not a handout. Whereas the liberals of the late 1960s and early 1970s identified an unqualified entitlement to income that was wholly at odds with the social philosophy they had inherited, the 1964 position constituted a celebration of American values and a reaffirmation of the

nation's belief in equality of opportunity" (p. 39).

Supported by extensive excerpts from a wealth of primary materials, Davies shows the pervasiveness of the liberal ideal in public and elite opinions. Yet as the sixties and seventies progressed, this near-consensus would break down. Weakened by growing racial problems and undermined by the increasing unpopularity of the Vietnam war, individualist liberalism began to give way to an alternative vision. The social problems of the era, and the rise of a new idealism, combined to entice some politicians and policy makers away from the liberal tradition, towards a more active egalitarianism.

While Davies tells the story of behind-the-scenes politics well, describing the hopes and strategies of Democrat contenders for LBJ's tarnished crown, his focus is more on pragmatic politics than on conflicts between ideals. While the materials he uncovers are important, some readers may be disappointed by this approach, since ideological conflict is the context he chose for his book. Davies might have described better the failures of color-blind individualism to account for disparities in wealth between racial groups. If opportunities were truly equal, why were outcomes so different along racial lines? America's racial problems, he might have shown better, are a serious and disturbing threat to the American ethos for reasons that go beyond pragmatic politics. While the Vietnam War was an injury from which the American ideal might recover, racial inequities challenge liberalism at its core.

But politically, the war was the more immediate problem. Taken together with a range of other social issues, "the fissure that opened up within liberal ranks during the 1960s, and that reached its apogee with the battle for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972, owed far more to the Vietnam War than to any other single factor. But it was the simultaneous emergence of a series of splits over issues of race, culture, and civil liberties (including freedom and group rights) that encouraged the sense that a New Politics agenda was emerging from the ashes of New Deal-Cold War-Great Society liberalism" (p. 178). The new agenda was based on an optimism by its proponents that America might be ready for an egalitarian renewal. With the failure of the War on Poverty and the end of the political regime which had supported it, the way seemed clear for a more ambitious program of reform.

Yet as Davies demonstrates, this new approach was based on a miscalculation that led to George McGovern's disastrous presidential campaign. He concludes that today's welfare reforms should be judged in the light of the liberal ideals and values that the American public actually hold, rather than the values that egalitarian reformers would like Americans to hold. This conclusion, which some will find controversial, means that today's welfare retrenchment represents a return to liberalism and a rejection of what most of the world would recognize as a more socialistic ideal. Perhaps the fact that in America the label itself is rejected shows that Davies is right.

Like the citizens of any modern democracy, Americans vary in their political beliefs. Some are conservatives, some are liberals, and some would be called socialists anywhere else. Still, Davies may be right that Americans more than others congregate toward liberal individualism. If so, his political realism will remain insufficiently progressive for many academic readers. But even they can learn something from Davies' study, which at minimum shows the obstacles faced by those who want to change society through political action. For radicals, his book will provide many examples of the kind of thinking that must be overcome before democracy can begin. For others, this book may be refreshing in the respect it pays to the values of ordinary Americans.

Notes:

[1]. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward. *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*. New York: Vintage, 1971.

[2]. Marvin Olasky. *The Tragedy of American Compassion*. Washington: Regnery, 1992.

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Citation: Boris DeWiel. Review of Davies, Gareth, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. July, 1997.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1161

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