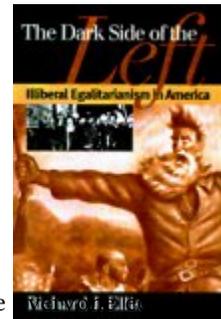


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Richard J. Ellis. *The Dark Side of the Left: Illiberal Egalitarianism in America*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998. xiii + 426 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0875-1.

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In the 1960s, the New Left made full-scale assault on American liberalism. It mostly dismissed conservatism as an errant and inconsequential dimension of American history and focused its attention on the mainstream. Liberalism, at least since the New Deal, had become the consensus center of American politics and thus had to be the main culprit in making the United States the menacing and oppressive society it had become, by this account. Hence, we heard such refrains as “corporate liberalism,” expressing the liberal state’s partnership in the domination of the big business interests. And we heard the term “fascist liberalism,” linking liberalism to America’s imperialist posture toward the rest of the world. Now, in this book, liberalism fights back.

Richard J. Ellis would share with the New Left a conviction that liberalism has almost nothing in common with a certain strand of egalitarianism in American history. And liberalism, he warns, must know these differences and keep its distance. He understands the problem well. Egalitarianism seems to be liberal, or at least progressive. It seems to resonate with the traditional ideals of our democratic culture. Jefferson, after all, told us that we are all created equal. But a great ideal, he finds, turned ugly. Egalitarianism turned against its liberal roots and devoured them. It took on qualities that we might conventionally associate with conservatism and reactionism. Historical examples abound and that’s what this book is about. It is also about the contradictions of egalitarianism.

Ellis begins with the abolitionists. They had a great cause—the nineteenth century’s most inspiring moral crusade, the fight against slavery. The abolitionists, though, early describe for Ellis the troublesome features of radical egalitarianism. Egalitarians, the author be-

lieves, thrive on a passion to make be sure, but they want to eradicate differences between them in doing so. They are not content to establish mere equality of opportunity or process; “they are committed to reducing differences between people” (p. 5). That quest leads them in search of the larger causes of the nation’s ills. They seek holistic reconstruction. Thus, among the abolitionists, leaders such as Lewis Tappan and William Lloyd Garrison linked slavery to the reigning materialism in American society. The drive to eradicate root causes, Ellis believes, will almost always make the egalitarian impatient with the day-to-day processes of the political system, the give and take of democratic politics, and the reliance on a consensus among the general populace. Such affective habits will place the egalitarian at odds with the liberal democrat and his intellectual kin, the pragmatist. Large, revolutionary goals replace immediate and local ones. Radical abolitionists did not seek just the end of slavery; they sought the end of the Old South. “The whole social system of the Gulf states,” said Wendell Phillips, “is to be taken to pieces, every bit of it.”

In radical abolitionism, writes Ellis, “utopian zeal outstripped its liberalism” (p. 42). Utopianism, in turn, supplies the author with another differentiation between egalitarianism and liberalism. Political scientist Charles Frankel once commented on the tendency of rational liberalism to take on secular millennial hopes. Ellis finds the utopian strand in egalitarianism achieving a particular vitality in the late nineteenth century. Edward Bellamy’s classic *Looking Backward* in 1885 portrayed the utopian world of Boston in 2000. Ignatius Donnelly’s *Caesar’s Column* offered a populist vision of capitalist self-destruction. In the case of Bellamy, one wonders how his book, so silly if it were not so frightening, at-

tained its great popularity. It flourishes with contempt for individuality, the menace that underscores the chaos of Gilded Age America, in its author's judgment. It revels in authoritarian alternatives to messy democracy. To Ellis, Bellamy foreshadows state socialism and aspects of Soviet-style totalitarianism. The egalitarian, Ellis believes, smarts from all the contradictions and tensions, the mess and disorder, of the modern society, and looks for an escape in some form of authoritarian power. It blinds him to all the dangers therein.

A recurring problem in radical egalitarianism is its approach to people as they actually live. On one hand, Ellis finds a romantic attachment to "the people." Bellamy believed that an underlying harmony exists among individuals, so that the new state, his utopian state, must be a benevolent one because it will inherit that harmony. On the other hand, probably most egalitarians move within such a hope of revolutionary renewal that they they come to harbor a contempt for people as they actually are. Walt Whitman provides Ellis with a portrait of this mentality. Mild Gold provides another one. Gold edited the magazine named for the people he actually held in contempt, "the new masses." A genuine voice of American radicalism, Gold looked for a revolution to overthrow capitalism. But he saw an American working class mesmerized by the cheap thrills of a hedonistic culture and the materialism fueled by the economic system. Like so many on the egalitarian left, Gold then turned away from the United States and looked elsewhere for a model of redemption. The Soviet Union provided it, of course, and Gold mimicked the party line in the 1930s and 40s.

Herein is another aspect of the radical egalitarian—the willingness to be duped. So dispirited with the conditions at home does the egalitarian become that other people and movements inherit the great hopes. Waldo Frank despaired that the American masses had become a dumb, docile herd. In recoil, he invested the revolution in Russia with poetic purpose and mystical meaning. Some of Frank's pronouncements on the Soviet Union really give one pause. He could see the same wretched industrial conditions there that he might find in the United States, but in his 1932 book *Dawn in Russia* (significant title), Frank could write: "in these dismal halls there is a whole humanity. Dream, thought, love, collaborate in the tedious business of making electric parts, since these toilers are not working for a boss—not even for a living; the least of them knows that he is making a Worker's Union, that he is creating a world." With such "consciousness of the whole" so powerful, why should anyone care about individual liberties and the contentiousness of the demo-

cratic process? Frank didn't.

It's disheartening, to say the least, to recall such ridiculous sentiments. But the later egalitarian left did not escape them either. It constantly looked for that locus of innocence and purity in the population that could furnish its hope of redemption. Always in quest of its own purity as well and dreadfully fearful of co-optation by the System, the egalitarian left searched desperately for the uncorrupted. The civil rights movement found them in the rural blacks of Mississippi. The environmentalists (Earth First! is the focus) found them in the American Indian. The Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) of Students for a Democratic Society found them in the urban poor—people so far outside the System that they remained uncorrupted by it. Or so they thought. When ERAP failed, New Leftists gave up on the American locus and looked abroad—to Cubans or the the Vietnamese peasantry. As Tom Hayden would say of the latter: "we felt they were like us." Indeed.

Ellis presses his case against the egalitarian left unrelentingly. All the groups that come under his scrutiny bear an animosity toward liberalism. The feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s supplies another example. Ellis focuses on the contest between the liberal faction, represented by Betty Friedan, with its goal of bringing women into the mainstream of American life, and radical feminists. Disgusted with the "tyrannies" of male hegemony, the radicals denounced the integration effort. Radical feminism became totalitarian feminism as in the splinter group "The Feminists," led by Ti-Grace Atkinson, and in the anti-liberal animus and general inanities of Catharine McKinnon.

Ellis begins his book by describing himself as a liberal and a Democrat. He anticipates the question of whether his book, with its sustained critique of the left, supply ammunition to the conservatives. Ellis, though, clearly wants to save the best in liberalism from association with its worst features. *The Dark Side of the Left* recalls Arthur Schlesinger's book of 1949, *The Vital Center*, in which a centrist liberal sought to show the incompatibility of American liberalism with support of the Soviet regime. It is a curious twist of our history that Ellis must go to such lengths to demonstrate that incompatibility. I wish Ellis would state more emphatically that the radical egalitarian temperament, and the consequences of it as chronicled in this book, in fact has very little to do with liberalism. Liberalism respects individuality; it questions authority and renounces ideology; it upholds the democratic process, however unwieldily and how-

ever disappointing in producing ideal solutions; its mentality is pragmatic, not utopian; it neither worships nor despises the masses and the society they have produced. I believe that this is liberalism at its best and most useful. All these qualities help to keep society together. I think Ellis would agree, for his book is ultimately about the destructive side of the egalitarian left. Writing in his 1924 book *Democracy and Leadership*, the conservative Irving Babbitt observed that when one starts with the assumption that men are naturally good and virtuous, one ends

by wishing to kill them all. Conservatives and liberals can both make a case against the egalitarian left. This very useful book makes the liberal case.

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