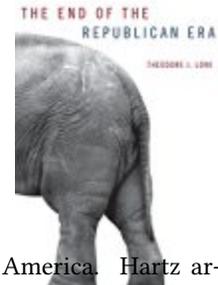


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Theodore J. Lowi. *The End of the Republican Era*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995. xix + 275 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8061-2887-0; \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-2701-9.

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In the preface, Professor Lowi acknowledges that *The End of the Republican Era* is a follow-up, or a “revisit” of his earlier *The End of Liberalism*, published in 1969 and 1979. If you liked *The End of Liberalism*, then you will love this newer work. I liked *The End of Liberalism* very much indeed, and I am convinced that this newer work is a major contribution to our understanding of the current status of American politics. His analysis covers the whole of American political history, sweeping from the First American Republic (i.e., from the Founding to the New Deal) to the Second American Republic (from the New Deal to the current time). He discusses the possibility of two different versions of a Third Republic, one the emergence of a new moralistic majority bound together in the Republican party, the other a restoration of a, to his mind, more proper amoral liberal public philosophy based on the rule of law. Lowi has strong opinions; this is not a neutral, objective, empirically based work. Instead, it is a very finely crafted polemic with a definite prescriptive approach. And it is very well done.

Lowi’s work is tightly bound together. To understand his conclusions on the current trends of American politics, and public philosophy, one must understand his terminology, which is consistently used throughout his work. Lowi understands that political parties, and both elite and mass political behavior, are founded on ideas, on public philosophies. He describes the basis of the major public philosophies found in the United States. A major point is his rejection of the standard unidimensional approach of categorizing public philosophies into the Left-Right continuum. He argues that what we have had in the United States is at least three different philosophical traditions that do not neatly fit into specific ordinal slots on the continuum. He takes Louis Hartz (*The Liberal Tradition in America*) to task for underestimating the

complexity of political thought in America. Hartz argued, of course, that liberalism has been the predominant American political tradition and that conservatism does not have deep American roots. Lowi argues that while the liberal tradition has been dominant, at least until recently, there still has been a conservative tradition of some power and prominence.

The reader needs to understand his definitions of liberal and conservative. Liberalism is the classic individualistic amoralism that has favored the free market and limited government. Old liberalism, the type dominant in the nineteenth century, has at times bordered on the anarchic in its dislike for governmental activism. Old liberalism gave way in prominence in the 1930s to a new liberalism, typified by a greater willingness to accept governmental regulation of individual and business conduct to prevent social ills. But both old and new liberals support capitalism, both avoid taking moralistic stands, both accept that different people will have different moral beliefs that could be equally valid (or at least deserving of equal respect in public policy). Both are Center or Right of Center by European standards.

With this definition of liberalism, Lowi argues that both the Democratic and Republican parties were liberal through the nineteenth century. The Republican party stayed liberal through the New Deal; Hoover, for example, self-consciously called himself a liberal until the 1940s. The Democratic party at the national level became predominantly new liberal from the New Deal days. In the 1960s, new liberals became enamored of interest group pluralism and Keynesianism, accepting greater governmental regulation of a (still) free market and additional governmental programs to support the interests of discrete groups. While the Democratic party was the

bastion of new liberals, there were some in the Republican party, especially at the presidential level—Eisenhower and Nixon being two prominent examples.

A second public philosophy is that of the Left, composed of those who reject capitalism and societies built upon free markets. While there have been socialists in America, Lowi argues there is little socialist or Leftist tradition in the U.S. due to the absence of a class-conscious working class. New liberals are not Leftists because they accept the fundamental value of capitalism, while also accepting that governmental action may be necessary to correct market imperfections. Lowi saves some of his most bitter venom for those responsible for the current day demonization of the word “liberal” and the sweeping, ahistorical charges that liberals are Leftists.

The third public philosophy is conservatism. In discussing this body of thought, Lowi makes some of his most meaningful contributions. There is a real tradition of conservative thought in America, if conservatism is properly defined. Lowi’s definition, in a nutshell, is “the Bible and Burke” (p. 25). That is, American conservatism has stressed the importance of religion, morality, traditional social institutions, collectivism, and the need to use government to advance those values. Many, such as Hartz, failed to see the importance of conservatism because they failed to understand that for many decades conservatives were only active at the state government level, not the national. At the national level, the Bill of Rights made the advancement of conservative values difficult. Until the twentieth century, the Bill of Rights was held not to apply to state governments, however, and conservatives were free to pursue their moral values at the state level—and did. The reason that liberalism has been held by most scholars to be predominant is that it was the only public philosophy able to act effectively at the national level, and both major parties adopted variants of it. The only real conservatism present at the national level until recent decades, Lowi argues, was in the Democratic party, especially among Southerners. It was not until the triumph of new liberalism after the 1930s and the creation of the positive welfare state that conservatives became active at the national level. At that time, the national government started dealing with issues about which conservatives cared deeply, and they began to pay serious attention to it.

The major thrust of Lowi’s book is the story of the building of the new Republican party coalition, its operation during the presidencies of Reagan and Bush, and its inevitable decay. The word *inevitable* is used advis-

edly, for Lowi argues that any public philosophy has the seeds of its own decay. The new liberalism had its triumph but brought on its own decadence by overextending the welfare regulatory state into areas that were intrinsically difficult to regulate and that were controversial. Civil rights and welfare became major cornerstones of the liberal state, while also becoming issues that mobilized the Right and were used as wedges to split the Democratic coalition.

Lowi offers a useful summary of the development of modern conservatism, noting the contributions of Whittaker Chambers, William Rusher, William F. Buckley, Russell Kirk, the Austrian and Chicago schools of economists, Barry Goldwater, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and others. There were conflicts and internal contradictions, however, among those who called themselves conservatives. Traditional conservatism was patrician, upper class, led by moralists who were not necessarily personally religious; religion, however, was prized for its positive effects on teaching morality to the common people. A populist, lower class conservatism also existed, based on an evangelical Christianity of true believers, and in the 1960s and 70s that form of conservatism grew much faster than any other (just as evangelical Christianity grew much faster than mainstream Christianity). The populist conservatives, the New Christian Right, had strong attachments to a range of social and cultural issues but have not been especially enamored of the unfettered operation of the free market. Another part of the coalition was the intellectual neoconservatives, who were typically non-religious moralists and refugees from earlier dabblings in socialism and communism. The final part of the New Right coalition was the old liberals, the hangers-on from the old Republican party, strongly capitalistic and amoral in public policy issues.

The catalyst that allowed these disparate elements to come together was Ronald Reagan, himself a converted New Deal Democrat, who led the coalition to three presidential election victories. The coalition was an especially fragile one, however, held together by agreement on issues of race, a strong military, and a constrained court but above all by common desires to negate the national government, all of its previous actions, and most of its institutions.

Just as the new liberalism had the seeds of its own decadence, the New Right contains its own. The different elements of the coalition do not agree on all issues, and on some there are intense disagreements. A coalition is based on pluralism, on different groups agree-

ing to disagree on some items while working for common interests. With the New Right Republican coalition, however, some elements fundamentally reject the very premises of coalition formation, reject heterogeneity, and reject tolerance for different views, especially in issues based on moral certainty. Without tolerance, the coalition cannot stay together; with tolerance, there is moral relativism, and thus the negation of the moral certainty upon which religious moralism is founded. Lowi argues that the coalition cannot stay together; hence, the end of the Republican era is inevitable.

Lowi's concerns are broader, however, for it is not just the end of the Republican party coalition that he was foretelling, but also a possible end to the Republican system of government. He sees the ends (i.e., goals) of the Christian Right as being moral absolutism, centering on the attempt to align man's law with their version of God's law. And this, of course, is dangerous to a pluralistic, heterogeneous society and to democracy itself. For moral absolutism allows only one version of the truth, and that is antithetical to pluralistic democracy.

How can the Republic be saved? Lowi argues there is no perfect solution. The public philosophy that is best for the restoration of the democratic Republic is new liberalism, but a different form of new liberalism from that which led to so much turmoil in the 1960s and 1970s. The new new liberalism would be amoral ("Abandon God, all ye who enter here," p. 246) but would be firmly grounded on the rule of law, meaning no vague laws with sweepingly good intentions and no broad delegation of discretion to administrative agencies by Congress. With the rule of law as the guiding premise, laws would be clear, specific, with predictable outcomes. He realizes the dif-

iculty of the task: the more specific the law, the greater the difficulty of legislative passage. But vague laws are only good, he argues, for the moralistic Right and Left and for public employees. The moralistic Right and Left can never govern for long in a democracy because they are by nature anti-democratic—only those who know the truth (their truth) should govern. Liberals are different: they are moral, "but leave their morality at home when they enter into the public domain" (p. 259). Thus, in the end, while liberals are flawed, they are the best bet for saving the Republic.

Lowi is one of the major figures in modern political science, and this book shows why. It is written with his usual flair and dynamism. He does not hedge his arguments. While his thesis on the importance of conservatism and liberalism to American political thought may not be original with him, his analysis of the different elements of what we in popular discourse too easily call conservatism, liberalism, and the intrinsic strains among those elements is consistently and brilliantly developed. Some public administration scholars have taken him to task for what they claim is an underlying bias against bureaucracy, but I think they are overly sensitive. The bias is against vague laws, and overly generous delegation of discretion, which in the end are no friends to good administration. All serious students of American political history, political thought, political parties, and public policy should read this book, and they will draw important lessons from it.

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