

## Liberalism and Its Discontents

**Review Number:**

86

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 1 July, 1999

**Author:**

Alan Brinkley

**ISBN:**

9780674530171

**Date of Publication:**

1998

**Price:**

£34.95

**Pages:**

384pp.

**Publisher:**

Harvard University Press

**Publisher url:**

<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog/BRILIB.html>

**Place of Publication:**

Cambridge, Mass.

**Reviewer:**

Bruce Collins

This volume of essays offers a powerful review of various central issues in the history of 20th Century American liberalism. Its underlying concern is how a political ideal, or set of ideals, once so firmly adhered to, should now be so discredited in contemporary American political debate. The journey of intellectual exploration which Brinkley pursues is never less than fascinating. And none would deny its importance to any historian with a concern that past and present are locked in a dynamic if often deceptive relationship.

It is possible, by overlooking many of Brinkley's subtleties, to piece together a fairly straightforward answer to the question he initially poses. One initial element in that answer lies in the nature of the New Deal itself. In many ways the reforms, policies and ideas of the 1930s broke with the Progressive past by making the federal government a 'compensatory' state (in Brinkley's formulation) not a weapon for the destruction of concentrated and irresponsible corporate power. The liberal state dedicated its efforts to fiscal management in order to enhance consumption not to implement economic regulation or wealth redistribution. This important distinction helps explain later disillusionment with programmatic liberalism, for, in one sense, post-war America has delivered what the New Deal sought to achieve: high, if not full, employment and rising, if sometimes interruptedly so, standards of living for most Americans. The New Deal went further. In removing the Democrats' electoral dependence on the Deep South, it opened a way from the 1950s for the national Democrat party to pursue a more liberal course on race issues than the party dependent on white conservative voters could envisage in the 1930s. Yet the very success of liberal economic policy made an

explicit liberal agenda increasingly unnecessary. In the 1980s the Reagan administration, rather like the Thatcher government in Britain, presided over an aggregate increase in relative federal spending while simultaneously denouncing statism and Keynesianism together. As George Will remarked, 'Americans are conservative. What they want to conserve is the New Deal.'

The second element of an explanation for the decline in liberalism as a doctrine comes from the experience of the 1960s. Kennedy's administration helped to set up future disenchantment by promising too much. The very sense of political dynamism whipped up by President Kennedy and his lieutenants - however vague it almost invariably was and however cynical it occasionally became - was bound to lead to subsequent disappointment. Yet, again, successful outcomes reduced the need for doctrinal liberalism. As Brinkley points out, much student radicalism of the 1960s concerned conditions within the universities themselves and only later, with the mauling involvement in Vietnam, acquired wider political ambitions. But as Irving Bernstein showed, the intellectuals' preoccupation with Vietnam crowded out new reformist thinking. With the redefinition of universities as life-style playgrounds as well as centres for learning, and with the establishment of an all-volunteer army, virtually all serious pressures for further liberal crusading ebbed from the student body politic. This was predicted in the celebrated chant, 'Make Love Not War'. The emergence of a society which could be - albeit crudely - characterised as materialistic, hedonistic and, perhaps, selfish rather than even just individualistic clearly worries any thoughtful observer of America, except for robustly full-blooded political libertarians. But Brinkley underscores the disturbing paradox that the apparent success of much of the liberal programme since 1930s has led, not to advancing commitments to community values, political enlightenment or civic responsibility, but instead to a resurgence of militant conservatism. In an illuminating discussion of Oral B. Roberts, one of the longest established and leading tele-evangelists, he emphasises that support for populist evangelical religion comes largely from those who want to be included in the mainstream of American society. However commercial the motives of some leaders of the religious right may be, their supporters come from strong traditions of popular religion and strive now for full recognition of their legitimacy and role. On the political front, Brinkley points out that the New Right has gained strength especially from anti-feminist women reasserting the values of 'family life' against what is portrayed, however erroneously, as a liberal tide which has undermined the tradition nuclear family. Relative affluence has raised age-old questions of our moral responsibilities for families and communities. Freedom from want and freedom from fear have exposed us to the moral dilemmas posed by the possibility of freedom from ourselves.

If this bald summary does less than full justice to Brinkley's unfailingly subtle and often sophisticated analyses, it provides nevertheless a basis for some alternative reflections on his approach, an approach which he stresses has its roots firmly anchored in the liberal Democratic tradition.

Perhaps the most difficult area of analysis lies in the definition of the moral basis for systematic government intervention in society. In a country dedicated even more than most to individualism it is difficult to square the collective requirement to devote efforts and resources for social reform by government with individuals' sense of philanthropic or humanitarian commitment. The work of an array of voluntary societies, buttressed by churches, is scarcely ever analysed in relation to government's social reform initiatives. This misleadingly marginalises one of the most powerful countervailing forces to the extension of liberal welfarism, the sense - however erroneous it may be in macro terms - that individuals are contributing to amelioration and that government intervention entails highly inefficient transfer costs. Brinkley's discussion of religion is illuminating, but brief and does not touch on the possible ways in which for a majority of church members, the increased activism and membership of churches in the last twenty years has channelled impulses of mutuality away from liberal reformers acting through state and federal governments towards fellow members of churches and their obligations to a wider society. The energetic 'joiner instinct' of Americans

has often been commented on. Its implication for government responsibilities has been less frequently analysed.

Withdrawal from government interventionism is accelerated by the way in which much interventionism has been fuelled by political opportunism. Brinkley is excellent on the purely pragmatic agendas pursued by FDR and JFK in advancing the liberal cause. But he tends thereafter to describe government activism as a generalised public good. Administrative bureaucracies simply do not behave in the ways implied. The 'public sector' has no more sense of 'community' than most business corporations. Public officials pursue rent-seeking objectives and compete over the question of who decides as vigorously as over what is to be decided. Bureaucratic gamesmanship, involving the excitement of competing for power, prominence and place, consumes as much energy as any dedication to the establishment of shared values and implementation of reformist policies. The expansion of federal programmes in the 1960s exposed the many pretensions of liberal interventionist rhetoric. None of this is meant to deny the depth and sincerity of many liberals' commitment to reform, or the need for many of the programmes developed. But the claims still outstrip the performance. Historians who depict the involvement of corporate leaders in civic affairs as an effort to extend business control frequently fail to analyse public officials' behaviour as similarly elitist and governed by self-serving agendas.

If New Left historians may have exaggerated in describing government officials as pawns of the corporate state working to businesses agendas, they are correct in insisting on the careful analysis of those officials' motives, priorities, and effectiveness.

Another contributory factor in the discrediting of collectivist symbolism has been the very success of one of its major achievements. The expansion of American mass higher education has provided an extraordinary transformation over the last 50 years and mostly as a result of state and federal government effort and expenditure. The contention that enormous human talent lies untapped around us is scarcely novel - Thomas Gray had much to say on that subject though he does not seem to have used his Professorship at Cambridge to do much to remedy the situation - but the pursuit of Ezra Cornell's idea of higher education available for any person pursuing any study has never been fully realised in human experience as in the United States in the last 50 years. The effect of such an expansion has not necessarily been to the good of liberal causes. The leading professions - legal, medical, engineering - whose growth has been fuelled by university expansion are scarcely notable for their communitarian, as distinct from competitive, ideals and practices. Business is now the leading subject taken by undergraduates, and postgraduate business schools - enjoying a far longer history than those in Britain - are not at the forefront of reformist liberalism. Expanding higher education has assisted the process of de-unionisation and emphasised individual careerism rather than the pursuit of social equality. Nor does the intense competitiveness of the university system contribute self-evidently to community values. The plurality of American government intensifies this institutional competitiveness even if it did not create it. However derived, the higher education system, which plays so crucial a role in shaping the attitudes of society's professional and managerial classes, offers a market-driven ethos sponsored and supported by public spending. Market-driven behaviour characterises even those who aspire to 'public good' ends. This attribute of public sector behaviour is only part of a much wider phenomenon.

One vital distinction drawn by Brinkley is between Progressives' desire to control corporate power and the New Deal's eventual elaboration of the notion of fiscal management. It is useful to be reminded that the central purpose of federal economic intervention by the later 1930s was to manage the economy through fiscal policy in order to foster consumerism. The New Deal did not aim to redistribute wealth or to promote the vastly expanded public sector. It sought to use taxation and government spending to create short-term jobs in order to reflate consumer demand and thereby reinvigorate manufacturing output. The legatees of the New Deal continued in a similar vein. This doctrine made it difficult to distinguish morally or politically between consumption in the shape of spending on a movie and a hamburger or on the Met and Quaglinos.

The path was open to the 1980s notion of 'greed is good'. After all, the New Deal's message was in effect 'to consume is to be public spirited'. For the public policy aspirations of many contemporary American social critics, the redistributionist objectives of democratic socialism would have provided a far more effective ideological platform than that yielded by the New Deal, as some of FDR's advisers argued at the time.

The answer to the dilemma which Brinkley poses at the beginning of his collection of essays is therefore partly resolved through his wide-ranging variety of case studies. The political opportunism of FDR and the pragmatic programme which he experimented with laid down only a blurred ideological blueprint for the future. It was possible from within the Democratic tradition and from among the various policy options available during the 1930s to have created a firmer ideological framework upon which to base future action. But Keynesian economic theory was about managing the economy not transforming it. And the very dedication to consumerism as a key element in promoting recovery scarcely indicated any ideological commitment to changing the nature of American social and economic relationships. Brinkley demonstrates that the political activism of the 1960s had more to do with particularist liberal causes than with a commitment to a thorough-going reformist agenda. Once major breakthroughs had been made in reforming higher education to meet students' demands, to pass wide-ranging civil rights legislation, and to pull American out of Vietnam, then a great deal of the energy and commitment in the reformist impulses of the 1960s quite logically disappeared. Without being entirely facetious, one could suggest that Ronald Reagan's steady evolution from youthful New Dealer to 1980s conservative exemplified the experiences of a generation. As the have-nots became haves, there was little else in their upbringing as New Dealers to inspire belief in anything other than a market-driven American system. And the actual policies pursued by the federal government during the 1980s combined pro-capitalist rhetoric with massive doses of federal government borrowing to sustain heavy public expenditure during recession. Perhaps with increasing hindsight we may regard the vibrant reformism of the 1960s as being far more exceptional than as a stage in a process of liberalisation in American political life and attitudes towards government.

Anyone who contemplates modern America is bound to be puzzled at how so technologically sophisticated and indeed - in Galbraith's formulation - technocratic a society has been swayed by the crude incantations and punitive policies of the New Right. The resolution of that paradox has to take account of a profound populist reaction against the pretentious claims and knee-jerk interventionism of the liberal reformers as well as the grim truism that the spread of opportunity has led to the spread of opportunism. Whatever their aspirations, successful middle class people will behave in the time-honoured fashion of the grasping bourgeoisie, tempered, but not tamed, by moral, social or ideological restraints. In the 1890s a Liberal Treasury minister in Britain declared, 'we are all Socialists now'. A century later a more apposite catchphrase could well be, 'we are all market-traders now'. The New Deal and the Great Society programmes in one sense set up vast publicly-funded market places for the promotion and peddling of public policy initiatives and ideas developed and offered by fiercely competing individuals and interest groups.

#### **Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/86#comment-0>

#### **Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1015>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>