

Two Views on the American Left

The Dark Side of the Left: Illiberal Egalitarianism in America

By Richard J. Ellis. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999. 426 pages, \$34.95 (cloth)

Reviewed by Andrew Hazlett

From the turbulent Sixties to today's campus thought monitors, there is ample evidence in living memory that the Right has no monopoly on political violence and dogmatism. The Left's excesses, however, are usually characterized as departures from an otherwise benevolent creed, while militia bombings are somehow less surprising. But what if there is a dark heart within American egalitarianism?

That's the question posed in Richard J. Ellis' *The Dark Side of the Left*. A professor at Willamette University and a long-time student of American political ideologies, Mr. Ellis has identified and dissected several egalitarian movements that have exhibited what he terms "illiberal" tendencies: unreasoning dogmatism, disdain for individual autonomy, demonization of opponents, apocalyptic millennialism, and violent rhetoric.

Mr. Ellis finds a common thread that runs through nineteenth-century utopian collectivists, 1960s campus rebels, today's radical feminists, and environmentalist misanthropes. Intrinsic to all these forms of egalitarianism is the rejection of the classical liberal understanding of equality before the law. Instead, radical egalitarians seek *de facto* equality of wealth, of status, of gender, among species, etc. These goals come into conflict with the existing rule of law in the United States (especially property rights) and the preferences of the vast majority of ordinary people. Mainstream American culture is essentially individualistic and focused on attaining private happiness and prosperity.

In contrast, radical egalitarians' objectives are *social*. In most cases, they choose not to withdraw into utopian communities and leave others alone.

They feel compelled to change every aspect of the world they regard as so deeply corrupt. As their inevitable frustration with the task grows, these movements often eschew the gradual process of persuasion. They come to disdain people outside their movement as helpless victims of "false consciousness" whose choices have been conditioned by the "system." Their alienation is increased by a belief in an imminent apocalypse—whether religious, environmental, political, or social. The battle becomes so urgent and the odds so desperate that other moral concerns are cast aside—people must be "forced to be free."

Because egalitarians' actions are ultimately in the name of others, the last inhibitions against coercion and violence fall away. In a way that no person simply pursuing his own happiness could, the radical egalitarians feel justified in the advocacy and use of coercive tactics on a wide scale. Mr. Ellis reports, "those who claimed to act in the name of mankind, or the earth, or the children, or the future, or equality, could be more self-righteous and fanatical than those who freely admitted to acting out of self-interest."

The results can be chilling. As Mr. Ellis writes, "to make altruism ... the motive responsible for running the system may be an idle dream, but more troubling is that it invites unchecked state coercion." Edward Bellamy's 1888 book, *Looking Backward*, called for an omnipotent state to eradicate individualism and mold humanity into a harmonious collective. The New Left invoked Frantz Fanon and Herbert Marcuse in the advocacy of riots and the defense of communist dictatorships. Because the "personal is political," radi-

cal feminists like Catherine MacKinnon would criminalize the most private consensual activities. Environmental egalitarians like Earth First! welcome plagues and famine and offer tacit support of sabotage and terrorism.

Mr. Ellis does not blithely link egalitarianism and illiberalism in these many instances without detailed evidence. Based on meticulous primary research, his conclusions are carefully qualified and the book is exhaustively footnoted (there are half as many pages of notes as text). He is also anxious to avoid being called a conservative, and he deserves to be taken seriously in that regard.

What Mr. Ellis upholds instead is what he calls a "liberalism of fear" that shies away from moral absolutism and "radical certainty." He agrees with E.E. Schattschneider that "democracy is a political system for those people who are not too sure they are right." This viewpoint is a weakness throughout the book because it undermines the moral confidence we need to combat the very evils he describes. Several of the book's case studies dramatize what happens when reasonable, well-intentioned people are fearful and vacillating: those who are not so benevolent but *are* sure of themselves quickly seize the reins. On a broader scale, history is full of weak liberal governments that gave way to highly motivated totalitarians. If anyone is going to be confident about their political vision, let's hope it is the defenders of individual rights and capitalism.

This book is most valuable as a reminder that real sins of the illiberals are the denigration of individuals as such and, as a shortcut to power, the casting aside of rational persuasion. What we need is *more* certainty and *greater* moral confidence in the service of the nation's founding ideas and institutions. They protect us from authoritarians of any stripe who would impose their will by force.

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