

The Right Left?

Freedom's Power: The True Force of Liberalism

by Paul Starr

Basic. 304 pp. \$26.00

Reviewed by
Wilfred M. McClay

WHAT CHIEFLY ails American liberalism today—or so we are told—is lack of a vision. Needed is a fresh and energizing idea, together with a big and persuasive book to articulate and promote it—a book that will do for our time what Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life* did for the Progressive era, or the late Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Vital Center* did for the post-World War II years.

And hope, we hear, is on the way, if not already over the horizon. Last year's entry in the campaign to regenerate the intellectual core of liberalism was *The Good Fight* by Peter Beinart, the former editor of the *New Republic*. Beinart argues for the resurrection of something resembling cold-war liberalism—that is, a politics combining an energetical-

WILFRED M. MCCLAY holds the Sun-Trust Chair of Excellence in the Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

ly expansive social policy with a tough-minded approach to the problem of global terrorism.* And now, in *Freedom's Power*, we have another effort by an editor of another influential liberal magazine, the *American Prospect*.

Unlike Beinart, who is concerned mostly with liberalism's present discontents and how to overcome them, Paul Starr looks at liberalism in a large historical context, and likes what he sees. Going all the way back to the emergence of Anglo-American constitutional democracy in the 17th century, he traces the intellectual and institutional "lineages" of liberalism forward to the present. In so doing, he is able to show to his satisfaction that modern "democratic liberalism"—i.e., the liberalism he favors—emerged out of the same intellectual nexus as classical liberalism and modern conservatism but has remained truer to the core insights of the original revelation, realized its promise more fully, and mastered its inherent problems more effectively.

IN ITS EARLIEST forms, as Starr tells it, liberalism sought to defend human freedom by protecting it, using legal and constitutional means to limit and contain the trespasses and encroachments of power. But that, in time, proved insufficient. If the sphere of freedom was to expand, liberalism had to *create* the social power that would make this expansion possible. Thus began the morphing of what had been a philosophy of limited government into a philosophy of expansive government.

In Starr's historical reconstruction, modern democratic liberalism emerged out of the need to address several deficiencies in its 19th-century predecessor. In the American context, one such need arose out of the discrepancy between a philosophy of universal rights and a political system that excluded so many categories of people—including women and blacks—from participa-

tion. Another was the need to temper property rights and laissez-faire economics in the face of the unprecedented problems generated by industrial capitalism. A third was the need to "deregulate" private life and get government out of the morality business, where it did not belong. Finally there was the need to create frameworks for international cooperation to advance democracy and defend free governments against tyrannies.

So far, so familiar. Anyone who has read a standard account of this subject in an American textbook will feel quite at home with Starr's history. *Freedom's Power* is also highly reminiscent of Herbert Croly's own sweeping (and much longer) historical analysis, with its central thesis that under modern conditions it was imperative for liberalism to adopt the "Hamiltonian means" of an activist state in order to further the "Jeffersonian ends" of individual liberty. There is merit, moreover, in Starr's belief that today's liberalism can benefit from thinking itself back to its origins. "Clarity about what liberalism stands for," he urges, "is an essential step in awakening the force of its ideas."

UNFORTUNATELY, though, few readers are likely to find this clarity in *Freedom's Power*. Short though it is, the book is a drab and colorless undertaking, one that renders its subject in almost entirely gray and abstract terms. For the most part, Starr disdains to provide such particulars as proper names, historical events, or specific examples to buttress his case; instead, generalization follows generalization, gliding along in a steady stream of indistinct images and disembodied concepts. Worst of all, in these pages the superiority of liberalism is affirmed at every turn, but never demonstrated.

One of the oddest features of *Freedom's Power* is that almost any

* James Nuechterlein discussed Beinart's book in "Rallying the Democrats," COMMENTARY, September 2006.

conservative can read large chunks of it and find little of substance to disagree with. In the first third of the book, for example, Starr praises limited government, rule of law, separation of powers, and so on—virtues that are very far from being peculiar to liberalism but that he simply sweeps into its exclusive purview. “A central insight of liberalism,” he writes early on, “is that power arbitrarily exercised is destructive not only of individual liberty but also of the rule of law.” Could one not just as plausibly call this a central insight of conservatism? “Limiting the scope of state power,” he writes with approval, “increases the likelihood of its effective use.” Not only is this another central insight of conservatism, but it stands in flat contradistinction to the modern liberal belief in the *expansive* use of state power.

To deal with such complications and contradictions would require a fuller account of liberalism than Starr is willing to provide. It would especially require engaging the questions posed by the conservative critique of democratic liberalism. Is it really possible to use Hamiltonian means to achieve Jeffersonian ends? Is it not rather all too possible that the expansion of state power may result not chiefly in greater individual liberty but in the creation of a vast web of clients dependent upon that power, and the sacrifice of a vibrant civil society to a regime of unresponsive courts and unelected bureaucracies? As easy as it is to tick off the inequities to which laissez-faire economics can give rise, is there not an equivalent obligation to speak seriously of the inequities and trade-offs involved in the steady extension and intrusion of government? Is anyone really going to be persuaded by the argument that big government is merely the continuation of limited government by other means?

In Starr’s world, conservatism can hardly be said to exist as a philosophy of government. Liberals are the only ones in human history who

have both conceived noble ideas and acted from generous impulses. Conservatives, by contrast, are invariably fearful or greedy or hidebound, and their responses can be summarized under the headings of reaction, resentment, and “backlash.” Nowhere in *Freedom’s Power* is there even the slightest acknowledgement that conservative thought over the past 40 years has supplied a powerful corrective to the unforeseen (though not always unforeseeable) consequences of bad or poorly thought-out liberal ideas.

THE CLOSEST Starr comes to recognizing the worthiness of his opposition is in a short subsection where, in discussing the debacle of welfare policy in the United States, he grudgingly concedes that “part” of the conservative critique was correct. The truth, of course, is that conservatives played the *key* role in documenting the human damage done by the existing welfare system and then in providing the political will to change it—in the teeth of incessant liberal resistance and a great deal of manufactured media outrage.

This is no minor matter; it is a matter of political philosophy. What the saga of welfare policy showed was that, contrary to Starr’s version of liberal doctrine, it is not possible simply to “deregulate” private life or “get government out of the morality business.” Successful social policy inevitably involves the shaping of human desires and values, and the privileging of certain moral choices over others. Indeed, as Starr well knows, the historical success of liberalism itself depended upon the cultivation of certain qualities of character—he mentions integrity, reasonableness, and openness to new ideas, and there are presumably others. But he has nothing to say about where these qualities of character come from, or how they can be reliably instilled. He simply presumes them to be out there, available for mobilizing.

Are they? Liberalism can plausi-

bly be seen as the moving force behind the American system of public education. But the grave failures of that system in recent decades arguably constitute the most powerful single obstacle to the progress of the disadvantaged in our society. Public education provides a classic example of a quasi-monopolistic state institution that has too often come to place its own interest over the public interest. Its problems cannot plausibly be laid at the feet of conservatives, who on the contrary have sought to improve education by opening it up to greater competition and choice—something that the public-education establishment, a bastion of liberal political power, has once again fiercely resisted.

Nor does Starr ever come to terms with the embarrassing fact that, though it is a “democratic” liberalism he insists upon, nearly all of the liberal policy initiatives of the past three decades have issued from the most undemocratic and unrepresentative elements of government: namely, the courts and the executive-branch regulatory agencies. “Only if one thinks of democracy merely as simple majority rule are courts inherently undemocratic,” Starr writes defensively. But it is not enough to assert, as he does, that using courts and bureaucracies enacts the “spirit” of democracy. One also has to answer the classic question of who decides when unelected officials are speaking legitimately for “the people” and when they are speaking merely for themselves or for an elite and narrowly self-interested understanding of what “the people” would want, were they wise enough to want it.

FINALLY, BY expecting us to take his theoretical claims as empirically true, and by refusing to weigh the risks and costs to individual liberty and self-governance entailed in his understanding of democratic liberalism, Starr has missed a great opportunity to make a case for those instances in which the exercise of

state power might actually be better than any real-world alternative on offer.

In this connection, it is telling that the book's brief chapter on foreign policy is almost exclusively an exercise in Bush-bashing, utterly devoid of ideas about the concrete choices that lie ahead of us. Here Starr's strategy of scooping up all the good things on the table and putting them in liberalism's pocket becomes especially egregious.

Thus he states, with studied casualness, that during the cold war, "liberals and conservatives [were] generally allied in their anti-Communism," and that success in this conflict derived from "liberal policies tempered by realism." Some of us do not quite remember things that way. From which quadrant of the universe, after all, did that tem-

pering "realism" come from, and why did liberal policies stand so badly in need of it? Why were towering Democratic figures like Senator Henry Jackson pushed to the margins of the party, and of American liberalism generally? What led President Jimmy Carter to disparage the "inordinate fear" of Communism? Why did it take the leadership of conservatives and Republicans—and particularly Ronald Reagan's determination to challenge the USSR in both the military and the ideological spheres, in the face of massive liberal ridicule and protest—to see the cold war to its successful conclusion?

In his final sentences, Starr declares that liberals need to "reclaim the idea of America's greatness as their own." His phrasing is am-

biguous, perhaps purposely so. Is he saying that contemporary liberals should reject the siren song of alienation and anti-Americanism and instead rededicate themselves to the great enterprise that has already realized many of their own once-high political ideals, and that today deserves their full-throated admiration and loyalty? Or is he saying that, since liberalism is self-evidently *the* source and sum of all that is good and admirable in America, the nation's greatness only waits to be reclaimed by the return of liberals to political power?

One would hope for the former. But an exceedingly large quantity of evidence, both inside and outside the pages of *Freedom's Power*, suggests that both he and the liberals he speaks for intend only the latter.