

**FRED SIEGEL**

# Blinded by the Left

*Liberals are at their best when they recognize the difference between themselves and radicalism. Too often in American history, they haven't.*

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**FREEDOM'S POWER: THE TRUE FORCE OF LIBERALISM** BY PAUL STARR  
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**T**wentieth-century American liberals have a record of glorious achievements. In the 1920s, they responded to the hysteria unleashed in the wake of World War I by crafting the modern First Amendment. In the 1930s, they mobilized to succor the suffering of millions in the midst of the Great Depression. In the 1960s, they were at the forefront of the movement for civil rights for African-Americans and economic security for the sick and elderly.

For the first seven decades of the twentieth century, liberal intellectuals were buoyed by a historical narrative that assumed the world was progressing their way. They saw themselves as a vanguard guiding the country into a future that resembled their ideals. But in the years since the 1960s, liberals, drawn into the interest-group ideologies that emerged during that era, have largely lost their way.

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FRED SIEGEL, *a professor of history at the Cooper Union for Science and Art, is the author of the Prince of the City: Giuliani, New York, and the Genius of American Life.*

Paul Starr's important new book *Freedom's Power: The True Force of Liberalism* tries to reconnect contemporary liberalism with its illustrious past.

*Freedom's Power* is designed to guide a liberal restoration by scraping away the barnacles of past political shipwrecks so that a refitted ideology can sail to success. Indeed, with Republicans in disarray and Democrats in a position to possibly control both elective branches of government after 2008, liberalism looks as though it could be poised to make a comeback. A co-founder and co-editor of the liberal magazine the *American Prospect* as well as a professor at Princeton University and a widely published author, Starr is in a strong position to seize the moment. But Starr's zeal for a purified, ahistorical liberalism makes it impossible for him to come to grips with its past failures and future opportunities, a reckoning necessary for a liberal rebirth.

**T**here are few books that state their thesis as straightforwardly and effectively as does this relentlessly upbeat effort. As Starr explains in the preface, the book is "about what some may regard as the counterintuitive propositions that freedom requires power in the form of a strong and capable constitutional state and that modern democratic liberalism—by enlarging that state in some respects while constraining it in others—makes it possible for a society to achieve both greater power and greater freedom." Time and again, he restates his thesis that the modern liberal society is successful because its state is "strong yet constrained...indeed strong because constrained. This is the classical theory of freedom's power."

Starr sees contemporary liberalism as a *juste milieu*. He explains, in the somewhat dated framework of the New Deal era, that while leftists wanted to "socialize the means of production" and the right to "rely on the free market," liberals "lacking an equally comprehensive remedy" had been willing "to mix state and market and testing out different hybrid approaches." His liberalism represents an appealing tradition of open-minded gradualist experimentation. And yet Starr is anxious to refute perhaps the most common criticism of American liberalism, namely that its talk about experimentation implies an absence of long-held underlying principles. Liberalism, say its conservative detractors, lacks a navel, an organic connection to the American political tradition. Not so, insists Starr, who, presenting himself as a great-great-great grandson of the Enlightenment, explains, "Unlike those who see a sharp discontinuity between classical and modern liberalism"—usually differentiated between the original small and later large "1" version—I see the two as closely related—the latter growing out of the former in response to historical experience." And to prove his point he spends four chapters and 100 pages

on a *longuer*-laden, potted history of English and American liberalism in an attempt to teach the untutored reader the correct conceptual table manners for enjoying the feast offered up by the current variety. Mature readers would be advised to skim this primer-like exercise about the inevitable march of the liberal spirit through the problems of the division of powers, separation of church and state, and the public/private distinction.

Nevertheless, what's peculiar about Starr's presentation is that, after having marched the liberal spirit across this historical landscape, he then falters, barely discussing the intellectual origins of liberalism as we know it today. Following the conventional narrative, Starr sees liberalism as an early twentieth-century reaction to the growth of monopoly corporations under the regime of limited-government liberalism. He's right as far as that goes. But modern liberalism was much more than that. It was, at the time of the founding of the modern American university, an attempt by Progressive intellectuals to literally re-found the Republic.

When Virginia Woolf made her famous assertion that "on or about December 1910 human character changed," she (perhaps unknowingly) spoke directly to the hopes of a new generation of American intellectuals. They had shed the Founding Fathers' pessimism about human nature; they hoped, in the words of the modernist poet Ezra Pound, to "make it new." The notions of continuity Starr insists on would have seemed odd to men like Herbert Croly, founding editor of the *New Republic*, who saw reverence for the constitution as a form of "monarchism"; Charles Beard, the ground-breaking constitutional critic and author of *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*; and, despite the stray quote that Starr produces, pragmatist John Dewey, who dismissed the Founding Fathers' idea of natural rights in favor of what he called "creative intelligence." From journalists to professors, these progressive thinkers saw themselves breaking sharply with the American past even as they employed some of its elements to create a re-founded regime led in large measure by disinterested intellectuals, experts, and social scientists like themselves.

In this, many of these early twentieth-century liberals were hardly liberal at all. Some, including Dewey, retained a faith in democracy, while Croly and others were ambivalent (Croly insisted, "democracy must stand or fall on a platform of possible human perfectibility"). But a significant segment of these reformers were openly hostile to it. In 1934, Walter Shephard, president of the American Political Science Association, spoke for many social scientists when he proposed a reorganization of American government, including the rejection of the "dogma" of universal suffrage. "The ignorant, the uninformed, and the anti-social," he argued, should be disenfranchised so that "an aristocracy of intellect and character" could govern. Thurman Arnold, Franklin Roosevelt's

assistant attorney general and one of the key thinkers of the New Deal, concurred. “This conception of a group of thinking men in society to whom rational appeals can be made, who are willing to accept right principles when they are logically explained, is much like the former ethical notion of individual free will which used to be applied in the treatment of maladjusted personalities.” Arnold hoped that a “competent, practical, opportunistic governing class may rise to power.”

None of this is dealt with in *Freedom’s Power*, because the book depicts an ideal spirit of liberalism moving through history while only pausing occasionally to touch down and discuss what real-life liberals actually were doing. No one who has tried to come to grips with what happened to liberalism in the 1930s, and again in the 1960s, could write, as does Starr, that liberalism “has always been a gamble on freedom and public argument, made out of a willingness to entertain doubts about all things in particular, a belief in robust criticism and competition and a general confidence in the outcome.” Thirties-era liberalism was captured in the *New Republic* editor Stuart Chase’s famous rhetorical question asking, “Why should the Russians have all the fun of remaking a world?” Such barely clothed hostility was based on the certainty that capitalism had failed, that strong planning was the answer to the Depression, and that economic rights were far more important than traditional, individual rights, such as freedom of speech. Starr’s spirit of liberalism glides by all that. Always open, balanced, and experimental, his liberalism is something of an inert gas that can’t be de-arranged, even during the harrowing 1930s and 1960s and its chemical interactions with political extremism.

Lionel Trilling, looking back on the 1930s from the 1960s, saw what Starr has missed:

In any view of the American cultural situation, the importance of the radical movement of the Thirties cannot be overestimated. It may be said to have created the American intellectual class as we now know it in its great size and influence. It fixed the character of this class as being, through all mutations of opinion, predominantly of the Left. And quite apart from opinion, the political tendency of the Thirties defined the style of the class—from that radicalism came the moral urgency, the sense of crisis, and the concern with personal salvation that mark the existence of American intellectuals.

To be sure, there were liberals in the 1930s, such as the philosopher Morris Raphael Cohen, who were never seduced by the love affair with the Soviet Union and a redemptive politics that promised a heaven on earth. But they were the exception. What any rescue party for liberalism needs to come to grips with is why

liberals, most notably in the 1930s and 1960s, were so vulnerable to the extremism and repeated quests for a salvific politics that Starr has defined away.

Indeed, Starr says little about the irrational, nihilistic, and millenarian strands of the 1960s, as instanced by the best-selling popularity of Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and Charles Reich's *The Greening of America* (which was touted by George McGovern), except to note euphemistically that it was a period in which "the strained but productive relationship between mainstream and opposition liberalism broke down." Instead, he points to the American failure to support democracy around the globe in the 1950s as the source of the New Left's excesses. But where Starr elides, others have dwelled. In 1970 Isaiah Berlin, writing in the *New York Review of Books* about the growth of nihilism in Russia and Europe following the failed revolutions of 1848, saw the similarities between that era and the one just ending. At both points liberals were, he explained, caught between the mortar of the anti-rationalist right and the pestle of irrationalist left. And like the great liberal Ivan Turgenev, the subject of Berlin's essay, in the 1960s many liberal "fathers" maintained their distance from their enraged "sons" even as they admired their commitment and functionally supported them.

The problem with Starr's book is not that he doesn't try to scale the intellectual and emotionally mountainous heights of such pivotal moments to survey the ideological landscape from their summit; it is that he never even approaches the foothills of the problem. Put simply, that problem is an ironic tension—in the 1930s, the 1960s, and even today, the very compromises required to create a thoughtful environment can produce a sense of inauthenticity in its own would-be adherents. It is the modern-day liberals own fear that they are mere trimmers in the face of horrors—be it the Depression, Vietnam, or Iraq—while the extremists are authentic and courageous that allows radicals and charlatans to repeatedly overtake liberalism.

Moreover, Starr ignores the ways in which liberal policies were implicated during the explosion in crime and the collapse of the urban schools during the 1960s and 1970s—though he does concede, "the growth of welfare did signal a failure." It was a "mistake," he agrees, "to reward the idle poor more than the working poor." But there is no examination of the reasons for the "mistake." Here Starr would have done well to have read Shelby Steele. In the wake of the 1960s, Steele explains in his book *White Guilt*, liberals, who had done so much to free African-Americans from the shackles of segregation, forged newer but thankfully weaker fetters on black achievement. Under the liberal dispensation, the segregated world of responsibility without rights was replaced, for blacks, by a framework of rights without responsibility. New York Governor Mario Cuomo,

the leading liberal of the early 1990s, argued, for instance, that families headed by teenage women just weren't a problem: "If you took a fifteen year-old with a child, but put her in a clean apartment, got her a diploma, gave her the hope of a job . . . that would change everything." If we did all this, concludes Cuomo, "the fact that she had a baby at fifteen wouldn't produce any disorientation at all, and the hope that comes from new context would solve the problem."

In this reversal, the morally indefensible world of segregation was succeeded not by the responsibility that comes with freedom, but by the destructive assumption that African-Americans shouldn't be held accountable for their actions. In other words, shunting generations of people off into welfare wasn't an accidental byproduct of liberal policy, but its very expression. Starr may disagree with this argument, but he does his readers a disservice by not even addressing it. In any case, Starr hurries on, everything turned out for the best because "replacing welfare with an employment-oriented earning system" in the Clinton years was "entirely in line with liberal tradition." There's not a hint that Republicans might have played an important role in welfare reform, or that many liberals—including Starr's *American Prospect* co-founder and Clinton Labor Secretary Robert Reich—were bitterly opposed.

**Any rescue party for liberalism needs to come to grips with why liberals, most notably in the 1930s and 1960s, were so vulnerable to extremism.**

Liberalism's excesses were not limited to social policy. Indeed, Watergate overshadowed the fact that the 1970s was a disastrous decade for liberalism. Its economic model, built on a Keynesianism that allowed for government intervention that was not too intrusive, collapsed, along with the Phillips curve, and has never been replaced. Worse yet, the sense that liberals, guided by the social sciences, were the heralds of the future failed as well. But that doesn't stop Starr from writing that "the pragmatic disposition" of liberalism in the 1970s "implies that policy can not be derived from moral principles alone, without regard to empirical results." But this is precisely what didn't happen. When the social-science evidence about the Great Society began to outline its limitations and failures and as the fatherless families of the inner city generated an expanding underclass, the predominant liberal response was not to rethink pragmatically the old positions but rather to retreat into the moralist redoubt of rights-based policies, built not on empiricism and experiment but on an ungrounded faith in judicially driven social engineering. After all, there was no need to rethink welfare if it was not mere policy, but what amounted to a constitutional right.

Liberal intellectuals, it turned out, were as self-interested as unlettered Americans when it came to preserving their turf, patronage, and positions from the onslaught of unwelcome evidence. As with devout Hayekians, it is inconceivable to the earnest Starr that rules derived from scientific evidence might be gamed on behalf of one interest or another. Has he ever met a trial lawyer?

*Freedom's Power* repeatedly makes the point that American liberalism, though intellectually grounded, is far less ideological than its rivals. But Starr's presentation of the European Union (EU) as a model for the United States is but another example of the triumph of ideology over evidence. Starr is effusive in his praise of how, as he sees it, Europe has balanced liberalism and democracy, fairness and growth, far better than his own country. Is this the same administered EU that even most Europeans acknowledge suffers from a democratic deficit? Does he want us to emulate the policies that have produced unemployment rates two to three times than that of the United States (depending on the country), that have produced virtually no job growth over the past 30 years? Does he realize that the EU's current levels of productivity and income were reached by the United States in 1985? Only an ideologue can imagine that France, with its 23 percent unemployment rate for young people, and Germany, which is hemorrhaging scientists and professionals, should be taken as a model.

The ideal of liberalism Starr promotes is worthy of admiration, but our actually existing liberals are not likely to be governed by it. For all this, I can hear Starr falling back to the position, "Yes, we've had our failings, sometimes we've betrayed the spirit; still, for all that the other guys are much worse." Maybe, but that would hardly be the banner with which to march into the inspired future of a revived American liberalism. ■