

VOLUME XVI, NUMBER 4, FALL 2016

# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

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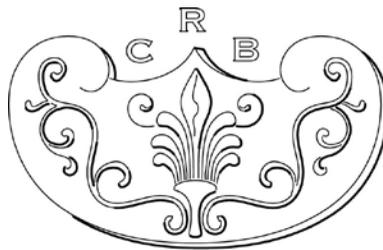
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Essay by William Voegeli

## WHAT'S LEFT?

THE 2016 ELECTIONS RESULTS WILL BE known to this essay's readers. Due to CRB's publication schedule, however, they are unknown to its author. Suffice to say that in the wake of news cycles dominated by Donald Trump's theories and practices regarding mating rituals, and Republicans' subsequent turmoil over whether to tolerate or repudiate him, Democrats appear highly likely to retain the presidency, to have a good chance of regaining a Senate majority, and a plausible prospect of winning a majority in the House of Representatives. A Democratic president and Senate would also ensure that federal courts, including the Supreme Court, are increasingly populated by jurists hostile to Republican aims and friendly to Democratic ones.

An election that left Democrats with no majorities on one end of Pennsylvania Avenue, and no White House occupant on the other, is the least likely scenario of all. Unless it occurs, the liberal project will move forward—how fast depends on Democrats' success on Election Day, but in what direction depends on liberals' evolving ideas about their mission. Three books published in 2016 present different assessments of liberalism's condition and prospects. They bear examination at a time when the Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump insurgencies signal that the battle lines between Left and Right in American politics, long static, are giving way to new conflicts and coalitions, ones that are notably fluid rather than predictable.

*How the Right Went Wrong* by veteran *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne examines liberals' purported Diogenes-like quest for decent, intelligent conservative adversaries with whom they can do business. The other two volumes are, one might say, by professional leftists. Thomas Frank, a polemicist best known for *What's the Matter With Kansas?* (2004), wrote *Listen, Liberal*. Jefferson Cowie, an academic historian, is the author of *The Great Exception*. Both books take up the American Left's frustrations with growing economic inequality and the failure of government to do more to reverse it.

### Me-Too Republicanism

OF THE THREE, *HOW THE RIGHT Went Wrong* is the least satisfying, neither an engaging read nor a fresh, compelling argument. Dionne's account of the past 50 years of American political history moves briskly, relying on interviews, reportage, and polling data to advance its thesis. After a few chapters, though, it becomes clear that the book is what journalists call a "notebook dump," overstuffed with material Dionne gathered but didn't use for his columns and blog posts. As such, *How the Right Went Wrong* would have been significantly better had it been significantly briefer.

It also suffers for making the least of its moment. Though the dogmas of the quiet past appear increasingly inadequate to the stormy present, Dionne leaves the impression

that the politics of the decade following 2016 will differ only trivially from the politics of the decade preceding it. Not coincidentally, his central argument and much of the same supporting evidence was presented more effectively four years ago by historian Geoffrey Kabaservice in *Rule and Ruin*, which examined how moderate Republicans became an endangered and then extinct species.

Kabaservice noted that the teenaged E.J. Dionne applied to be a member of the Ripon Society, the once prominent liberal Republican organization, but came to think of himself as a Democrat after Senator Eugene McCarthy's 1968 presidential campaign. *How the Right Went Wrong*, like *Rule and Ruin*, regrets the road not taken, the "Modern Republicanism" practiced by President Dwight Eisenhower, theorized by his advisor and speechwriter Arthur Larson, and pursued by Ripon Society Republicans. Modern Republicanism "may have been the great missed opportunity of American politics," Dionne believes. In its stead, we got the conservatism formulated by William F. Buckley, Jr., at *National Review*, and offered to voters by Barry Goldwater. While they scorned Eisenhower as a "me-too Republican," and demanded that the GOP present "a choice, not an echo," Larson wanted Republicans "to come to terms with the New Deal and the welfare state," in Dionne's words. The road that *was* taken, however, the one laid out by Buckley, Goldwater, and then Ronald Reagan, led to the conservatism of our century,



which Dionne joins many other liberals in deploring as intransigent, venomous, irresponsible, and destructive.

Not the least of the problems with this thesis is that the Modern Republicans' efforts at comity were scorned rather than reciprocated by mid-century liberals. Their preeminent public intellectual, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., gave no credit to 1950s Republicans who supported "as much government as is necessary," in Larson's words. Instead, Schlesinger in a 1960 *Esquire* article deplored the "Eisenhower epoch" as a "period of passivity and acquiescence in our national life." Eisenhower's "particular contribution to the art of politics was to make politics boring at a time when the people wanted any excuse to forget public affairs." Schlesinger was an advisor that year to John Kennedy, whose presidential campaign pledge to "get the country moving again" implied that Eisenhower's validation of the New Deal and welfare state had been a worthless endeavor.

As an abstract proposition, Dionne understands that it takes two to tango. But in practice, this truth only applies when liberals are calling the tune. *How the Right Went Wrong* approvingly quotes socialist Irving Howe's observation about the 1964 Goldwater campaign—"the more housebroken the left, the more adventuresome the right"—but never acknowledges the possibility that the reverse is true. Instead, good, nice, reasonable, responsible, and respectable conservatives should *aspire* to be timid. The Left, and only the Left, should be adventuresome.

"[T]here are moments," Dionne says, "when the primary political task is to move the center to a new place—or, at the least, to keep it from being dragged in the wrong direction." But there are never such moments for conservatives. Thus, Wisconsin's Republicans, led by Governor Scott Walker, were not trying to move the center to a new place when they severely curtailed that state's public employee unions in 2011. Instead, they were taking a "genuinely alarming approach to politics," Dionne wrote the following year in support of efforts to recall Walker, because they were using "incumbency to alter the rules and tilt the legal and electoral playing field decisively toward the interests of those in power."

Dionne presents himself as man of the "center-left" who believes that "a healthy democratic order needs conservatism's skepticism about the grand plans we progressives sometimes offer, its respect for traditional institutions, and its skepticism of those who believe that politics can remold human nature." Happily, the New Deal and Great Society turn out

to have been around long enough to qualify as traditional institutions, which means conservatives should embrace "the responsibility of conserving the genuine achievements of progressive reform."

There appears to be less scope for conservative skepticism, since Dionne gives no example of a progressive plan that is excessively or dangerously grand. The "Reform Conservatives" of recent years, for example, might well be described as accepting the legitimacy of the New Deal and the welfare state, but Dionne discounts their efforts: every time these conservatives call for more public spending to address a particular problem they propose to pay for it with "steep long-term cuts in programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security." This, to

#### Books discussed in this essay:

*Why the Right Went Wrong: Conservatism—From Goldwater to Trump and Beyond*, by E.J. Dionne, Jr.  
Simon & Schuster, 544 pages,  
\$30 (cloth), \$17.99 (paper)

*Listen, Liberal: Or, What Ever Happened to the Party of the People?*,  
by Thomas Frank. Metropolitan Books,  
320 pages, \$27

*The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics*,  
by Jefferson Cowie.  
Princeton University Press,  
288 pages, \$27.95

Dionne, amounts to "rob Peter to pay Paul" budgeting by calling for sharp reductions in programs progressives see as necessary."

#### Good Money After Bad

**B**UT ARE PROGRESSIVES RIGHT TO SEE things this way, to summarily dismiss efforts to redirect our welfare state's outlays from less to more urgent purposes? Peter and Paul are equally saintly, but not every welfare state expenditure is equally necessary. Dionne finds nothing wrong with liberal policies, only their execution. Progressives

need to pay far more attention than they do to making government work effectively. Nothing did more damage to the Affordable Care Act than the collapse of its website [upon its 2013 launch], an

entirely avoidable problem. This was not a failure of ideology but of procurement, performance, and management.

Perhaps, however, failures to attend to such obvious imperatives as procurement, performance, management, and the optimum use of available resources in general is *not* just happenstance, but the result of an underlying ideological failure. In fiscal year 2014, the federal government spent over \$2.5 trillion on what the Office of Management and Budget terms "Human Resources" programs: Social Security, Medicare, income support, health programs, education and social services, and veterans' programs. Spending for such purposes, a good approximation of what we mean by "the welfare state," accounted for nearly three fourths of all federal government outlays, one seventh of the Gross Domestic Product, and nearly \$8,000 for every man, woman, and child in America. Adjusted for inflation and population growth, that figure was twice as high as Human Resources spending had been in 1989, three times as high as in 1974, and five times as high as in 1968.

In addition to federal Human Resources spending, state and local governments spend nearly \$1 trillion dollars on welfare, hospitals, public health, and housing and community development programs. The \$2.5 trillion in outlays also excludes the hundreds of billions of dollars in federal "tax expenditures" that subsidize private home ownership, medical insurance, and retirement security. And, finally, it doesn't reflect the cost of transfers from one citizen to another mandated by federal, state, and local regulations promoting welfare state goals, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, minimum wage laws, and rent control.

In short, government efforts to enhance Americans' economic security and opportunity have a per capita cost well in excess of \$10,000, at a time when the official federal poverty level is \$24,300 for a family of four. Despite the enormity and relentless growth of this governmental commitment, the proportion of Americans considered poor or nearly poor (with incomes not exceeding 125% of the poverty level) has fluctuated in the same narrow band—from one fifth of the population when the economy is weak to one sixth when it's strong—for the past half-century. Since liberals have demonstrated a consuming interest in expanding—and a negligible interest in renovating—this sprawling, duplicative, inefficient, and ineffective mess, conservatives have good reason to conclude that the liberal project is beset by

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fundamental errors, not just a few operating glitches. That belief, in turn, animates and vindicates conservatives' belief that their role as liberalism's opponents should be assertive rather than submissive.

### New New Deal

**D**IONNE, IN OTHER WORDS, WANTS the New Deal to go on and on. Liberals should keep elaborating and expanding it, continue to avoid reckoning with its failures and defects, and ignore if they can or defeat if they must the unreconstructed conservatives who won't embrace it. Frank and Cowie, both more radical, make clear that they desire much more: a *new* New Deal that departs as boldly from the political economy of 2016 as FDR's did from that of 1932. Nothing less, they contend, will give lower- and working-class Americans the robust economic prospects and security that their grandparents had enjoyed in the middle of the last century. (Cowie's previous book, *Stayin' Alive*, published in 2010, was subtitled *The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*.) From a leftist perspective, the need for the next big expansion of interventionist, egalitarian government is axiomatic. As Frank says, with characteristic restraint, the "relationship of the very wealthy to the rest of us has come to approximate the relationship of Louis XVI with the peasantry of eighteenth-century France."

From the perspective of 2016, of course, the question is why liberals are *still* hoping for the next New Deal, eight years after Barack Obama was supposed to deliver it. The circumstances were so auspicious: Obama's victory over a demoralized GOP, large Democratic congressional majorities, a terrifying financial crisis that made voters receptive to aggressive government interventions in economic life. And yet, laments Frank, "The crisis went to waste." The Obama Administration "renounced any intention of making the big historical turn it had been elected to make."

*Listen, Liberal* is not, however, primarily an attack on Obama. His shortcomings, instead, are treated as manifestations of his party's dereliction of duty. Republicans "bear primary responsibility for our modern plutocracy," Frank writes, but the lack of "conviction or imagination to do what is necessary" in order to reverse inequality is a "Democratic failure, straight up and nothing else."

This failure, as Frank tells it, is primarily sociological, rather than economic or political. The "party of the people," as his subtitle describes the Democrats, has become the party

of government by and for what he calls the "well-graduated." Both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, for example, were "plucked from obscurity by prestigious universities," and populated their administration with other high-achieving professionals, nearly all of whom held at least one degree from an Ivy League college.

These successful strivers may say, and even think, that increasing socioeconomic precariousness is a problem, but they don't *feel* much urgency about it. What they feel instead, says Frank, is "a profound complacency." It would be surprising if they did not. People who have flourished under one set of arrangements, as the well-graduated have under modern meritocracy, will be the last to entertain the possibility that these arrangements are deeply unfair or malign.

Frank dissects some political consequences of this complacency. For one, the well-graduated are understandably disposed to think that a good education can solve every national problem, since it was the key to solving so many of their personal ones.

### The question is why liberals are still hoping for the next New Deal, eight years after Barack Obama was supposed to deliver it.

"The world we face today is one where what you earn depends on what you can learn," President-elect Clinton said in 1992. Even in a thought-experiment where every adult American is a college graduate, however, somebody is still going to end up working the counter at 7-Eleven.

Moreover, a Democratic Party dominated—not numerically, but in terms of financial contributions and worldviews—by the well-graduated is not very likely to function as Wall Street and the Fortune 500's nemesis. Increasingly, those private-sector institutions are also dominated by the well-graduated. Democrats in politics, journalism, think tanks, and the academy are less likely to regard the leaders of these institutions as enemies than as peers, who traffic in the same milieu of technical proficiency and high abstraction. For some, especially at the highest levels, the private sector is something to join rather than oppose. Former Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin came from Goldman Sachs to the Clinton Administration

before leaving to run Citigroup. President Obama's first Treasury secretary, Timothy Geithner, left government in 2013 to become president of Warburg Pincus, a private equity firm. In the interval between holding positions in the Clinton and Obama administrations, Rahm Emmanuel (now mayor of Chicago) made \$16 million in two years as an investment banker.

### Inequality

**F**RANK DOES NOT PURSUE ONE POSSIBILITY suggested by his argument, and developed more fully in *Bobos in Paradise* (2000), David Brooks's bestseller. It is that the reason "inequality" has become shorthand for the problem of economic insecurity and social instability is that inequality preoccupies a large but less prosperous subset of the well-graduated, those positioned to shape the national agenda but not to glide from professorships to government posts to investment banks. Brooks argued that academics, writers, and intellectuals "at the butt end of the upper class" suffer from "Status-Income Disequilibrium, a malady that afflicts people with jobs that give them high status but only moderately high income."

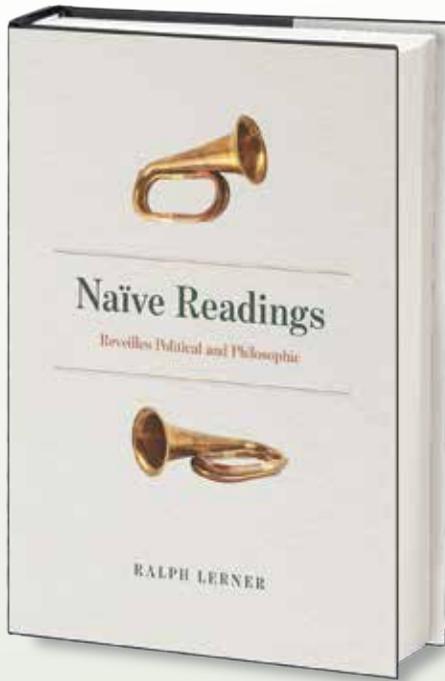
Inequality, as such, is not the most pressing concern of the laid-off factory worker or foreclosed homeowner. Most would be indifferent to the CEO or bank president's stock options if their own lives rested on sturdier foundations. It is, however, of obsessive interest to the merely affluent, who measure themselves against the truly wealthy. In the 1950s, Brooks writes,

an investment banker went to Andover and Princeton, while a newspaper person went to Central High and Rutgers. But now the financiers and the writers both are likely to have gone to Andover and Princeton. The student who graduated from Harvard cum laude makes \$85,000 a year as a think tank fellow, while the schlump she wouldn't even talk to in gym class makes \$34 million as a bond trader or TV producer.

Worse than envy and resentment is the fact that the slightly rich are doomed to lose every competition with the extremely rich for "positional goods," a term coined by Fred Hirsch in *Social Limits to Growth* (1977). Conceivably, every citizen of a prosperous nation could attend a school with good facilities and able instructors, or reside in a warm, spacious, and safe dwelling. It is a logical impossibility, however, for more than a small

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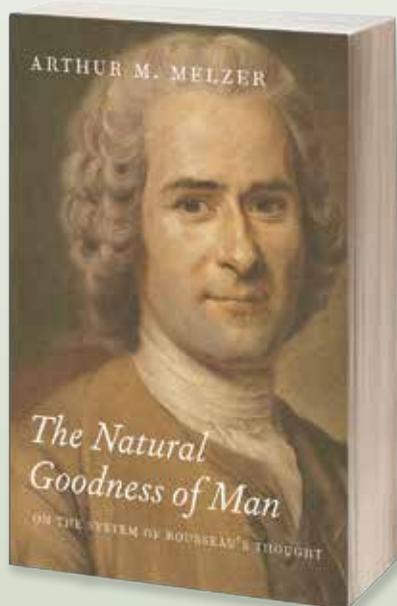
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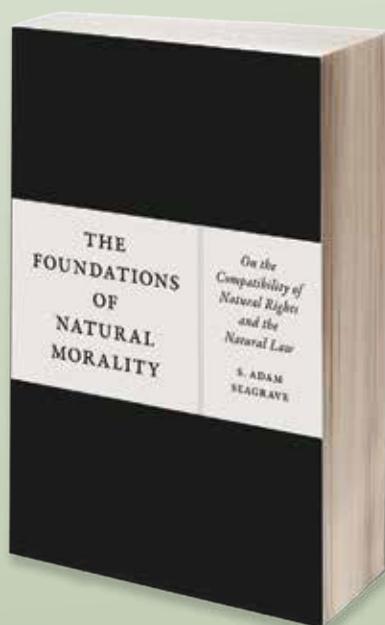
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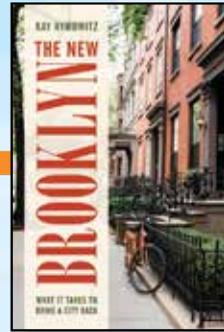
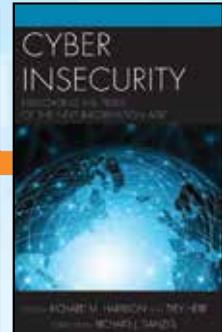
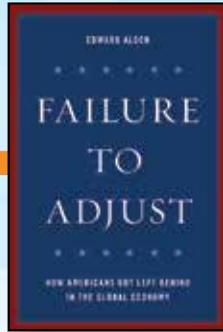
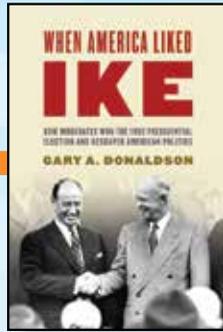
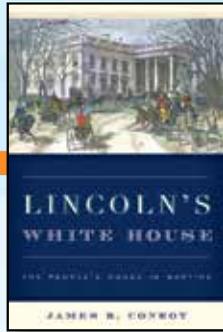
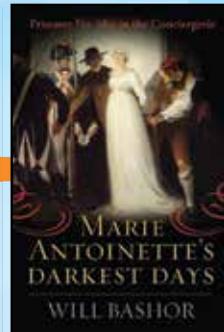
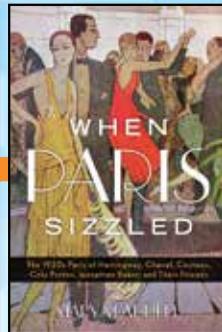
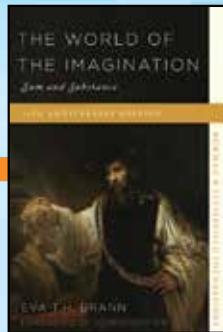
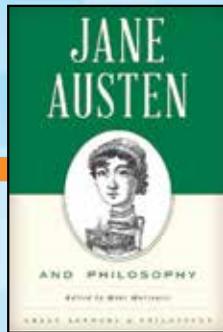
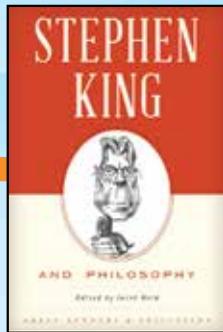
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segment of the population to attend prestigious colleges and live in exclusive neighborhoods, which are scarce by definition. Inequality preys on the minds of those who have just enough income to be reminded, by their daily contacts with the still more prosperous, of all the positional goods they don't possess and won't acquire.

Frank's thesis is also strikingly similar to that put forward by thinkers even more conservative than Brooks—specifically, the first neoconservatives' attacks on the "New Class" held to be running and ruining the country, and Ronald Reagan's 1964 denunciation of "a little intellectual elite in a far-distant capitol [that thinks it] can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves." *Listen, Liberal* tells us, "Nothing is more characteristic of the liberal class than its members' sense of their own elevated goodness," a feeling that "overrides any particular inconsistency or policy failing." It's a sentence that would be at home in any conservative publication, including this one.

The conclusion Frank draws from this premise, of course, is anti-conservative: the problem is not that liberals are arrogant and intrusive, but that they are arrogant and feckless. As a result of their deficiencies, government does too little rather than

too much. He devotes a chapter to railing against the Democratic Party in Massachusetts, so dominant politically that no policy failure can be blamed on Republicans or anyone else. The Democrats' "liberalism of the rich" thinks innovation and education can solve every problem. This liberalism, however, has nothing to offer the people of Fall River, an old mill town south of Boston with abandoned factories and declining prospects. It is, says Frank,

a place where affluence never returns—not because affluence for Fall River is impossible or unimaginable, but because our country's leaders have blandly accepted a social order that constantly bids down the wages of people like these while bidding up the rewards for innovators, creatives, and professionals.

Other than asserting that affluence for people like the residents of Fall River is possible and imaginable, Frank never indicates how the good times in such manufacturing centers of the receding past can be restored. Granted, *Listen, Liberal* is about politics, not policy, but Frank doesn't even seem interested in the question of how better politics

might engender better policies. Instead, the dominant premise is that where there's a will there's a way, which means that the failure of Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and all their attendant well-graduated Democrats to make Fall River great again is solely a result of the complacency resulting from their class-based interests and perspective. Like Senator Sanders, whose presidential campaign Frank supported, *Listen, Liberal* never acknowledges that a government's obligations cannot exceed the resources it secures to discharge them. (One of the Obama Administration's well-graduated, University of Chicago economist Austan Goolsbee, said during the 2016 primaries that the mathematics of Sanders's hyper-generous budgetary plan were unworkable absent "magic flying puppies with winning Lotto tickets tied to their collars.")

Frank, for example, criticizes Rhode Island's Democratic governor for reducing state employees' retirement benefits. But his readers would never know that after municipalities around the state closed libraries and eliminated bus routes as taxpayer support for public pensions doubled between 2003 and 2010, Rhode Island still had only 49% of the assets its pension obligations required. Even with subsequent reforms like eliminating cost-of-living increases, and requiring existing



# ELECTION 2016

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employees to participate in a hybrid pension and retirement-account system, Rhode Island will still need until 2030 before it has 80% of the necessary assets. To make the retirement system solvent without making it less generous, in other words, really was impossible and unimaginable. The well-graduated's lack of conviction and imagination had nothing to do with it.

### Conditions of Freedom

LIKE FRANK, JEFFERSON COWIE WAS also disappointed by Barack Obama. The first two years of his presidency were a "lost opportunity," in terms of policies but especially politics. Obama was reluctant to "make the case to the American people that the state could help build economic security and opportunity for all."

Unlike Frank, however, Cowie does not imagine that everything will be all right again once modern Democrats get back in touch with their inner William Jennings Bryan. The problem is much bigger than finding the courage to speak truth to power. As Cowie sees it, the challenge is to speak class solidarity and collective action to Jeffersonian individualists. That Americans' deeply rooted don't-tread-on-me cussedness renders them strongly averse to Big Government is, he says, "an American tragedy," but also a fundamental American reality. Leftists cannot help but wish it were otherwise, but accomplish nothing by pretending so.

Cowie, for example, strongly endorses organized labor (as does Frank). He recognizes that it cannot flourish without government support, and will necessarily achieve many of its goals through government programs, including ones whose beneficiaries are not necessarily union members, such as minimum wage and parental leave laws. Business interests have indeed opposed the labor movement, but its weakness also reflects what Cowie calls a "problematic and still unresolved strain of individualism in American culture." He cites another historian, Melvyn Dubofsky, who wrote that the right of individual workers to cross picket lines, break strikes, and avail themselves of right-to-work laws "lives not because judges and the law that they declare create reality but because the appeal of individualism and the desire for liberty resonate across a wide spectrum of society."

Always and everywhere, people are strongly inclined to believe that which is congenial to

believe. Liberals happily embraced the notion that the New Deal, Wagner Act, and Great Society marked a decisive turn in American history and change in American character. The old individualism, which defined itself against the collective and government power, was being replaced by a new individualism, one that emphasized self-discovery and self-expression rather than autonomy. By transcending the old zero-sum mentality that jealously guarded private rights, such individualism not only permitted but required vigorous state action to build economic security and opportunity for all.

The problem, says Cowie, is that it's just not so. The period from the 1930s to the 1970s was "a sustained deviation, an extended detour" from the ways of thinking and governing that prevailed before...and after. These decades were the "great exception" of his title in that their changes "were less the linear triumph of the welfare state than the product of very specific, and short-lived, historical circumstances." Once those ended, the fragility of the New Deal order became manifest. In this sense, he argues, the "Reagan revolution" of 1980 is better understood as the "Reagan restoration."

The Depression and World War II are, obviously, the specific historical circumstances that gave rise to the New Deal era. The post-war economic boom, imagined at the time to be eternal, was crucial to its consolidation. The prosperity appeared to validate Big Government, justifying the Great Society's promise to bring material goods to those still trapped in stubborn pockets of poverty, and cultural riches to the newly and increasingly affluent Americans who would otherwise be "condemned to a soulless wealth," in Lyndon Johnson's phrase.

A less obvious circumstance makes the tragedy of American individualism even more acute, according to Cowie. The era's soulless wealth was a direct reference to the fears, much discussed by postwar liberal intellectuals, of excessive, stifling conformity. The New Deal era was also a time of reduced immigration, its political effects beginning about a decade after the highly restrictive Immigration Act of 1924 and ending about a decade after the far more welcoming Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Cowie dislikes both "cultural homogeneity" and nativism, but says that they were crucial to the Great Exception, providing "the cohesion necessary for the most liberal period in American history." The subsequent increase in cultural and

ethnic heterogeneity has seen the decline of solidarity and social trust as Americans revert to their older, more established habits: namely, they "like to fight with each other more than they do with the economic powers that rule them."

Unable to write happy endings, tragedians can do no more than offer hazy ones. The identity politics of blacks, women, gays, immigrants, transsexuals, etc., animates the leftism of our day. The resulting preoccupation with unique heritages and grievances necessarily frustrates efforts to form a united front to fight The Man. Cowie longs for a solidarity that transcends without diminishing these particularities, but cannot express the wish without making it sound like squaring the circle. The agenda that will catalyze this solidarity? He recommends

a politics of reform and regulation both moral and pragmatic; spurred by local and state sites of innovation; bolstered by cross-class alliances and enlightened elite leadership; focused on immigrant rights, consumer safety, corporate regulation, and occupational justice; advocating gas and water (and perhaps health care) socialism; and even promoting the types of militant voluntarism that originally grew in the shadow of a state hostile to the collective interests of workers.

I have no idea what any of that means, either.

People who call themselves "progressives" clearly think time is on their side, just as those who call themselves "conservatives" clearly think it isn't. The latter may find solace in reading the books of the former, such as these three. They make clear that behind the smug blather about the "right side of history," progressives have real dilemmas and doubts. To make their ideas cohere, and to align them with recalcitrant political realities, remains a great challenge. In a season where conservatism suffers from adverse circumstances and self-inflicted wounds, a deeper understanding of progressives' frustrations encourages the hope that there may yet be, as Adam Smith said, a great deal of ruin in a nation.

*William Voegeli is a senior editor of the Claremont Review of Books, and the author, most recently, of The Pity Party: A Mean-Spirited Diatribe Against Liberal Compassion (Broadside Books).*

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