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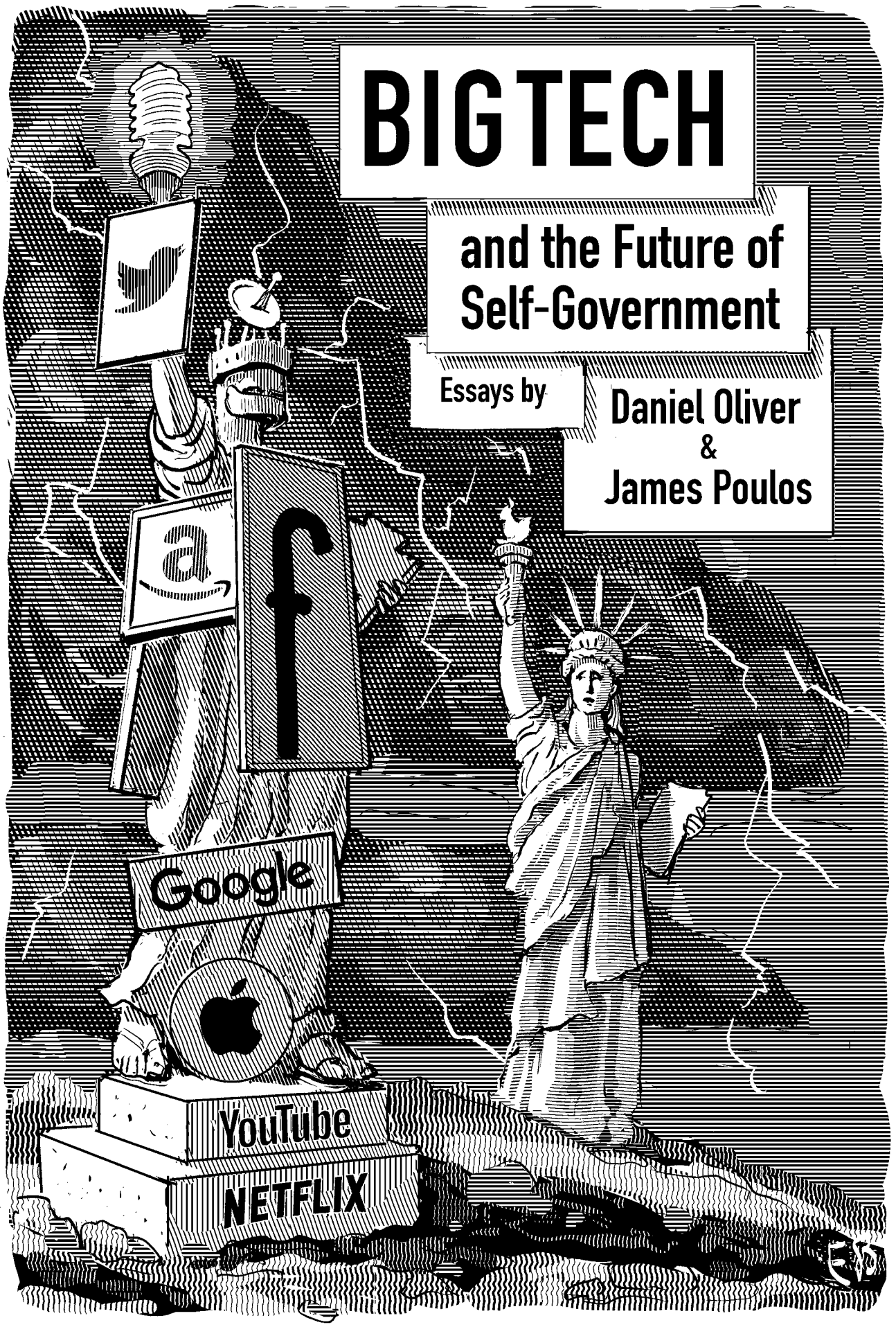

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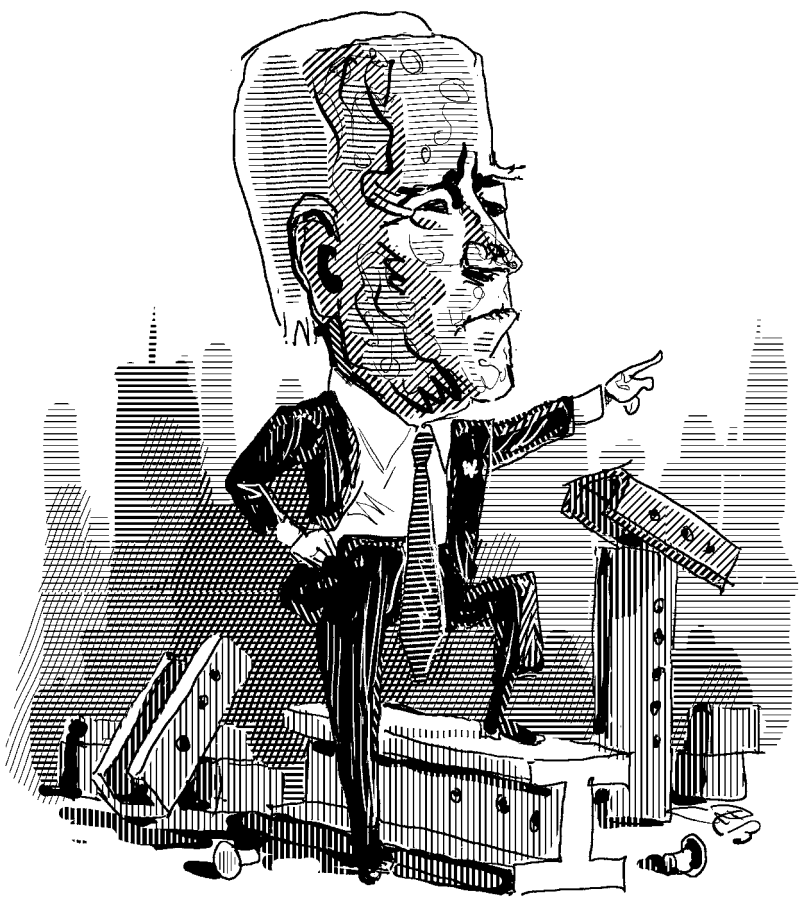
Essay by William Voegeli

Progressively Worse

Activist government's crisis of competence.



The Biden administration's shock-and-awe statism—trillions of dollars in additional federal spending for COVID relief, infrastructure, and economic opportunity—is not being devised from scratch. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Democrats in the White House and Congress are treating California as both a "de facto policy think tank" and an "inspiration." Former governor Gray Davis told the paper that Vice President Kamala Harris, the first California Democrat elected to national office, will be "sharing ideas, innovations, and breakthroughs from California that might help solve problems on the national level."

The more you know about California's recent governance, however, the less enthused you'll be about replicating its policy triumphs on a national scale. Dan Walters, a journalist who has covered California government for more than 50 years, wrote in 2020 that the Golden State is beset by a "crisis of competence." As a result, government agencies' "chronic inability to provide rapid and efficient service—to simply do their jobs—has created boundless frustration and anger." His list of particulars is long and depressing: accounting systems that don't mesh; housing programs that don't mitigate homelessness; a high-speed rail initiative that the *Times*, once an enthusiastic supporter, recently called "the project from hell"; schools that don't teach; a power grid that takes sabbaticals.

Vox founder and California native Ezra Klein reluctantly conceded the point in the *New York Times* earlier this year: "If progressivism cannot work here, why should the country believe it can work anywhere else?" That is, a state where Republicans are in no position to prevent, undermine, or even discredit any policy initiative *should* be highly conducive to progressive achievements. Democrats hold supermajorities in California's state legislature and account for 80% of its congressional delegation. More than a decade has passed since a Republican won election to any statewide office.

"California is dominated by Democrats," in Klein's summation, "but many of the people Democrats claim to care about most can't afford to live there." In the wake of its governing failures, California has turned into a net exporter of people to the other 49 states. The past decade, during which the Democratic Party has secured hegemony in California, has also seen the state's share of the national population decline, reversing a 160-year trend that began with the 1849 gold rush. California accounted for 11.97% of the U.S. population in 1990, which increased to 12.04% in 2000 and 12.07% in 2010 but fell to 11.95% in 2020. The 2020 Census will bring a reduction in the size of the state's congressional delegation, something that has never occurred since it joined the Union.

Big Government, Big Problems

If California were an outlier, we should zero in on those areas where it is making mistakes while other blue states are acquitting themselves impressively. But it appears that California is an example, not

an exception. To borrow a current buzzword, progressivism appears to suffer from *systemic* deficiencies that cause blue-state governments to do much but accomplish little.

The problem has become so acute, so manifest, that even the *New York Times* has noticed. West Virginia, Alaska, and other red states led the nation in the proportion of residents receiving COVID-19 vaccines, David Leonhardt reported in February, while states that gave Biden landslide margins, including California, New York, New Jersey, and Illinois, were all below the national average. Leonhardt diplomatically suggested that this awkward fact results from "progressive leaders…sacrificing efficiency for what they consider to be equity." In New York, for example, vaccine providers ended up discarding doses rather than face penalties for administering them to people who, though ready and willing to roll up a sleeve for the needle, stood far back in the state's elaborate queue, which defined the precise sequence for vaccinating various demographic and occupational groups.

Activist government's dysfunction is not only a pervasive problem, but a worsening one. Things used to work better. It took "two decades, with huge cost overruns," Walters observes, "to replace one-third of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge [after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake], even though building the entire bridge originally took just four years in the 1930s." Similarly, economists Leah Brooks and Zachary Liscow found that, even after adjusting for inflation, the cost to build one mile of interstate highway tripled between the 1960s and the 1980s.

What's gone wrong? We can begin by reiterating the fundamental conservative principle that human nature doesn't really change, and certainly not by orders of magnitude in less than a single century. To believe that axiom is to reject the contention that the politicians and administrators directing Big Government today are markedly less honest, industrious, and intelligent than the ones who designed and implemented the New Deal.

Leonhardt hints at a stronger explanation: government finds it increasingly difficult to do anything because it is increasingly rare for government to do any *one* thing. Vaccinating everyone as quickly as possible isn't a sufficient goal for government even in the worst epidemic in a hundred years. Additional, complicated imperatives must be folded into the pursuit of this public health objective, ones that take time to formulate because they require input from many constituencies and experts. After that, the implementation of the multi-faceted plan inevitably becomes complex, contested, and protracted in ways that a program to realize a single objective would not. A program to build new housing for homeless people in Los Angeles, for example, required far more time and money than originally anticipated because the construction projects had to meet detailed standards regarding environmental safety, durability, and workers' wages. Some developers ended up complying with rules requiring the inclusion of parking facilities in their projects, even after demonstrating that few of the low-income residents were likely to have cars.

If one cause of governmental incompetence is insisting on too many tasks at once, then a smaller list of undertakings ought to set things right. But the proliferation of policy objectives each government program is supposed to satisfy is not just a bad habit that wiser public officials can drop. This bug is, in fact, a feature. Increasing government dysfunction results from forces integral to the progressive project, now well into its second century. Progressivism suffers, in particular, from the inability to resolve two tensions: between the past and the future, and between the many and the few.

Killer Kludges

As the term implies, progressivism is more process-oriented than goal-oriented. Implicit in this worldview is the belief that constants beneath the flux either don't exist or don't matter. In his First Inaugural Address, for example, Bill Clinton said that "the urgent question of our time is whether we can make change our friend and not our enemy." He described life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as "America's ideals"—aspirations and inspirations, not inalienable rights grounded in human nature. American history, in his understanding, constitutes a never-ending process of sustaining these ideals by adapting and reimagining them: "Each generation of Americans must define what it means to be an American."

Progressives like to think of themselves as forward-looking—thinking about tomorrow, candidate Clinton said in 1992, by way of Fleetwood Mac. Or, as Clinton's hero John F. Kennedy declared in 1960, the modern liberal "welcomes new ideas" because he is "someone who looks ahead and not behind."

But yesterday is *not* gone, Kennedy, Clinton, and Fleetwood Mac to the contrary notwithstanding. William Faulkner was closer to the truth when he said that the past isn't even past. Its continuing, pervasive effects frustrate progressives' desire to confine retrospection to criticizing our ancestors' misdeeds or surpassing their achievements.

In particular, progressivism pays scant attention to its own past. Unending difficulty follows from the assumption that the earlier history of activist government provides nothing but vindication and encouragement for today's progressives who want even more activist government. As sociologist Nathan Glazer wrote at the dawn of the Great Society, "How one wishes for the open field of the New Deal, which was not littered with the carcasses of half-successful and hardly successful programs, each in the hands of a hardening bureaucracy."

Political scientist Steven Teles examined this problem in a widely discussed 2013 essay for *National Affairs* on "kludgeocracy." The term "kludge," he explains, comes from the world of computer programming, with a meaning that corresponds to the pre-digital era's "stop-gap measure." Teles defines it as "an inelegant patch put in place to solve an unexpected problem and designed to be backward-compatible with the rest of an existing system." As the number of kludges in a software package increases, so does the likelihood of ending up with "a very complicated program that has no clear organizing principle, is exceedingly difficult to understand, and is subject to crashes."

In the same way, Teles writes, America governs itself "through more indirect and incoherent policy mechanisms than can be found in any comparable country." He cites the devastation in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. It subsequently became clear that one reason the flood control system failed in 2005 was "confusion about the basic question of who is in charge of the levees." Kludgeocracy "harms liberalism," Teles argues, "by creating both the image and the reality that government is incompetent and corrupt." No matter how inapplicable they are to current needs, initiatives and practices from the past remain in place. As a result, "new ideas have to be layered over old programs rather than replace them—the textbook definition of a policy kludge."

Consider, again, the case of California. The state grew explosively after World War II, its population 88% larger in 1970 than it had been in 1950. The political response was an "era of limits" that found Governor Jerry Brown, first elected in 1974, regularly extolling the 1973 book by economist E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful*. "Smart growth" meant less growth, according to the thinking at the time. State and local government, including the courts, acquired new powers to discourage "sprawl," resulting in the building of fewer houses, freeways, and other infrastructure projects. Reversing the *Field of Dreams* credo,

California took the position that if you don't build it, they won't come.

The policies had the intended effect: California's population increased only 17% between 2000 and 2020. But their unintended effects have been a nightmare for California progressives attempting to implement their 21st-century agenda. The high-speed rail project between San Francisco and Los Angeles, Ezra Klein explains, was "choked by pricey consultants, private land negotiations, endless environmental reviews, [and] county governments suing the state government." He complains that the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), passed in 1970 and fortified thereafter, has been "wielded against… everything from bike lanes to affordable housing developments to homeless shelters."

Though not the entire solution to the related problems of homelessness and housing affordability, building more residential housing is clearly indispensable. (By 2017, the percentage of residents who owned rather than rented their principal dwelling was lower in California than in all but two other states.) And yet, the Legislative Analyst, California's counterpart to the Congressional Budget Office, found that when CEQA triggered an Environmental Impact Report on a proposed housing development, the subsequent delays lasted an average of two and a half years, driving up the project's cost and the price of every unit, once (and if) they finally get built.

Similarly, in 2018 the state's Energy Commission approved a plan to require solar energy panels on all newly constructed homes in California. The marginal cost of any particular regulatory requirement may be modest but, as the *Washington Post*'s Megan McArdle points out, "little fractions quickly sum up to big numbers if you string enough of them together." Moreover, the regulations are regressive. Complying with requirements that, cumulatively, add $40,000 to the cost of each unit in a housing development will raise the price of a $1 million house by 4%, but a $400,000 starter home by 10%.

By and for the People

The problem, more fundamental than the standard complaint about the proliferation of red tape and bureaucrats, goes to the heart of the progressive undertaking. In America, Abraham Lincoln said at Gettysburg, government of the people is meant to be both for and by the people. Progressivism is best understood as the continuing and, over time, radical elaboration of these two imperatives.

A century after Lincoln's speech, Lyndon Johnson promised a Great Society in which the meaning of government *for* the people was stretched to encompass the duties to: make "leisure…a welcome chance to build and reflect, not a feared cause of boredom and restlessness"; serve "the desire for beauty and the hunger for community"; and forge "a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor." The one sort of progress progressives reject involves getting closer to identifying a single aspiration or dissatisfaction that government has neither the capacity nor the legitimate authority to address.

Over the same century, government *by* the people meant shrinking the constitutional space between the governed and the governing process. Changes included: the direct election of United States senators, displacement of party bosses and "smoke-filled rooms" by primary elections, and growing reliance on ballot propositions, of which California was a pioneer and remains a leader.

The combined effect of these two progressive crusades—facilitate government's intervention in society, but also facilitate citizens' intervention in governance—has made it increasingly difficult for progressives to achieve their proclaimed goals. Indeed, it has made it increasingly difficult for government to function at all. Demanding that government solve more problems while, at the same time, pro-

viding more tools to more groups that enable them to challenge, reshape, postpone, or even veto government undertakings is a recipe for gridlock and failure.

Ezra Klein complains that many of the organizations that have grown proficient at weaponizing CEQA to advance their own agendas "have no record of green advocacy." But a law like CEQA not only gives everyone a place at the table, a long-standing progressive ideal. It also reassures everyone seated there that the interconnectedness of all living things turns the pursuit of every parochial concern into an expression of, rather than a transgression against, social justice. Affluent, educated winners in the post-industrial economy—the ones economist Robert Reich calls "symbolic analysts"—are especially adept at convincing everyone who needs to be convinced, starting with themselves, that any public policy that threatens their property value, retirement plans, lifestyle options, or children's educational opportunities is an affront to everything that is good and decent in our land.

Reich, the Clinton cabinet member who went on to a professorship at the University of California, interrupted his strident attacks on inequality and Wall Street last year to implore Berkeley's Landmarks Preservation Commission to prohibit the construction of a new housing project on his street. Allowing the 10-unit building in a neighborhood where single-family homes predominate would, he said, be a dereliction of the commission's duty to preserve "enough of the character of an older neighborhood to remind people of its history and provide continuity with the present." Only a malevolent cynic would conclude that self-interest rather than high principle was at stake: "Development for the sake of development makes no sense when it imposes social costs like this." The real victims, that is, are not prospective occupants denied an additional housing opportunity. They are, instead, residents like Reich and his wife, who moved into the neighborhood—where more than half the adults have a postgraduate degree and only 1% of the residents are black—to enjoy its "abundance of older homes" and mature oak trees, some of which would have been removed in the course of the construction project.

Creative Destruction

Progressives who are serious about overcoming activist government's crisis of competence will have to pursue the hardest kind of learning: unlearning. A chastened progressivism must come to grips with some disquieting truths about its pre-Reagan golden age, from the 1930s to the 1960s. For one, the New Deal and Marshall Plan figure prominently in the progressive legend, but the success of these initiatives depended heavily on their being implemented in desperate circumstances, which meant that there was little resistance for social reformers to overcome. Under all other conditions, progressivism struggles. When the politics of making change our friend requires more than pushing on an open door, and progressive governance entails more than writing on a blank sheet of paper, reality proves recalcitrant.

If, as appears to be the case, progressivism requires the "open field of the New Deal," then one of progressives' most urgent tasks becomes euthanizing obsolete or failed programs. But getting serious about this work would constitute a major course correction. When Franklin Roosevelt called for "bold, persistent experimentation" in 1932, he also spelled out the corollary implied by the idea of running *experiments*: "take a method and try it: if it fails, admit it frankly and try another." Instead of frank admissions and the discarding of failures, however, progressivism has always gravitated to Not One Step Back, less because of an affection for Stalinism than due to the easy, gratifying belief that progressives' conservative opponents were the moral equivalent of the Wehrmacht.

Demanding that government solve more problems, while also providing more tools to challenge government undertakings, is a recipe for gridlock and failure.

The 2020 Democratic Party platform, for example, performed the quadrennial rite of demanding more money for Head Start. In doing so, it memory-holed a 2011 Department of Health and Human Services study, which demonstrated that Head Start had spent a half-century, and tens of billions of dollars, not achieving its central goal: getting poor kids ready for school. Joe Klein (no relation to Ezra Klein), summarized the report for *Time* magazine: "a structural flaw in the modern welfare state" is that "there is no creative destruction when it comes to government programs."

The other awkward fact about progressivism at high tide is that it recognized the tension between government *for* the people and government *by* the people, then resolved it by being serious about the former and disingenuous about the latter. In political scientist Ronald J. Pestritto's deft summary, progressives wanted politics to be more democratic, but also wanted government to be less political. Increased participation would mostly amount to democracy theater, producing workshops and resolutions that barely impinged on talented, dedicated experts' ability to analyze complex dilemmas and then make the tough but necessary decisions.

The issue was the subject of a protracted debate in the 1920s between columnist Walter Lippmann, who explicitly favored technocracy, and philosopher John Dewey, who insisted on the continuing need for participatory democracy. Despite his concern for solving problems while promoting dignity and responsibility through civic engagement, Dewey lost, due to both the haziness of his ideas and the necessity for decisive action to cope with the Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. Thus, participation was subordinated to expertise from the time the Democratic Party coalesced around the New Deal in the 1930s until it fragmented over Vietnam in the 1960s.

The embodiment of this triumph of technocratic expertise was New York's Robert Moses, who never held elective office but was more powerful and consequential during the four decades of liberal ascendency than any mere mayor or governor. Using all the power conferred on him by the several appointed positions he held simultaneously, Moses was the key figure responsible for constructing 13 major bridges, including the Triborough and Verrazzano-Narrows; highways in all five New York City boroughs, 416 miles of parkways; Lincoln Center; the United Nations building; 658 playgrounds; and 150,000 housing units.

By the time of his death in 1981, however, Moses had seen his reputation demolished as a result of Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) and Robert Caro's *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (1974). His transgression was being *too* technocratic: ruthlessly employing eminent domain to demolish neighborhoods and drive thousands from their homes in order to build the city he envisioned.

The progressives who demonized Moses had bigger concerns than highways and eminent domain. The New Left ultimately turned the hearts and minds of liberals against the Vietnam war, which resulted in a severe backlash against technocracy. In losing his power, then his reputation, Robert Moses paid for his own mistakes but also Robert McNamara's.

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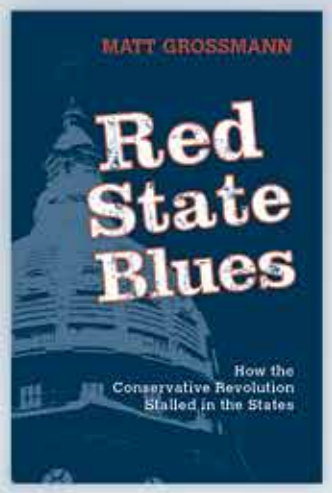

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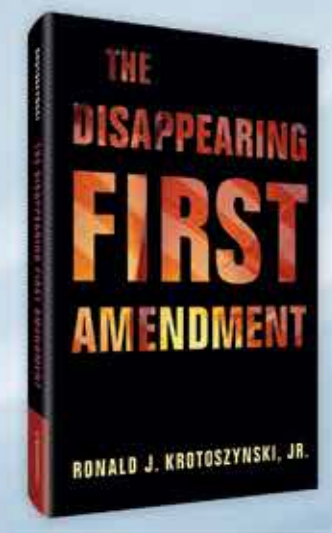

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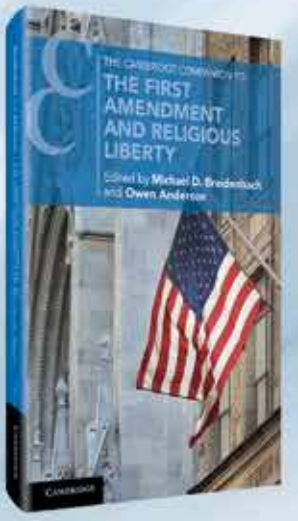

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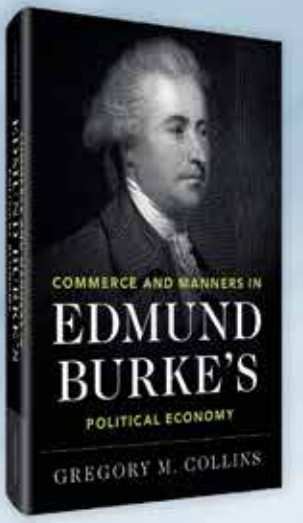

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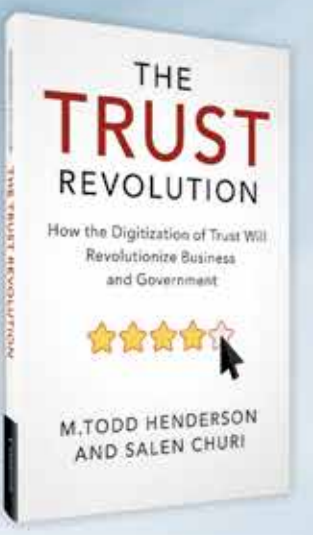

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The same political forces that led to Moses's downfall also fortified participatory democracy with new ways for citizens to make their voices heard, and their opinions matter: open-meetings laws; Freedom of Information Act requirements; new and strengthened boards and commissions that could stop or revise private real estate developments or public infrastructure projects; environmental impact statements; and the proliferation of class-action lawsuits, in which standing could be granted to plaintiffs solely on the basis of their being pissed off, and grievances previously addressed by elected officials were settled by judges or court-appointed monitors.

Participation versus Democracy

From the vantage point of 2021, it's clear that this post-'60s experiment in participatory democracy produced a negative-sum game. Technocracy lost, in that it is impossible to imagine anyone becoming the next Robert Moses. But democracy did not really gain, in that it is also impossible to imagine anyone becoming the next Pat Brown. Unlike Moses, Brown *was* an elected official, winning the governorship of California by a landslide in 1958, being reelected in 1962, and bringing in a Democratic majority in the state legislature, which the party has maintained for 58 of the past 62 years.

As was true of Moses, Brown never met a bulldozer he didn't like. During his eight years in office, Brown added nine campuses to the state's public higher education system and 1,000 miles to its network of freeways. His greatest achievement was a massive, statewide water project that, in contrast to his son Jerry's bullet train, proceeded with negligible hindrance from land negotiations, environmental reviews, and litigation.

The travails of California, and of progressivism afflicted by kludgeocracy in general, argue that participatory democracy enervates rather than enhances self-government. In the new dispensation, no one is accountable, no one is responsible, and everyone acts accordingly. Participatory democracy ends up reinforcing rather than moderating technocracy because the participation is just another form *of* technocracy. It is conducted by experts and advocates who move in and out of the public, private, and non-profit sectors. Citizen "involvement" is reduced to signing petitions and donating money to lobbying groups.

Liberated by the passing of Robert Moses from the scene, for example, New York governance descended into squalor and dysfunction, combining the most arbitrary features of autocracy and anarchy. After Manhattan's West Side Highway collapsed in 1973, the city and state governments developed Westway, a promising plan for a 97-acre park on the waterfront, built on landfill that would contain a new underground interstate highway. Ostensibly powerful people elected by voters—such as the city council, mayor, and two of the state's governors in succession—favored Westway. Some environmental activists and a federal judge sympathetic to their arguments opposed it, however, and they ultimately proved to be more powerful.

One of the activists, Brian Ketcham, had worked in City Hall before founding a private environmental planning firm and an organization called Citizens for Clean Air. Ketcham was not shy about telling journalists that the system was more responsive to people like him, who knew how to manipulate it, than to the elected officials naïve enough to think they ran it:

> Everyone knows how these things work, and nobody knew how to do it better than I did.... You just comb through the environmental impact statement and try to find flaws. You delay and

> delay, and pretty soon the project just disappears…. If I were the only person on earth who was opposed to Westway, I could still stop it all by myself. The regulations on a big project like this are essentially impossible to meet.

A technocrat like Ketcham, wielding expertise in both the substance of policy and the process of making it, was a Goliath who appeared to the untrained eye to be a David. "Environmental impact statements are like the sacred rituals of certain Indian tribes," journalist William Tucker explained after Westway's demise. "They have to be done over and over again until they are performed perfectly, otherwise the gods will not accept them." The final nail in Westway's coffin came when environmental groups convinced a federal judge that rotting piers on the Hudson River had become a "critical habitat" for the striped bass who paused there while swimming inland from the Atlantic Ocean for their spring mating season. "It is almost unbelievable that public policy can be made in such a way," Tucker concluded. "The Sierra Club doesn't even have anyone answering their phone in New York."

Even progressives' earlier expansions of democracy are prone to undermining self-government. One lesson from modern California is that government by ballot proposition brings out the worst in every participant. In particular, politicians and activists who take ambitious proposals for things like high-speed rail and affordable housing to the voters cannot resist the temptation to over-promise about every crucial element: cost, the availability of other revenue sources, time necessary for completion, the insignificance of problems that could stymie the project, and its compatibility with existing policy goals and political practices. Somehow, the ensuing debacles are always lamented as unanticipated setbacks. The division of labor between the progressives who supply the raw material that generates cynicism about activist government, and the progressives who deplore this cynicism, is especially risible.

No Will, No Way

Ezra klein's inspired explanation for progressivism's failures in California is that the state, dominated by liberal Democrats, is too *conservative*. The problem, specifically, is "temperamental conservatism," by which he means the pursuit of self-interest rather than its renunciation, a framework that makes widespread altruism, bordering on Franciscan ascetism, the precondition for progressivism's success. The entirety of Klein's advice for getting Californians to shoulder the sacrifices and risks progressivism requires is that the state must "do better," a remedy laughably inadequate to the affliction. If progressivism can work only in a polity where Robert Reich is the face of reaction, then progressivism cannot work in any American political setting we have ever known or can envision.

California's example argues that, for progressives, doing better is going to necessitate doing less, not more. Progressivism's most pressing need is not for an expanded agenda, but to produce a completely revised mission statement and operating manual. The goal should be "a world in which constitutional norms forced government to act directly and transparently or forgo action altogether," Teles argues. The outcome would be "a government that did fewer, simpler, bigger things."

Any such purposeful clarity in the chronicle of progressivism's own progress is neither imminent nor likely. The belief that progressivism's problems are more apparent than real, and that the only "corrective" it needs is to be fairly tried and judged, is the default assumption among left-of-center thinkers and activists. Reinforced by the desire to judge progressive initiatives by the nobility of their goals rather than the quality of their results, it culminates in a framework that treats the need to keep and expand every government program as a self-evident truth.

> Progressives who are serious about overcoming activist government's crisis of competence will have to pursue the hardest kind of learning: unlearning.

Thus, any willingness to take stock and make fundamental changes is episodic, at best. Progressivism's focus on the future works against revising past achievements and correcting old mistakes. It is hard and unpleasant enough to fashion policy kludges today that are backward compatible, adequately accounting for the accretion of previous initiatives and the compounding challenges they pose. It is even more difficult and unusual for today's politicians and activists to be backward *custodial*, to evince any sense of responsibility for keeping the ramshackle contraption in working order, much less redesigning the beast to account for lessons learned since it was put on the road. As Megan McArdle puts it, every new program or regulation is "debated independently, without anyone taking responsibility for the whole."

Last year the *Washington Post* described Bill Clinton's Reinventing Government initiative, launched in 1993, as the most recent "serious attempt at government reform." The best the paper could say was that while the effort "achieved some success," its benefits had a shelf life of a few years, not several decades.

Even the will to reformulate progressivism does not guarantee that there will be a way. If progressivism's numerous misfires derive from its essence rather than its attributes—a bad design rather than some bad components—then the whole enterprise can be replaced but cannot be repaired. There are reasons to believe that progressivism's structural defects do indeed go all the way down. Klein's choice to pathologize behavior that is normal rather than noble as temperamental conservatism is representative of a mindset that is always surprised by self-interest and short-sightedness. It leads to policymaking that repeatedly fails to anticipate or account for opposition from interest groups, entrenched bureaucracies, and single-issue zealots.

The American experiment rests on the belief that government is necessary because men are not angels. Progressivism's effort to supplant that experiment in favor of a more modern and optimistic approach assumes, instead, that progress applies not just to government policy but to social conditions, intellectual capacities, and moral dispositions. Thus, the clash of different, often incompatible interests and perspectives is *not* "sown in the nature of man," as James Madison believed, but just a phase humanity is going through. Progressivism rests on the faith that history will bring "a unity of sentiment and fundamental will to the nation," to quote Pestritto once more.

One of the great gambles of progressivism lies in proceeding as if such unified progress were already well along, and assuming that people can be shamed out of their opposition to it with accusations of selfishness, reaction, and bigotry. That this strategy has led to so many failures—even in California, a place as committed to the Left as it is to the Future—argues that there is a better case for progressivism to transform itself than for it to transform the United States.

William Voegeli is senior editor of the Claremont Review of Books.