

# Toward a More Complex Liberalism

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Toward a More Complex Liberalism by Peter Berkowitz

A review of *The Virtues of Liberalism* by James Kloppenberg. Oxford University Press. 272 pp. \$35.00.

James Kloppenberg has written a scholarly book at odds with the temper of the times. Whereas scholars, especially those writing about political thought, have grown increasingly inclined to produce books held together by overheated rhetoric and gelatinous jargon, Kloppenberg has crafted his essays on American political thought in clear, self-contained, unpretentious prose. And whereas it is becoming less and less unusual for professors to simplify complex issues in order to advance partisan political purposes, Kloppenberg, who does not hesitate to proclaim in the opening pages his devotion to a principled liberalism, a prudent progressivism, and a non-doctrinaire pragmatism, provides in their name an intelligent and learned overview of the conflicting elements and multivalent ideas that, his book demonstrates, have constituted American political thought from before the birth of the republic.

To readers unfamiliar with the debates about American political thought that have roiled the disciplines of history, law, and political theory for the last 40 years, Kloppenberg's central argument may seem tame and commonsensical. After all, at the core of American political thought he finds a liberal tradition that places a premium on protecting individual rights, especially those of speech, of property, and of religious belief. Yet, as Kloppenberg also shows, the liberal tradition never held unchallenged sway in America nor did it, even in its defining moments, develop in isolation from competing traditions.

In emphasizing how liberalism has integrated or at least made room for alternative ideas and aspirations, Kloppenberg may at moments allow his political predilections to cloud his scholarly lenses, for he does slight the defiantly illiberal dimensions of the American political tradition, dimensions that recently have been subjected to detailed scrutiny by Rogers Smith in *Civic Ideals*. Still, Kloppenberg argues forcefully that liberalism has played the defining role in American political thought and is distinguished by its flexibility and open-endedness, its ability to hold together contending principles --- freedom and responsibility, efficiency and justice, equality and excellence, limited government and active government --- and its capacity to incorporate insights from alternative sources, both secular and religious.

After the mountain of scholarship Kloppenberg has assembled and the supple arguments through which he has organized and interpreted it, only willful ignorance will permit scholars to continue to subscribe to the extreme and one-dimensional theses about American political thought that have dominated debate for the last 40 years, since the publication in 1955 of Louis Hartz's seminal book, *The American Liberal Tradition*. Hartz had argued that from the beginning American political thought was defined and indeed exhausted by a liberalism limited to a concern with individual freedom. In opposition to Hartz's claims, the historical scholarship of Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and J.G.A. Pocock yielded an alternative but equally extreme interpretation. According to the republican thesis, at the time of the Founding, American political thought was not defined by liberal principles but rather by classical republican ideas. Rooted in the civic humanism of Renaissance Italy, the republican tradition understood freedom as participation in public life and viewed virtue as the selfless pursuit of the common good. Indeed, as recently restated by Michael Sandel, the republican thesis claims that liberalism is a latecomer in American political thought, an unwelcome upstart that in the twentieth century defeated and displaced the wiser and healthier republicanism out of which the country originated.

In Kloppenberg's essays one finds a sensible synthesis that aims to accord both liberalism and republicanism their due and suggest how the career of each in America was enriched by its encounter with the other. At the same time, Kloppenberg's synthesis restores some appreciation for the role in the American political tradition of religion, or more precisely Protestant Christianity, a third element that has been sadly neglected by proponents of both the liberal thesis and the republican antithesis.

Sensible as it is, Kloppenberg's synthesis carries with it tendencies of its own to neglect or to occlude salient features of American political thought. One manifestation is the inclination to understate, especially in regard to colonial America and the Founding era, the tensions between religion and liberalism. Such tensions as that between the Protestantism of popular discourse with its emphasis on local self-governing community and the nationalizing drive of elite thought and politics which promoted individual rights and a growth economy, tensions which have been thrown into sharp relief by Barry Alan Shain in *The Myth of American Individualism*, may have more staying power than is commonly supposed or is suggested by Kloppenberg's analysis.

The competition between and collaboration among liberal, republican, and Christian principles can be seen, according to Kloppenberg, not only in public debate, lawmaking, and constitutional design, but more strikingly as taking place within the minds of those who have formed American political thought and observed American politics most acutely. For example, although he is associated with a secular liberalism of individual rights and interest-group politics, James Madison, Kloppenberg argues, eventually endorsed the First Amendment because he thought it was a necessary means to the protection of religion from the corrosive influence of politics. One reason religion needed this special protection, according to Kloppenberg's interpretation of Madison, was because it fostered the virtue on

which republican politics depended. In *Democracy in America* (to the historical reception of which Kloppenberg devotes an entire chapter), Tocqueville argued that the spirit of freedom in the United States was supported by both the spirit of religion and vigorous participation in community life and democratic politics. In his debates with Stephen Douglas and in his great speeches as President, Abraham Lincoln wove together liberal commitments to individual rights, republican ideals of self-government, and biblical appeals to justice and human equality. Jane Addams, the progressive social critic and founder of Hull House saw her devotion to democracy as an expression of Christian belief in the dignity of all human beings. And the financial and spiritual support provided by the network of black churches in the South was vital to the success of Martin Luther King Jr.'s epic struggle to secure civil rights for black Americans.

Although most of his essays are devoted to charting the historical development of American political thought, Kloppenberg also brings his historical learning to bear on debates among contemporary political theorists concerning how to think about liberal democracy today. For example, Kloppenberg argues that the theory of deliberative democracy or "discourse ethics" championed by the German social theorist Jürgen Habermas and embraced by many American political theorists should be viewed as developing ideas set forth by the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, perhaps America's leading public intellectual in this century.

Habermas seeks to construct an "ideal speech situation," a philosophical device that enables theorists to derive judgments about the laws free and equal citizens, once their views are no longer distorted by the beliefs and practices of capitalism, would enact in order to govern themselves. This exercise in theoretical construction may seem --- and according to Richard Rorty, Dewey's most prominent self-proclaimed disciple, is in fact --- utterly opposed to Dewey's ambition to shift the attention of philosophy from issues of abstract theory to the solving of concrete problems. And yet, as Kloppenberg patiently explains, Habermas's search for rational principles to guide democratic practice exhibits an enlightenment optimism he shares with Dewey, a bright, shining confidence that reason is purposeful and progressive, capable of yielding authoritative if provisional criteria for the guidance of moral and political life.

In an illuminating twist, Kloppenberg goes on to suggest that in its loss of faith in the power of reason to guide practice or even vindicate the superiority of liberal democracy, Rorty's "postmodernist bourgeois liberalism" is closer to the "tragic sensibility" of the great German social scientist Max Weber than to Dewey's "indomitable democratic faith." This is not to say that Rorty's theory is Weberian. Indeed, Rorty's exhortation to liberals to cordon off from public life a private sphere and to cultivate for it an ironic and aesthetic sensibility is, Kloppenberg observes, not only at odds with Dewey's vision of democracy as unifying all aspects of a well-lived life, but resembles the "apolitical emotionalism" that Weber diagnosed as a pathology induced by the "iron cage of modernity."

Kloppenbergs, however, goes beyond the useful task of sorting out issues of intellectual descent and propinquity. For he succeeds in showing that behind the debate between Habermas and Rorty is a still undecided issue that divides Dewey and Weber and remains very much alive today: whether the spirit of democracy --- egalitarian, experimental, and emancipatory --- that Dewey wished to see suffuse all areas of life, public as well as private, was, as Weber contended, a threat to the individuality and sense of personal dignity crucial to the citizens who must bear ultimate responsibility for keeping liberal democracy in good working order. In calling attention to this issue, if only briefly, Kloppenberg places on the agenda a critical question for those who wish to take the measure of the virtues of liberalism -- the question of the vices that liberal democracy in America unleashes and those destructive dispositions for which it provides safe haven and fertile breeding grounds.

No reader of James Kloppenbergs learned and thoughtful essays can reasonably doubt his judgment that American political thought is a tradition "rich in diversity and in ambiguity." It remains more contentious to claim, as does Kloppenberg, that thanks to its virtues, the spirit of liberalism is uniquely well-suited not only to understand this rich diversity and ambiguity but to protect and indeed advance America's material and moral achievements. But this contentious claim is of fundamental importance, and Kloppenbergs essays in historical recovery will allow it to be debated in a more informed and fair-minded manner. Even if it should not turn out to be in every way to liberalism's advantage, such a debate is nevertheless a liberal imperative.

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