Liberalism’s Discontents | PeterBerkowitz.com

The Weekly Standard, Feb. 21, 2000

Liberalism’s Discontents A collection of essays asks whether we betrayed liberalism or liberalism betrayed us by Peter Berkowitz

A review of The Betrayal of Liberalism edited by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball. Ivan R. Dee. 256 pp. $28.95.

In January 1838, on an unexceptionable occasion, a fledgling lawyer delivered an exceptional address to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois. The subject was "The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions," and with awe and gratitude, Abraham Lincoln declared himself and his fellow citizens "legal inheritors" of "fundamental blessings" conferred by the Founders' establishment of a "political edifice of liberty and equal rights."

At the same time, Lincoln warned of danger, not from foreign invaders but from ourselves. Signs of "ill-omen" were all about: "I mean the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country; the growing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions, in lieu of the sober judgment of Courts; and the worse than savage mobs for the executive ministers of justice." To defeat the menace from within, it would be necessary to muster "sober reason" to mold "general intelligence, sound morality, and, in particular, a reverence for the Constitution and law."

Of course, these days, we enjoy unprecedented prosperity, a lengthy peace, unrivaled military might, and broadly extended civil rights. Yet surveying contemporary American culture and politics, Hilton Kramer, the editor and publisher of the *New Criterion*, and Roger Kimball, the managing editor of the New Criterion, nonetheless see numerous signs of ill-omen. From rampant political correctness in the universities to pervasive vulgarity in popular culture, from declining standards and neglected discipline in our public schools to shallowness and cynicism on the Supreme Court, from failed social and economic policies at home to confusion about our mission abroad, Kramer and Kimball perceive increasingly dire disarray. They do not pretend to have a solution, but they are quite confident that the root of the problem lies in our liberalism.

In The Betrayal of Liberalism, Kramer and Kimball collect the long-running series of essays on the topic from the pages of the New Criterion. By "liberalism," the editors and their distinguished group of contributors mean the political tradition that first arose in seventeenth-century England and made the protection of individual liberty and not the pursuit of virtue or the attainment of salvation the highest goal of politics.

Toward the liberal tradition, their stance is one of acute ambivalence. Sometimes they write as if the liberal tradition itself is guilty of undermining the preconditions for civilized life. And sometimes they write as if an otherwise good liberal tradition had been stabbed in the back by the supposed liberals of our time. Roger Scruton in his essay on Rousseau and Kimball in his essay on Mill come closest to suggesting that the liberal tradition as a whole represents a disastrous turn for the human spirit. Other contributors seem instead to admire the moral aspiration that gives the liberal tradition its animating spirit --- the dedication to individual liberty and equality before the law --- while criticizing contemporary liberalism for the illiberalism they see practiced in its name.

In education, contemporary liberalism favors a progressive approach that encourages students to learn by doing and to acquire knowledge by discovering it for themselves. But, argues Scruton, this renders children ridiculously unfree: It gives them a false feeling of independence while making them dependent on a teacher who must carefully manipulate the child's environment to give the child the illusion that his achievements are all his own; it deprives students of the accumulated wisdom stored up in history and literature; and it leaves students undisciplined, bereft of the benefits of routine and rigor.

In law, contemporary liberalism has evacuated moral judgments from constitutional questions. In the process, argues Hadley Arkes in his contribution to The Betrayal of Liberalism, the Supreme Court has embraced a relativism that is incoherent and a menace to individual freedom. In Planned Parenthood v. Casey, the 1992 case that upheld a woman's constitutional right to abortion, the Court declared that "at the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of life." By proclaiming that the value of life is what each individual thinks it to be, the Court believes that it shows respect for women's rights. But in fact such a formulation leaves all rights more vulnerable by suggesting that at the heart of liberty is pure choice, rather than a notion of what it is about men and women that makes their choices worthy of respect by the law.

In religion, contemporary liberalism strives to separate church and state. But in the name of pluralism, it zealously promotes, as Jean Bethke Elshtain shows, its own brand of monism. While insisting on the worth of, and its openness to, all ways of life, contemporary liberalism exhibits open hostility to the claims of faith, demanding that religion, alone among systems of belief and forms of life, confine itself entirely to the private sphere. In so doing, present-day liberalism not only acts intolerantly, but also cuts itself off from a major source of insight into the human condition and denies a place in public life to a key institution that teaches the self-restraint on which morality in a democracy depends.

In foreign affairs, contemporary liberalism veers between an idealistic devotion to the worldwide promotion of universal principles of justice and a moralism that forbids any dirtying of its hands on behalf of national interests. As Robert Kagan points out, in the United States these contradictory impulses stem from an aversion to the exercise of power.

And freedom itself is thus endangered, by the severing of the connection between our national interest and the vindication beyond our borders of the universal principles to which we proclaim allegiance.

Is the cause of these liberal betrayals the disruptions produced by capitalism? The arrogance of a pampered elite? The leveling forces unleashed by the democratic spirit? The editors and contributors nowhere say clearly. No doubt many factors are at work. Among the most basic is the inherent instability in the idea from which liberalism begins --- the idea that all human beings are by nature free and equal. We are free in the primary sense, proclaims the liberal tradition, in that no man or law can legitimately govern us unless we choose to be so governed. And we are equal in that, as beings endowed with the power to reason, we all share this fundamental freedom to choose the authority under which we shall live. At first, the liberal tradition understands freedom in political terms. Later it requires that custom, tradition, and religion submit as well to the authority of individual reason. Eventually, it demands that reason itself be seen as a matter of choice, a human invention that we should be free to take or leave as we please.

The liberal premise of natural freedom and equality seems to generate a sort of self-devouring skepticism that consumes every claim to authority that comes before it, including its own. This is how liberalism's fundamental premise --- especially once it untethers itself from religious belief, traditional morals and custom --- paves the way for postmodernism, both in its fatalistic vision of a world in which freedom is an illusion because our very humanity is socially constructed, and in its utopian fantasy that because our humanity is socially constructed we are free to remark ourselves from the ground up.

Kramer, Kimball, and their contributors generally avoid such abstract philosophical speculation. Their essays are written with an air of urgency and the desire to show how our politics can be rescued from some of its own worst practices. At the end of the day, their sober counsel is to search for ways to conserve what is best in the liberal tradition, not overthrow it. In offering this counsel, they follow Lionel Trilling, who, as Kramer and Kimball point out in their introduction, had warned fellow liberals back in the 1950s, in the preface to The Liberal Imagination, that they were increasingly prone to moral and intellectual complacency. Complacency and disdain for different viewpoints are not peculiarly liberal vices. But they are peculiarly harmful to liberalism, because liberalism depends for its vitality on the capacity of individuals to think for themselves and to draw on moral and intellectual resources from other traditions. If it is to win the battle against its illiberal tendencies, contemporary liberalism must cease to flatter itself and demonize its opponents. It must relearn that discipline, tradition, and self-restraint are preconditions for freedom.

Our predicament differs in obvious ways from the coming crisis that filled Lincoln with foreboding in 1838. Lincoln saw a great evil loose in the land, a lawlessness at war with the freedom and equality out of which the nation was conceived. Nowadays, our morals are corrupted by our fundamental beliefs themselves, from their radicalization and their

extension into domains where they tend to sow confusion and discord. But this difference only increases the relevance of Lincoln's admonition to the Young Men's Lyceum: "The political edifice of liberty and equal rights" was not only built by, but cannot be maintained without, good character, sound judgment, and a reasoned respect for the principles of limited constitutional government.

Peter Berkowitz teaches at George Mason University Law School and is the author most recently of Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism.