

New Republic Falls Short of the True Liberalism It Champions

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - October 13, 2014

Liberalism, most people would agree, stands for the state's responsibility to actively improve the social, economic, and political quality of citizens' lives. In a more fundamental sense liberalism also denotes certain qualities of mind and character, among them tolerance, generosity, the capacity to engage civilly competing opinions, and a determination to base politics on reason rather than physical force or arbitrary authority.

On the occasion of The New Republic's 100th anniversary, Franklin Foer, a proud liberal serving his second tour of duty as TNR editor, has brought out "Insurrections of the Mind: 100 Years of Politics and Culture in America," a collection of essays from the magazine's pages that aims to feature both senses of liberalism.

Foer's informative and enthusiastic introduction provides a brief history of TNR. Its founding editor, progressive Herbert Croly, espoused a strong central state staffed by university-trained experts who would impartially manage the people's affairs. He hoped that through the rigor of its analysis of politics and the arts, his magazine would elevate the people's opinions and refine their tastes.

Stricken by a stroke in his late 50s, Croly died in 1930, so he never got to see the arrival of the New Deal, which carried forward his progressive vision. Under his successors in the 1930s and 1940s, TNR showed indulgence for Stalin and the Soviet Union, a topic that Foer passes over quickly. But in the years following World War II, TNR developed "the combination of styles -- passionate but realistic, hardheaded but permissive of idealistic daydreams" -- that Foer argues set the magazine apart.

Foer expresses the hope that his volume will demonstrate to liberalism's critics that "modern liberalism was an American invention, and its history is a great American story." The formulation is somewhat provincial and self-satisfied. By the middle third of the 18th century, liberalism as a theory of state intervention on behalf of freedom had been planted in Britain, France, and Germany. More relevant today, the future of American liberalism is open to doubt in part because of tendencies increasingly on display in Foer's own publication.

This is alarming for several reasons, not least because the wide-ranging and incisive writings contained in "Insurrections of the Mind" recall the adroitness, playfulness, and moral seriousness at which liberals once excelled. Cheek by jowl with finely argued pieces on war

and peace, poverty and discrimination, terrorism and deficits, this compilation presents sparkling explorations of jazz and translation, Freud and Fellini, Martha Stewart and Norman Mailer.

The collection, organized by decades, contains many virtuoso performances including Walter Lippman's "Life Is Cheap" (1914); Benedetto Croce's "The Future of Democracy" (1937); Lewis Mumford's "The Corruption of Liberalism" (1940); Murray Kempton's "The March on Washington" (1963); Michael Kinsley's "Mr. Democrat" (1988); Andrew Sullivan's "Here Comes the Groom: A (Conservative) Case for Gay Marriage" (1989); and Zadie Smith's "The Limited Circle Is Pure" (2003).

At its most distinctive, TNR essays are infused with the spirit that marked Daniel Patrick Moynihan's successful 1976 campaign for the Senate. Reflecting on the race in January 1977 in "The Liberal's Dilemma," the newly minted senator from New York explained that he "ran as a liberal willing to be critical of what liberals had done."

Nowhere is that bracing, self-critical liberal spirit more powerfully on display than in "The Value of the Canon," Irving Howe's stalwart 1991 defense of liberal education. A longtime editor of Dissent magazine and longtime contributor to TNR, Howe embraced economic views significantly to the left of TNR's left-center position, yet he defends the study of the great books without a trace of partisan rancor or partisan prerogative.

Taking on the "anti-traditionalists," whom he calls the "insurgents," Howe observes that "the socialist and Marxist traditions have been close to traditionalist views of culture." He maintains that a vital aim of liberal education in a democracy is to expand the range of people who have access to the classical heritage in the humanities, and that far from indoctrinating students in fixed and elitist doctrines, serious study of the great books provides students with competing perspectives and "critical engagement with living texts from powerful minds still very much 'active' in the present."

Around the same time, a different tendency, indeed a dark and decidedly illiberal tendency, emerged in TNR. This trend receives dramatic expression in this collection, too, in the form of Hendrik Hertzberg's "The Child Monarch," a 1991 review of several books about Ronald Reagan. In his introductory note to Hertzberg's diatribe -- by far the book's longest piece -- Foer notes that Hertzberg's work exhibits "bile" as well as "wit and vigor." It would be more precise to say that in the process of denouncing Reagan's political judgment, integrity, and intelligence, Hertzberg places his acerbic wit and vigorous prose in the service of bilious contempt for the conservative movement.

Foer appreciates that in recent decades liberalism has taken a wrong turn, but he does not accurately identify the nature of that turn.

"Over the last 25 years, liberalism has lost its good name and its sway over politics," reads a 2006 statement by TNR editors, with which he introduces outstanding essays of the 2000s. "But it's liberalism's loss of imagination that is most disheartening." More disheartening, actually, is the preaching of hatred under the guise of liberalism. More disheartening still is Foer's decision to highlight TNR essays from the previous decade that do just that as if they carry forward liberalism's noblest traditions.

In mid-December 2000, two days after the U.S. Supreme Court decided *Bush v. Gore*, legal affairs editor Jeffrey Rosen published a cover story, "Disgrace." The high court invalidated the Florida Supreme Court's 4-3 authorization of a statewide manual recount of presidential ballots and brought the recounting to an end, which resulted in the election of George W. Bush.

Rosen declares that by intervening in the Florida recount dispute, the five conservative justices engaged in "a naked act of political will." Worse, "by not even bothering to cloak their willfulness in legal arguments intelligible to people of good faith who do not share their views, these four vain men and one vain woman have not only cast a cloud over the presidency of George W. Bush," he asserted. "They have, far more importantly, made it impossible for citizens of the United States to sustain any kind of faith in the rule of law as something larger than the self-interested political preferences of William Rehnquist, Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas, Anthony Kennedy, and Sandra Day O'Connor."

Rosen's foul accusation that five Republican-appointed judges abandoned their judicial duty to ground their decisions in intelligible legal arguments is refuted by a simple fact readily visible as he was writing. All seven judges on the Florida Supreme Court who decided *Gore v. Harris* (which on appeal became *Bush v. Gore*) were appointed by Democratic governors, and of them three found constitutional infirmities with the recount ordered by the four-judge majority. As Florida Supreme Court Chief Justice Charles Wells wrote in dissent, "The majority's decision cannot withstand the scrutiny which will certainly immediately follow under the United States Constitution."

Anticipating legal arguments that would be put forward a few days later by the United States Supreme Court, the chief justice of the Florida Supreme Court added that "this system of county-by-county decisions regarding how a dimpled chad is counted is fraught with equal protection concerns which will eventually cause the election results in Florida to be stricken by the federal courts or Congress."

In 2003, Senior Editor Jonathan Chait upped the stakes. In "Mad About You: The Case for Bush Hatred," Chait argues that Bush hatred was logical, rational, and moral. Foer celebrates this as an appropriate response to the conservative shift "toward its present-day nihilism." In fact, the impaired political vision that sees only nihilism in American conservatism demonstrates nothing so much as hatred's deplorable subordination of reason to passion.

In 2004 Peter Beinart got in on the act. Writing in the wake of Bush's defeat of Democratic challenger John Kerry, TNR's then-editor called on liberals in "The Good Fight" to recognize the threat posed by "totalitarian Islam." This was salutary. But to rally his fellow liberals, Beinart admonished them to grasp that "the recognition that liberals face an external enemy more grave, and more illiberal, than George W. Bush should be the litmus test of a decent left." No: The litmus test of a decent left should be the recognition that it is obscene to liken George W. Bush to terrorists seeking to destroy Western life (even if concluding that Bush posed the lesser threat), and that conservatives are not the enemy but rather fellow citizens with alternative opinions about how to secure individual freedom and equality before the law.

In a 1994 selection, "After Memory" -- a probing meditation inspired by the opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum -- veteran literary editor Leon Wieseltier wisely observes that "hatred is not necessarily an intellectual failure, it is not necessarily a moral failure." But Wieseltier makes clear that when directed at anything other than the kind of "radical evil" perpetrated by the Nazis, hatred is both.

TNR's promulgation of hatred of conservative people and ideas -- and editor Foer's showcasing of it in TNR's 100th anniversary tribute to itself -- represent intellectual and moral failure. Not insurrections of the free mind but posturing and preening of the partisan mind.

The trouble with The New Republic is not that it has become too liberal, but that it has not remained, in the more fundamental sense, liberal enough.

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