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Proudly Liberal

By PETER BERKOWITZ

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Proudly Liberal

By PETER BERKOWITZ

PAUL STARR. *Freedom's Power: The True Force of Liberalism*. BASIC BOOKS. 256 PAGES. \$26.00

PROUD LIBERALS THESE days are few and far between. It's not that the left's ranks have been depleted, what with the angry left, the hard left, the populist left, the progressive left, the moderate left, and the center left all making their presence felt as Democrats flex their muscles in Congress and the party gears up for election 2008. But liberals — out of the closet, standing tall, claiming credit for their historic achievements, owning up to their past errors, boldly facing the future — are another matter. Both the excesses of post-1960s liberalism, in politics as well as in culture, and the conservative critique of those excesses,

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deserve responsibility for making liberalism, for going on 30 years, a label to be shunned. But ignorance of the liberal tradition has played its part, too.

The ignorance has been exacerbated by liberalism's having become the name for one partisan interpretation of the American political heritage. To be sure, this identification derives considerable support from history. Although Locke, Montesquieu, and the American founders taught that the core of politics was the defense of individual liberty, liberalism did not come into fashion as the name for the tradition they were elaborating until well after they had developed their doctrines. And in both England and the U.S., the term entered the political lexicon to designate parties devoted to progress. Emerging in the early nineteenth century, the Liberal Party in England stood for greater political democracy and, for a century, represented the major opposition to the Conservative Party. Although the U.S. never had a party by the name, the association of liberalism with FDR's Democratic Party and New Deal, which were distinguished by the conviction that it was among government's principal tasks to provide jobs for able-bodied citizens and a social safety net for those unable to provide for themselves, gave the term in America a definite partisan cast. The association was reinforced in the 1960s by JFK's New Frontier initiatives and LBJ's Great Society programs. The anti-war platform and culturally avant-garde sympathies of George McGovern's Democratic Party paved the way for the association, still strong today, of liberalism with a left that had separated itself from the center.

Yet the liberal tradition in America

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transcends party politics. It rests on the moral premise that human beings are by nature free and equal. It is oriented around an overarching political good — the securing of individual freedom for all. It champions principles and institutions — toleration, the separation of powers, an independent judiciary, a free press, the market — crucial to the construction of a free society. And it depends on the exercise of virtue, or rather a constellation of qualities of mind and character, befitting a free person: generosity in giving to each what he or she is owed as a person, respect for reason and its limits, and the propensity to see the many-sidedness of moral and political matters. Since the experience of freedom and equality begets the desire for more of both, it is understandable that liberalism has come to be associated with the party that makes progress its priority. But a free society must also preserve its material and moral preconditions. And the party that makes a priority of such preservation is also critical to the cause of individual freedom.

PAUL STARR, PROFESSOR of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University and its Woodrow Wilson School of Public Affairs, is a man of the left and a proud liberal. His book demonstrates that liberals whose allegiance is to the party of progress have much of which to be proud. The book aims to “offer a historical interpretation of the liberal project and a defense of its modern inclusive and egalitarian form.” Its success in both the interpretation and the defense is rooted in an appreciation that liberalism combines rights with responsibilities, the need to

create power with the need to constrain it, and large aspirations with practical solutions to urgent political challenges:

Liberalism does not call only for rights that place limits on the state. Rights inevitably imply corresponding individual and social responsibilities, and . . . liberalism is as much a method of creating power as of limiting it. This is the lesson of the immediate aftermath of the great classical liberal revolutions (1688 in England, 1776 in America) as well as liberal revolutions of more recent vintage (1989 in eastern Europe). In a sense, the liberal state and its laws are freedom’s power, the indispensable basis of freedom’s survival. Liberalism isn’t just a set of fine aspirations. Historically, it has emerged from the pressures of political conflict, domestic and international, not least of all from the pressures of war.

So understood, many on the right as well as on the left can trace their political ideas to the liberal tradition.

Indeed, in a welcome break from the standard fare generated by enraged left-of-center intellectuals after *Bush v. Gore* and the war in Iraq, Starr does not treat conservatives in America as an alien and hostile tribe. Of course, he thinks conservatives are wrong about America’s constitutional heritage and the nation’s contemporary requirements. To show that this is so, he presents “a better way to think about liberalism,” which is “truer to the tradition and better suited to the world’s realities.” This better way connects contemporary liberalism to its past: “Unlike those who see a sharp disconti-

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nuity between classical and modern liberalism,” Starr views “the two as closely related — the latter growing out of the former in response to historical experience, changed social conditions, and a more democratic politics.” In contrast, contemporary conservatism, he argues, represents a deviation from America’s classical liberal heritage: “Both conservatives and liberals in the United States see themselves as bearers of the nation’s founding ideals. This book argues that liberals have the better claim.” Actually, Starr concludes that left-liberals’ claim is so much better as to be the sole legitimate contemporary claim.

Something different, however, is suggested by the theoretical and historical discussions in his book. His own analysis of early modern constitutional liberalism and the development of democratic liberalism in the twentieth century lends support to the opinion that contemporary right-liberals *as well as* left-liberals are “bearers of the nation’s founding ideals” — and that what he calls “the liberal project of our time” is incomplete and dangerously unstable to the extent that it attempts to make do without the conservative contribution to constitutional liberalism in America.

TO REMAIN TRUE to its core commitment “to create a free, fair, and prosperous society,” liberalism, Starr stresses, must constantly adapt:

At its heart the liberal project is what it has always been. But the ways and means of achieving that end have necessarily evolved. Every living political idea must be tested against new experience and period-

ically clarified and revised in light of it. Even philosophies that claim to adhere to eternal truths and original meanings quietly adjust themselves to new moral understandings and social facts. A readiness to adapt to new conditions is all the more necessary in a philosophy that asks to be judged by its real effects on human freedom and happiness and the power and peace of nations. Mere gestures toward a good society are of no interest beyond a seminar room. Liberalism stands not only for the principle that we all have an equal right to freedom but also for the hypothesis that this is a workable ideal — indeed, that liberalism, properly understood, can produce the power and wealth that make a free society more than a dream.

The inevitable need to adapt political ideas to changing circumstances, Starr believes, strongly favors the left-liberal interpretation of the liberal tradition.

Another factor, in Starr’s view, is American conservatism’s reactionary inclination: “The classical opposition in the eighteenth century was between a liberalism that upheld the principles of individual freedom and equality against a conservatism that defended a more hierarchical, paternalistic, and tradition-minded society.” He recognizes that conservatism in America changes as well. As it made its peace with democratic developments, it tended to rally around either the free market or tradition, but, according to Starr, during the long struggle to provide equal rights for all, conservatism “provided a justification of inequalities that liberalism has attempted to reduce or elimi-

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nate.” Of course, he notes, conservatives embraced the extensions of civil and political rights to women and minorities once they were inscribed in law.

One hypothesis Starr does not consider is that over time, changing conditions in America may have made the changing conservative outlook more salient to the preservation of freedom. Indeed, he gives little credence to the conservative concern that progress in freedom and equality has a tendency to erode the foundations of social order, to erase knowledge of moral and religious tradition, and to impair the cultivation of excellence. And so he doesn't ask whether conservatives, who take a special interest in these matters, might be well-positioned to collaborate with left-liberals in the formation of policies that strengthen constitutional liberalism in America by counterbalancing liberalism's extreme tendencies. Which is a pity, because many aspects of his book could contribute to the forging of such an alliance.

In contrast to innumerable and proliferating academic discussions of the liberal tradition, which never get beyond examining the origins and scope of individual rights, and in opposition to the polemical charges hurled at liberalism by twentieth-century fascist and communist opponents that it promotes political weakness, Starr highlights constitutional liberalism's "discipline of power." The need to discipline power grows out of the liberal tradition's understanding that "power is essential to liberty, yet power is also inimical to liberty." The more familiar aspect of the discipline of power involves the imposition of constraints on government to protect citizens from

tyranny and to defend the state itself from its own capricious or reckless decisions. The less familiar aspect — but central, Starr stresses, to constitutional liberalism as it developed in Britain and America — involves the creation of the conditions for the growth and more effective use of government power:

Limiting arbitrary power encourages confidence that the law will be fair and thereby increases the state's ability to secure cooperation without the imposition of force. Limiting the scope of state power increases the likelihood of its effective use as well as the ability of society to generate wealth, knowledge, and other resources that a state may draw upon in an hour of need. That, at least, has been the theory of power — of freedom's power — implicit in constitutional liberalism. And the historic rise of liberal states to become the most powerful in the world suggests that the theory has worked astonishingly well in practice.

Appreciation of the discipline of power is, he allows, "the common heritage of both modern conservatives and modern liberals, as those terms are understood in the Anglo-American world." For both right and left embrace the idea of the rule of law — the demand that "laws be general, public, unalterable retroactively, and applied the same regardless of individuals involved" — in which constitutional liberalism is grounded.

There are alternative explanations, Starr recognizes, of why England in the nineteenth century and the United States in the twentieth became the most powerful states in the world.

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Doctrinaire Marxists and doctrinaire libertarians contend that the cause is strictly economic. Foucault and his postmodernist followers maintain that the success of liberal societies stems from subterranean forms of social discipline that routinize and regulate personal conduct. But, as Starr points out, economies never develop in a vacuum: “For wealth to become the basis of power, a state must be capable of extracting resources, using them efficiently, and directing them expressly to desired political ends.” And constitutional liberalism certainly does depend on a “culture of self-restraint,” but, he reminds, not every form of discipline is domination or an “enemy of freedom.”

In agreement with both the political science of Aristotle and of the *Federalist*, Starr shows that the decisive factor in explaining the power and prosperity of liberal democracy in America is the nature of the regime. The Constitution created a powerful state, capable of raising revenue and making war, for a people that was “deeply suspicious of state power.” It did this by separating and blending governmental powers, both in the relations among the three branches of the federal government, and in the relation between the federal government and state governments. It also tolerated religious diversity; separated church and state; maintained a principled if ever-shifting distinction between public life and private life; and protected freedom of speech and association, the rights of property and contract, and the rights of criminal process. As a result, constitutional liberalism created space for individuals to pursue avidly their particular interests in politics, make their own decisions about consumption and pro-

duction in commercial life, conduct their romantic and family lives as they saw fit, and seek salvation or not as the spirit moved them. At the same time, the nation drew on and derived energy from the diversity of citizens’ talents and outlooks, and the clash of their competing opinions in public debate and democratic politics.

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Classical or constitutional liberalism, Starr argues, gave rise to two great tensions. The first involved the conflict between the promise of universal inclusion and the reality of exclusion — of blacks, of women, of ethnic minorities. The second concerned the conflict between the promise of formal equality under law and the reality that not only discrimination but poverty, sickness, and old age create disparities of wealth and power that threaten to undermine the value of equality under law. Grappling with these tensions, according to Starr, drove the shift to modern or democratic liberalism:

Modern liberalism offers a distinct vision of what an equal right to

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freedom requires. Formal guarantees of civil and political rights, liberals have come to believe, are an insufficient basis for a free and just society unless government also acknowledges rights to minimum conditions of security and human development. Broader interpretation of other earlier liberal commitments also follow from the effort to put equal freedom into practice. Just as the state must treat people of different religious faiths equally, so it must show equal respect for people of diverse ethnic and cultural groups. In the international arena, that same equality of respect requires a rejection of colonialism and imperialism in favor of support for the aspirations of diverse peoples for national independence and democracy.

In the movement from the Progressive Era to the New Deal through the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, Starr sees the working out of the idea of the equal right to freedom. Along with the “democratization of liberalism” and “advocacy of a more positive government,” he observes, the development of modern democratic liberalism witnessed “the emergence of a positive conception of freedom based on the idea of self-determination” not only for individuals but for nation-states.

Indeed, so powerful are the transformations that America’s core liberal tradition has undergone that today few are those, left or right, who doubt that all citizens, regardless of religion, race, sex, or class, should be counted as full citizens; that government has a substantial role to play in providing material minimums below which no citizen

should be allowed to fall; and that individuals as well as peoples should be encouraged to develop their special gifts and talents. In contrast to the left, however, conservatives also tend to emphasize that government-mandated equality should not be sought in all spheres of life; that many worthwhile tasks should be left to the private sector because government performs them inefficiently or harmfully; and that self-development should not be separated from the wisdom embodied in tradition. What divides conservatives and liberals is a question of balance among competing human goods. Without the variety, and without the balancing, the liberal tradition would be severely weakened.

Starr himself points out that the great contest in the twentieth century between liberal democracy on the one hand, and socialism and communism on the other, ended with an emphatic victory for liberal democracy. While socializing the means of production proved a disaster wherever it was tried, liberal democracies learned to remain true to their core principles while imposing reasonable regulations on the economy. As a result, democracy today almost always carries with it the implications of liberal protection of individual rights, a free market under law, and provision for the poor, the sick, the elderly, and children.

But Starr does not see in this extraordinary development a brief for the alliance within liberal democracy of conservative and liberal interpretations of the liberal tradition. Rather, he argues that despite the post-1960s rise of conservatism in America and the electoral defeats the left has suffered over the past 30 years, the left-leaning

interpretation of liberalism should prevail. The “liberal project of our times,” for Starr, should draw inspiration from the EU, which has spread liberal political principles and a commitment to robust government involvement in the economy across the European continent. The liberal project should launch a chastened liberal internationalism that sustains and enlarges American power by undertaking multilateral initiatives forging effective international institutions. It should seek the creation of universal health care coverage, and measures to address “growing income inequality, environmental deterioration, and long-term fiscal problems.” It should ask more of young people by making some form of “national service a routine experience,” and it should do more for young people by helping them “invest in their educations, careers, businesses, and homes.”

STARR’S POLITICAL program is generally high-minded, but it neglects too much that is vital to the defense of individual liberty and the preservation of free institutions. He generally slights the crucial importance of culture, education, and the family to the formation of generous, reasonable, and many-sided men and women. Nor does he say much about the threat posed by Islamic extremism, or evince much interest in the policies that must be adopted and laws enacted to enable the U.S. to protect itself against the threat of massive terror attacks while respecting rights and democratic process. If this is work for conservatives, then so much more reason for him to have welcomed them as members in good standing of the liberal tradition.

Starr’s interpretation of the “liberal project” does provide a “better way to think about liberalism” than most recent attempts by progressives to distill the fundamentals of the American political tradition. And in many ways it is “truer to the tradition and better suited to the world’s realities.” But it is not true enough to the tradition. Nor is

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it sufficiently well-suited to the world’s realities. It is not just that he understates the liberalism of many of today’s conservatives. It is that he obscures the harmonizing imperative within the liberal tradition. This imperative can be seen in the ordinary citizen who, believing both that government ought to provide support for the least well-off and that the growth of government endangers individual freedom, will favor the candidate, Democrat or Republican, who does most justice to both beliefs. It can be seen in the thought of John Stuart Mill, the nineteenth century’s greatest liberal, who strove to weave together a philosophy of individual freedom that respected the romantic and the rational, the traditional and the

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innovative, the claims of order and the claims of progress. It can be seen in the statesmanship of President Ronald Reagan, whose hawkish belief in the virtue of American power, dovish belief in the utility of dialogue with one's adversary, and bedrock conviction that American foreign policy should be directed toward promoting individual liberty decisively contributed to America's victory in the Cold War, as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher put it, "without a shot being fired." An interpretation of liberalism that leaves no room for such citizens, thinkers, or statesmen is not nearly liberal enough.