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The Decay of the Liberal Mind

After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State
by Paul Gottfried.
Princeton University Press, 1999.

Liberalism in America today is a lot like the Loch Ness Monster; we cannot say what it is, but we can say with considerable certainty what it is not. It is not consistent, principled, or coherent as a political philosophy. It has abandoned ontology, hence the rule of law. It has forsaken duty in favor of “rights,” and been reduced to nothing more than temporizing policy formulations which it implicitly defends in terms of *parens patriae*, the paternal powers of the state.

Indeed, liberalism today has become virtually indistinguishable from socialism and the materialist ontology it presumes. This is why, following socialism, liberals try to locate the motivation of all human actions in the darker regions of the soul, accessible only to the therapeutic arts—which are the social sciences in their capacity to impose moral outcomes. Or else, contemporary liberals reduce human affairs to mere epiphenomena of the structural features of society. Yet as recently as the third edition of George Sabine’s *A History of Political Theory* (1961), liberalism was defined in terms of individualism and the irreducibility of moral relations. Paul Gottfried is thus surely right to observe in his cogent work,

After Liberalism, that “liberalism has not been allowed to keep any fixed or specific meaning.”

This transformation might have been foretold. For the early liberal stratagem of constructing society around the pursuit of *private* interests entailed the end of *public* life as a good—which was the only coherent premise of democracy. Privatized men could not really fulfill the responsibilities of democratic citizens. Hobbes’s solution was a Sovereign that would keep “all in awe.” In a masterstroke, the early liberals connected sovereignty with an abstraction, the People. But in time, liberal hostility toward *actual* people, manifested in a general desire to uproot all forms of localism, pushed liberals ever closer to the more robust Hobbesian solution. In the name of advancing private interests, liberals discovered that they could advance a sovereign state control that would manage the passions of the people, thereby relieving them of the cumbersome process of democracy. This lineage leads directly to Gottfried’s thesis that “democratic practice has entailed less and

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less vigorous self-government, while becoming progressively dissociated from any specific cultural or ethnic heritage." "Democratic citizenship," he writes, "has come to mean [nothing more than] eligibility for social services and welfare benefits."

The implication of this process of disconnection from America's culture and traditions—what Gottfried calls "discontinuity"—is that democracy no longer means self-rule but rather outside-rule, the rule of "experts." And as Gottfried takes pains to document, we come to this end not by way of a changed meaning of democracy, but by a substantive redefinition of liberalism. Gottfried is at his best in letting liberals condemn themselves out of their own mouths. And self-incrimination clearly makes the best prosecution.

Gottfried focuses much of his discussion on the twentieth-century phenomenon of "pragmatism," which seemed so congenial to the American tradition of self-help and local control. Liberals, however, used pragmatism as an ideological mask to transform representation into administration, which is the corruption of popular action by obscure rules and decrees, all executed by the "experts." Here Gottfried points to Arthur Bestor, an epigone of John Dewey, who revealed the liberal subterfuge: "The alliance between pragmatism and liberalism was a fortuitous one, called forth by a particular historic situation. Pragmatism constituted in essence [a] sacred act of intellectual spoliation." Such spoliation follows in the train of "debunking" that is among the choice liberal tactics in the century just past. As Gottfried makes clear, pragmatism was a ploy to baffle an unsuspecting public while bringing to birth a widespread value-relativism. If such relativism was the stick, then the carrot was an advancing bureaucratic power that could look after the felt needs of its subject-clients. In Bestor's words, liberalism and the new pragmatism

were little more than "social acids" to dissolve American beliefs.

Perhaps this is Hegel's revenge. His *Geisterreich* did not die in the Reichstag fire, but made it to America in the form of an intellectual elite that thought popular deliberation unnecessary. State control of human affairs, or what one liberal called the "New Society based on planning," was the objective of the managerial class, collectivists who dared not speak that name—at least during the Cold War. During the New Deal era, John Dewey himself chided his liberal predecessors for being held captive by a forgotten past. Nouveau liberalism Dewey defined in the argot of socialism, a "commitment to the experimental method and a continuous reconstruction of the ideas of individuality and liberty in intimate connection with changes in social reforms." Social reforms? Of course they come first.

Liberalism has now taken Hobbes one step further and transformed interests into "entitlements," thus reifying society into a materialist order while devaluing the individual as the ground for law and moral relations. This points to the incoherence of liberalism as a political theory while it forms the thrust of Gottfried's conclusions concerning "the gap between [liberal democracy's] democratic and liberal self-description and its imposed social policies."

While Gottfried's focus is institutional rather than theoretical, he is clearly mindful of liberalism's own self-doubt about its project, and about the political will it takes to sustain it. He observes how the "efforts to justify these policies with the archaic terminology of human rights rhetoric no longer elicit wide-spread belief." More important theoretically, it is no longer possible to defend democracy as a voluntary form of rulership or liberalism as a rational system of law when the individual is abolished as a moral agent. Having forsaken its moral

assumptions, liberalism has increasingly been forced to defend its statist ambitions simply by attacking its enemies on the right, those often guilty of nothing but defending the older liberal assumptions. He calls this practice liberalism's "polemical sense"—demonizing opponents as "antiliberal." But this goes to the core of his theme: once liberalism forsakes its moral assumptions, abolishes the individual as a moral agent, and presumes to rule through the omniscient state, are we still talking about liberalism? Are we still talking about democracy?

Behind Gottfried's thesis about a shattered liberal continuity lies the transformation of liberalism into a movement for worldly salvation. He observes here George Bancroft's sententious clamor for a "civilizing mission of democracy," not to be confused with culture. And we recall President Wilson's desire to go to war to "make the world safe for democracy." The voice of the abstract People replaces the voice of God, while the presumed consent of the former substitutes for the Commandments of the latter. Turning away from the moral relations that were intended to make for good men, liberalism bureaucratized its benevolence in order to make for happy subject-clients, constituents that are more than slaves but less than citizens.

Drawing on "the liberal creed: government exists to promote individual gratification," the modern state has set about the organization of desires in a symbiosis be-

tween "public administration and liberal democracy." As Gottfried points out, this ambition undermines the old reciprocity between ruler and ruled inherent in the philosophy of democracy. And "absent that responsibility, the state is no longer living up to an implicit social contract." The real danger, of course, is that the modern notion of democracy is entirely contingent upon "contract." When the contractarians no longer live up to their part of the bargain, what then?

Today, liberalism's managerial mentality, which has encouraged the transformation of the fact of pluralism into a celebration of darkly racial passions, claims to manage primal feelings in the name of "diversity." Thus, the factions our Founders warned us against have come to be seen by liberals as virtually a "public" good, and liberals now assure us that regulation through administrative threats is superior to amelioration through virtue or appeals to the common good. Such passions put the state in perpetual crisis, and as James Madison warned, "Crisis is the clamor of the tyrant."

What Paul Gottfried's small book does is to offer a brief summary of our present decadence, with cogent observations of the many attempts by liberals to save themselves through the process of redefinition. Gottfried in the end reminds us that liberalism is now the disease that considers itself the cure.