

RESISTANCE LITERATURE

The Tyranny of Liberalism: Understanding and Overcoming Administered Freedom, Inquisitorial Tolerance, and Equality by Command
by James Kalb (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008)

Books written in a spirit of resistance move us. I don't mean manifestos or theoretical treatises decrying oppression and calling for revolution: there is little to inspire in the illusion that the real world can be mastered by the relentless application of abstract principles. Nor do I mean utopian effusions such as William Morris's 1890 *News from Nowhere*. No, the powerful, lasting literature of resistance has a personal and existential urgency. Unlike the Marxists who live in the high uplands of settled political dogma, the real experience of resistance is heavily weighted with the difficulty of trying to breathe in an atmosphere polluted by propaganda, the difficulty of thinking clearly in a world of lies so widely and sincerely believed that they exercise a frightening, insidious charm. George Orwell, Fredrick Douglass, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: we read them and feel their struggle to find a way to live and speak as human beings.

James Kalb's *The Tyranny of Liberalism* falls into the genre of resistance literature. The outward form of an essay in "understanding and overcoming" suggests a cool analysis of contemporary social problems followed by an agenda for political change. The prose patiently lays out the issues, and the book is carefully organized to weigh objections and present a solid argument.

Yet this wide-ranging, ambitious, lawyerly brief against the regnant liberal consensus in America is powerful and effective because of its spirit of urgent dismay.

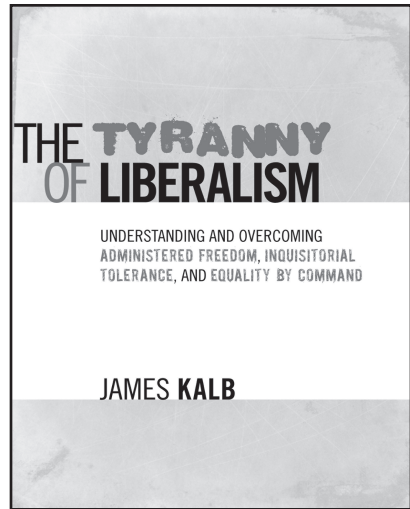
We don't just face a smug cosmopolitan elite, aggressive do-gooders, and an ever-growing welfare state. "Advanced liberal society," Kalb writes, "is reproducing the error of socialism—the attempt to administer and radically alter things that are too complex to be known, grasped, and controlled—but on a far grander scale. The socialists tried to simplify and rationalize economics, while today's liberals are trying to do the same with human relations generally." Inevitably, the round peg must be pounded into the square hole. And we don't even notice. "So dominant is liberalism," Kalb worries, "that it becomes invisible. Judges feel free to read it into law without historical or textual warrant because it seems so obviously right. To oppose in any basic way is to act incomprehensibly, in a way only explicable, it is thought, by reference to irrationality, ignorance, or evil." Dissent is medicalized as a psychological "fear of change," an infantile desire to "escape from freedom," or criminalized as "hate speech."

R. R. RENO is a professor of theology at Creighton University.

This seems a strange outcome. Modern liberalism began as an effort to limit the power of the sovereign, not to inflate it to the point of omnipotence. For John Locke, an inviolable right of private property was a crucial foundation for liberty. The American Founders built checks and balances into the exercise of government power. Mill defended the free exchange of ideas. In these and other ways, liberalism expanded the scope of freedom in modernity. Today, however, the liberal consensus endorses the growth of an aggressive bureaucratic state eager to impose an increasingly intolerant progressive agenda.

What explains the shift in modern liberalism from limiting to enhancing the state? By Kalb's reckoning, "The dominant features and tendencies of the system to which the liberal tradition has led can be illuminated by referring them to a very simple principle: equal freedom." This fundamental goal explains the consistency that underlies liberal politics. For example, a formal democracy does not satisfy the liberal ideal. Although championed by liberals at an earlier stage, it is not enough for everyone to have a right to vote. Instead, everyone should have an equal "voice" in the political process. Of course, we all know that wealth can amplify one's voice. So the liberal finds himself compelled to intervene, either by using the regulatory power of the state to limit the role of money in politics, or to use the state's taxing power to redistribute resources. Our current combination of campaign finance laws and public funding of presidential campaigns are instances of both strategies. The rationale for state intervention is consistent. The liberal wants to enhance the substantive freedom of *everyone* in the political process.

As Edmund Burke noticed long ago, modern political ideologies embrace abstract ideals that invariably mandate an



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assault on inherited culture. Kalb gives many examples, and readers can easily provide their own. The contemporary liberal has gone to college. He has taken classes in sociology and cultural studies. He knows that social mores and attitudes can have a dramatic influence on the political process. Racial stereotyping, gender bias, and a general feeling of exclusion can marginalize whole sectors of society. Thus, in pursuit of the simple idea of a free and equal say in the political process, the contemporary liberal finds a mandate to write laws requiring gender and racial representation, to restructure education, to shame if not criminalize certain ways of speaking in public.

As Kalb observes with Burkean clarity, "Freedom and equality are abstract, open-ended, and ever-ramifying goals that can be taken to extremes." Women will not achieve full equality in our society until they constitute X percent of CEOs and Y percent of senators, and until the media portray women in such-and-such roles, and only after childcare is universally available, and on the list goes. The political agenda follows as a matter of what seems to liberals obvious moral necessity: a raft of new

laws to ensure the percentages, massive social pressure for more progressive images of women in the media, and of course, federally funded childcare, along with public relations campaigns to demonize any who might suggest that mothers have unique and irreplaceable responsibilities to their children. What begins as an entirely sensible goal of ensuring free access to the polling booth turns into a large-scale effort to re-engineer society.

Of course, the re-engineering never succeeds, and the goals of modern liberalism remain elusive. It doesn't take much experience to realize that making sure everybody participates equally is unrealistic. Many are apathetic, poorly educated, and disengaged. Money and status and prejudice will invariably find their way into the political process. And quite a few citizens seem to hold on to traditional views that the liberal cannot help but find retrograde and oppressive. Therein lies the move from the warm ideal of democratic participation to the cold reality of freedom administered by experts. To overcome intractable limitations, what we need is an objective analysis of what people *would* want if they were truly free and equal citizens. With this analysis in hand, benevolent liberal elites reassure themselves that they can govern justly, doling out what people *would* want if they were truly free and rational.

"Since 1945," Kalb writes, "Western public life has been based on the practical supremacy of economics and the principle that social order exists to get men to what they want rather than to express an essence or ideal." A thoroughly liberal society becomes "an aggregate of interchangeable units ordered by abstract legal, financial, and bureaucratic principles." Deracination, the triumph of mere utility, and the reduction of the human person to the status of a desiring machine—many of the mechanical and dehumanizing features of

the present age that I remember reading about in the Frankfurt School theorists who were so popular in my youth—follow from the necessarily abstract ideal of equal freedom. It seems paradoxical, but the more explicitly liberalism pursues its noble ideal—a society in which everyone has the resources to live as a free man or woman—the more base it makes us. The liberal reformer always serves "the human," but this turns out to be the thin, Hobbesian layer of fear and lust we all share. "In the long run," Kalb writes, "the point of liberalism is to give us what we want and not to improve us except by making us more perfectly liberal—that is, more exclusively concerned with the equal satisfaction of desire simply as such." We are living in the long run. Witness the two great promises of contemporary American liberalism: to deliver us from economic anxiety and to liberate our sexual desires.

Kalb's voice of heartfelt protest rings clear and true when he looks at the actual social costs of the liberal project. Liberal policies "have hurt the weak and the marginalized more than anybody." Go to inner-city Newark for a day and look at the violence, degradation, and social dysfunction of liberated desire. Although Kalb does not say so, he certainly helps readers to see that the liberal war on bourgeois morality has destroyed many lives. The same war has created a new inequality. The liberal assault on traditional hierarchies of honor and shame has led to "the forcible imposition on everyone of a wholly abstract and radically depersonalized order that abolishes the connections and distinctions by which human beings have always lived in favor of more formal ones such as wealth, education, and bureaucratic position." A cult of celebrity has taken the place of a culture of leadership; honor has no currency in the scramble for wealth. A new inequality, justified by the abstract prin-

principles of efficiency and merit and untempered by moral ideals, is emerging.

Is there hope? Kalb surveys modern American conservatism and finds it wanting. He rightly regards the difference between liberals and modern libertarians as a family spat. Both seek “to construct society on rational hedonistic lines.” Neo-conservatism may have jarred some out of a complacent liberalism, but on the whole “it has functioned more as a way of lining up conservative impulses in the service of the established public order.” Populism has no staying power. The Christian Right often “idealizes American institutions” that serve rather than turn back the liberal project. Overall, American conservatism has suffered from its Americanism: to be loyal to the American experiment seems invariably to entail conceding a great deal of ground to liberal premises and liberal outcomes. In short, American conservatism isn’t theoretically coherent. Against the liberal juggernaut, it fields only a rag tag citizen’s navy.

Perhaps I am a romantic, but I rather fancy all those fishing boats gathering up the British Expeditionary Force at Dunkirk. In any event, conservatism as a political movement should never seek the kind of ideological purity that characterizes the Left. Kalb himself offers no grand conservative political theory. He gives a useful account of the role of tradition in the life of reason, drawing on John Henry Newman, echoing many of the insights more thoroughly developed by Alasdair MacIntyre, and parrying many of the standard objections. He outlines what readers will recognize as an Aristotelian view of the soul: “Freedom requires serious social distinctions and roles and is impossible in a radically egalitarian setting.” But as he seeks to describe a genuine alternative to liberalism, Kalb comes to recognize that traditions and hierarchies and social roles

have the power to shape lives and inform reason only if they are suffused with sacred authority, not because they have a second-order justification when we closely analyze the conditions for knowledge. It turns out that a conservatism capable of resisting modern liberalism must be based on faith in transcendent truths rather than a theoretical account of political life. A true conservative is a man of piety who takes public responsibility. He is not the servant of a political theory or an abstract ideal. That is why he can enter into coalition with people who share common goals, but who think very differently about the world.

“From a traditionalist point of view,” Kalb writes toward the end of his book, “the modern world looks doomed.” He envisions the social mores of the urban underclass—and the brutal, impersonal, and violent methods used to control them—spreading widely. He provides a menu of political goals designed to resist this fate, as well as strategies for turning the liberal notion of rights to temporary good use as a way to create public space for conservative resistance. Yet all is for naught unless piety prevails. Resistance to liberalism requires “an acceptance of genuine authority that is not simply what people want,” and a society that encourages piety of this sort must have the courage to impose “a practical establishment of religion.” The only alternative to liberalism is a politics guided by sacred authority, transcendent truths that are socially enforced by the incentives of praise and the sanctions of blame. This form of deep resistance, so necessary for the future of human dignity, is a job for preachers, catechists, and parents—not think tanks, politicians, and social theorists. It turns out, as Kalb suggests and Alasdair MacIntyre once proclaimed, that what we need is a new St. Benedict, and not a conservative version of John Rawls.