

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE U.S.A.

IS LIBERALISM IN CRISIS?

Observers of the passing scene in the United States have intermittently flashed the apocalyptic message that the end of liberalism is at hand. Their proclamations of imminent doom for the liberal outlook have been issued generally *not on provisional but in categorical terms* not that liberalism will die if its supporters should fail to stanch this wound or that one, but simply that liberalism as a body political and social is luing on its desthbed.

The practice of *issuing bulletins* on the sinking condition of the liberal philosophy is of recent vintage. Regarding liberalism in the first three decades of the present century, John Dewey wrote in 1929, in the magazine **Outlook and Independent**, that the trend in that period had been downhill. "For thirty years, at least", he said, "the story of liberal movements in this country is one of temporary enthusiasm and then steady decline."

Eleven years later, in 1940, Cornell University's George H. Sabine, author of the best-known history of political theory, repeated that American liberalism since the turn of the century had shown signs of being on the downgrade. "... for at least forty years," Sabine said in his contribution to a cooperative volume on cultural history, "the opinon has existed that

liberalism had served its term . . . Today its position is more problematic than ever and its future more threatening." Sixteen years after Sabine's report, C. Wright Mills said in **The Power Elite** (1965) that what Dewey and Sabine had found to be true for 30 and 40 years, respectively, was then true of 50 years. "Over the past half-Century", according to Mills, "liberalism has been undergoing a moral and intellectual decline of serious proportion."

In the year in which Mills presented his gloomy appraisal, Charles Frankel, of Columbia University, referred to past crises of liberalism and said that the crisis then occurring was unique. Frankel wrote, in his book **"The Case for Modern Man"**:

It is not surprising, to be sure, that liberalism should now be under reconsideration by liberals; it has been reconsidered and revised by successive generations of liberals . . . And liberalism, it need hardly be said, has never needed criticism more than now. But what is unprecedented is that liberal voices should be speaking, as they now are, in such strange accents, in the accents of Burke and Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky and Heidegger. . . . A current of criticism that runs back to the reaction against the French Revolution has touched the American shore.

In 1962 Norman Cousins agreed that liberalism was undergoing reconsideration after noting that "Historically, the word ("liberal") has been invested with political magic, he added, on his **Saturday Review** page: "In recent years, however, there has been an effort in some quarters to use the term liberal as a nasty word." Three years later, Leslie W. Dunbar also concurred. Dunbar told an audience at the University of Michigan: "Liberals — whoever they are — are contemporarily in bad repute. The political left sneers at them, Negro polemicists bait them, segregationists snarl at them, and the political right accuses them of every imaginable sin."

The majority of American voters in November 1968 rejected the Presidential candidacy of vaunted liberal, Hubert H. Humphrey. When Richard M. Nixon was chosen as President, the outcome of the election was declared by many observers to constitute a repudiation of liberalism by the electorate. Garry Wills commented in his **Nixon Agonistes** that "The liberal Eastern Establishment found that was not needed on election day." He described as irretrievably lost the exhilaration experienced by liberals earlier in the 1960's, noting that "Nothing was left of Camelot but the dream; and the princess shattered even that when she remarried."

This flood of bulletins reporting a serious crisis liberalism is only a small sampling. Numerous other pronouncements give the same diagnosis. But the appraisals of liberalism's state of health are by no means unanimously gloomy. On the contrary, findings that liberalism is strong are almost as prevalent. In fact, some writers defend both diagnoses, contending that liberalism is in crisis in some respects and is vibrantly alive in others.

James MacGregor Burns went so far as to say that the majority of scholars in this field had found *liberalism* to be not dying but a living, generic trait of ideology in America. In his 1972 book **Uncommon Sense**, Burns wrote: "Most American Scholars exploring the web of the American belief system — Parrington, Louis Hartz, Perry Miller, Richard Hofstadter, Arthur Schlesinger, for exemple — have located in the American experience a wide and persistent adherence to an individualistic liberalism."

Louis Hartz, of Harvard University's department of government, devoted his book **The Liberal Tradition in America** (1965) to arguing that liberalism is the sole American tradition. The United States, he contended, is a nation that was built in the liberal image. A year later Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., writing in the **Reporter**, referred to "the liberal tradition in this nation" not as the sole or dominant tradition, but as one which is at least "as old as the Republic itself."

According to a 1958 book on liberalism by J. Sawyn Schapiro, of New York's City College, "most" American leaders from the beginning have been liberal, with result that "political conflicts in America have been between "conservatives," or liberals of the right, and "progressives", or liberals of the left.

In 1964 David Spitz, professor of political science at Ohio State University, explicitly rejected the position that liberalism was undergoing a crisis.

He presented his case as follows in a book on the liberal idea of freedom:

... The liberal demands that all claims to truth be heard. His commitment is to the method of rational inquiry, not the specific results that may at any one time emerge from such inquiry. Hence, his basic value is the value of free inquiry; his basic attitude, the skeptical, or at least the inquiring, mind.

And if this is the meaning of liberalism, as I believe it most commonly is, then I deny that there is a crisis of liberalism. I admit, as one is bound to admit, that not many adherents flock to its causes; for liberalism so understood offers no royal road to certainty, no cheap ticket to political salvation. But this constitutes a challenge, not a crisis ... Thus, those who were moved to raise the question of the health of liberalism have been sharply divided in their findings.

Now it has been necessary, in the foregoing, collation of depositions, to specify in what sense the word "liberalism" is used. The purpose thus far has been merely to seek out witnesses and to notice what said. That process has provided a backdrop of communiqués in which the word "liberalism" means different things to different observers. For an effort to appraise their conclusions, it will be necessary to begin with a definition.

In the assessment which is to be attempted here, a certain definition of liberalism will be presupposed. The assessment will then apply to that definition. If valid for that definition, it will not necessarily be valid for others. But at least it may bring out some useful truth, provided the definition that is presupposed is viable.

The presupposed definition, the viability which a reader may judge intuitively (in the absence of a detailed discussion), is: **Liberalism is the belief that individuals and institutions, including governments, should so act — or refrain from acting — as to liberate as many individuals as possible from as many shackles as possible, without overturning basic social machinery.** "Shackles" here means circumstances which prevent an individual from fulfilling his constructive potentialities. "Constructive potentialities" are possibilities, talents, aspirations, aims, desires, and hopes of any one individual the fulfillment of which will not impede, and may enhance, like fulfillment on the part of others.

The chief merit of this definition is the fact that it embraces the outlook of liberals who emphasize organized or governmental power and action for liberating purposes, as well as the outlook of liberals who emphasize reduction of societal or governmental hindrances to enjoyment of the full life.

In the light of the definition suggested, the question whether liberalism is weak or strong may be seen to consist of subordinate questions, corresponding to the elements which comprise the definition. These elements are an end, a means, and a limitation on the means. The end set forth in the definition is promotion of the liberation of as many individuals as possible. The means is individual or organized action, or decision to refrain from acting. The limitation on the means is a ban on the overturning of basic social machinery.

To test the health of liberalism, it is necessary to consider the following questions about the elements listed:

1. Is the end laudable? Is it widely deemed to be laudable?
2. Is the means effective? Is it widely regarded as effective?
3. Is the limitation proper? Is it widely accepted as proper?

If the answers to these questions are all affirmative, then liberalism is strong and is not in crisis. If the answers are all negative, then liberalism is in a sad state. If the answers are mixed, then the judgment of liberalism's state of health also must be mixed.

That the end described in the definition is laudable, almost follows from the definition. Unshackling of people from what prevents development of their "constructive" potentialities is generally approved even by those who label themselves nonliberals or anti-liberals. For nonliberals

and anti-liberals oppose not fulfillment of constructive potentialities (and measures, or nonintervention, aimed at promoting **such** fulfillment), but rather fulfillment of potentialities (and measures, or inaction, which may result in promoting or permitting **such** fulfillment),

We thus have an affirmative answer to the first of the three questions that can open the door to an understanding of the sick or well status of liberalism. In this sense, liberalism is well and not in crisis.

The second question is, (a) Are governmental and other decisions (involving actions or inactions) which are liberal in being aimed at promoting constructive fulfillment **usually effective** in promoting the constructive fulfillment (or well-being) of everyone, or at least as many as possible? and (b) Are liberal leaders and legislators **usually reliable** in favoring truly liberating measures? In view, of the prevalent dissatisfaction with governmental decisions taken in the name of liberation, and with the actual moves over the years of leaders advertised as being liberal, it is not likely that many Americans will want to give an inqualified affirmative answer to either part of this question. At the same time, few will want to brand **every** effort or **dedored** policy aimed at promoting constructive fulfillment (or well-being) as turning out to be a total failure.

Probably a mixed answer would be needed to represent a widespread appraisal of liberalism's effectiveness. Such an answer might be framed in terms such as these:

- a. Some decisions, actions, and pronouncements which are aimed at promoting constructive fulfillment **were** effective, in varying degrees.
- b. Others were **not** significantly effective, or even, in their implementation, may have resulted in more harm than good.
- c. Some liberal measures may actually have promoted, at least in specific cases, fulfillment of evil potentialities.
- d. What the government, other organized groups, and individuals should do in the future is to be more careful to adopt measures calculated **genuinely** to promote fulfillment of good potentialities, or likely at least to discourage fulfillment of bad potentialities.

This mixed answer to the second question suggests that American liberalism is in one respect sick and in crisis; in another sense, well. It is sick and in crisis because it has not been nearly as effective as its advocates hoped it would be: and disillusionment with liberalism is therefore widespread. American liberalism is well, however, at least as regards this second question, in the sense that many people still feel that if the right measures were chosen, aimed at liberating people from their shackles, those measures **would** be effective.

The third question asks whether it is right to confine liberating efforts to those preservative of basic social machinery; that is, those which stay away from revolutionary or radical overturning of institutions. If the right

answer to this question is no, or if most people believe that the answer is no, then liberalism is in trouble. Here, as in the analysis of question 2, it is important to make a distinction. If by "basic social machinery" one means deeply underlying elements of "liberal Western culture" such as machinery aimed at self-determination of peoples, fulfillment of individual rights, and promotion of self-betterment, then the answer that most Americans would give is: Yes, we should preserve any machinery which genuinely promotes these things, and any efforts to improve conditions should be liberal in the sense of not overthrowing such machinery. If, however, by "basic social machinery" one means rigidified conventions, which preserve inequality of opportunity, hamper movement between social strata, and obstruct needed social change, then many Americans would say: No, efforts to improve conditions should **not** be bound by the requirement of preserving such machinery.

Our three questions are now answered, though superficially to be sure. The affirmative answer to the first question, about the liberal goal, suggests that liberalism is not undergoing a crisis. But the mixed answers to the second and third questions indicate that liberalism in some respects **is** and in other respects **is not** undergoing a crisis.

In brief, the answer to the question whether liberalism is in crisis is Yes and no, as follows:

1. No, liberalism is not in crisis in that (a) the aim of liberalism (promotion of the fulfillment of people's constructive potentialities) is both laudable and recognized as laudable, (b) the means chosen by liberals to effectuate that end are sometimes at least partially effective, and (c) the requirement of liberalism that basic social machinery be preserved is partly valid and approved.

2. Yes, liberalism is in crisis in that the means chosen by liberals to effectuate their end is sometimes ineffective, and the requirement of liberalism that basic social machinery be preserved is partly not valid and not approved.

Some candidates for office and some writers on political philosophy have stopped referring to liberalism and have begun to talk instead about "populist" and "progressive" ideas. Part of the reason for this, presumably, is the ambiguous status of liberalism. It seems safe, however, to surmise that, under whatever name, the urge to achieve a better effectuation of the admittedly laudable goal of liberalism will survive the present crisis.

Joseph Kraft reported in a recent column: "A populist tide is running in the country and all the aspiring politicians are running with it. So are most of the media celebrities." What this means, if the above analysis is correct, is that leaders and citizens are again hoping that, with a view toward furthering the goal of liberalism, better means than those tried previously, or more diligent application of means already on the books, will be given a chance.