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Review of The Dark Side of the Left: Illiberal Egalitarianism in America

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The Dark Side of the Left: Illiberal Egalitarianism in America. By Richard J. Ellis. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998. 426p. \$34.95.

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In this elegantly written, provocative, and sometimes just plain provoking book, punctuated by bits of anguish and rather more pique, Richard Ellis worries that the American Left has been so passionate about equality that it has run roughshod over liberty. So put, the thesis is not exactly news. It has been the recurrent lament of conservative indictments—Tocqueville's is the canonical statement, but he has plenty of precursors and followers. And it has its scholarly variations, too, such as Arthur Lipow, *Authoritarian Socialism in America: Edward Bellamy and the Nationalist Movement* (1982). No profound surprises are on offer here.

So what does Ellis bring to the hoary old wisdom? For one, he writes as himself a liberal, "a card-carrying member of the American Civil Liberties Union and an avid supporter of public broadcasting and Big Bird" (p. ix). He is unwilling simply to write off leftist causes as so much pernicious tripe, so his criticism does not just sound different; it has different force. For another, he does not rest content with stylized abstractions, or the same old two or three fabled stories you have heard countless times before. The book is a colorful and detailed, if opportunistic, tour through American history. Ellis has done some primary research, but he also draws heavily on familiar published works by American historians. Then again, historians have something to learn from his blunt and well-done challenge to Richard Hofstadter's influential view that we should see this illiberal terrain as the property of paranoid right-wingers.

The tale opens with abolitionist opponents of slavery, whose fierce moralism, their conviction that slavery was evil incarnate, made them famously uncompromising. (I do not think Ellis quite wants to counsel, against Garrison, compromise with slaveholders, but he does want to warn us right away of the political dangers of striking such a pose.) One might wish the tale had started earlier, indeed, as early as the Puritan settlers and their sustained efforts to run pure, even holy, commonwealths. It would be nice to know what, if anything, changed after the ratification of the Constitution and the arrival of the United States of America.

Ellis moves on, rapidly, through tours of utopianism from Bellamy to Llano and left-wing contempt for the "masses" of ordinary people from Walt Whitman to communist writer Mike Gold. Picking up steam, he offers a genuinely savage skewering of the New Left, its romanticization of the lumpenproletariat and other benighted groups and polities, and the pathologies and idiocies surrounding their abortive campaigns to have political organizations without leadership or authority. Turning a now thoroughly jaundiced eye to the contemporary scene, Ellis pillories radical feminists—his

account of Catharine MacKinnon is blurry at best, sometimes downright misleading—and environmentalists.

There is much food for thought here, but too much of the digestion is left for the reader. Ellis owes us a more precise account than the one he furnishes of just which versions of "equality" conflict with just which versions of "liberty." If you think equality means everyone has identical income and wealth, and liberty means an unregulated free market, then hey, presto! the two conflict. But suppose you think equality is a matter of the state ignoring the religious attachments of its citizens; of the law ignoring irrelevant facts about race, poverty, sexual orientation, social status, and the like; more generally of all institutions' ignoring contextually irrelevant facts. This is itself just a classical liberal demand. Does it conflict with *any* interesting sense of liberty? Or, indeed, is it partly constitutive of what we mean by liberty?

Or try this: Ellis's strategy is to locate leftists who say and do disturbingly illiberal things and then notice that they are egalitarians. But it does not yet follow that their egalitarianism is the source of their illiberalism. Are egalitarians always illiberal? (Ellis acknowledges that William Randolph Bourne's "radical egalitarian vision" [p. 99] offers much for liberals as well as radicals, but then he suggests very quickly that it cannot be sustained for long. I suppose Bourne died too young for us to be sure. To give one of many examples he simply does not discuss, what of the politics that led Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman to abominate both World War I America and its hundred-percenters *and* the Soviet Union?) Ellis notices (pp. 279–84) that more remains to be said on this subject, that the historical vignettes cannot interpret themselves or settle anything.

Fair enough. But in fact, his own book says more. For instance, Ellis has intriguing things to say about radical and utopian social organizations that cut off contact with the broader society, painting it as corrupt; and about how such dynamics help set up or reinforce Manichean us/them distinctions that invite contempt for the other. So the machinery he actually develops has more working parts, more nuance, than any simple wire running straight from equality to illiberalism. My suspicion is that the most we can say in these matters is that there are loosely knit, highly contingent, but still recognizable constellations of political positions featuring both some kinds of egalitarianism and some kinds of illiberalism, and that it is just mistaken to assign priority to any one position in such constellations. But even if I am right, this would not make it sensible to set aside Ellis's book. His evidence and argument are better than his title and official statement of purpose suggest.