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

Donald J. Herzog
University of Michigan Law School, dherzog@umich.edu

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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—Toqueville’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 the broader society, painting it as corrupt; and about how such dynamics help set up or reinforce Manichaean 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 this 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.


Don Herzog, University of Michigan