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RECONSTRUCTING PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY. By *William M. Sullivan*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1982. Pp. xiv, 238. \$19.95.

The past ten years have seen great changes in American society. Modern political thinkers have argued that these changes produced the present crises of confidence and legitimacy that have deprived America of the consensus needed to shape economic and social change.¹ In *Reconstructing Public Philosophy*, William M. Sullivan² asks whether America's predominantly liberal political tradition can

1. For a general discussion of this crisis from, respectively, a liberal and a neo-conservative perspective, see J. HABERMAS, *LEGITIMATION CRISIS* (1975) and R. NISBET, *TWILIGHT OF AUTHORITY* (1975).

2. Associate Professor of Philosophy at LaSalle College. Mr. Sullivan is also the co-editor of *INTERPRETIVE SOCIAL SCIENCE: A READER* (1979).

provide a public philosophy, something that he believes is indispensable to democracy. He questions whether America's commitment to justice and human dignity can survive in a world in which resources are becoming increasingly scarce and economic power more concentrated. This inquiry leads him to the issue of whether a genuine public life is possible in a society as individualistic and atomized as ours.

Sullivan's answers to these questions are optimistic. He believes the solution to the problems of our time lies in what he terms "Civic Republicanism," an idea he claims has long been a significant, if somewhat hidden, aspect of the American political tradition. According to Sullivan, "[t]o realize the nation's central value of popular self-rule, a renewed democratic political life of active citizenship and enlightened discussion is needed, and that in turn requires an expanded political culture, a public philosophy" (p. xii). Thus, the answer to America's problems is to develop the notion of citizenship, a concept dating back to the classical ideal of the *polis*.

In Sullivan's view, the 1950's and 60's were a time of great optimism resulting from a strong liberal consensus regarding the good society. This conception was one of individual advancement within a competitive economy. Politics was seen as instrumental. Its ultimate goal was the development of scientific engineering that could achieve a perfect adjustment of needs and wants. The role of government was seen as that of a balancer of private interests.

Sullivan believes that the "contemporary crisis of liberal society" (p. 23) springs from the inherent contradiction between liberal philosophy's goal of protecting human dignity, and the utilitarian methods it employs to achieve that goal. Traditional liberalism has tended to view human relationships and institutions as contractual arrangements designed to further individuals' self-interests. By denying that these relationships and associations have intrinsic value, such utilitarian ideas tend to erode a sense of community and make individuals self-interested and competitive. Without the fundamental social relationships that restrain self-interest, politics becomes a power struggle and human dignity is lost. In the past, America's new frontiers and abundance of natural resources absorbed the energies of the ambitious and limited conflict. But today, as the liberal notion of competition has become deeply ingrained and new frontiers have begun to disappear, confrontation is harder to avoid. According to Sullivan, "[t]he energy crisis and slower growth have meant that the gains of some have increasingly come to mean the losses of others" (p. 3).

In examining the works of such writers as Robert Nozick and

John Rawls,³ Sullivan points out what he believes are flaws in the liberal notion of the social contract. Social contract theory presupposes that there exist certain fundamental ideas upon which individuals can agree. According to Sullivan, even "the mores of individualism, which accustom persons to living with no concern beyond their own welfare, are themselves social, collective developments" (p. 7). Thus, he argues, even the most basic ideas of liberalism must have their source outside of liberal thought.

Sullivan also discusses the efforts of those such as Lawrence Kohlberg⁴ to develop a scientific "moral psychology." These efforts have failed, he believes, because liberal thinkers are enmeshed within their own liberal premises. They refuse to make the qualitative value judgments he feels are needed to foster "civic virtue" and a sense of community (p. 163).

Sullivan believes that America needs to reconstruct a public philosophy. He uses the term "reconstruct" because he believes that a public philosophy has long been a part of the American tradition. While early historians emphasized the influence of philosophers such as John Locke on the early development of American society, more recent scholars have concluded that the tradition of civic republicanism played a role in America's founding.⁵ Sullivan argues that "while there has been no intellectually continuous republican tradition of importance in American politics, there has been a heavy indirect influence of republican civic culture" (p. 14). Thus, he contends that while this tradition has often been greatly overshadowed by philosophical liberalism, it has never completely died out.

Sullivan describes this tradition as "a partially lost and suppressed form of speech and practice" (p. xiv). It is a moral tradition in that it contends that social relationships which recognize human dignity have an intrinsic value and that human life should be "lived meaningfully for ends beyond power and the satisfaction of private desire" (p. 92). Most importantly, it is a tradition of public participation in community life.

Sullivan's advocacy of a public philosophy stems from his fear that our present liberal philosophy cannot solve America's problems and will lead the nation into despotism. He argues that as liberal instrumentalism leads to increasing conflict, the "desire for social stability . . . could push the United States toward an imposed 'public purpose' concordant with the interests of our dominant social groups, organized under the rubric of 'prosperity', national interest,

3. See generally R. NOZICK, ANARCHY, STATE AND UTOPIA (1974); J. RAWLS, A THEORY OF JUSTICE (1971).

4. See, e.g., Kohlberg, *Stage and Sequence: The Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Socialization*, in HANDBOOK OF SOCIALIZATION THEORY AND RESEARCH (D. Goslin ed. 1969).

5. See W.C. McWILLIAMS, THE IDEA OF FRATERNITY IN AMERICA (1973).

or security" (p. xiii). This prediction is based on the premise that if human desires are seen as unlimited, the only solutions are either to provide an ever increasing quantity of satisfactions or to impose authoritarian control to harness desires.

For Sullivan, the answer lies in citizenship and self-governing institutions. He argues that the burden of protecting the good society "cannot be carried alone by the administrative organization of the state, staffed by professional functionaries, without undermining the very nature of self-government" (p. 9).

While Sullivan explains in great detail the need for a public philosophy, he does not really address the details of his solution. He declines to engage in a "programmatic discussion of how to transform our economy into a more democratic and responsible one" (p. 224). But he does suggest that the implementation of his ideas will require experiments with both public and private enterprise, and he advocates the use of intermediate structures of public enterprise, such as juries, labor unions, and religious groups, as the objects of experimental study.

Many of Sullivan's observations regarding the nature of Western liberal culture are not new. Many have written of the inherent contradiction of liberal capitalism.⁶ What is novel about Sullivan's approach is his realization that a republican tradition has played a role in the history of the nation and his optimism that its spirit can be reborn in our time.

Some may find Sullivan's book unsatisfying because he says very little about the actual content of his public philosophy. But because the values arrived at are less important than the fact that they are shared by a community, perhaps greater specificity is unnecessary.

At least one flaw in Sullivan's work is apparent. He argues that America's liberal tradition, if allowed to remain dominant, will result in tyranny and the imposition of a "'public purpose' concordant with the interests of our dominant social groups" (p. xiii). But his theory provides no safeguards to insure that the social organizations he advocates will not themselves be coercive and dominated by the powerful in society.

On the whole, *Reconstructing Public Philosophy* is a book that should prove interesting to general readers as well as serious students of political philosophy. It offers a lucid and well-reasoned analysis of the ideas of many important figures in political philosophy. It is also valuable because it offers an alternative to the views of John Rawls and Robert Nozick. Because it is a timely discussion of our

6. See, e.g., D. BELL, *THE CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS OF CAPITALISM* (1978); J. DUNN, *WESTERN POLITICAL THEORY IN THE FACE OF THE FUTURE* (1979); R. HEILBRONER, *BUSINESS CIVILIZATION IN DECLINE* (1976); F. HIRSCH, *SOCIAL LIMITS TO GROWTH* (1976); C. LASCH, *THE CULTURE OF NARCISSISM* (1979); W. LIPPMAN, *THE PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY* (1955).

present social condition, it has obvious relevance to any reader. After all, as Sullivan notes, "What is ultimately at issue is the radical question of what is a worthwhile life" (p. 10).