

Leslie Butler, *Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007), and Neil Jumonville and Kevin Mattson eds. *Liberalism for a New Century* (Berkeley and Los

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These two books remind readers of the protean nature of United States liberalism and raise the prospect that, after three decades of drift, it may be able to renew itself. *Liberalism for a New Century* aims to instigate a renewal based on reinstating core liberal values and policy commitments of an earlier time. The book's main thrust defends the democratic liberalism, concerned with economic citizenship and social justice, that progressives and liberals built from the early twentieth century through the 1940s. Editors Jumonville and Mattson and other authors fault mid-twentieth century liberals for losing faith in their own ideals (Alan Brinkley), abandoning formerly constructive relations with organised labour and the left (Michael Kazin), buying too much into identity politics (Jumonville and Mattson), forsaking the social gospel message that energized earlier progressive movements for an amoral secularism (Amy Sullivan), and offering a feckless response to the rise of the Right (Jennifer Burns). For most of these authors, liberalism's potential for revival in the twenty-first century as a broadly reformist ideology attuned to mainstream social and economic issues depends on liberals pulling back from these failings and returning to core New Deal-era liberal ideals.

Leslie Butler's *Critical Americans* introduces an influential group of late nineteenth century liberal intellectuals who were devoted to a different set of ideals. The four key figures are Charles Eliot Norton, James Russell Lowell, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and George William Curtis, who—among them—edited and wrote extensively for the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Century*, *Harpers Weekly*, *Harpers Monthly*, *Nation*, *Putnam's*, and (Higginson's favorite venue) *Women's Journal*, working to establish critical journalism as a force for elevating American intellectual and civic life. Initially men of letters, they were drawn as well to more broadly political questions and to a role as public moralists. In addition to marvelously detailed portraits of the central four, Butler provides fulsome side glances at *Nation* editor E.L. Godkin and at the core group's frequent English correspondents, among them John Stuart Mill, Leslie Stephens, and Frederic Harrison. No women figured in the group, where manliness—defined by upright character rather than athletic vigor and bellicosity—was a requirement for inclusion.

By placing these closely-linked careers in the context of trans-Atlantic reform, Butler aims to overturn entrenched representations of Victorian political intellectuals as mugwumpish “best men” and “genteel reformers,” put off by the rough and tumble of US politics. The formative experience for Butler's critical Victorians was the US Civil War, to which they came as opponents of the

Mexican-American War, passionate abolitionists (even, in Higginson's case, active John Brown supporters), and advocates for women's suffrage. The Civil War in their eyes presaged the blossoming of a true people's democracy that could inspire the democratization of all of Western civilization. Yet neither then nor later, in the 1890s, was theirs a vision of radical, populist (or Populist) democracy. It demanded sober reflection, moderation, and active cultivation by citizens of their full intellectual and spiritual capacities. This explains the importance these men assigned to informing public opinion on political matters. Their vision of an educative democracy included schooling newly freed black voters on equal terms. Supporters of Radical Reconstruction, they likened the Southern planter class to much-despised British aristocrats who had supported secession and continued to oppose suffrage expansion at home.

Butler adamantly rejects a depiction of these Gilded Age liberals as soulless defenders of possessive individualism. Although their principled desertion of the Republican Party in 1884 made them traitors in the eyes of party loyalists, it showed their determination to stand for liberal virtues of clean government, honest money, and low tariff. The critical Victorians would eventually lapse into despondency over US and British imperialism and bemoan the brutality practiced in the Philippine-American and Boer-British wars, but in their "mugwump" political moment, Butler argues, they achieved genuine coherence in their beliefs.

Yet one might argue that this coherence strangely excluded concern for some of the most serious social issues of the day. Butler grants these omissions with this comment: "The liberals' critique of Gilded Age politics included many blind spots. Their inattention to many of the challenges presented by urban poverty and the concentration of industrial power would cause 'New Liberals' and Progressives of a later generation to belittle the earlier reform vision as overly timid and naïve" (177). But the fact that her subjects essentially had no Social Question, that they ignored the most significant debates underway regarding economic policy, should have elicited a harsher judgment. Butler nevertheless excels in identifying the core values that her Gilded Age liberals did passionately defend.

The same can be said for the Jumonville-Mattson collection in its treatment of New Deal and Great Society liberals. But what a shift in emphasis occurred in core commitments between Butler's subjects and those later social liberals! The critical Victorians linked Americans' capacity for self-government to qualities of intellect, taste, empathy, and devotion to duty that cultural uplift could develop in individual citizens. For Jumonville and Mattson, mid-twentieth century liberals linked democracy to strong government, active in its defense of legal, political, economic, and social rights that would otherwise be denied. They defended liberty of conscience, a regulated capitalist market in which government ensured fairness, a generous welfare state, strong labour unions, and other independent sources of countervailing power. The concern for social and eco-

nomic equality missing among the critical Victorians provided the vital core of New Deal liberalism. Yet—these writers contend—the rise of Soviet power and the onset of the Cold War prompted liberals to cut off earlier close ties with democratic socialists, the 1930s Popular Front left, and Henry Wallace supporters, with whom they had largely earlier agreed.

As the source of liberalism's subsequent decline, *Liberalism for a New Century* points an accusing finger toward a specific segment of the more recent left. Although the New Left, the anti-war movement, and the rise of the Right get some credit, special blame is reserved for an “academic and cultural left” (ACL) that shifted its focus to cultural politics, beguiling credulous youth. Influenced by postmodernism, the ACL preached the fluidity of meaning, championed minorities, and cultivated a policy bias in favor of the “other” that “derailed important liberal commitments and increased the American populations’ animosity toward liberalism”(7). Even Jennifer Burns’ nuanced chapter on liberalism and the conservative imagination, though granting more agency to the Rise of the Right, still credits the liberals’ shift from class to culture, and from emphasizing economic issues and the role of the state to stressing moral issues, for liberals’ inability to respond effectively to the appeal of neoconservatism.

Not surprisingly in a multi-authored work, the volume’s contributors disagree on elements of this overarching narrative. Berkowitz and John Diggins demur regarding US liberalism’s ideological pedigree. Berkowitz argues for a central paradox in the long history of liberalism: a passion for liberty and order moved nineteenth century liberals, whereas mid-twentieth century “progressive liberals” prized equality above liberty and turned statist to achieve it, undermining the necessary balance between democracy and individual rights. Diggins attacks left-leaning professors for ignoring the teachings of early American political thinkers, who wisely designed a state able to restrain the passions that would motivate humans much of the time. From Mattson, Jumonville, and other key contributors, the academic and cultural left gets most of the credit for weakening liberalism’s hold on the national imagination. “The ACL embraced the worst excesses of ‘political correctness,’ affirmative action, and identity politics,” (7) the editors charge, and their attacks on traditional beliefs and values alienated god-fearing, country-loving Middle Americans. We do get a careful critique, drawn by Mona Harrington, of the serious flaws in what passed in liberalism’s heyday, and continues to pass, for a family policy. Yet the volume’s framing seems excessively to discount as proper concerns of liberals the subordination of women, the gay bashing, the institutionalized racism, and the Euro-American chauvinism that were routine aspects of life at mid-century. Indeed, the arguments presented here against the ACL are more than a little reminiscent of attacks on the professoriate, and on liberal and progressive intellectuals more generally that have typically come not from Middle Americans, but rather from disgruntled figures on the academic (e.g., David Horowitz) and cultural right.

In the final section of *Liberalism for a New Century*, Danny Postel and Michael Tomasky extend the postmortem for liberalism to foreign policy in ways that support the general tenor of the earlier chapters: the liberalism of the New Deal and the Great Society was better, more authentic, more universally appealing than the anti-establishment, anti-capitalist, postmodern, anything-goes post-1960s liberalism of relativism, fluid identity, and lifestyle choice. Postel argues that Iranian intellectuals' fondness for Habermas, Popper, and Arendt reveals how appealing an older, Enlightenment-based liberalism of individual freedom, political democracy, and rights remains in much of the non-Western world. Tomasky contends that liberal hawks who supported the Iraq war and liberal doves who opposed it need to own up to their mistakes: for hawks, their defense of the invasion as a justifiable effort to establish democracy, when George Bush actually intended to establish a client state in the Middle East; and for doves, the view that any foreign intervention whatsoever is always illegitimate. Both groups should resubscribe to a pre-Bush liberal internationalism, argues Tomasky, in which fighting wars to right unacceptable wrongs may at times be both legitimate and necessary.

The strongest (and most controversial) message of the edited volume is a call for return to liberalism at its best and brightest, when liberals achieved significant steps toward a welfare state, established (*de jure*) full civil rights, set in place international structures and policies that ultimately defeated communism, and retained a diverse middle and working class base in the Democratic Party. Thus the volume can be read as an endorsement of the vision that placed Barack Obama in the White House, promising to withdraw US forces from Iraq, redress wrongs perpetrated at Guantanamo, achieve universal health care, restore essential economic regulation, and deal with global warming. Yet the serious defense of workers' job and organizing rights that these writers see as essential to liberalism has not had top billing in the Obama agenda; nor, it currently appears, will a significant redistribution of income and wealth be a major goal of the rebuilding of economic regulation. Perhaps more renewal will be needed.

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Louis Adamic, *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America* (Edinburgh, Oakland, West Virginia: AK Press, 2008).

In 1931, as the Great Depression gathered steam, Louis Adamic published *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America*. Adamic, a self-taught Slovenian immigrant who came to the United States in 1913, drew on extensive experience as a wage labourer and his wide reading of literature on the labour movement to create a compelling "popular" account of violence in American labour history.