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Margins of Disorder: New Liberalism and the Crisis of European Consciousness

Gal Gerson

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The transformation of liberal political theory in the late 19th and early 20th century remains a fertile subject for research in the history of political thought. A number of important studies have demonstrated that in this period so-called 'classical' liberalism underwent a significant crisis and rebirth, triggered by the rise of democratic politics, the sharpening of class conflict, and shifts in scientific understanding. The characteristic features of liberal ideology were reconsidered, perhaps above all the emphasis on individual freedom as consisting in the silence of the law, and instead liberal theories began to stress the importance of the community for the flourishing of the individual and the need for positive action by the state to secure effective individual liberty. This 'new liberalism', associated in Britain with the theorists and publicists Leonard Hobhouse and John Hobson (and more indirectly with philosophers like TH Green), helped to make the intellectual climate more hospitable to the claims of the working class and even influenced the eventual emergence of the welfare state.

In *Margins of Disorder*, Gal Gerson takes up this now familiar story and expands our understanding of it with an arresting study of the relationship between the new liberalism and the rise of counter-enlightenment ideas. Tempting as it is to view the critique of modernity as simply the latest intellectual fashion fresh from the boutiques of Paris, in fact postmodernism has a long and complex history. As Gerson demonstrates, many of the key ideas first emerged in the 'revolt against reason' of the late 19th century, forming a significant and neglected influence on the development of the new liberalism. By the 'revolt against reason', Gerson means 'the late 19th-century intellectual reaction that composed Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Emile



Durkheim, Henri Bergson, the new genetics, crowd sociology' and other related trends. This cluster of counter-enlightenment theories fostered, among other things, scepticism about the objectivity of knowledge; the uncoupling of instrumental rationality from its service to certain objectively specifiable ends; doubts about the possibility of universal or shared meaning between individuals and groups and in general emphasized the powerful role of the irrational, the particular and the subjective in shaping individuals and communities (pp. 14–8). How could such antimodernist themes possibly support the robustly rationalist and universalist aspirations of the new liberals? Gerson argues that Hobhouse, Hobson and their allies actively engaged with these intellectual trends, seeking to integrate certain of these insights into their own theories while blocking their more destructive implications in order to salvage a comprehensive and rationally justifiable basis for a progressive liberalism. In doing so, they preserved within their thought, in Hobson's words, a 'margin of disorder' that could accommodate some of the plurality and subjectivism highlighted by *fin-de-siècle* thinkers.

In particular, Gerson examines three important issues raised by counter-enlightenment thought and directly confronted by the new liberals. First, disturbing evidence about the nature of individual and crowd psychology was incorporated into liberal theory. Le Bon and Freud suggested that individuals and groups could be governed by irrational and contradictory impulses. Progressive liberals in turn accepted the multiple layers and contradictions contained within individual minds and society as a whole, but nonetheless saw these complex elements as capable of reconciliation into a systematic but differentiated whole. Second, a lively debate about evolution and the social implications of biology was provoked by the apparent discontinuity and unpredictability of the natural world disclosed in Mendelian genetics and Bergson's vitalism. In the face of this challenge, liberals maintained the possibility of some order immanent within nature's complexity, or else saw a parallel between a natural realm lacking a telos and the free development of the individual in a liberal society. Third, the introduction of the insights of functionalist anthropology into the study of classics challenged the new liberalism's reliance on ancient Athens as a significant influence on Enlightenment-style democratic and egalitarian thought. Functionalist analysis saw the apparent rationalism of antiquity as masking an underlying ritualistic and collectivist culture, an emphasis that undermined casual progressive assumptions about modernity's relationship to the classics. Nonetheless, it also enabled new liberals to stress that a significant advantage of their philosophy over earlier liberal thought was that, like the ancients, they took account of the need to balance individuality with sociability.

One question that arises in response to Gerson's stimulating exploration of these themes is the extent to which the lessons of the 'revolt against reason'



were absorbed by the new liberalism alone, of all the currents of progressive political thought at this time. Much of the literature on the new liberalism stresses its similarity to other broadly left-of-centre political languages in Britain, notably various forms of democratic socialism, and it would be interesting to investigate whether there was a shared 'progressive' set of responses to the intellectual ferment at century's end. Gerson seems to resist this move, at least insofar as it would imply that the new liberals' coping strategy was also replicated in socialist thought. Instead, he assumes that Fabian socialism reached conclusions on mind and society sharply opposed to those of the new liberals, since the Fabians favoured a 'Platonic order' in the form of 'an expert-ruled mass society', and liberals endorsed a more participative and pluralistic regime (p. 38). Gerson illustrates this point by suggesting that different theories of mind shaped contrasting new liberal and Fabian ideas about social policy. In my view, this overstates the distance between the new liberalism and Fabianism. Their underlying theories about the individual and society had some important similarities (contrary to popular perception the early Fabians did actually believe in democracy and the importance of the free development of the individual) and their theories of welfare do not seem to me as distinct as Gerson suggests. Both saw society as a network of reciprocal rights and obligations and both sought a state that adequately recognized the social conditions of citizenship. One extension of the analysis presented in this book, then, might well consider if other left-of-centre ideological groups took a similar view to the new liberals on the significance of the revolt against reason.

This consideration is not intended to detract from the author's achievement: he has written a very subtle, complex and well researched book, and it is only possible here to give a flavour of the originality of Gerson's account. *Margins of Disorder* raises important issues both for historians of political thought and contemporary theorists, revealing a new perspective on the history of liberal ideas, and providing fascinating historical evidence relevant to present-day discussions about the relationship between liberalism and its postmodern critics.

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