

The Crisis of Liberalism: The Prelude to Trump, Fred Siegel, Telos Press, 2020, 284 pp., \$29.95 paperback.

Liberalism: How We Got Here

Gene Dattel

Fred Siegel's *The Crisis of Liberalism* is a valuable collection of articles ranging over forty years. These demonstrate his firm grasp of reality and his mastery of the complex underpinnings of intellectual thought. He traces the evolution of liberalism/progressivism to its current leftwing extremes.

The urban landscape is Siegel's passion and a thriving middle-class is his aspiration. Siegel chronicles the elite-led descent of liberalism into a statist model, the insidious rise of the separatism embodied in multiculturalism, the advent of the "riot ideology," the suppression of free speech and vibrant interchange of ideas, the

demise of academic integrity, the morass of urban politics, the ascendance of anti-American sentiment, the dismantling of middle class norms, and the displacement of a healthy national cohesiveness by unaccountable globalism.

This former Democratic liberal moved decidedly to conservatism when liberalism became a destructive utopian fantasy. The descent was orchestrated by a "top-bottom" coalition, with elites at the top and the non-white poor at the bottom. The middle class was excluded. The elite consists of academics, lawyers, the media, and the rich. The poor were black Americans, immigrants, Hispanics, and any aggrieved group. The result is a leftist centrally planned welfare state with an underclass dependent on the federal government, the destruction of the black family unit, and the creation of a separatist society politically based on ethnic and racial groups.

The Liberal Top-Bottom Coalition

Siegel begins with intellectuals—the all-but-forgotten Herbert Croly, novelist Sinclair Lewis, and H.G. Wells, all of whose influence soared

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in the 1920s. Croly, in *The Promise of American Life* (1909) blamed capitalism for economic individualism and income inequality. He trusted an elite, a “skilled professional leadership,” to thwart the influence of ordinary people and “self-interested businessmen.” The hierarchical German bureaucracy was the model for a “fourth branch of government, “the planning department of progressive democratic states.” Sinclair Lewis’s disdain for the middle class and glorification of an elite permeated his novels, in which he mocked the middle class, typified by main street American Rotarians, while yearning for a European-like intellectual “clerisy.” His Middle America was an obsessively materialistic failure. The “back-slapping Rotarian” was transformed into an embryonic fascist. H.G. Wells “gave up on democracy” in favor of a “vanguard to carry forward a postcapitalist social order.” In 1932, he proposed a “Liberal Fascisti,” “enlightened Nazis,” and the “formation of a greater Communist Party.”

Along came F.D.R.’s Brain Trust, Siegel explains, to install the experts. Siegel would draw a direct unambiguous link from New Deal experts to John F. Kennedy’s “the best and brightest” to today’s infatuation with social engineering in the promised land of socialism. Incredibly, the

New Deal would create, in 1934, a National Planning Board which would study four totalitarian countries—Germany, Italy, Russia, and Japan—as models. This “think tank” within the Department of the Interior was disbanded in 1943.

The rise of Japan and China would add momentum to this misplaced respect for centralized planning in the 1970s through the 2000s. Siegel recognized the bizarre “support for a soft authoritarianism . . . reminiscent of the 1930s,” during which favorable opinion of “Stalin’s Soviet experiment and Nazi Germany” arose. In the contemporary version, the *New York Times’s* Tom Friedman has preferred China’s “reasonably enlightened group” of leaders to America’s messy democracy.

Siegel dubs this unholy alliance “the liberal top down coalition.” A rich, sophisticated, educated, perhaps well-intentioned, highly credentialed upper crust was positioned to dominate the poor by government programs and rhetoric with no accountability. Hillary Clinton famously designated the non-elite the “deplorables.” Barack Obama condescendingly spoke of the “bitter” people of small town America. The country had moved from the constructive liberal origins of social security legislation to

the debilitating spectacle of the welfare state.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan: The Well-Intentioned Visionary

New York is Siegel's central focus in this descent of liberalism to "soft authoritarianism." (In *The Future Once Happened Here*, 1997 his analysis extends to D.C., L.A., and generally to America's major cities.) Siegel deftly sketches the characters who figured largely in this drama. New Yorker Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who served as Assistant Secretary of Labor for both Kennedy and Johnson, was, for Siegel, a "genuinely original and visionary thinker." Nevertheless, the eclectic Moynihan was flawed.

In 1965, the "Moynihan Report" correctly called major attention to the "parlous condition of the black family" which "is approaching complete breakdown." Moynihan ignited a torrent of criticism from the left. Among Moynihan's detractors, William Ryan, in *Blaming the Victim* (1971), codified victimhood, not personal responsibility, as the all-encompassing cause of the dysfunctional black family. Moynihan was shattered by the vicious assault and "teetered on the edge of a nervous breakdown." This would be the beginning of the left's ongoing suppression of dissent from its agenda.

Moynihan's remedy—billions spent on rectifying black subordination and affirmative action to speed the path to equality—was implemented. The massively expensive welfare programs of the "Great Society" ensued. Siegel concludes:

Moynihan's great mistake—allowing the self-serving panoply of government programs to survive—helped displace the Burkean liberalism . . . Statist liberalism's half-century of efforts and millions in expenditures, [Shelby] Steele rightly observes, has produced a society fit for continued second-class citizenship.

Mayor John V. Lindsay

John V. Lindsay, New York's mayor from 1966 to 1973, would bear the brunt of Siegel's disdain. The handsome, Yale-educated WASP was a triumph of form over substance. The photogenic mayor was all "hubris and hype." Siegel unsparingly eviscerates Lindsay's policies—the doubling of New York's welfare rolls, the series of crippling taxes, the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs, the rising crime rates, the massive increase in debt, and the orchestration of the demise of the public school system.

Siegel condemns Lindsay and former “brain truster” McGeorge Bundy for their role in ruining New York’s public school system. Chaos was created when they “turned over the Ocean Hill-Brownsville (Brooklyn) school district to black nationalists” in the decentralization process which created community control. The school’s black principal proceeded to “fire the white teachers and violently intimidate others.” A teachers’ strike and racial turmoil resulted. Black organizations like the African American Teachers Association, dismissive of Western-style education, advocated a program based on distinct black values. They professed a vague attachment to cooperation, community, and ethnic-group consciousness, with seemingly no interest in mastering reading, writing, and mathematical skills. Black culture precluded the competition inherent in individualism and a merit system and fostered a separatist, even belligerent attitude toward whites. Disruptive classroom behavior was condoned. “The damage wrought by Ocean Hill-Brownsville,” he wrote, “is still not undone.”

Lindsay was “not solely responsible” for New York’s brush with bankruptcy in 1975, but his alliance with the unaccountable public service unions contributed mightily to the financial catastrophe. Siegel would

surely deem the current New York mayor Bill de Blasio’s ineptness comparable to that of John Lindsay.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg: The Super-Rich

The book focuses on the staggering wealth propelling the elitist takeover of liberalism. George Soros, Michael Bloomberg, Mark Zuckerberg, and a host of tech billionaires are pilloried by Siegel. In 2007, he took aim at “Money-bags Mike” Bloomberg, mayor of New York City (2002-2013): “He uses his fortune to buy interest groups, who can then impose their agenda on the rest of the population,” Siegel wrote. With a plus \$50 billion bankroll, Bloomberg wasted over one billion dollars in a humiliating run for president in the 2020 election. Then, he sprinkled \$100 million around to assist Democratic candidates.

Bloomberg often violated the values he previously held in a grab for power. In order to garner votes, he apologized profusely to a black church for policing policies he championed during his administration. His conservative views, as expressed in his 1997 memoir, *Bloomberg by Bloomberg*, were abandoned. His disdain for identity politics, multiculturalism, and political correctness succumbed to rank opportunism. Bloomberg, the businessman patriot, revered

assimilation and deplored multiculturalism which he deemed separatism. He slammed bi-lingual education as “misguided,” while he favored forcing “immigrant children to learn [the English] . . . they’ll need for success.” Siegel’s profile of Bloomberg in 2007 was on target and a perfect guide to the conduct of the future politician. Bloomberg who spent billions to buy votes had traveled a long way from the Cub Scout who escorted the elderly mother of Amelia Earhart, the legendary aviation pioneer, to the voting booth in Medford, Massachusetts. “Bloomberg,” Siegel warned, “is the personification of inequality, of a social hierarchy in which the super-rich seem to have seceded from the rest of the country.”

Mayor Kurt Schmoke: The Racial Elite

Siegel does occasionally discuss the experiences of other cities to bring out specific points. Kurt Schmoke, the Baltimore mayor from 1987 to 1999, Rhodes Scholar, graduate of Harvard Law School, and former member of the Yale governing body—epitomized the ascendance of blacks in education and other powerful institutions in America during the decades following the Great Society. Despite such formidable credentials, awards, private sector connections and positions of

power, Schmoke and other black leaders have done little to diminish crime and to ameliorate the endemic issues of black inner-city culture.

Siegel documents the ineffectual reign of Schmoke. He campaigned on a platform of “bringing business into government” via federal funds. His connection with legendary real estate developer, James Rouse, spawned an attempt to rid the West Side neighborhood, Sandtown-Winchester, of poverty. It failed. “Baltimore,” wrote Siegel, “repelled small businesses unable to cut deals with city hall.” Taxes doubled, the murder rate surged, and drugs continued to proliferate. During his three terms, “Baltimore—endowed with multiple federal programs to incentivize business development—lost 56,000 jobs and became a city of transfer payments fueled by nonprofits and government.” Schmoke could only provide “speeches and slogans” without results. The 2015 Baltimore riots attest to the ineffectual leadership of the black Ivy League celebrity in the face of urban decay.

The Riot Ideology in the Top-Bottom Coalition

Siegel coined the phrase “riot ideology” which seeks to justify racial street violence, looting, and destruction as an acceptable means

of extorting funds from the federal government. Militant blacks of the 1960s understood the value of riots in the 1960s. As early as 1945, black sociologists wrote in the seminal *Black Metropolis*: “So far, most [white] Chicagoans view Negro-white relations negatively—solely in terms of preventing a riot.” John Lindsay “used the fear of . . . rioting to expand welfare rolls.” “[I]n the 1980s Washington, D.C. mayor Marion Barry . . . articulated an explicitly racial version of collective bargaining . . . a threat that without . . . federal funds, urban activists would unleash wave after wave of racial violence.” Siegel perceptively observes:

The first version of the “riot ideology” assumed that not only cities but also whites could be reformed; the new version assumes that America is beyond redemption and that the black inner city needs to segregate itself from the larger society (with the exception of federal welfare funds which should continue to flow.)

Siegel explains we have now come a long way from the political backlash that arose against the “riot ideology” after the Rodney King riots in 1992, riots that resulted in strict welfare

work requirements, “broken windows” policing methods, and mandatory sentencing laws. In the America of the 2020s, by contrast, the riot ideology has been effective. Riots of the last few years are now deemed justified social unrest; looting is termed reparations for past injustice. And billions have been handed over to activist groups from all levels of government, the private sector, and non-profits.

Black America and its left-wing allies added shame to its potent racially coercive riot ideology, now far easier to do with the help of social media. Any opposition to its agenda instantly provokes cries of “racism,” which silences any person who dares challenge its agenda.

Conclusion

The path toward a socialist fantasy beckons the current elite toward totalitarian Communist China. The list of those who have celebrated China includes the *New York Times*'s Tom Friedman, the investment banker and Obama car czar, Steven Ratner, and Andy Stern, the former head of the Service Employees' International Union. The Obama ally Stern is direct: “[C]apitalistic pluralism” is headed for the “trash heap of history . . . The Chinese . . . get things done.”

The 1960s could have seen a mass entrance into the mainstream

for black Americans, the most conspicuous segment of the poor. A not insignificant number of blacks did, but too many remain mired in poverty. “Blacks, who finally had the doors of opportunity opened to them,” Siegel despairs, “[dispensed with] the key values necessary for success—thrift, self-control, and personal responsibility.”

Siegel successfully charts the course to the present day’s partisan and fragmented America. Anyone interested in learning why a vibrant adaptive democratic republic is now a society where individual responsibility is denigrated, and anti-Americanism, anti-Western, and anti-white sentiments grip our most powerful institutions, could benefit handsomely from this book.