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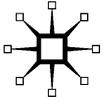
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Politics without Reason

The Perfect World and the Liberal Ideal

David P. Levine

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POLITICS WITHOUT REASON

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One of the most deeply rooted traits of the modern soul is doubt of the good, the smile of superiority and mockery, the passion for losing one's innocence.

Pierre Manent

Contents

| | |
|----------------|----|
| <i>Preface</i> | ix |
|----------------|----|

Part I

| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| 1 Introduction | 3 |
| 2 Reason, Desire, and the Self | 13 |

Part II

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| 3 The Flight from Reason | 39 |
| 4 Family Values | 57 |
| 5 Moral Renewal | 79 |
| 6 Deception | 97 |

Part III

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| 7 Desire without Limit | 115 |
| 8 The Ultimate Fulfillment | 133 |
| 9 Greed, Morality, and Corruption | 151 |
| 10 Corporate Corruption | 169 |

Part IV

| | |
|-----------------------|-----|
| 11 An Imperfect World | 189 |
|-----------------------|-----|

| | |
|--------------|-----|
| <i>Notes</i> | 193 |
|--------------|-----|

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| <i>References</i> | 197 |
|-------------------|-----|

| | |
|--------------|-----|
| <i>Index</i> | 203 |
|--------------|-----|

Preface

Some years ago, I attended a conference at which the keynote speaker proudly announced that she had spent her life “bashing liberalism,” by which she had in mind so far as I could tell the idea that the individual conceived separately from the group ought to form the normative basis for shaping social institutions. We will not consider pride in a lifetime of liberalism bashing surprising in a period during which liberal has become a term of abuse, but we may wonder how a term the dictionary defines as synonymous with open-mindedness, generosity, and reason could have taken on such a role in public discourse. This is the question I propose to explore in this book.

Let me say from the outset that in doing so it is not my intent to offer a defense of liberalism. Since my concern is with animosity toward liberalism, I am only concerned with the liberal ideal so far as specific elements in it provoke that animosity; and indeed it is those specific elements that are my concern more than liberalism itself. Although I think the intensity of the attack on liberalism does at times foster a distorted view of the liberal ideal so that it will make a more suitable target, this does not mean that I consider those who devote their lives to bashing liberalism altogether off the mark since liberalism does indeed contain to a significant degree the idea they find difficult to tolerate. Yet, though my purpose here is not to defend liberalism, my interest in the attack on liberalism does express concern over trends in public life associated with that attack, trends that involve flight from reason and repression of the self. These trends, if powerful enough, can foster the hatred and violence so prominent in public life

and about which many have been rightly concerned. I think the question about liberalism takes us to the heart of these trends and because of that deserves our close attention.

I also think that the usual approach to understanding political trends, an approach that focuses attention on the reality-based assessment of the consequences of policy for clearly defined interests, will serve us poorly in understanding the attack on liberalism. More important than calculations of consequences for well-defined ends are the hope-invested ideas that drive conduct and determine what can or cannot be thought and therefore what decisions and actions are or are not possible. My premise in writing this book is that political trends are driven by hope-invested ideas, and that the political trend expressed in the attack on liberalism is driven by a specific and powerful idea, which is the idea of the perfect world.

The idea of the perfect world and the hope embedded in it are not, however, expressed explicitly. What get expressed instead are simple propositions that hide as much or more than they reveal: “liberty is the design of nature;” what America needs is “moral renewal;” we need a leader who will “stay the course.” Although the propositions through which ideas are expressed may be held consciously and asserted with conviction, the ideas they express are neither well known nor clearly understood by even their most fervent exponents. Rather, these simple propositions express complex systems of thought, belief, and the emotions that indicate what is significant about them. It is such a system that I have in mind when I refer to the idea of the perfect world, an idea that I would argue has played a large role in shaping public life.

My interest in this book is in exploring the complex systems of thought expressed in the simple propositions that occupy so much of the space of public discourse. In exploring these systems of thought, my main concern is with understanding the hold they have over those who believe in them. In other words, my main concern is with the way in which people are attached to their ideas, where I take attachment to ideas to mean investment of emotional significance in them. Because my interest is in the matter of emotional attachment to ideas, my

method of interpretation appeals mainly to what we might refer to as the logic of emotional life. Put in brief, my interest is in how propositions and the ideas they represent express this logic. I take it as a premise that emotional life has a logic, however odd that may sound to those who would treat emotional experience and logic as orthogonal.

An important part of the logic of emotional life is the connection between ideas and the fantasies that more directly express the reasons those ideas exert such a powerful force. By fantasy I have in mind a wish-invested narrative of the self. On one level, politics is all about fantasy life. The problem is gaining access to this more primitive dimension of mental life and seeing how consciously articulated thoughts and ideas are connected to it. Considered more broadly, the complex system of thought I refer to by the term idea includes both the explicitly stated proposition and the unstated, and in many ways unknown, fantasy to which it is linked.

Since the ideas to be explored here are complex systems of thought, access to which is more or less restricted even to those who hold them, there can be no assurance that our interpretation of the ideas is the correct one. In the application of the logic of emotional life to specific phenomenon there is no method that can guarantee the validity of interpretations, which always remain speculative to a degree. Those readers who expect more than plausibility will therefore be disappointed by what I have to offer. I make no apology for this limitation, which in any case will not be overcome by applying the usual empirical methods to the subject matter explored here. The entire focus of the book is not on proving propositions or offering systematic empirical evidence for them, but on making interpretations plausible by exploring cases and examples, and by involving the reader in a process of thinking about them.

Material in chapter 11 appeared previously in *Human Relations* 58, 6 (2005) and material in chapter 9 was originally prepared for presentation at the Annual Symposium of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations, Haarlem, The Netherlands, June 2006.