
"Liberalism and the Left: Rethinking the Relationship"

A Symposium from RHR #71

Introduction

[Eliza Jane Reilly](#)

Participants:

[Eric Foner](#)

[Blanche Wiesen](#)

[Cook](#)

[Manning Marable](#)

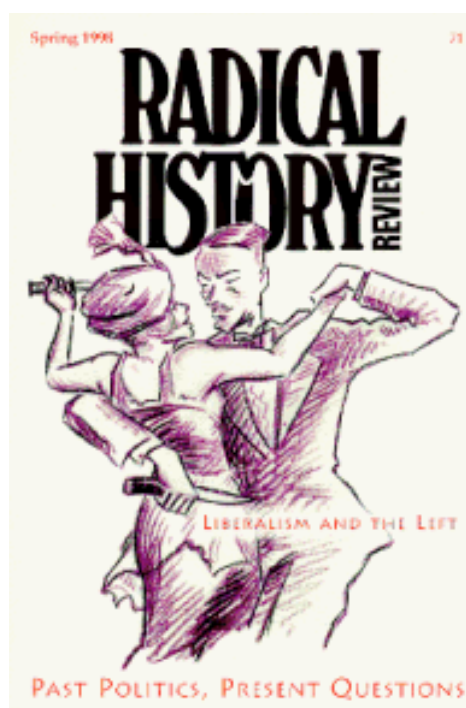
[Amber Hollibaugh](#)

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Introduction

Eliza Jane Reilly

The initial idea for organizing a forum on the relationship between liberalism and the left came shortly after one of the more dramatic manifestations of the collapse of the liberal consensus in U.S. politics--the 1994 midterm elections. This collapse is, if anything, more apparent today as we watch the Democratic Party distance itself from postwar liberalism's most characteristic commitments--the welfare state, affirmative action, and the rights of organized labor, to name just a few. The forum was designed with two goals in mind: First, to address the ways in which, for better or worse, this historic relationship has shaped and defined both parties to it; second, to consider whether or not liberalism in any way constitutes a "usable past" for the contemporary left.

As more than one person has pointed out, such a project is infinitely complicated by the fact that "liberalism" and "the left" are notoriously hazy terms, used to describe a wide range of often contradictory political positions. Nevertheless, our four speakers and three commentators have proven that it is possible to coherently address this complex topic from a number of perspectives. Taken together, they offer a collective portrait of the past, present, and future prospects of these competing, yet inextricable, traditions.

This inextricability is in part, as Eric Foner points out, an outgrowth of their common origins in the eighteenth century's revolutionary strivings for individual liberty. Robert Westbrook sees an even closer bond, in that the left's struggles for civil and political equality--from Susan B. Anthony to Martin Luther King, Jr.--have always been grounded in the liberal assumption of universal and inalienable human rights.

Blanche Wiesen Cook, however, demands that we judge the liberal political order, particularly since World War II, not by its unrealized ideals but by its deeds, and in particular its decision to "smash the left" during the Cold War. "Without the principled, creative, and imaginative

left" to rein it in, cold war liberalism rationalized domestic political repression, untrammled militarism, and imperial aggression as the price of American democracy. Gerald Horne agrees with Cook's conclusions about the recent past, but goes further in proposing that liberalism's historical excesses were not contradictions at all, but inevitable consequences of the white supremacy and patriarchy deeply embedded in the Enlightenment project.

Sara Evans and Amber Hollibaugh remind us of how important gender and sexuality continue to be as determinants of political identity. Together with Manning Marable they also remind us that there is more than a little irony in the left's condemnations of "identity politics"--which have now taken the place of sympathy with foreign revolutions as the villain in the declensionist narratives of the new left. But if the rise of identity politics constituted a fall for the left, then it was a fortunate fall, for it is in no small measure due to black nationalism, feminism, and the gay rights movement that those previously excluded groups are now political forces to be reckoned with. Evans also proposes that the identity-based movement of feminism, which has long combined its gender-based critique of both traditions with practical engagement, problem solving, and dialogue, may offer the most productive model for rethinking the relationship between liberalism and the left.

That so little was said explicitly about class in this dialogue (aside from references to the increasing inequities wrought by the new global economy) does imply an unexpressed consensus, at least among historians, that the definition and constituency of the left will proceed from a basis other than one's relations to the means of production. On the other hand, Westbrook's eye-opening insight, that embedded within the oft-cited liberal distinction between public and private identities is another, perhaps more relevant, distinction between dependent and independent classes of individuals, suggests that we may have to reopen the question of class as part of the task of thinking beyond liberalism. Indeed, the new energy and expanded purview of the labor movement indicates that this is already happening. The "dependent/independent" distinction may have new and unexpected consequences in this era of global capital, as fewer workers do a larger share of the work, even "professional" workers are proletarianized, and employment at a living wage, or even employment of any kind, is increasingly the privilege of those with advanced education and skills.

The liberal order that began with the New Deal is over, but endings are always beginnings as well, and the institutional disintegration of liberalism may represent a long-awaited window of opportunity for the left to reassert its intellectual leadership on matters of economic and social policy. This is, in essence, what Hollibaugh proposes in her talk, which reflects on the new openness that at least one bastion of traditional liberalism, the labor movement, is showing towards left-wing activists of every stripe, including the often-mocked and discredited left academics. We can only hope that her optimism about the political power of dialogue, and her confidence in the left's ability to lead, will be contagious.

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