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# Liberalism and the Retreat from Politics, by William J. Newman

Charles S. Hyneman  
*Indiana University*

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# BOOK REVIEWS

LIBERALISM AND THE RETREAT FROM POLITICS. By William J. Newman. New York: George Braziller. 1964. Pp. XV, 190. \$5.00.

This is a book about, and for, people living in the United States who are trapped in a cage and have little or no prospect of ever getting out of it. The enslaved population is not just the Negro, those who are unemployed and destined to remain unemployed in this affluent society, or any of the other categories of people you think of as underprivileged. Equally in bondage (or on the edge of it) are you, me, and all other well heeled and articulate citizens of the United States who have not fought or slickered their way into that small elite group which exploits the rest of the population.

If you have been unaware of your bonds, ponder the angry outcry of Emile Capouya,<sup>1</sup> one of many who recognize their desperate condition but also one of a few who now see a slim chance that they may some day break through to freedom. Mr. Capouya is excited to remark that the current protest and resistance of American Negroes "gives me hope for the vast underprivileged majority to which I myself belong, the affluent poor-whites, those helots, servants, and sutlers of the modern state. With the example of the Negro before them, there is hope that they too will read the Declaration and the Constitution, take heart of grace, and determine on organizing their public business in a manner more nearly manlike."<sup>2</sup>

In the book under review, Professor Newman brings together several pictures of American society as seen by "social critics" of liberal or left commitment. They are not all of common vision, but it seems fair to say that virtually all of them agree that the American society "is acutely hostile to the individual rather than a place in which significant acts can and should occur, and which gives meaning and direction to human existence."<sup>3</sup> American Society resembles a supermarket and "as a supermarket, a cornucopia constantly supplying goods, [it] is divided into two worlds, one being an upper world of bureaucratic power and the other a lower world of individual anarchy. . . . The upper world allows no significant choice because it is only meaningless activity; the lower

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1. Capouya, Book Review, *Saturday Review*, May 16, 1964, p. 43.

2. *Ibid.*

3. P. 68.

cannot create a meaningful activity because it lacks the attributes of form, structure, and institutions."<sup>4</sup> Neither those who constitute the bureaucratic overlay nor those who drift in the currents that are constantly stirred by the bureaucrats stand any chance of introducing significant change into their social environment. All are caught and entangled in a system that has built into it unyielding defenses against invention, innovation, and change of direction. There is, it follows, no freedom in the United States for any but a very few. At the peak of the two-sectored pyramid are a few who have the will and the power to alter the course of important events. At the bottom, a growing number enjoy at least an illusion of freedom, having won some relief from the boredom of conformity by withdrawal from their restrictive environment (these are the beatniks) or by open rebellion against it (these are the hipsters and juvenile delinquents). Between the power elite and the conforming mass is the layer of bureaucratic insolence consisting mainly of men and women who think it a privilege to exist as "helots, servants, and sutlers of the modern state," but numbering a few who have tunneled their way to freedom as one supposes Mr. Capouya to be about to do if he has not already tasted free air.

This ugly scene is not the American society which Professor Newman sees about him but one which he finds in the writings of certain contemporary social critics. In combining their descriptive accounts, he runs the risk of presenting a composite view which none of the critics will acknowledge as his own. The result is worth the risk. The organization, style, and precise statement of the book testify to an honest search for evidence, a conscientious evaluation of evidence, and an imaginative projection of evidence about beliefs and behavior into judgments about social consequences. Anyone who can be satisfied by a summary account of contemporary social criticism ought to find Newman's book fully worth its price. Those who want to hear about their condition from men who write in greatest despair or greatest anger will be wise to start their reading with three books which figure prominently in Newman's analysis: GOODMAN, *GROWING UP ABSURD* (1960),<sup>5</sup> MILLS, *THE POWER ELITE* (1956),<sup>6</sup> RIESMAN, DENNEY & GLAZER, *THE LONELY CROWD* (1950).<sup>7</sup>

Newman examines the campaigns and strategies (they are few in number) which the social critics recommend to Americans who recognize

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4. P. 69.

5. Cited p. 58.

6. Cited p. 50.

7. Cited p. 43.

their desperate condition and are prepared to strike for freedom. They include retreat to personal autonomy (deliberate choice to conform or not to conform), withdrawal from the general society to form distinctive sub-societies (the way of the beatnik and the way of the street gang), and organized protest and resistance (exemplified by present day tactics of the Negro). Newman finds little promise in any of these strategies. "The freedom they offer may be the only one possible today, but if so, it is a most impoverished and fragile one."<sup>8</sup> They can contribute significantly to realization of the state which contemporary social critics call freedom only if they are combined with the political action by which Americans traditionally have controlled and used their government.

It is his analysis and evaluation of possible strategies and tactics that I find least satisfying in Newman's book. This is due partly to his determination to wrap up in the word "freedom" enigmas and dilemmas that I think require differentiation and opposition to one another, and partly to his failure to appraise socially induced conformity as a glue that joins individuals into a society and makes cooperative living a possibility. But my dissatisfaction stems also from a treatment of traditional political methods and alternative action programs which I find much too brusque. Take, as an example, the way of the Marchers—the "more nearly manlike" manner which Mr. Capouya found so admirable in the current civil rights campaign and which he recommended as a model for all of the well-fed but spiritually impoverished sutlers of the modern state. Narrow the case down to the articulate intellectual who is not content to advertise his liberation from conformity by the dress, decorations, and manners of the beatnik. What will the conforming population be confronted with if the non-conforming intellectual engages in "guerilla warfare in time of peace?"<sup>9</sup> If his protest is against the moral code, will he be content simply to parade his willing partner about the county square, or will his calculations of response require him to give more conclusive demonstrations in public places? Will his lie-downs and his sit-ins be carefully separated from his compensated employments, or may he carry his protest into his job by acts of sabotage? If the latter, must we suppose that he will deliberately label as "agrarian reformer" the organizer and leader that he knows to be bent on seizure of power by violent means? If the latter, how is the conforming public to calculate when and to what extent it may place confidence in professional ethics? And if confidence in professional ethics is breached, how are you and I and other conformers to differentiate between the peace time guerilla

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8. P. xiv.

9. P. 138.

and the revolutionary whose goal is destruction of our system rather than its reform?

My wants could have been satisfied only by a considerable extension of the book which Professor Newman chose to write. No doubt he had good reason for leaving undone what I would have urged him to do. It is possible that my sensibilities have been dulled by the experience of having been so long one of the biggest fools in a fool's paradise.

CHARLES S. HYNEMAN†

POWER AND POLITICS IN LABOR LEGISLATION. By Alan K. McAdams. New York: Columbia University Press. 1964. Pp. 346. \$7.50.

In 1949, the publication of Stephen K. Bailey's *Congress Makes a Law*,<sup>1</sup> a study of the passage of a full employment statute, was recognized by political scientists and other students of the legislative processes to be a piece of frontier research. Bailey made no pretentious claims for his study. He had set himself the task of exploring a decision while it was in the process of being made. He provided us with a single case, explored in depth and interpreted with insight. The reader of Bailey's volume obtained a "feel" for legislative and interest group politics which most of us, cut off from the daily experience of life in the halls of power, lacked, however sophisticated our intellectual awareness of the processes of decision-making might have been. After Bailey's study was published, a number of other case studies of legislative decision-making supplemented the description which he provided for us. Alan K. McAdams' *Power and Politics in Labor Legislation* adds another brick to the edifice of case studies.

The title of Professor McAdams' study leads the reader to expect more of the volume than can be found in it. It is concerned with a particular, though very complex, legislative decision—the passage of the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959. It is written, in McAdams' words, for "the general public, or more accurately . . . that anonymous but hopefully large group of readers, the 'intelligent laymen'."<sup>2</sup> It was written "to inform the reader about the processes of his government and, in turn, the impact of the government on certain aspects of the economy, using as a vehicle a law which aroused passions

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† Professor of Government, Indiana University.

1. BAILEY, CONGRESS MAKES A LAW (1949).  
2. P. vii.