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Liberalism and Social Control

The New Class' Will to Power

Kevin Carson

May 2000

Twentieth century liberalism, as an ideology of social control, goes back to the Progressive movement in this country and Fabianism in Britain. Its primary base of support was the New Class of social engineers, planners, technocrats and “helping professionals” who saw themselves as divinely appointed to manage the lower orders for their own good. Although the term “New Class” was coined by Milovan Djilas to describe the bureaucratic collectivism of communist society, it is well suited for the ruling class under welfare state liberalism. Orwell’s description of this class is as good as any.

The new aristocracy was made up for the most part of bureaucrats, scientists, technicians, trade-union organizers, publicity experts, sociologists, teachers, journalists, and professional politicians. These people, whose origins lay in the salaried middle class and the upper grades of the working class, had been shaped and brought together by the barren world of monopoly industry and centralized government.

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Walter Lippmann described the phenomenon from a much friendlier perspective in **Public Opinion**:

The Great Society had grown furiously and to colossal dimensions by the application of technical knowledge. It was made by engineers who had learned to use exact measurements and quantitative analysis. It could not be governed, men began to discover, by men who thought deductively about rights and wrongs. It could be brought under human control only by the technic which had created it. Gradually, then, the more enlightened directing minds have called in experts who were trained, or had trained themselves, to make parts of this Great Society intelligible to those who manage it. These men are known by all kinds of names, as statisticians, accountants, auditors, industrial counsellors, engineers of many species, scientific managers, personnel administrators, research men, "scientists," and sometimes just as plain private secretaries [pp. 233–234].

The central theme of this new class ideology, as Joel Spring put it [**Education and the Rise of the Corporate State** p. xiii], was that "*the good society meant the efficiently organized society that was producing the maximum amount of goods*"—and the most efficient social institutions for this purpose were "[l]arge organizational units and centralized government." The ordinary person was "*viewed as a raw material whose worth was determined by his contribution to the system.*"

Christopher Lasch, a left-wing populist who sounded at times suspiciously like a social conservative, defined the New Class ideology in terms of the ethos of "professionalism." The Jeffersonian ideal of the independent yeoman farmer or tradesman—a well-rounded citizen capable of competently handling all issues that affected his daily life—was, in the view of the Progressives,

obsolete. Instead, every aspect of life was to be “professionalized,” handed over to a class of “experts” protected from interference by the lower orders [**Revolt of the Elites; The Culture of Narcissism; The True and Only Heaven**]. This was unabashedly argued in **The Promise of American Life** by Herbert Croly, who sought to obtain “Jeffersonian ends with Hamiltonian means.” In this progressive manifesto, he praised “experts” and “intellectuals” in almost messianic terms.

Barton Bledstein admirably described this fetish [**The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America**, in Boyte]:

The citizen became a client whose obligation was to trust the professional. Legitimate authority now resided in special places like the courtroom, the classroom, and the hospital; and it resided in special words shared only by experts.

John McKnight, in a speech to the 1976 retreat of the Brainerd, Minn. Community Planning Organization [**Are the Helping Systems Doing More Harm Than Good?**] in Boyte pp. 173–174], described the ways the “helping professions” infantilize ordinary citizens.

When the capacity to define the problem becomes a professional prerogative, citizens no longer exist. The prerogative removes the citizen as problem definer, much less problem solver. It translates political functions into technical and technological problems.

It is important to remember that the New Class’ dream of professional control of the population did not arise in a vacuum. Liberal social engineering was not the only alternative to exploitation by robber barons. The working class in the nineteenth century had

its own culture and institutions, and was attempting to build a society in which workers themselves controlled all the things that affected their daily lives. Working class children in England sometimes attended “penny a week schools” taught by an aged or crippled worker; the artisan class contained a large proportion of self-educated people, some of them remarkably well-read in the political controversies of the time (many radical leaders were master tradesmen who found time to educate themselves during breaks in their work); friendly societies often subscribed in common to the radical press and met to read and debate [E. P. Thompson, Chapter Sixteen, “**Class Consciousness,**” in **The Making of the English Working Class**].

Genuine working class unions, built from the bottom up and controlled by workers themselves, aimed at direct workers’ control of the production process. Workers’ organizations for self-help and mutual aid included collections for charity, and “friendly societies” organized on a subscription basis to insure members against funerals and sickness [They are described in the later chapters of Kropotkin’s **Mutual Aid** and in E. P. Thompson’s chapter on “**Community**”]. So every function of the “progressive” welfare state so beloved of Arthur Schlesinger Jr. was already being attempted by the workers themselves—but organized from the bottom up, instead of handed down from on high by paternalistic liberals.

The main shortcomings of working class self-organization were those imposed from outside—i.e., lack of resources, and active suppression by the state. Had the working class been free to organize without interference by the state—and more importantly, had they had the full product of their labor to dispose of—their provisions for their own health, education and welfare would have been far superior to anything doled out by the state. But goo-goos like Schlesinger ignore the fact that the welfare state was created precisely in order to prevent the working class from organizing to keep the product of their own labor and control their work. The entire

Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward. **Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare** (New York: Vintage Books, 1971, 1993).

Joel Spring. **Education and the Rise of the Corporate State** (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

E.P. Thompson. **The Making of the English Working Class** (New York: Vintage Books, 1963, 1966).

Sidney and Beatrice Webb. **The Prevention of Destitution** (London, New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911).

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Gary Wolfram. "School to Work: A Large Step Down the Road to Serfdom," **Ideas on Liberty**, Sept. 1999.

"progressive" agenda in the twentieth century was oriented, not toward ending the framework of state policy that supported corporate rule, but increasing state intervention to make corporate rule more bearable.

The New class saw such self-organization as an atavism, to be eliminated with all the other imperfections of the past when society was reorganized under the benevolent rule of "professionals." Working class institutions were either supplanted or destroyed: working class free schools were rendered "obsolete" by state schools, and in the process the New Class ideology achieved hegemony over the minds of children; organs of self-help were encouraged to wither away by the "helping professions"; syndicalist unions controlled by the rank and file, and the vibrant labor press, were liquidated by good "liberals" during Wilson's Red Scare.

One of the best pictures of the ideal world envisioned by the New Class was drawn by Hilaire Belloc in **The Servile State**. Belloc believed Fabian collectivism to be less dedicated to state or workers' ownership as such than to the idea of control by "efficient" centralized organizations. It would be politically impossible to carry out expropriation of the large capitalists. Therefore, attempts to regulate industry to make labor more bearable, and to create a minimal welfare state, would lead instead to a system in which employers would be compelled to provide a minimum level of comfort and economic security for their employees in return for guaranteed profits. The working class would be reduced to a state of near-serfdom, with legally-defined status replacing the right of free contract, and the state fitting the individual into a lifetime niche in the industrial machine. Such a society would appeal to the authoritarian kind of socialist, whose chief values were efficiency and control.

Let laws exist which make the proper housing, feeding, clothing, and recreation of the proletarian mass be incumbent upon the possessing class, and the observance

of such rules be imposed, by inspection and punishment, upon those whom he pretends to benefit, and all that he really cares for will be achieved [Ibid. pp. 146–147].

Belloc was horrified by bloodless Fabians like H. G. Wells and the Webbs, who dabbled in social engineering in addition to their many other hobbies. The Fabian movement preferred working within existing institutions to make capitalism more stable and humane. Since it coincided with the rise of “Progressive” industrialists—who envisioned cooperation between business, government and labor in the interest of efficiency—the two phenomena reinforced each other to promote class rule by men in suits who sat behind desks. In place of the classical socialist movement of the nineteenth century, aiming at workers’ control of production and largely made up of real workers, the Fabians and Progressives substituted management of workers by their betters. As Belloc pointed out, if only their lust to manage and regiment the underclass were satisfied, the Fabians would be quite accomodating about capitalist ownership.

Wells favored a minimum safety net of aid to the children of the destitute, in return for responsibility of parents to the state, on pain of rehabilitation in “celibate labor establishments.” Minimum wages and housing standards would be designed, not to guarantee subsistence to poor families, but to end the availability of cheap housing and low-paying jobs on which the destitute subsisted. The goal was to cease perpetuating “the educationally and technically unadaptable elements in the population” and to breed “a more efficient race by increased state supervision,” in Wells’ words to “convince these people that to bear children into such an unfavorable atmosphere is an extremely inconvenient and undesirable thing.”

The Webbs wanted relief conditioned on “treatment and disciplinary supervision,” with local government councils imposing compulsory vaccination and determining who was “mentally defective or an excessive drinker” (these things became a reality

Those of us on the left who believe in things like workers’ control, community technology, and neighborhood government, need to find common ground with those on the right who are into gun rights, home schooling, and free juries. Anyone who believes that ordinary people should control their own lives and work, and that producers should keep the fruit of their labor, is an objective ally.

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to hire armed guards for themselves). And then there's the National Health official from Quebec who sneaked across the border under an assumed name to get decent medical care.

There has been a whole host of commentators who have put the New Class at the center of their analysis. Those who draw the most critical notice are those on the Right like Peggy Noonan, who focus on what I call the "soft" New Class. This category includes mainly academics, teachers, and "helping professionals." But they tend to ignore the other side of the phenomenon, in the private sector—the "hard" New Class of managers and engineers. The paternalistic welfare state and arrogant "public" school establishment cannot be separated, in their origins, from the rise of scientific management and the cult of "professionalism" in the workplace. Both reflect an attempt to alienate the ordinary person from his own common sense, and rob him of the ability to control the things that affect his daily life.

The solution to New Class rule is not the spurious populism of the neocons and New Right. The dittoheads appeal to the "aw, shucks" sensibility of Norman Rockwell's America, and play on the producing classes' resentment of bureaucrats and welfare deadbeats; but their real interest is getting government off the backs of bankers, plutocrats, and CEOs. They carefully conceal the fact that the greatest criminals are in the corporate boardrooms and the national security state, and the biggest parasites and deadbeats are the heavily subsidized, privileged corporations.

The real solution is to revive the kinds of working class self-organization and direct action which the New Class so despises: LETS, mutual banks, cooperatives, militant syndicalist unions, squatting, rent strikes and tenant unions, community-supported agriculture, etc. We need to appeal to an American populism not limited by traditional left-right fetishes or sectarianism. We need to fight the New Class in all its manifestations; while we're organizing to "fire the boss," we should also be fighting to "fire the school board" and "fire the department of human services."

in the Swedish "social democracy"). Those too unemployable even for the "compulsory labor exchanges" would be required to attend training camps, with "their whole time mapped out in a continuous and properly varied program of physical and mental work, all of it being made of the utmost educational value." Those refusing to cooperate would be sent to "Reformatory Detention Colonies" [Wells, **Mankind in the Making**; the Webbs, **The Prevention of Destitution**; John P. McCarthy, **Hilaire Belloc, Edwardian Radical**].

This "liberalism" reached maturity during World War I, when a group of statist intellectuals grouped around the British War Office, the Wilson administration, and **The New Republic**, invented the modern science of propaganda as a tool to engineer public support for the war. Some members of this circle, like Walter Lippmann and Harold Lasswell, went on to develop theories of "spectator democracy," in which the masses choose among elite candidates every four years, and sit down and shut up the rest of the time.

It is instructive to compare the composition of the socialist movement before and after Wilson. Before the Great War, Socialist Party congressmen, mayors, etc., were elected by Montana miners, Milwaukee brewers, and Oklahoma oil workers. After the Wilsonian terror, the rare "socialist" politician comes from a yuppie hog heaven like Burlington, Vt., and the main demographic base for socialism is academia.

Human services departments today are a favorite habitat of authoritarian statists. The welfare state, portrayed by conservatives as an instrument of class warfare, is really an instrument of class rule. It regulates the underclass so as to prevent class warfare from threatening the neat, comfortable, antiseptic world of the New Class. The Progressive Jacob Riis, in **How the Other Half Lives**, warned spell-bound middle class readers of the "Man with the Knife," the anarchist raising "the danger-cry... the shout that never should have been raised on American soil... the solution of violence [in Spring p. 5]." Despite the illusions of aging New Deal

Democrats who live in an Arthur Schlesinger time warp, this is the real origin of the welfare state.

Piven and Cloward argue that the two major expansions of the welfare state, under FDR and LBJ, were both spurred by drastic increases in social disorder, with the unemployed and homeless participating in violent demonstrations and being drawn to radical movements [**Regulating the Poor**]. The welfare bureaucracy serves three functions: it takes the edge off of potential underclass radicalism by minimizing outright homelessness and starvation; it subjects its clients to close supervision by a network of case-workers who make sure they don't get up to any subversive mischief; and it enforces labor discipline by making the system as unpleasant as possible and scaring away all but the hard-core unemployable.

The most egregious example of the New Class sense of divine right can be seen among the ideologues of the "public" education establishment. Joel Spring draws a close parallel between early Progressivism in society at large and public educationism as a microcosm of that ideology, with the schools being "a central institution for the production of men and women who conformed to the needs and expectations of a corporate and technocratic world" [op. cit. p. 1]. The state school systems were organized about the time that large factories began to need a docile, obedient work force that was trained to line up on command and eat and piss at the sound of a bell. In the words of Edgar Z. Friedenberg,

Whatever the needs of young people might have been, no public school system developed in response to them until an industrial society arose to demand the creation of holding pens from which a steady and carefully monitored supply of people trained to be punctual, literate, orderly and compliant and graded according to qualities determining employability from the employers' point of view could be released into the economy as needed [The

finally replacing them with state-appointed managers. In an April 1918 **Izvestiya** article, Lenin praised Taylor's "scientific management" methods and argued that, in the name of the proletarian revolution, workers should unquestioningly submit to one-man management of production [Maurice Brinton, **Workers' Control in the Bolshevik Revolution**]. American corporate experiments with worker self-management were abandoned, even when they resulted in drastic productivity increases and reductions in absenteeism and injury. The reason, in both countries, was that social control was more important than productivity. If workers saw how much better they could organize production without the foreman, they might try to decide questions of what and why, instead of just how—and fire the board of directors or people's commissar.

New Class progressivism continued to flourish among welfare statisticians after WWII; it heavily influenced both interest group pluralism and neo-conservatism, and the shadowy borderlands in-between. Among others this includes Daniel Bell, Samuel P. Huntington, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Francis Fukuyama. The most notable modern descendant of the "progressive" social engineer, by the way, is Hillary Clinton. Her ideal government is a giant matriarch, like Godzilla in an apron, who constantly chants "Momma don't allow, Momma don't allow"—all to protect us from ourselves, of course. Or as Joseph Stromberg wrote, "*the body of Leviathan and the head of a social worker*." Those who view Hillary as a radical leftist are delusional. A woman who made a 10,000% profit in cattle futures and served as a director of Wal-Mart, is hardly a threat to the power of the ruling class. She and her ilk just want to protect upper middle class soccer moms with SUVs and cell phones from any underclass disruption of their white bread suburban world.

The New Class' sense of privilege is evidenced by its zealous defense of the public schools' monopoly status (while they send their own kids to Sidwell Friends); and their relentless struggle against their serfs' right to bear arms (without touching their right

as long as they pay us good.” The result was that a labor establishment dominated by mediocrities like George Meany was willing to purge itself, during the Cold War, of the same leftist radicals who had led workers to victory in the mid-30s.

William F. Buckley said somewhere that he’d rather be governed by people randomly chosen from the Cambridge, Mass. phone book than by fifty Harvard professors. True enough; but the same holds true in the workplace. I’ll take a decision made by workers on the shop floor over one made by a boss any day.

Conservatives who complain of “left-liberals” and otherwise treat liberalism/progressivism as synonymous with leftism are sadly mistaken. There is nothing left-wing about liberalism. As Chomsky wrote somewhere about the press, they may be “liberal” in the sense that they favor gun control and “a woman’s right to choose,” and listen to NPR a lot; but they are far from “left wing” in the sense of a genuine criticism of the institutional power structure in this society.

In fact, liberalism closely parallels Leninism as a pseudo-leftist ideology of social control by the New Class. Leninism and liberalism between them wiped out the genuine (i.e., libertarian, populist) left from a major part of the world. Woodrow Wilson, A. Mitchell Palmer, and their liberal storm troopers tossed hundreds of Wobblies, socialists, anarchists, Nonpartisan Leaguers and other leftists into prison under the provisions of the Espionage act and state criminal syndicalism laws; many thousands of anarchists and libertarian socialists, labelled “saboteurs” and collaborators with White forces, disappeared into Lenin’s gulag. Ever since then, the conventional “left” has been a movement largely of academics and pseudo-intellectual peckerheads.

Attempts at workers’ control of production met similar resistance both in Lenin’s Russia and in corporate America. Although management of factories by workers’ committees compared favorably to pre-revolutionary managers, Lenin and Trotskky placed them under increasing restrictions by the people’s commissariats,

Disposal of Liberty and Other Industrial Wastes p. 16].

Public educationists have never been bashful about their self-appointed mission: to take pieces of human “raw material” from their families and transform them into useful servants of the State. James Mill, for example, saw the task of the schools as being “to train the minds of the people to a virtuous attachment to their government.” The writings of leading figures in departments of education, teachers’ colleges, the NEA and the AFT, were full to overflowing with statements to this effect.

William Bagley’s **Classroom Management** was the standard teacher’s manual for two decades, reprinted thirty times between 1907 and 1927. It recommended machine-like organization as the “educative force” for “slowly transforming the child from a little savage into a creature of law and order, fit for the life of civilized society.” A teacher’s efficiency could be judged by “the manner in which lines pass to and from the room.” He recommended the establishment of “regular habits... with regard to the bodily functions,” and conditioning to assume a posture of “head erect, eyes turned toward the teacher, hands... folded” upon hearing the command “Attention!” [Spring pp. 46–47]. The sociologist Edward Ross, in his 1890s **Social Control**, treated school-sponsored extracurricular activity as “an economical system of police” [Spring p. 75].

The educrats’ mania for social engineering dovetails nicely with the corporate state’s need for easily controlled drones. From the very beginning of the factory system, the more “benevolent” owners tried to exercise paternalistic control over the social lives and morals of their employees, with experiments in “company planned self-improvement programs or moral and ethical instruction” to weed out those prone to “immoral conduct, bad language, disrespect, or... an improper attitude.” The goal was to create healthy, well-adjusted workers and prevent the emergence of a

“depraved and shiftless” proletariat on the European model. “The combination of work, self-improvement through education, and moral scrutiny created a wedding between the church, the school, and the factory” [Spring pp. 22–23].

This tendency was rapidly augmented by an arsenal of pseudo-science; personality and aptitude testing evolved into a new industry under school guidance counselors and “human resources” departments. The most ominous development of human engineering is the “school to work” movement. Currently, all fifty states receive federal grants under the terms of the School to Work Opportunities Act of 1994. When fully implemented, the program calls for “comprehensive career guidance” for every student by seventh grade at the latest. He is to adopt a “career major” within an occupational area, with available choices to be prescribed by a local planning board based on projected “need.” Students at graduation receive “certificates of mastery,” based on national standards being developed by the National Skill Standards Board. If the program develops as envisioned, it will evolve into a system of certification for all occupations, with the federal government using tax and regulatory powers to “encourage” businesses to hire only those with certificates of mastery [Gary Wolfram, **“School to Work”**].

Most of the Progressive-era “good government” reforms were aimed at “professionalizing” government and removing it from “politics”—that is, placing the rule of “experts” safely beyond interference by the great unwashed. In the words of FDR, “The day of the Politician is past; the day of the Enlightened Administrator has come.”

The replacement of ward representation with at-large election resulted (in Pittsburg’s 1911 “reform,” for example) in transformation of a council made up of two-thirds common workmen, tradesmen, clerks and shop-keepers, into one composed entirely of “professionals” and “prominent businessmen” [Spring p. 86]. The replacement of neighborhood control with city-wide school boards and superintendents was similarly designed to remove

education from parental influence and give it over to the care of properly trained “professionals.” The intergovernmental “authority,” pioneered in America by the New York Port Authority and Robert Moses’ Long Island highway system, like many methods of authoritarian government, was resurrected from British law and adopted near-universally as a form of “professional” government beyond the control of the electorate.

The New Class ideology of “progressivism” appeared in the workplace in the form of “scientific management.” The goal of Taylorism was to take the management of work as much as possible away from master craftsmen on the shop floor, and eliminate the initiative and independent judgment of the worker. The blue collar worker was to be deskilled, and expertise shifted upward into the ranks of salaried white-collar engineers. Management would determine the most efficient way of organizing production, and tasks would be transformed into rote repetition which engaged the mental faculties as little as possible. Workers were to be taught in no uncertain terms that they were paid to do as they were told, not to think. The bosses feared that, if workers controlled the production process, they might realize that the bosses were parasites and, in the words of the Wobbly slogan, “fire the boss.” [Stephen Marglin, Williamazonick, David Montgomery, David Noble and Katherine Stone have produced an excellent body of work on this trend].

Taylorism was accepted by the labor establishment in the devil’s bargain of the New Deal. The Wagner Act was supported by corporations engaged in high-tech, export-oriented production, because labor costs were a relatively insignificant part of their total costs, and they needed long-term stability and predictability in the workplace. The Wagner Act ended the genuine revolution that was taking place on the shop floors of Detroit and the docks of San Francisco, coopted the CIO leadership as part of the corporate establishment, and turned unions into enforcers of labor discipline. The position of the new labor bureaucrats was “Let the bosses manage,