

# interpretation

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## Book Reviews

*The Spirit of Liberalism*. By Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978. Pp. xii + 130. \$13.50.)

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Harvey Mansfield's *The Spirit of Liberalism* is a collection of six essays all written during the 1970s and all directed towards defining liberalism and defending it against its critics on the left. One surmises that the word "spirit" in the title refers equally to an essence made known by definition and to the toughness of soul or thumotic passion that emboldens the supporters of a cause to "speak up" (p. ix) in its behalf. Mansfield's central contention is that liberals have failed to understand their position and as a consequence have fallen woefully short in their defense of it — their spiritlessness is his theme.

Three of the essays are extended book reviews, two of which are reprinted from journals; the three remaining essays are reprints also. Selected for review are Lowi's *The End of Liberalism*, Reich's *The Greening of America*, Dahl's *After the Revolution?*, Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, and Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. In Mansfield's judgment these books were timely when written in the late sixties and early seventies; but for most, their time has past. If Mansfield is correct, then substantial segments of his own book (though not originally composed as a book) are likewise untimely. In his criticism of these authors, Mansfield is consistently penetrating, witty, and artful; but the result of his success is that one faults him for calling renewed attention to books which were passing slowly out of memory — it is indeed tiresome to hear again about the folly of Charles Reich! Much better is Mansfield when disengaged from such works, speaking directly about the meaning and tradition of liberalism and the problems currently besetting it. The essays on liberal democracy as a mixed regime and on defending liberalism are especially instructive; also interesting is a Bicentennial essay on the right of revolution.

*The Spirit of Liberalism* revives the ancient theme of the few and the many. On the authority of Aristotle, Mansfield submits that liberal democracy is a special variety of the mixed regime. The elements comprising the mixture are liberals and democrats — what else? Liberals are those who profit most from the equal opportunity to acquire property and to speak freely, the two rights most sacred to the liberal regime. Hence liberals, or the "few" in the mixture, are businessmen and intellectuals. The "many" are democrats — not the democrats of old who distinguished themselves as "asserters of freedom," but an inert mass whose freedom and comfort are provided them by the exertions of the few. The difference between ancient (Aristotelian) and modern (Lockean) mixed regimes lies in the fact that the former based its mixture on some conception of moral virtue, whereas the latter,

fearful of priestly “soul-caring,” located the standard of human dignity in the equality of human bodies. Despite such egalitarian underpinnings, liberal democracy is a bona fide mixture because room is made in it for liberals to continue their pursuits of wealth and honor, so long as their accomplishments contribute to the betterment of the democrats—e.g., rising standards of living and the steady spread of science. The problem today, argues Mansfield, is that liberals have forgotten that they are liberals (not that they are discreet about their privileged positions—Mansfield concedes the importance of “disguising” liberalism in his review of Lowi). Unconvinced that they contribute to the well-being of society and feeling guilty about the advantages accruing to them, liberals “use their unequal status to destroy tolerance for unequal status” (p. 14.) A case in point is Rawls, whose concern for the “least advantaged” is carried to the extreme of wanting to eliminate the natural differences among men which alone legitimate distinguishing liberals from democrats.

Taking his bearings from Madison’s *Federalist 10*, Mansfield nicely explains the defining attribute of liberal politics: a compromise, ever-renewed and never completed, between the openness and universality of reason (albeit fallible reason) and the particularity of self-love. Liberalism defends individuality, the fact that human beings occupy separate bodies, while striving to find common ground upon which they can come together and act as one.

Opposite this well-established approach to politics is the radical movement, whose principal representative is Herbert Marcuse. The radical movement is of the opinion that individualism, self-love, separate bodies cause no problem once practical needs have been satisfied through an economy of abundance. While self-love, associated with the struggle for existence, requires management and restraint; self-expression, the replacement of self-love in an affluent society, can be safely liberated from political repression. The argument is vintage Marxism, and it suffers from several shortcomings: (1) as with Marx, there is the attempt to combine the universality of species-being (e.g., the minimizing of separate bodies) with the individuality of creative labor (self-expression); but the union depends on the unwarranted assumption that the appetites are indeed satiable and that at some point they will release their claim upon the soul; (2) it supposes that self-expression can be satisfying without the recognition and esteem of others; in this it shows no comprehension of spiritedness and of the fact that, even amidst plenty, love of honor will continue to divide men; (3) although denying in theory the angry emotions of thumos, radicalism is itself, in practice, at all times angry; likewise Marx is an angry author even when articulating a “science” (historical materialism) that deprives anger of its justification.

In the Preface Mansfield calls himself a friend of liberalism but not a liberal. He says of liberalism that it bows to human nature. One suspects in reading *The Spirit of Liberalism* that Mansfield would like to improve human nature, and that he befriends liberalism because its only genuine alternative in the modern world threatens to worsen human nature.