

# H-Net Reviews

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**Robert Booth Fowler.** *Enduring Liberalism: American Political Thought Since the 1960s.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999. xvii + 331 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0974-1.



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Robert Booth Fowler has written a series of books on American political thought in recent years. All of them have been thoughtful works characterized by fair and moderate assessments of contending interpretations of the American polity. *The Dance with Community* (1993), for example, carefully examined and categorized the often acrimonious debates between communitarians and liberals. Fowler, after reviewing each side, offered his own alternative which attempted to acknowledge the most important positions of both. *Enduring Liberalism*, his most recent effort, is probably his very best.

Fowler's focus is an extremely important one for he reviews the dramatic fracture in political consensus in America after the 1960s. Whether the Sixties will ultimately prove to be the great divide in both American political thought and practice that it now appears to be is, of course, a difficult question. At the moment, however, the Sixties is a fiercely contested historical moment with some asserting that the decade was a "comprehensive disaster for America" (Harvey Mansfield) and others asserting that it is still the "best hope for mankind" (Barbara Ehrenreich). Many students of the Sixties have concluded, as did David Steigerwald in his history of the decade, that this debate continues because no side completely "won" during the period and the American political culture has since been in a "social and political stale-

mate."

*Enduring Liberalism* is written in a broad sense against this backdrop. Fowler begins his analysis by reviewing the "fall of consensus" in American political thought since the Sixties. This consensus in political thought was most influentially and brilliantly presented by Louis Hartz in his *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955). The "Hartz thesis" that American society was in the grip of Lockean consensus since its inception and that both conservative and radical viewpoints never seriously emerged was mercilessly attacked on numerous fronts. Hartz had failed to see the influence of republicanism in his analysis as well as racial and gender challenges to the liberal order. While many critiques better fit other theorists of the 1950s and early 1960s than Hartz whose work never celebrated consensus, Fowler notes that "over time, criticism of consensus metamorphosed more and more into alternative interpretations of American political thought and practice" (p. 97). "Diversity" became the same theoretical icon that "consensus" was before the Sixties and not only "corrections" of Hartz's analysis of particular periods such as the Revolution and the founding (which Fowler discusses in detail) but also new methodologies and approaches (a new conservatism, feminism, post-modernism, green political thought) rapidly emerged.

American political thought since the Sixties then shook off consensus for diversity and so too did American political culture at large. Or did it? Fowler agrees that consensus is dead, at least for the moment, but he is skeptical about the abandonment of liberalism that presumably is the core project of both post-Sixties radicals and conservatives. In detailed examinations of aspects of American society, Fowler discovers several important patterns. For example, despite the sustained demands of those on both the right and left (Robert Nisbet, Alan Ehrenhalt, Benjamin Barber, Jane Mansbridge and others) for the need for stronger forms of community in civil society and/or the political sphere, the American public shows "little inclination to repudiate liberal values or support community in some form beyond the family and thin civil society groups" (p.174). And while environmental political thinkers position themselves as a "point of redirection" as well by attempting to envision a holistic view of society and nature, many of their demands can, and are, reformulated in a liberal language of rights.

One can be tempted to conclude that, in the long run, Hartz's observations about American political culture will still prove to be correct. An analysis of the

"post-Sixties" period some years hence will reveal patterns that Hartz himself described in the early 1800s and even in the 1850s and 1930s. There is much posturing and even open rejection of liberalism but ultimately the "tyranny of Locke" returns and the controversies will look more like "two boxers, swinging wildly, knocking each other down with accidental punches" than the liberation all sides think they are fighting for. Fowler does not reach this conclusion however. He more cautiously states that while this criticism "amounts to less than it appears," he still entertains the hope of an altered future in which there is a "slow, and incredibly diverse, drift of American civilization toward a reawakening ... to a more community-oriented society ..." (p. 252).

*Enduring Liberalism* is an important assessment of American political thought at the end of the twentieth century. It is thorough, fair and reasonable and thus will be essential to both novice and expert.

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