

BEYOND LEFT & RIGHT

BY DAVID A. HOROWITZ

The renewed focus on domestic concerns in the post Cold War era initially appeared to offer an opportunity to reconceptualize the American political map. Yet the vast economic changes of the past two decades have proved overwhelming. In addition to the problems of an unskilled underclass, semi-skilled and parttime workers barely survive at the margins of the "post-industrial" information and service economy. In turn, the middle class finds itself squeezed by corporate belt-tightening and the reduced social mobility induced by global competition. Meanwhile only the most affluent benefit from participation in international financial markets that seem to have no relation to the nation's production of goods and services.

Unable to offer solutions and palsied by the financial clout of powerful interest groups and lobbies, politicians of the 1990s increasingly resort to futile posturing and symbolic gestures. As a result, millions of Americans respond to deteriorating services, high taxation and government favoritism by rejecting the usefulness of politics and questioning the competence of the state itself. Never before in the nation's history have so many viewed the political system with such cynicism. By mid-decade the very legitimacy of democratic government appears to be at stake.

Contemporary political journalists such as E.J. Dionne, Jr., Thomas Edsall and Kevin Phillips have sought remedies for political gridlock and stalemate. Finding a mixture of "liberal instincts and conservative values" among voters equally distrustful of business and government, Dionne has argued that ordinary citizens support both equal opportunity and equal rights, self-reliance and social concern, personal responsibility and individual rights. He has drawn upon a pre-socialist language of democracy, community and republicanism to outline a revitalized political centrism to express the needs and interests of the nation's "restive majority." In a similar approach, Thomas Edsall has called for a refashioned "insurgency" built on "recognizably legitimate claims for an equal opportunity to participate and to compete." Meanwhile, Kevin Phillips has proposed regulation of financial markets, taxation of exorbitant executive salaries, and containment of lobbyists and campaign contributions as steps toward a "refurbished populism of the center."

By focusing upon equality of opportunity as the central premise of American democracy, these writers provide a reminder that hostility to privilege lies at the core of the nation's republican heritage. Arguing that "liberals" no longer unite ordinary people around economic concerns such as progressive taxation and non-preferential employment, all three seek the recreation of "populist" coalitions to fulfill the common interests of the poor, working class and middle class.

The reassertion of populist politics offers an intriguing way of addressing the despair and cynicism prevalent in American life. Yet it raises questions concerning the ability of the insurgent legacy to address the systemic problems plaguing the nation in the late 20th century. Does the nation's heritage of democratic dissidence contain sufficient perspective, rationality



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and vision to serve as a reference point and organizing strategy for those seeking to enhance the common welfare? To answer that question a host of additional queries need to be posed.

What are the roles of small enterprise and large corporations in American society? How are the consequences of market risk and failure to be absorbed? What is the legitimate place of centralized government in a complex and multilayered social and economic environment? Can the state act to promote democratic opportunities for ordinary Americans while protecting market and constitutional rights for competitors? What role do professional experts play in the articulation of societal challenges? Can ordinary people be empowered to participate in the consideration of major national issues?

In terms of equity, can democratic politics respond to the impact of technological specialization and computer literacy on equal opportunity? Can the American dream of evenly distributed wealth coexist with market freedoms and the requirements of investment? What specific reforms can meet the desire of ordinary citizens for justice, equality and opportunity without producing systemic favoritism or problems more vexing than the original challenges? How are the potential economic losses associated with global competition or environmental protection to be allocated democratically? Regarding social issues, can Americans learn to accept cultural and ethnic pluralism as a counterpart of equal economic opportunity? Can participation in a diverse global market be reconciled to spiritual identification with locality and a national culture? Will national loyalty prevent Americans from embracing worthy transnational endeavors? Can Americans ever reconcile corporate modes of organization with the traditional spiritual and political values of the nation's heritage?

The questions raised address an insurgent tradition infused with a democratic spirit but frequently defined by narrow economic interests, local and nationalistic perspectives, reflex anxieties over change, and the limits of ethnicity, race and gender. Neo-populists will need to abandon exclusionary tactics to unify a fragmented society behind common goals. Although difficult, the task may be facilitated by the acknowledgment that the central American political debates of the 20th century have not pitted ideological *liberalism* against *conservatism*. Instead, the nation's democratic tradition has been framed by a healthy animosity to concentrated power and elitism, wherever it may be found. If the next century is to produce a vital national politics that defends ordinary citizens against arbitrary power and pursues reasonable goals of justice, fair play and equity, it likely will be one that replicates the most universal features of the insurgent legacy. For political democracy to survive in the United States, Americans must continue to move beyond left and right.

David Horowitz teaches history at Portland State University. His article is the conclusion of his recently written book, *Beyond Left and Right: The Insurgent Challenge to the Established Order in 20th Century America*, which is to be published by University of Illinois Press.

Sunbelt Stories

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Illustrated by Henk Pander



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YOM HaSHOAH IN 2 CANTOS

CANTO 1

(after *In Flanders Fields* by Col. John McCrea)

In Auschwitz now no poppies grow
Between the smokestacks in a row,
Nor line the tracks to Birkenau,
or Dachau's pyres that still echo,
The anguished cries of our sorrow.

We mark these hells, though in the sky,
The larks still bravely singing fly,
Scarce heard through ghostly moans below.

They are our dead. Sad years ago,
They lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now they sigh,
"You have a debt,
Do not forget."

CANTO 2

So many times I've heard it.
Repeat...repeat...repeat....

Yes, yes, I know...
Six million.
Terrible? Of course it's terrible...
But how many times...?

How many times?
How many times is one?
One hundred?
Two hundred?
Three, four, five...a thousand!
One hundred thousand!

Oh, my third listener,
How many...how many
Are six million!

For one soul,
For one ordinary Jewish soul,
A Kadish,
A candle,
A yartzeit, One tiny flame through the swirling mists
Of three hundred and sixty-five days.

How many candles for six million?
How many Kadayshem,
Rivers of tears?

Yes, dear friends,
We will light candles...
How many times?

Into eternity.

~NATHAN HOROWITZ
(1908 - 1994)

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