

Trouble in the City

by Kenneth R. Craycraft, Jr.

"In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful."

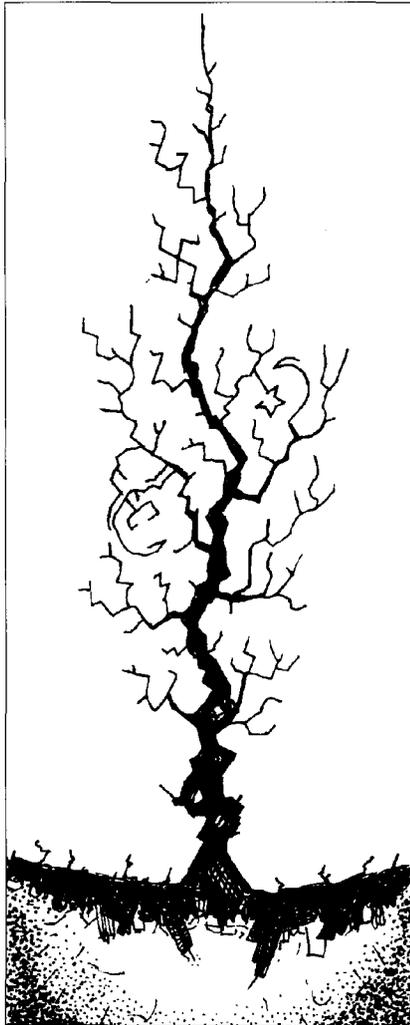
—C.S. Lewis

Democracy on Trial
by Jean Bethke Elshtain
New York: Basic Books;
153 pp., \$20.00

Recently named Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics at the University of Chicago, Jean Bethke Elshtain has a keen eye that sees through the haze of fashionable ideologies. In many ways *Democracy on Trial*, a series of speeches delivered in 1993, is a testament to her clarity and acuity. Elshtain's thesis is not new—that democracy is, at best, a tentative and cautious political endeavor—but she has identified some of the more pernicious maladies that infect America's democratic experiment. Among the more important diagnoses are the tendency of Americans to confuse wants with rights, the problem of political "totalism," in which every human relationship is reduced to politics, and group envy and resentment as our chief political paradigm. When these (and other) problems are manifest at once, Elshtain thinks, the temptation to despair over the lost possibility of civil society is a powerful one.

Alexis de Tocqueville's apprehension that America was inclined toward subversive individualism is well justified. As Elshtain explains, Tocqueville's fear was that "the individualism of an acquisitive commercial republic would engender new forms of social and political domination." The individualist ethos at the heart of American democracy tends to-

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H. Ward Street

ward the removal of those natural social webs which hold communities intact, leaving individuals without the thickly embodied contexts necessary for authentic moral life. "Into this power vacuum," Elshtain observes, "will likely move a top-heavy, ever more centralized state. Or we will hunker down in defensive 'lifestyle enclaves,' forbidding others entry."

The second reaction destroys the defining contexts that make authentic freedom possible, removing the obliga-

tion to preserve and protect the freedom of the other. Absent these obligations, modern democratic man tends to translate his wants and desires into rights and entitlements, meaning claims against other isolated rights-bearers. Without an abiding notion that individual freedom must be tempered and delimited by the demands of social interaction, every human whim becomes a divine right. This is especially (though not uniquely) seen on the political left, which sees "any restriction of individual 'freedom' or 'lifestyle option'" as "an unacceptable diminution of rights and free expression."

It soon follows, then, that every "lifestyle option," being as it is a political expression of right, collapses the private into the political. Elshtain sees this tendency arising with the radical feminism of the 1970's, in which "the personal is political. Nothing personal was exempt from political definition, direction, and manipulation—not sexual intimacy, not love, not parenting." But political "totalism," which absorbs the private into itself, also effectively eliminates authentic politics. "If there are no distinctions between . . . personal and political, it follows that there can be no differentiated activity or set of institutions that are genuinely political," notes Elshtain. And "when genuine politics ceases to exist, what rushes in to take its place is pervasive force, coercion and manipulation," since authentic politics is rooted in reason, and reason has yielded to caprice.

The tendency expresses itself alternately in what Elshtain calls the "politics of displacement" (what Charles Taylor has recently called the "politics of authenticity") and the "politics of difference." In the case of the former, it is not enough to win toleration of one's

lifestyle; rather, it must be given political recognition as an authentic moral stance. Tendencies, behavior, and orientations previously classified as deviant now demand civic and political approbation. This kind of “identity absolutism lends itself to expressivist politics, the celebration of feeling or private authenticity as an alternative to public debate and political judgment.”

The “politics of difference” could be described as multiculturalism run amok. It is at the confluence of two rigidly held, but perhaps irreconcilable, convictions: that humanity is divided into discrete, incommensurate moral, cultural, or ethnic identities, and that all of these identities are morally equivalent. As Elshtain explains, the process actually begins with a *suspicion* of equality, which, it is supposed, has the effect of imposing the same set of social or political standards and expectations across ethnic, sexual, and cultural lines. Such an imposition is a denial of the unique characteristic attributes of groups, and to this extent it is violent and dehumanizing. On the other hand, our deeply egalitarian sensibility will not allow us to regard one way of knowing, or any single form of cultural expression, as superior to another. Therefore “we now impose a common condition on ourselves in the name of diversity.”

Obviously our condition is rooted in deep individual and group resentment, the wooden stake in the heart of any political regime. Resentment may manifest itself either through direct violence and coercion, or through retreat into discrete enclaves which demand to be seen as different from, but treated the same as, everyone else. Or, it demands the same social and political status. In either case, reasoned political discourse is once again the victim. A politics of resentment will always be a politics of irrational power, in which argument surrenders to assertion.

Elshtain does a nice job of parsing these and other social pathologies in our contemporary democratic society, and of pointing to the serious possibilities of future discord and strife. Hers is a sobering (though never hopeless) vision. However, a few shortcomings in her analysis leave the reader dissatisfied.

Elshtain’s unrestrained commitment to pluralism is a blind spot in her analysis. For instance, she begins curiously by identifying John Courtney Murray, S.J.,

as “the great American Catholic pluralist.” Now, to be sure, Fr. Murray was a pluralist, but of a very restrained sort; it was not his primary identification. “Religious pluralism is against the will of God,” he once wrote. “But it is the human condition; it is written into the script of history. It will not somehow marvelously cease to trouble the City.” Elshtain nicely summarizes the troubles of the modern City, but she fails to ask what role pluralism, inevitable as it is, might play in these troubles.

This is by no means to suggest that pluralism ought to be condemned or overcome; indeed, properly understood, pluralism can be a blessing to any society. But some of the social problems in our democratic culture may be rooted not in a corruption of pluralistic democracy but in the genius of the system itself. Elshtain’s failure to note this is exemplified in her tendency toward the end of the book to lump all political positions into the seemingly exclusive categories of “democrat” and “anti-democrat.”

The onus for any critic of our current democratic malaise is to show how it is a corruption of liberal democratic pluralism, rather than an inevitable result of it. Such an analysis must start by asking what it means to claim that we hold it “self-evidently true” that “all men are created equal.”

The idea that there are such things as self-evident truths is itself highly problematic. But leaving aside the epistemological problem, the political implications of such an idea can be extremely dangerous. If I hold self-evident truths (or truths I think are self-evident), then by virtue of that I am a rational person. But if you do not share my understanding of these self-evident truths, this is evidence either of your irrationality or of your bad faith. In either case, you cannot be expected to be a democratic citizen, as you will not yield to obvious reason. And, of course, if your obduracy is threatening to me, I may be forced to impose some sanctions against you. This is especially a problem if you do not (or at least pretend to) hold it to be self-evidently true that all men are created equal.

On the other hand, if all men *are* created equal, then the obvious implication is that all men’s opinions are equal (except the opinion that not all men are created equal). And if all men’s opinions are equal, the possibility of one person

making a rational judgment about the contrary opinions of another is eliminated. Any “disagreement” will be a function not of rational analysis and deliberation, but rather of willful assertion. And, as Elshtain understands, such willful assertion does not even rise to the level of authentic disagreement, since disagreement requires a common arena of rationality in which we can agree on what does and does not count as being reasonably valid. In such a state of affairs, conversation ceases, shouting begins, and violence is not far behind.

Now few people (if any) really believe that all men are created equal. The axiom is a useful tool, by which we all agree to treat one another as we wish to be treated. But the idea can still be used as a powerful weapon against dissenting opinions in a political society based upon consensus. If all opinions are equal, then no opinion may be overridden, since to do so would violate one of the truths we hold to be self-evident. It is easy to see how group rights and the politics of difference and displacement grow from such a state of affairs. If I declare myself a sovereign opinion-holder, and ally myself with other like-minded sovereign opinion-holders, then no one has a right to exclude me from the conversation. Moreover, by the canons of our mutual life, my group and I are entitled to the same respect, dignity, and public affirmation as any other person or group.

Jean Elshtain has written a concise account of many of the pathologies that beset our democracy. But she fails to look deeply enough into the question of the roots of these pathologies. For instance, she notes that “each time we feel called upon to justify something politically, we tend to make our concerns far more individualist and asocial than they really are by reverting to the language of rights as the ‘first language’ of liberal democracy.” But “rights talk” is the first language of liberal democracy, and we cannot deny its role in shaping our political convictions. In short, if, as Elshtain rightly asserts, “Democracy . . . is about the habits and dispositions and everyday doings of a people,” then democracy, *per se*, cannot be exempt from scrutiny as we search for the causes of our political difficulties. We are becoming what we have told ourselves we are; we have removed the idea of public good from our political foundations, but we continue to expect people to respect the public good itself.

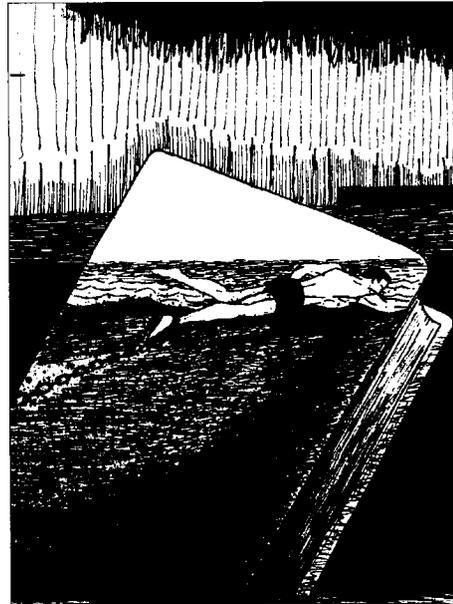
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Truth Against the Grain

by Arnold Beichman

“Zeus gives no aid to liars.”

—Homer



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Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism

by Richard Gid Powers
New York: The Free Press;
554 pp., \$30.00



Richard Gid Powers' history is a powerful, even brilliant, piece of scholarship which documents one of the most bizarre political phenomena of the 20th century.

While Soviet communism, in its 70-year dictatorship, was probably guilty of every conceivable crime against humanity, it was yet able to escape the kind of principled censure which befell anticommunism. In fact, it is regarded as tasteless in academic circles even today to suggest that the United States won the Cold War. An “avant-garde” historian will say that the United States really lost the Cold War. An “objective” historian will say that nobody won the Cold War. An honest historian, like Professor Michael Howard, the distinguished Yale

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historian, in an essay in the *Times Literary Supplement*, wrote, “The Soviet Union lost.” Even more, said Professor Howard, “the policy of the West has been ultimately vindicated, not only by our victory, but by the fact that the War remained *Cold*; and that we are alive to tell the tale.”

President Roosevelt, a great war leader and a worse than inept peace leader, gets high marks from mainstream historians. However, President Harry Truman, who undertook to resist Soviet designs, is treated as a villain for supposedly beginning the Cold War. President Ronald Reagan, having won a great victory against totalitarianism, is being airbrushed out of history by unforgiving Establishment historians. Professor Powers, though he describes the Iran-Contra conspiracy as “one of the most clearly presidential misdeeds in history,” has restored Mr. Reagan and his anticommunist policies to their rightful place in history.

To grasp fully what Professor Powers' book is about, the reader must remember the power which ideas such as communism and revolution had over people of all classes and professions, including noncommunists. Powers admits that “writing this book radically altered my

view of American anticommunism. I began with the idea that anticommunism displayed America at its worst but I came to see in anticommunism America at its best.” Professor Powers is acutely aware of what has been going on in American historiography, a field now bossed by feminists, deconstructors, multiculturalists, pseudopopulists, Afrocentrists, and Marxists, crypto and not so crypto. A monumental revisionist sweep of the contemporary past is at work: American communists are being classified as little worse than misguided idealists, thus worthy of our indulgent admiration; anticommunism remains the villain.

In a recent essay, “Communist History as Soap Opera,” in the *New York Review of Books*, historian Theodore Draper argues that “communism, as all the world knows, with the exception of a cadre of American professors, disgraced the largely democratic tradition of socialism and strangled democracy wherever it came to power.” He then asks: “What explains this perversion of socialism and democracy?” This is Mr. Draper's answer: “It is clearly an attempt to rehabilitate communism by making it part of the larger family of socialism and democracy. No one would think of doing this favor for fascism, but commu-