

CANARSIE: THE JEWS AND ITALIANS OF BROOKLYN AGAINST LIBERALISM. By Jonathan Rieder.¹ Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1985. Pp. viii, 290. Cloth, \$22.50.

*Edward J. Erler*²

Much has been written recently about the imminent demise of liberalism. The elections of 1980 and 1984 are said to signal the end of the New Deal coalition and the beginning of a critical realignment. Historically, however, critical elections (such as those in 1860 or 1932) have been characterized by their appeal to fundamental principle. By choosing between fundamentally opposed political principles, the people provide the consensus for their long-term political future. But President Reagan's most effective rhetorical stance has been not indeed a principled reinterpretation of American politics but his claim to be the legitimate successor to Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal.³

This is, of course, a far cry from Roosevelt's own strategy, which was to destroy the Republican Party as a political entity. As Charles Kesler has recently written, "[T]he key to F.D.R.'s strategy was to read the Republican Party as previously constituted right out of American politics, to cast it beyond the pale . . . , to pronounce it excommunicate and heretic and to anathematize its doctrines."⁴ This strategy, according to Kesler, is necessary to effectuate a critical realignment since in some sense every critical election is a reenactment of the Revolutionary War, i.e., is itself tantamount to a battle over the fundamental principles of the regime. Kesler further argues:

Roosevelt's genius was to so build [the New Deal] programs into the American economy and government as to make their roll-back virtually impossible, inasmuch as reducing an entitlement [would be] tantamount to breaking the contract made between government and the people. The inertia of these programs therefore drives

1. Assistant Professor of Sociology, Yale University.

2. Professor and Chair, Department of Political Science, California State University, San Bernardino.

3. See Jacobson, *Congress: Politics After A Landslide Without Coattails*, in *THE ELECTIONS OF 1984*, at 222 (M. Nelson ed. 1985).

4. Kesler, *The Reagan Revolution and the Legacy of the New Deal: Obstacles to Party Realignment*, in *REALIGNMENT OR REACTION? THE 1984 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION* (P. Schramm & D. Mahoney ed. forthcoming).

the government to extend its taxing, regulating, and spending authority more and more deeply into society.⁵

The Republican Party, as long as it stays within the horizons forged by Roosevelt, will always be on the defensive whenever questions of economic entitlements or civil rights are raised. Indeed, this defensive posture has been the leading characteristic of the Reagan administration; it evidences none of the aggressive boldness of the Roosevelt administration. The New Deal derived its vigor from the triumph of its principles and the consensus that supported those principles. Reagan's electoral successes might be more realistically traced to the desire to restore an older liberalism, rather than pre-empting a critical realignment which looks forward to the establishment of new conservative principles. Paradoxically, Reagan's electoral success may signal a rejection of Great Society liberalism in favor of the restoration of New Deal liberalism. And, while the two forms of liberalism are distinguishable, they are nevertheless derived from the same ideological stance, Great Society liberalism being merely a less disguised version of New Deal liberalism.⁶

Canarsie is an "ethnographer's" account of "the travails of liberalism,"⁷ an attempt to show the national crisis of liberalism in miniature. While the author describes this work as ethnography, it is in fact a montage of impressions, interviews, and shrewd observations dressed in appropriate sociological jargon.

Canarsie is populated principally by middle-class Italians and Jews. Most have only recently attained the middle class and are therefore nervously self-conscious of the precariousness of that status.⁸ Canarsie—long the butt of many unflattering jokes—is a white enclave located along the southern edge of Brooklyn, between the ghettos of Brownsville and East New York, and bounded by Jamaica Bay on the east. Italians and Jews fled to Canarsie from more perilous parts of the city. They now have a kind of siege mentality, a feeling that there is nowhere else to run. Its geography thus contributes to what Rieder calls "the distinctive politics of space,"⁹ a pervasive sense of vulnerability to urban forces that are beyond their control.

The politics of space had a profound influence on the liberalism of both the Italians and the Jews. Even though the liberalism of the middle-class Jews is inspired by what Rieder describes as its "alle-

5. *Id.*

6. See H. MANSFIELD, *THE SPIRIT OF LIBERALISM* 28-51 (1978).

7. J. RIEDER, *supra*, at 2.

8. *Id.* at 37, 96, 119.

9. *Id.* at 233.

giance to cosmopolitan ideals," it was no less affected by the politics of space than the more "provincial" and "ethnocentric" liberalism of the Italians.¹⁰ As Rieder laconically remarks:

Canarsians observing the unfamiliar folkways of the ghetto lacked the detachment of the anthropologist. They did not have the luxury of theoretical distance to compensate for their physical immersion in polyglot Brooklyn. . . . Great disparities of class, color, and culture divide Canarsians from the people of the ghetto. Like the Andalusians, they presume that the villagers next door steal more, suffer greater family breakdown, and are more addicted to vice—but the presumption is undoubtedly true.¹¹

Confronted with the harsh realities of urban life (the "actual contingencies in the environment"),¹² both the Jews and Italians of Canarsie have come to scorn the idealism upon which the new liberalism is based.

Rieder points to the most profound reason for Canarsie's rejection of liberalism when he remarks that "[b]oth Jews and Italians began to see liberalism as being out of key with the requirements of urban living and to equate it with a self-destructive idealism." In this revised interpretation, "liberalism did not embody a vision of transcendent justice; rather, it ignored the demands of bodily survival."¹³ As Richard Morgan has explained, liberal idealism has failed to understand "that portion of the human spiritual range which the Greeks called *thumos*—that righteous anger which stiffens the will so that men may undertake unpleasant and even dangerous tasks to protect the community and sustain its values."¹⁴ Yet it is precisely this *thumos* which ideological liberalism finds to be the principal barrier to enlightened reform.

Canarsians are the kind of people who eagerly embraced the tenets of New Deal liberalism; it presented to them "a great respect for the American dream."¹⁵ They are hardworking, self-reliant, ambitious, and willing to make the most of their opportunities. But Rieder found that the "self-congratulatory optimism" engendered by an older liberalism has been displaced by "a mood of outrage and betrayal."¹⁶ As Rieder describes it, "Since 1960 the Jews and Italians of Canarsie have embellished and modified the meaning of liberalism, associating it with profligacy, spinelessness, malevolence, masochism, elitism, fantasy, anarchy, idealism, softness, irresponsibility."

10. *Id.* at 27.

11. *Id.* at 58-59 (emphasis added).

12. *Id.* at 71.

13. *Id.* at 72-73.

14. R. MORGAN, *DISABLING AMERICA: THE "RIGHTS INDUSTRY" IN OUR TIME* 103 (1984).

15. J. RIEDER, *supra*, at 27.

16. *Id.* at 1.

bility, and sanctimoniousness.”¹⁷ Between 1960 and 1980 Canarsians saw New Deal liberalism transmogrified into Great Society liberalism. The new liberalism evidenced hostility and disdain for the Canarsians’ middle-class values. In their view it was a liberalism that had turned against the liberals.¹⁸ As Rieder cogently remarks:

Liberalism’s special enthusiasm for the poor fortified the belief that it worked against middle-class survival. Deriding lower-middle-class nervousness as racism, many reformers saw Middle America as a defiant stumbling block to an enlightened society. That verdict was only a partial truth. When they performed that moral excision, left-liberals abandoned much of the traditional mass base of the Democratic party.¹⁹

Middle-class America—and the besieged Canarsians especially—responded with what Rieder has termed “the politics of resentment.”²⁰ This was middle America’s response to radical liberalism’s “dogma of enlightenment.”²¹ The more subtle and penetrating theme of this book is the elucidation of this politics of resentment.

Allen Matusow has recently chronicled the transformation of New Deal liberalism in the 1950’s.

In retrospect the distinguishing feature of the post-World War II era was its remarkable affluence. . . .

That fact decisively determined the character of the era. Sociologically, increased discretionary income blurred class lines and eased class antagonisms. . . . And politically it underlay the celebration of American life in the Eisenhower years and the optimistic conviction of liberals in the decade following that most American problems could and would be solved.²²

The expansion of the middle classes posed a dilemma for liberal intellectuals—economic inequality was disappearing as a political issue.

Gone with the old issues was the old feeling of kinship with the masses. In the thirties intellectuals had expected politics to be the battleground of ideologies, the focal point of class conflict, the medium for translating the will of the people into policy. In the fifties “the people” were transformed into that scourge of the age—“mass man.”²³

Liberals discovered that they had been “betrayed” by the people; the people did not want reform, they wanted middle-class affluence.

17. *Id.* at 6.

18. *Id.* at 119; see A. WILDAVSKY, *THE REVOLT AGAINST THE MASSES* 29-51 (1971).

19. J. RIEDER, *supra*, at 119.

20. *Id.* at 4, 93, 106, 175, 241.

21. *Id.* at 141.

22. A. MATUSOW, *THE UNRAVELING OF AMERICA: A HISTORY OF LIBERALISM IN THE 1960s* at xiii-xiv (1984).

23. *Id.* at 6.

It was at this point that liberals discovered “the public interest,” and “qualitative liberalism.”²⁴

For the new liberals, what was most distressing about the middle classes was their lack of public spiritedness. Liberals soon discovered that the middle class had co-opted the majoritarian political process to serve its own selfish ends at the expense of those who were not middle class, the so-called “discrete and insular minorities.” This discovery exposed the majority as merely another special interest group. Whereas it was once thought that the majority in a pluralist society would rule in the interest of the whole, now the majority was seen to be the principal obstacle to the promotion of the public interest. If, therefore, democracy was to work for the common interest, the essential task of ruling would have to be given over to a vanguard who could act in the majority’s stead, i.e., act in the way that the majority itself would act if it were uncorrupted by its own particular class interests. Federal bureaucrats and, even more often, federal judges played the role of this public-spirited vanguard in liberal thought.²⁵

The shift to the new liberalism was especially dramatic in racial issues. Rieder writes that “[a] national consensus in the early 1960s sustained black demands for legal rights and equal opportunity. But as blacks pressed for social and economic equality, complex questions of status, justice and domination were raised.”²⁶ This national consensus was dramatically expressed in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Both of these great pieces of civil rights legislation rested on the premise of equal opportunity and its necessary corollary that rights are vested in individuals. But it became almost immediately evident that the idea of equal opportunity was insufficient to satisfy the new demands of “qualitative liberalism.” After all, equal opportunity would only lead to an expansion of the selfish middle classes. What was needed was not equal opportunity, but equal results, results that could be measured in terms of group progress. Thus, the notion of racial class rights replaced individual rights and equal opportunity as the basic concept of equal protection in the new liberalism. In addition, policies based on equal results could be used to force the middle classes to become public spirited—or failing that, it could be used at least to attack the smug self-satisfaction of the middle classes.²⁷ Thus busing—which the Supreme Court

24. *Id.* at 8, 376.

25. J. RAWLS, *A THEORY OF JUSTICE* 303 (1971).

26. J. RIEDER, *supra*, at 96.

27. R. MORGAN, *supra* note 14, at 62.

has determined to be remedy required by the fourteenth amendment itself²⁸—could be used against those suburbanites who wanted to isolate themselves from “the contingencies” of urban life.²⁹ Indeed, one could almost say that busing has come to play the same symbolic role for “qualitative liberalism” that the doctrine of the Trinity does for some religions.

Dean Ely makes the equivalent jurisprudential argument in the following terms: in a system dominated by a monolithic majority it must be presumed that all legislation will be calculated to promote the interest of the majority at the expense of various discrete and insular minorities. Therefore all legislation should be subject to strict scrutiny by the courts except in those instances where the majority has built into the legislation some disadvantage for itself. This positive disadvantage to the majority is the only sure guarantee that the majority is acting in the interest of the whole, i.e., has not disadvantaged some minority. As Ely writes, “The function of the Equal Protection Clause . . . is largely to protect against substantive outrages by requiring that those who would harm others must at the same time harm themselves—or at least widespread elements of the constituency on which they depend for reelection.”³⁰ Ely has thus erected a curious negative version of Kant’s categorical imperative, where justice does not rest on the universality of the legislative enactment but depends upon some positive disadvantage to the majority. Fortunately, the framers of the fourteenth amendment were not nearly as sophisticated as Dean Ely.

Rieder persuasively argues that

[a] strain of biracial populism . . . remained a submerged yet latent and probably growing current in Canarsie life. It rested on the grievances shared by middle-income whites and blacks . . . Across America, large numbers of blacks rejected busing as a remedy for de facto segregation, endorsed strict controls over the disbursement of welfare funds, and disliked affirmative action in the form of explicit racial quotas.³¹

Canarsians found the transmogrification of the Civil Rights Act into an instrument of affirmative action and other forms of “benign discrimination” to be an outrage to their sense of justice—an assault on their middleclass way of life. It was at this point that their liber-

28. *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Bd. of Educ.*, 402 U.S. 1, 17 (1971).

29. H. MANSFIELD, *supra* note 5, at 35-37. In a parody of an argument of one of the “qualitative liberals,” Professor Mansfield writes that “[t]o rediscover the whole, or the public, we must recapture the suburbs for the city.” Massive busing “would remove an important incentive to escape the city”

30. J. ELY, *DEMOCRACY AND DISTRUST: A THEORY OF JUDICIAL REVIEW* 170-71 (1980). See also Ely, *The Constitutionality of Reverse Racial Discrimination*, 41 U. CHI. L. REV. 723, 727, 735-36, 741 (1976).

31. J. RIEDER, *supra*, at 118.

alism began to “unravel.” As one Jewish Canarsian remarked, “I’m against compensation. I changed with the notion of not offering equal rights and opportunities, but compensation. That’s reverse discrimination.”³²

Rieder notes that “[g]radually the perception had spread among the people of Canarsie that they were being asked to atone for some unconfirmed wrong. The enlightened called it redress; many Canarsians considered it little more than extortion.”³³ Racial class remedies left the Canarsians with a feeling of helplessness, since there no longer seemed to be any correspondence between their individual actions and the apportionment of rights and remedies. This was the source of resentment that turned the citizens of Canarsie “against liberalism.” As Rieder further notes:

Civil rights legislation celebrated the sanctity of the person through its argument that segregation placed fetters on the ability of individuals to compete in meritocratic races. And quotas put forth not class or the individual but race as a proper basis for making claims on the stage or on the conscience of private institutions. The specific argument about remedy merged with a tangled debate of immense philosophic and practical moment.³⁴

Canarsians saw this radical change in public policy as a danger not just to their own middle-class interests, but to society as a whole:

Canarsians became persuaded that a different, and quite dangerous, notion of race had triumphed in public discourse, in the policies of court, in the requirements of government. The use of explicit terms of race to allocate goods, assign blame, and apportion respect threatened to rend the fabric of society with communal passion. Concepts like compensation and restitution imposed more than financial burdens. By implying that all whites shared equal liability for past wrongs, racial remedies bestowed judgments of guilt and innocence, shame and virtue.³⁵

Yet, as Rieder makes clear, the reaction of the Canarsians was not racist. Rather it was a *class* reaction—they saw this new conception of civil rights as striking at the individualism that they identified as the foundation of the middle classes. Rieder’s observations about class and not race being the primary political motivation of the Canarsians confirms the observations of other sociologists, particularly those of William Wilson.³⁶

32. *Id.* at 112.

33. *Id.* at 107.

34. *Id.* at 119.

35. *Id.* at 120.

36. W. WILSON, *THE DECLINING SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE: BLACKS AND CHANGING AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS* 150-52 (1978):

[C]lass has become more important than race in determining black life-chances

. . . . [I]t would be difficult to argue that the plight of the black underclass is solely a consequence of racial oppression, that is, the explicit and overt efforts of whites to keep blacks subjugated, in the same way that it would be difficult to ex-

It was this resentment borne by an outraged sense of justice and fairness that led the Canarsians to question their liberalism. Yet one has to wonder whether Rieder is right in implying that the Canarsians have rejected liberalism *tout court*. Whatever else the middle-class Jews and Italians of Canarsie have become, they have certainly not become rock-ribbed conservatives. Canarsie's political battles are still being fought within the confines of the Democratic Party. As Rieder notes, "The dominance of the Jefferson Democrats meant that the conflicts played out elsewhere as wrangling between Democrats and Republicans erupted in Canarsie as fights inside the Democratic Party."³⁷ No backlash candidate has been able to break the power of the Jefferson Democratic Club. Rather, one suspects that the Canarsians voted for Reagan because he seemed to represent more of the old liberalism under which they had prospered than the "qualitative liberals" who now dominate the Democratic Party.

Canarsians seem to want to restore the older sense of liberalism that they credit with having made it possible for them to achieve middle-class status. They see the new liberalism—rightly in my opinion—as an attack on the middle class and its sense of justice and fairness. It is this sense of justice—animated by the principles of equal opportunity and individual rights—that the new liberalism seeks to destroy.

plain the rapid economic improvement of the more privileged blacks by arguing that the traditional forms of racial segregation and discrimination still characterize the labor market in American industries.

37. J. RIEDER, *supra*, at 237.