

Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline

by Robert H. Bork

ReganBooks/HarperCollins • 1996 • 382 pages • \$25.00

Reviewed by Jessica Schupak

Robert Bork's *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* thoroughly chronicles how modern liberalism has corrupted American culture and set the country on the road to moral chaos. In the 1960s the Left developed its two main tenets: radical individualism and radical egalitarianism. The first describes the decreasing limits individuals place on personal gratification, and the second refers to the growing emphasis on equality of outcomes rather than opportunity. Together they have formed the new religion of the Left.

It is logically impossible to be both a radical individualist and a radical egalitarian. In trying to do so, the Left has become what Harold Rosenberg termed the "herd of individual minds." It recommends a leveling of income not out of genuine compassion for the poor, but an aversion for the successful. As Bork observes, liberals are driven not by what they lack, but what others have. Their strategy has been to vilify the rich, in an attempt to stop anyone from attaining such status. It is, after all, easier to arrive at the Left's utopia by preventing success than by engaging in mass redistribution of wealth.

Likewise, as Bork notes, liberals are opposed to any real achievement in academia. Self-esteem overrides learning not only in the Ivory Tower, but in elementary and secondary education as well. Learning also succumbs to politics as universities disparage Western civilization, and academic bankruptcy and political correctness plague their curricula, perpetuating facets of liberal ideology such as radical feminism and Afrocentrism, not to mention blatant historical inaccuracies like the myth of the "robber barons."

Such revisionism comes without remorse. The Left, having renounced any claims to objective truths, embraces moral relativism and eschews institutions that once defined moral constraints on liberty, including religion, family, and community. Consequently, it ignores fact for political expediency—in this case, that laws indeed impose a morality and that a public morality is both unavoidable and necessary.

Liberalism, asserts Bork, is incompatible with true democracy because it seeks to concoct con-

ditions that no individual would actually desire. In fact, the radical egalitarian element of liberalism is necessarily statist because it cannot be implemented and enforced by any entity other than the government. Bork cites Alexis de Toqueville's observation that Americans are more obsessed with equality than freedom, and notes that this misguided prioritization did not pose a threat to liberty until the twentieth century. Liberals now view inequality of income as one of the most pressing issues that need attention and rectification—by politicians, of course.

Bork does an excellent job relaying the components of America's cultural demise. He lacks solutions, however, and many of those he does offer are dubious, such as his proposal for a constitutional amendment allowing Congress to override state and federal court decisions. More disappointing is his unadulterated pessimism about America's cultural future. He dismisses the popular conservative theory that because modern liberalism is predicated on intellectual dishonesty and moral nihilism it will fail on its own. Instead he proposes that only an unlikely "optimism of the will" can divert America from the highway to Gomorrah. Judge Bork gives liberalism too much credit. □

Miss Schupak is a junior at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts.

The Last Monopoly: Privatizing the Postal Service for the Information Age

edited by Edward L. Hudgins

Cato Institute • 1996 • 140 pages • \$9.95 paperback

Reviewed by William H. Peterson

PPrivate Postal Service in the 21st Century." That was the brave title of a 1995 Cato conference seeking privatization of the vast vertically integrated, largely unionized 800,000-employee U.S. Postal Service.

The USPS fights back. Its newspaper ads trumpet the claim that it gets not a dime of federal subsidies. Oh. Edward Hudgins, Cato director of regulatory studies and editor of this volume of conference papers, begs to differ. He points to federal support of some \$1.2 billion, mainly to offset revenue forgone by federally mandated free or reduced-rate mail such as Congress's franking privileges. Still, with annual revenues at about \$56 billion, that two percent or so of federal support seems not too tiny.

Hudgins also takes note of many indirect subsidies. He observes, for example, that the Postal Service is virtually tax-free, gets preferential federal borrowing treatment, and has billions of dollars of unfunded pension liabilities backed by Uncle Sam. Too, the USPS boasts monopoly power dating back to the private express statutes of 1845. This power has long enabled the post office to raise its prices, have a grip over all residential and company mail boxes, and allow no competitors on its exclusive turf.

Today, however, the Information Age intrudes more and more on this slipping monopoly via faxes, E-mail, Internet, telephone calls, electronic check deposits, and overnight delivery couriers such as United Parcel Service and Federal Express.

A key argument for maintaining the USPS monopoly is that it is "a natural monopoly," so competition would fragment its ability to serve the public. Conferee-economist Thomas J. DiLorenzo of Baltimore's Loyola College disagrees. He views the natural monopoly idea as a fiction. Why? He says that prices are not set by historical costs but by the interplay of supply and demand, that a free-market monopoly is an oxymoron because competition is a discovery process of dynamic rivalrous entrepreneurship.

DiLorenzo notes, for example, that California and other states are transforming the regulated electric utility industry of fixed-area franchises into a free market of price-cutting interstate and intrastate competition. He also sees that while cable TV operators complain of "duplication" and accordingly win franchise monopolies, prices tend to fall fast whenever new operators break into local franchises.

So, is USPS "the last monopoly," as claimed in the title? Maybe. One proposed congressional bill would create the world's largest ESOP or employee stock ownership plan and transfer the entire Postal Service to its 800,000 employees. They would get comparable retirement benefits and a spur to control costs and raise productivity. Postal unions show some interest, even if after a five-year grace period their industry would be open to all comers.

For his part, conferee-U.S. Postmaster General Marvin T. Runyon rejects the proposal. Mr. Runyon asserts that universal mail service must be "backed by the full faith and trust of the U.S. Government." He calls for "the right amount of deregulation" that will allow the USPS to "compete on an equal footing with other couriers and alternative communication."

But what's meant by "the right amount" and "equal footing"? Enter politics. Or will uninhibited

competition with its cleansing action be at last allowed to enter the postal industry? In a sense, it already has, if imperfectly. So shouldn't Congress act to privatize the USPS and avoid what Milton Friedman calls "the tyranny of the status quo"? □

Mr. Peterson, a Heritage Foundation adjunct scholar, is the Distinguished Lundy Professor Emeritus of Business Philosophy at Campbell University.

The Industrial Revolution and Free Trade

Edited by Burton W. Folsom, Jr.

The Foundation for Economic Education • 1996
• 178 pages • \$14.95 paperback

Reviewed by Gene Smiley

By the mid-1800s, socialists had initiated an attempt to show that the industrial revolution and concomitant rise of free trade had worsened the lives of British workers. Great Britain's adoption of free trade internationally with the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 only made detractors more determined to show that a society built on private property and free exchange did not improve the general lot of workers. For years historians taught this as fact. But modern scholarly research has shown that this simply was not true.

Unfortunately, myths tend to persist. Some contemporary historians continue to believe and teach that the industrial revolution harmed, rather than helped, workers. Government officials and others, not understanding the true nature of the industrial revolution of the last half of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, continue to call for restrictions on internal and international trade to improve the well-being of their citizens. These individuals would do well to read the collection of essays, primarily from *The Freeman*, that Burton W. Folsom, Jr., has assembled in this volume.

The book is divided into three sections: "Theories and Theorists," "The Industrial Revolution and Its Consequences," and "The Case for Free Trade." In the first essay on theory, Murray Rothbard points out the similarities between mercantilism and Keynesianism and then describes a number of the restrictive practices that mercantilists employed which were incompatible with the industrial revolution and free trade. John Montgomery's essay on Adam Smith describes how *The*