

Equal Treatment

BY CHARLES MURRAY

The End of Equality, by Mickey Kaus, New York: BasicBooks, 293 pages, \$25.00



Mickey Kaus wants to substitute Civic Liberalism for Money Liberalism.

Mickey Kaus is a liberal (I concede the contemporary meaning of *liberal* for the duration of the review) who believes that liberalism took the wrong fork in the 1960s and '70s and has by now become rootless and witless, maundering about "fairness" and "compassion" and "social justice" without thinking clearly about what these concepts mean, for whom, to what ends.

Kaus's conception of the situation is simple and exact, and it constitutes a signal insight for political thinking on the left: Modern liberalism, he says, is driven by opposition to inequality and attempts to mitigate it. But equality has become equated with money equality. "Money Liberalism," as he labels it, tries to mitigate inequality by suppressing the income differences that are part of a successful capitalist economy.

This is foolish, Kaus says. Income differences cannot be appreciably

suppressed. The reforms that Money Liberals propose either do not work because the smart folks can figure out how to circumvent them or, worse, do work by killing prosperity. And anyway, what really bothers liberals about American society—or at least bothers Kaus and, for that matter, me—is not that some people drive Mercedes-Benzes while others drive Hyundais but that an egregious social inequality has become part of American culture.

America has always had its rich and its poor, but until the last few decades the great bulk of society was bound together by the assumption of an equality of worth that struck Tocqueville so forcibly back in the 1830s. It was not just that Americans tugged no forelocks, though that was part of it, but that the average farmer or worker thought himself the moral equal of anyone and (crucially important) that the successful also took pride in that credo and behaved in ways that validated it. Today, that social glue has loosened, and America is becoming a class society in unprecedented ways. Kaus wants to restore the old bonds.

If Money Liberalism is not the answer, what is? Kaus calls it "Civic Liberalism," which "pursues social equality directly, through government action, rather than by manipulating the unequal distribution of income." Most of the last seven chapters of the book are devoted to an examination of the specific policies that Civic Liberals might propose.

The most detailed and provocative policy innovation that Kaus proposes is to replace the welfare system

with a work system of great simplicity: "an offer of employment for every American citizen who wants it, in a useful public job at a wage slightly below the minimum wage for private sector work," which would replace Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, public housing, and all other cash-like welfare programs. This is not workfare. There is no nonsense about trying to cajole welfare recipients into work or training programs. Kaus's system "would give you the location of several government job sites. If you show up and work, you get paid for your work. If you don't show up, you don't get paid. Simple."

The point is not to diminish the money inequality that separates welfare recipients from the rest of society (Kaus's system might well increase poverty among current welfare recipients) but to diminish the social inequality. Let welfare recipients have a chance to claim that great unifying basis for social equality in this society, the boast that one is paying one's own way in the world.

I have been thinking about Kaus's plan off and on since he first proposed it in a widely discussed 1986 *New Republic* article. I have many practical objections, because the program doesn't have a prayer of getting implemented correctly. Like every welfare reform we have tried since the 1960s, the final product would be unrecognizably watered down, placating everyone from the government unions, which are rightly scared stiff that high-paying, low-skill government jobs would be lost, to the welfare-rights lobby, which would be screaming for a zillion exceptions for mothers with infants, mothers without a good education, ad infinitum.

But I do not have a politically practicable alternative, so I might as well say it: If Kaus's plan were implemented as is, it would work. He has proposed an authentic solution that would immediately reduce the number of babies born to

low-income single women and, over a not-too-long period of time—a few decades, let us say—drastically reduce the size of the underclass. Moreover, his way of dealing with the underclass is no more offensive to the ideals of limited government than the current system. Both are miles out of bounds, but Kaus's way is much less intrusive and more respectful of personal responsibility than what we have now.

Kaus's other ideas—universal service for young people, tighter restrictions on private campaign contributions, a universal health-care system, day care—are standard parts of the liberal agenda. As the list indicates, Kaus really is a liberal, not a closeted conservative or libertarian. He believes in “affirmative government,” he actually hopes that government will play a larger role in our everyday lives, and he exhibits no interest whatsoever in the idea that government should have limits, dammit, that may not be transgressed no matter how good the cause.

In discussing his scheme for mandatory national service, for example, Kaus correctly concludes that it will not work without a penalty for evasion “harsh enough to be coercive,” possibly jail, possibly a money fine “that judges could tailor to fit the financial circumstances of any refuseniks”—millions of dollars in some cases. Nowhere in this discussion does he pause to ask how such uses of government can conceivably be squared with the vision that inspired the Founders.

Kaus's analysis of all these policies is useful nonetheless because he approaches them from an unusual and coherent perspective. The point of his ideal health system, for example, is not just to provide good health care for the poor but to create a system in which most Americans end up in the same waiting rooms—part of the “ecology of equality” that he seeks to create. And if that phrase sounds like the smarmy stuff you've been hearing from liberals for years, I can only suggest you read Kaus. He is as sassy as P. J. O'Rourke. (What liberal but Kaus would describe equality as the “veritable

G-spot of liberal rhetoric”?) The prose is sometimes jarringly colloquial, but mostly Kaus made me wish I could write like that. If sometimes he is naive—his discussion of what parents will tolerate in government intervention when it comes to their own children sounds like the writing of a man who has no children—he is always smart, turning over possibilities in his mind, thinking of problems with his own ideas, and always ready to try a different slant.

Kaus's solutions are not the main issue in any case, for the crucial part of the dialogue about social policy at this point is to probe the nature of the problem: How is the American idea, or what we have left of it, to survive the kinds of inequality that have not only increased in recent decades but will continue to increase, per-

haps accelerate, in the decades to come? As someone who has been working on the same topic from a different angle (this is not an entirely disinterested review), I think Kaus's concern is well-founded. Indeed, in my view Kaus confronts head-on the great challenge facing American democracy at the end of the 20th century: how to resist the forces that are pushing us toward a system in which the masses get bread and circuses while the elite runs their lives for them. *The End of Equality* asks better questions, more bluntly, than any liberal examination of American social policy in years, and it sweeps away a great many silly answers.

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The Best Years of Our Lives

BY STEPHEN MOORE

The Seven Fat Years: And How to Do It Again, by Robert L. Bartley, New York: The Free Press, 347 pages, \$22.95

Robert Bartley must feel like a man who shows up at a solemn funeral in a white tuxedo. While most of the American intelligentsia has been busy saying last rites over the supply-side ideas of the 1980s, Bartley's new book, *The Seven Fat Years*, is a celebration of the prosperity those ideas generated. His book is thus the ultimate in politically incorrect speech. These days, defending the “decade of greed and selfishness” just isn't done in polite company—and certainly not in print.

Not surprisingly, *The Seven Fat Years* hasn't received glowing reviews from the Washington press corps. As John Judis, who reviewed the book for *The Washington Post*, noted with scorn and incredulity: “Bartley actually seeks to repeat rather than repudiate the '80s. He just doesn't understand what's been happening.” Judis and other such critics are the same pundits who hysterically warned in 1980 that a Reagan presidency would mean thermonuclear war and that his tax cuts would lead to raging inflation and



Robert L. Bartley bucks conventional wisdom by celebrating the '80s.
steady economic decline.

Bartley's book also has not yet surged to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, nor is it likely to. Those exalted positions are already cluttered with gloomy chronicles of the 1980s. “What we are seeing in the books that are now selling,” says Linda Grey, president of Bantam Books, “is a turnaround from the decade of greed to the denigration of greed.”

This explains the endless litany of