



# The Dark Side of the Left: Illiberal Egalitarianism in America (American Political Thought) (American Political Thought (University Press of Kansas))

By Richard J. Ellis

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Why do people who identify themselves as liberal or egalitarian sometimes embrace intolerance or even preach violence? Illiberalism has come to be expected of the right in this country; its occurrence on the left is more paradoxical but no less real. Although equality lies at the heart of the liberal tradition, the earnest pursuit of egalitarian goals has often come at the expense of other liberal ideals.

In this provocative book, Richard J. Ellis examines the illiberal tendencies that have characterized egalitarian movements throughout American history, from the radical abolitionists of the 1830s to the New Left activists of the 1960s. He also takes on contemporary radical feminists like Catherine MacKinnon and radical environmental groups like Earth First! to show that, even today, many of the American left's sacred cows have cloven hooves.

Ellis identifies the organizational and ideological dilemmas that caused Students for a Democratic Society to transform itself from a democratic to an elitist organization, or that allow radicals to justify illegal acts as long as they are free of self-interest. He explains how orthodoxy arises within a group from the need to maintain distance from a society it views as hopelessly corrupt, and how individuals committed to egalitarian causes are particularly susceptible to illiberalism even poets like Walt Whitman, who celebrated the common people but often expressed contempt for their mundane lives. Political correctness, idealizing the oppressed, and an affinity for authoritarian and charismatic leaders are all parts of what Ellis calls "the dark side of the left."

Building on the groundwork laid by Richard Hofstadter in his pioneering book, *The Age of Reform*, Ellis exposes the shortcomings of today's left and provides a badly needed historical perspective on the contemporary debate over "political correctness." *The Dark Side of the Left* is a gutsy book that is essential reading

for anyone who occasionally feels dark forebodings about seemingly noble causes.

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

In his second paragraph, Ellis quickly points out that he is a lifelong Democrat, a "card-carrying member" of the ACLU, an environmentalist, a supporter of women's rights and a federalist. If it seems rather defensive, that is, in some way, the point of his book. Here, Ellis (American Political Cultures) offers a provocative critique of left-wing movements from 19th-century utopians to abolitionists to the old left of the inter-war era, to the New Left of the Vietnam era and, finally, to contemporary radical feminists like Catharine MacKinnon and certain environmental activists. Through an examination of speeches, books and articles, Ellis tries to document how varied ideologues abandoned their egalitarian principles in favor of rigid political correctness, sometimes slipping into violence and elitism. At root, Ellis sees a tendency to romanticize "the People"? "those powerful, natural persons whose heroism needs no drug of fame or applause to enable them to continue: those humble, mighty parts of the mass," to quote American Communist Michael Gold? while, to quote Gold again, denigrating "the simple souls who save their money, plod to offices, and plan college careers for their children." This is a largely academic study that attempts to lump in Walt Whitman and Tom Hayden with various extremists. The problem is Ellis's arguments often tend to be as reductionist and simplistic as the radical rhetoric he criticizes.

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### **Review**

"A courageous book that examines how some of the illusions and mystiques of the radical left have become axioms in the academic world today."—**John Patrick Diggins**, author of *The Lost Soul of American Politics*  
"I am impressed with the utter nerve of Ellis taking on so many sacred cows. He piles evidence upon evidence while telling a lively tale. I can't imagine how anyone could make a better case."—**Robert Booth Fowler**, author of *The Dance with Community: The Contemporary Debate in American Political Thought*  
"The writing is crisp, the illustration and documentation thorough, and the whole 'shape' of the argument impressive. A splendid book!"—**John L. Thomas**, author of *Alternative America*  
"The book is well written, energetic, quotable."—**Lewis Perry**, author of *Boats against the Current: American Culture between Revolution and Modernity*

### **From the Back Cover**

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