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Liberalism and the Challenge of *Fight Club*: Notes Toward an American Theory of the Good Life

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Christopher M. Duncan
Liberalism and the Challenge of Fight Club:
Notes Toward an American Theory of the Good Life

Here too the context seems to contaminate
the form, only the misery here is the
misery of happiness... an unhappiness
that doesn't know its name, that has no
way of telling itself apart from genuine
satisfaction and fulfillment since it has
presumably never encountered this last.
- Fredric Jameson

... if the moral force of liberalism is still
stimulating, its sociological content is
weak; it has no theory of society adequate
to its moral aims.
- C. Wright Mills

I felt like destroying something beautiful.
- "Jack," the narrator of Fight Club

The banality of homo economicus
produces homo brutalitas.
- Michael Gillespie

Introduction
In an episode of Saturday Night Live, the T.V.
sensation Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?
was treated satirically by replacing the usual middle
class contestants with what were supposed to be
poor peasants from some unnamed, developing
country and having them compete for various food
products rather than cash. As a female contestant
answered the questions, she moved from a sack of
rice to a block of cheese to a pile of meat while her
husband rooted for her from the audience. She was
finally stumped with a question that asked her to
name a disease where young women intentionally
starve themselves even though they have access to
plentiful food. Incredulous, the contestant shook
her head in disbelief and asked with genuine astonish­
ment how there could be such a disease. The
satire asked Americans to look at themselves
through the eyes of people for whom deprivation...
and hunger is a condition of existence and not a culturally induced psychological affliction. In other words, Americans were asked to acknowledge that they were different than much of the world but not in the exceptional way they typically imagine. It is this difference that serves as the starting point for this essay, though perhaps not in the way many would expect. My project aims not to condemn, shame, or celebrate American difference. Instead, my hope is to begin a much needed dialogue that is necessitated by this difference, one that is taking place too infrequently within the American academy, among our social elites or within the culture at large. The reasons this conversation is not taking place are manifold, but they tend to cohere around cultural embarrassment, indifference, ignorance, and, perhaps most importantly, the beneficiaries of the silence. Simply put, the conversation that many Americans are not having is about what constitutes the good life in the American liberal context. Many Americans must reacquaint themselves in a serious and public way with Emerson’s question: “How ought I to live?” (qtd. in Abbott 11).

Post-Liberal not Post-Modern

In the movie version of S. E. Hinton’s novel Rumble Fish, Mickey Rourke plays a misanthropic outlaw-genius known as the “Motorcycle Boy,” of whom his drunken, classically-educated father (played by Dennis Hopper) says, “He could be anything he wants, but just can’t think of anything he wants to be.” While not the most important problem in the world, nor perhaps even among the most important problems facing the American republic, the implications contained in that brief observation are pertinent and pressing enough to warrant theoretical treatment. Twenty-first century America has produced a unique personality, one that is neither plebeian nor patrician. Instead, we have citizens who are composites types: plebeian or commoner in taste and sentiment and patrician or aristocratic in means and opportunity—“plebeicians,” if you will. These are educated men and women of the middle class who take for granted that they have a right to pursue happiness but who do not have any clear idea or conception of what happiness is. In other words, they believe they can be almost anything they want to be, but they do not know anything they really want to be.

While making no claims that my sample is representative in a scientific or statistically valid manner, I draw the following insights from observation, conversation, and fifteen years of teaching political theory to undergraduates, who largely comprise the plebeian class, at both large state universities and smaller private religious institutions. In many instances, the problem manifests itself passively in the form of indifference masquerading as tolerance. As an old Calvin and Hobbes cartoon once proclaimed, “When you’re cool the world bores you.” In my teaching, I have seen not only a vague and (strangely) reactionary allegiance to the notion of tolerance, but often an inability or unwillingness to demonstrate any deeply-held beliefs that transcend the self. Whether it is from an inability to defend one’s attachments persuasively, from fear of ridicule for a lack of sophistication or from the larger fear of being labeled “judgmental” (and, hence, politically reprobate), students seem reluctant to engage in civil forms of public scrutiny, let alone serious confrontations about values and meaning that might force them either to take a stand or to re-evaluate their own beliefs and choices. However, in private conversations and in their journals, I hear and sense a longing for more. They do not want to spend their lives like Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilych, who proclaimed near his death, “Is it really is so! I lost my life over that curtain as I might have done when storming a fort. Is that possible? How terrible and how stupid!” (134). Yet they cannot seem to escape a social logic that perpetuates exactly this form of life. While there are numerous sub-classes within American culture in general and youth-culture in particular for whom the above is something of a misnomer or even a red-herring, they remain susceptible to the same malaise that characterizes plebeian youth.

Cultural theorist Anne Norton’s discussion of the relationship between American liberalism and shopping can be instructive here if we extrapolate the potential for psychological discontentment on the part of the reflective citizen who sees himself or herself in the following passage:

The practice of shopping enacts liberal theory’s identification of choice with freedom and, in that enactment, suggests a critique. Individuality, the conventions governing property, and the utility of representation as an instrument of the author’s will are all called into question. We realize, as we shop, that choice may be experienced as freedom, and as compulsion. The choices we appear to make have already been made for us. The individuality we prize is realized in purchases that deconstruct it. Property shows itself not only as a means for self-protection, self-expression, and self-discovery but also as a means for subjecting us to the authority of others. The enactment of the ideas of liberalism works simultaneously to confirm and subvert them. (4)

Despite the fact that the group I am speaking about may not be representative of the whole, I would argue that no country can afford to ignore this plebeian phenomenon because of the mischief this “class” might cause. Few things are as pregnant with the potential for social and political disruption as a right or an entitlement in search of animation and reification. Such is the price for open-ended theorizations that grant opportunities to act without stipulating the objects or ends toward which the action ought to be directed. An historical context that still assumes that rights (like the right to pursue happiness) are “inalienable” or foundational but has either rejected or forgotten the teleological imperative (the object of this pursuit) and, hence, has simultaneously embraced an anti-foundationalism, is one that is neither foundational nor anti-foundational. It is a context that is post-liberal but not post-modern. Such is the America of the Motorcycle Boy and his contemporary band of lost boys and girls.

The first “liberals” were both foundationalists and heroic without being “ironists” (Rorty, Contingency xv). At great personal risk to themselves, they opposed the old authoritarian and hierarchical political regime in straightforward and practical language and with simple religious confidence in their political position. While not self-consciously liberal, the following passage from The Twelve Articles issued during the German peasant revolt in the mid-1520’s sets the tone for the politics and theory that follows during the next two centuries:

Article 3
Along with this, they demanded certain rights and protections from the Lords, like the right to hunt, cut wood, and avoid overt exploitation (Klosko 311). In

Taking our gains for granted, we have forgotten that

ism emerged from the womb of the modern world breached and bloody,

the political result of the peasants’ demands, of course, took the form of the Ger­

sacrifices to come would have made little

society was assumed to be

always belongs to the worldings

that order is

Walzer then goes on to claim that

One day, however, that security becomes habit and zeal is no longer a worldly

In this world, the last word

the chosen suggests the nature of the new order they

5. The acting out of saintliness produces a new kind of politics . . .

c. The violent attack upon customary procedures sets the saints free to

experiment politically.

6. The historical role of the chosen band is twofold. Externally, as it were, the

band of saints is a political movement aiming at social reconstruction. . . .

Discipline is the cure for freedom and “unsettledness.”

Walzer also indicates that ideological, controls in human society and thought enthusiasm and battle­

the struggle against the old order seems largely to be won by

Lockean liberals found it possible to dispense with religious, even

as

ordinary men are

more optimistic about human

nature, more sanguine about the prospects for the emergent individualism, and,

hence, less inclined to repress their fellow travelers or their opponents into con­

formity beyond acceptance of a constitutional order and the rule of law. To paraphrase Walzer: The triumph of Lockean ideas, on the other hand, suggests the

overcoming of anxiety, the appearance of saints and citizens for whom sin is no longer a problem. The struggle against the old order seems largely to be won by

Locke’s time, and the excitement, confusion, and fearfulness of that struggle al­

most forgotten. Lockean liberals found it possible to dispense with religious, even

with ideological, controls in human society and thought enthusiasm and battle­

readiness unattractive in men. In a sense, then, liberalism was dependent upon the

something called a liberal bourgeois. In my story, it is the liberal bourgeois who

becomes simply a bourgeois (my post-liberal “plebeian”). Walzer’s model is laid out in the following manner (which I reproduce at some length but not in its enti­

1. At a certain point . . . there appear a band of “strangers” who view

themselves as chosen men, saints and who seek a new order . . .

2. These men are marked off from their fellows by an extraordinary self­

assurance and daring.

3. The band of the chosen confronts the existing world as if in war.

4. The organization of the chosen suggests the nature of the new order they

seek, but also reflects the necessities of the present struggle.

Walzer also indicates that ideological, controls in human society and thought enthusiasm and battle­
existence of “saints,” that is, of persons whose good behavior could be relied upon. At the same time, the secular and genteel character of liberalism was determined by the fact that these were “saints” whose goodness (sociability, moral decency, or mere respectability) was self-assured and relaxed, free from the nervousness and fanaticism of Calvinist godliness (303).

While liberalism was not nearly so complete elsewhere in 1700, it soon would be in various iterations throughout the West. In what would become the United States, liberalism was, in Hartz’s phrase, “a kind of self-completing mechanism” (6), in other words, more or less innate (Boorstin Genius and “Our Unspoken”). As much, even our revolution could be characterized as a “conservative” event, especially when compared to the French Revolution (Arendt On Revolution). Although the historical/ideological theorizations of the American revolutionary period vary considerably, the bulk of the post-founding American citizenry can be aptly characterized as Walzer’s “worldlings” (Wood Radicalism). For such people, citizenship is valuable for the protections and opportunities it affords them to pursue various public and private projects; it is mostly an instrumental good rather than the primary good or end in itself that it is often argued to be in republican political theory (Aristotle Politics, Arendt The Human Condition).

However, rather than providing another lament about the decline of civic responsibility in the American liberal state (Barber, Elshtain), my purpose here is a little different. I want to assert that even though American liberals in general viewed politics as instrumental, e.g. as preserving the right to pursue happiness, they did not view the ends pursued as benefit of teleological import. While they may have been early versions of what we now call “value pluralists” regarding the power of the state to impose various kinds of social, political, or religious orthodoxy on its citizenry, they did not necessarily believe that one opinion or way of life was as good as the next. You can be (or perhaps could be) a “value pluralist” politically without embracing relativism personally (Galston Value) (770). Indeed, early liberalism’s close intellectual ties to the Enlightenment explicitly rule out such relativism even while taking a hard stand in the name of tolerance (Locke). Liberals like Locke, Jefferson, and Mill believed that the “truth” was out there and that the “free market place of ideas” was the best hope for discovering it. What makes them “liberals” rather than “conservatives” is not their rejection of truth as an ideal, but rather their unwillingness to impose it on others and repress those with whom they disagree. As Mill himself put it, “We can never be sure that the opinion we are endeavoring to stifle is a false opinion” (18). However, this brand of liberal humility should not be confused with an intellectual indifference that refuses to engage in critical judgment. As Mill explains later:

We have a right, also, in various ways, to act upon our unfavorable opinion of anyone, not to the oppression of his individuality, but in the exercise of ours. We are not bound, for example, to seek his society; we have a right to avoid it (though not to parade the avoidance), for we have a right to choose the society most acceptable to us. We have a right, and it may be our duty, to caution others against him, if we think his example or conversation likely to have a pernicious effect on those with whom he associates. (72, emphasis mine)

But Mill does not stop with his assertion of the reciprocal nature of the rights of individuals; he goes on to paint a general picture of the sorts of individuals who might be pernicious and deserving of our avoidance: a person who shows rashness, obstinacy, self-conceit, who cannot live within moderate means, who cannot restrain himself from hurtful indulgences—who pursues animal pleasures at the expense of those of feeling and intellect—must expect to be lowered in the opinion of others, and to have a less share of their favorable sentiments (72-73). By inverting Mill’s picture above, I believe we can recast his negative injunction concerning what to avoid as a positive proclamation about what to embrace. In other words, if we want to be the sort of person who does not wish to have others warned against seeking our company, we should not be rash, obstinate, conceited, immoderate, unrestrained, overly indulgent, animalistic, unfree, or anti-intellectual but rather the opposites of these things. For lack of a better term, such a person would have what we could call a liberal character and disposition. But, if the opinions of others did not matter, why should such a character be preferred to an aliberal or even illiberal one?

Mill has an answer for this question as well, namely the lack of such a character demonstrates “want of personal dignity and self-respect” (73). Since his larger concern in this chapter of On Liberty is the relationship between the society and the individual, Mill does not say much else with regard to individual psychology. The implication, however, strikes me as plain: those individuals who deny their own dignity by embracing some form of illiberal life are somehow deformed as human beings as a result. While for Mill that deformity is not the business of society insofar as it does no harm to others, he does leave room open for intervention on the part of friends. In his words, “the worst we shall think ourselves justified in doing is leaving him to himself, if we do not interfere benevolently by showing interest or concern for him” (74). Such a friendly intervention, one must assume, would need to include the following stages: demonstrating and persuading the individual in question of the nature of the deformity, showing him or her the path to rectifying it, and finally explaining the utility of the change to the individual. The first two strike me as simply logical and obvious, but the last is a little trickier and requires a return to the earlier line of argument about the historical development of liberalism itself.

While Walzer’s model above does a good job of explaining how liberalism came to be, neither he nor I have answered the question of why it came to be. The German peasants outlined the moral authority for their request to be free, but we were never told why they wished to be free in the first place. Such is the power of the term “freedom” in our contemporary lexicon—we assume that the answer to the question is “self-evident.” But, of course, it is not necessarily the case. There is any number of reasons why someone would like to be free and not all of them are good ones; there are also good reasons for rejecting freedom in favor of other values (Hobbes). What I want to suggest is that there are specifically liberal reasons for wanting to be free and that those reasons, in a general sense, represent the teleological thrust of liberalism. In place of Richard Rorty’s negative description of a “liberal” as someone who thinks “that cruelty is the worst thing we can do” (Contingency xv), I would like to argue that we substitute a positive definition based
on Thoreau's sentiments in Walden. In other words, a "liberal" is some who wants to "live deliberatively..." and not, when [they] come to die, discover that [they] had not lived," who does not wish to practice "resignation," and who wants to "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life" (47-48). While this may seem like a redefinition, it is in my mind a redefinition. It is necessary because so many of us have forgotten and hence transformed liberalism into something very different without having engaged in a deliberative process as such.

At the most basic level, this is worth talking about because I believe the initial goals of liberal theory and practice were justifiable and, in a sense, "true."

To live "deliberately," however, requires that individuals are not "deformed" either by their own poor choices or by society's repressive mechanisms. The first "liberals" (Walzer's saints and, later, their liberal bourgeois progeny) understood this and embarked simultaneously (though in varying degrees) on individual-friendly political projects and very demanding, rigorous projects of the self. While the second projects took many forms, what linked them together was the imperative of choosing and the quest for proficiency and excellence. The goal of the modern liberal world was the same as that of the classical world of Aristotle, namely happiness (Aristotle, Ethic Bk. I). The price for happiness was diligence and excellence in the things chosen. The important point of departure for liberalism from the classical world, from the medieval Christian world, and even from modern republican ideology, was the staunch belief that the good itself could be multiple and varied even if the injunction to pursue it vigorously was uniform. Instead of building a "city on a hill," we would build "selves on the hill for everyone else to see and maybe emulate.

In this way, the right to pursue happiness can be said to have implied a reciprocal duty to pursue happiness. The liberal needs to be politically free to be happy, and so the state must not arbitrarily prevent the pursuit of individual excellence. But, the liberal must be "undeformed" personally and socially as well and, hence, demand the sort of discipline from one's self that in other eras was supplied by the state, Church, or other authoritarian institutions (used here in a non-pejorative manner). When individuals fail to discipline themselves, the liberal à la Mill, must resist stepping in with the state to "force them to be free," and, instead, pity them. Friends, however, can demonstrate (and may even have a duty to demonstrate) concern and intervene benevolently—though not in an authoritarian manner—to help an individual see and want to heal the deformity: Friends do this because they want those they care about to be capable of happiness; they do not have to avoid their friends or warn others to do so. It is my argument that, like Walzer's liberal bourgeois who "forgot" that he or she stood on space created by the Puritan saint, the contemporary bourgeois has "forgotten" that he or she stands on the space created by the liberal insofar as the contemporary bourgeois accepts the right to pursue happiness as foundational in origin but ignores the duty to do so. They do this under the mistaken assumption that whatever is chosen is, by virtue of having been chosen, good and in no need of any defense beyond what is minimally acceptable to the actor. While preventing the state from stepping in and enforcing such a duty, no early liberal like Locke, Mill, or Jefferson would have accepted this position as legitimate (Holmes).

As liberals of one sort or another, most authentic, founding American thinkers would have rejected such a position as well by casting aspersion on such people, pitying them, or intervening as "friends." Unfortunately, such thinkers are becoming less visible and audible, and an important tradition in American political theory is being lost. In turn, a liberalism worthy of the name is disappearing as the processes of "bourgeoisification" and "postmodernization" continues in the wake of our own forgetfulness. It is to this disappearing tradition that we must turn if we are to recover American liberalism in its fullest and most defensible form and rescue American political thought from what I will call the challenge of Fight Club in the final section of this essay.

America's Sermonic Tradition and Our True Lost Soul

While rejecting much of the Socratic metaphysic concerning the good life, American liberalism still held fast to the notion of a good life. Though the possible "lives" that might be considered "good" were plural in liberal America, the need to defend one's choices and strategies (ends and means) was constant. Residues of liberalism persist today. While often asked harmlessly enough, the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" is culturally loaded. Contrary to most traditional societies, the question carries with it the pregnant possibility embedded in the core of liberal ideology: we can, quite literally in many cases, choose what we want to be. However, once answered, the question most certainly begs the next: Why? And the question most certainly has a third stage to the conversation that involves the various demands and risks involved in the given choice and perhaps even a discussion of alternatives that might be more appropriate for a given person. Even though the state is denied much of a role in an individual's decision, others are not. How one is to live and what one is to do for a living are considered choices open for public, though not political, scrutiny. Failure to answer the questions or an inability to defend the choices properly is considered a sign of immaturity or confusion not befitting a full person or competent individual. This process also persists today in college admissions, especially to elite schools and programs. While we are properly denied the use of things like race, gender, religious affiliation, national origin, and so on in making admissions decisions, we are allowed to use "personal statements" and interviews to make our selections. The basic goal of the personal statement is to convince the readers that the student has given a good deal of thought as to the kind of life he or she thinks valuable and that he or she is sufficiently able and committed to achieving it. These are just two instances of what I would call "Socratic instances" in American life.

A "Socratic instance" is one where the participants in some brand of "conversation" take for granted the proposition that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (or at least not worthy of respect). Such an instance, (i.e., when a person feels compelled to give a persuasive answer to the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"), when shared between at least two parties, produces a public spectacle that elicits judgment on the part of the observers and participants regarding the choices and reasons offered up. The hope of such a process, when
done in good faith, is that the partners to the conversation will be improved (i.e., rendered less “deformed”). Looking at the _Apology_, we see Socrates proclaiming, in what would become a Millian spirit, that his practice of philosophy renders him a friend to the city (29d; Arendt, _Philosophy and Politics_). His preparedness to question any and all citizens whether rich or poor, established or marginal, and so on, in order to see if the citizen “attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things” (30a), is a benevolent attempt to help individuals choose their lives and actions in ways that will increase their happiness. As Socrates explains a little later, he sees his role as conferring on a subject the “greatest benefit, by trying to persuade him not to care for any of his belongings before caring that he himself should be as good and as wise as possible” (36d). Comparing himself to the well-treated and publicly-rewarded “Olympian victor,” Socrates asserts that “the Olympian victor makes you think yourself happy; I make you be happy” (38e).

This distinction between thinking one’s self happy and actually being happy is not one that finds a hospitable home in the contemporary American liberal mind. Americans tend to be either content or discontent, but seldom can we commit to the seeming absurdity of being discontent with what makes us content or content with what makes us discontent. Yet, this is exactly the sort of stance that a richer Socratically-inspired liberalism demands of us; this is the sort of life called forth by a wisdom that “knows that it does not know.” Metaphorically, it is like a hummingbird at a feeder. From a distance the bird appears still, but in reality, the wings are moving at a tremendous rate to maintain the stillness. If the Socratic/liberal mind is working optimally, the standing still (contentment) is only achieved legitimately (being happy) by rapid, sustained wing movement (contentment comparable to self-examination through shared questions). In other words, the bird must move to stand still to achieve its goal of eating from the feeder (happiness). To relinquish either part is to “think oneself wise when one is not” or to “think yourself happy.” This is also how we can make sense of Aristotle’s assertion that you cannot judge a man happy until the end of his life. Unfortunately, contemporary Americans are not readily given to deferring gratification. This is what I will suggest leads to the “misery of happiness.”

Contemporary bourgeois citizens are plagued by the “misery of happiness” because they think themselves happy rather than being happy. This is because they and their political culture have displaced what I will call authentic individualism with “deviant” forms like expressive or possessive individualism (Macpherson). The crude distinction between the two involves the former asserting that the unexamined life is not worth living and the deviant forms, by whatever name, making no such value claim. Thus, in deviant forms of liberalism, the unexamined life is given moral and political equivalence to the examined life. What I have called traditional liberalism would have nothing to do with such an assertion, and the demands of “friendship” require that liberal thinkers do not let the unexamined self go unchallenged. Before I continue, however, I want to be clear that it is not my objective here to assert the existence of some core self or “real” person who is engaging in some brand of false-consciousness and who is in need of “wising up.” On the contrary, I am not making any ontological claims; instead, I am suggesting that within the liberal tradition _rightly understood_ there is a particular kind of individualism and happiness that historically corresponded to the aims of political liberation, that the political constructions that followed the initial formation of the tradition are consistent with those aims, and that these aims have been neglected or forgotten at the price of accomplishing the original ends. Hence, if the original ends are still valued, then it behooves us to recover the traditional meanings of individualism and happiness, such that they might be lived again by those to whom the original aims appeal. Far then from what might be thought of as metaphysics, my project is ultimately concerned with how we live instead of what we are.

For purposes of this argument, I rely heavily on the ideal of “authenticity” as articulated by Charles Taylor. Referring to the work of Rousseau and later Herder, Taylor suggests that the contemporary ideal of authenticity, that in its most “degraded, absurd, or trivialized” form provides justification for “doing your own thing,” rests on a “powerful moral ideal that has come down to us” (29). That ideal held that “there is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. But this gives a new importance to being true to oneself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me” (28-29). Embedded in such a view, of course, is the potential for the sort of social atomism and solipsism that serves as the basis for numerous critiques of liberalism. Yet, the force of the ideal remains constant and, however battered, continues to serve as the foundation for the constitutional protections that Americans take for granted.

Where Taylor’s argument joins the one I have been sketching, and moves us beyond the more simplistic or heavy handed debates between liberalism and its critics, is through his assertion of the “fundamentally dialogical character” of human life (33). Taylor calls this “dialogical character” of human life an “inescapable horizon” (part of human facticity):

We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression. . . . No one acquires the languages needed for self-definition on their own. We are introduced to them through exchanges with others who matter to us. . . . The genesis of the human mind is in this sense not “monological,” not something each accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical. (33)

Hence, who I am and who you are are not separate questions if we are familiar with each other’s lives, words, and expressive acts. We are part of each other to the extent that we carry on some sort of “conversation” that can challenge, change, or reinforce our particular perceptions, beliefs, and choices. As “friends” (broadly construed) we are each other’s Socratic interlocutor or Millian benevolent interwener; we are each other’s necessary source of “discontent” that makes liberal happiness (contentment) possible. Moreover, this relationship is not bounded by time or space insofar as our “conversations,” while possibly constant in some form, need not be immediate or concurrent with one another. Taylor explains:
Moreover, this is not just a fact about *genuity*, which can be ignored later on. It's not just that we learn the languages in dialogue and then go on to use them for our own purposes on our own. This describes our situation to some extent in our culture. We are expected to develop our own opinions, outlook, stances to things, to a considerable degree through solitary reflection. But this is not how things work with important issues, such as the definition of our identity. We define this always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognize in us. And even when we outgrow some of the latter—our parents for instance—and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live. (33)

I would only add to Taylor's account by claiming that, aside from particular others, we are also in "conversation" with books, various forms of art, historical ideas, and exemplary figures that we believe are significant and that produce in us a visceral need to respond. Those "texts" with which we construct and reconstruct our identities are the root of authentic (liberal) individualism. It is a process that involves constant and conscious tinkering, like the movement of the hummingbird's wings. Inauthentic "individualism" comes from at least two general directions: the "right," where conservative or more authority-minded thinkers attempt to project a monological identity upon a person without giving the person a chance to respond or otherwise participate in the conversation; and the "left," where the need for other voices is dismissed as irrelevant and often labeled authoritarian and illiberal. Oddly enough, however, both modes are repressive from the stance of authentic individualism. In turn, even when we accept the arguments of the right or the left willingly, we are like Socrates' citizens who each have their own "Olympian victor" who makes them "think themselves happy." Taylor explains, "To shut out the demands emanating beyond the self is precisely to suppress the conditions of significance, and hence to court trivialization" (40). The larger of the two problems in American political culture today, however, is the former not the latter. Indeed, the "left" (those who dismiss other voices as irrelevant) has won this battle (unfortunately it may have come ironically at the price of the way), *insofar as even my most "conservative" students still believe that being called "judgmental" is a bad thing and that we should do "whatever makes us happy and not worry about what other people think." (Unless, of course, they think you are judgmental, in which case you should worry what they think.) Under the guise of tolerance, this flat and tepid individualism is, more often than not, just a thinly-masked excuse for a robust indifference and casual conformity. In other words, it is a relationship of convenience that, despite its pretense of nobility and homage, is really just a front for self-centeredness and an excuse for intellectual and moral sloth. While there are elements in such an assertion that dovetail with similar neo-conservative critiques like those associated with Allan Bloom, it is more a reflection of how far we have moved from the initial liberal ideal than a reactionary or pre-modern lament. As Donald Lutz would remind us, good theory has a transcendent character that political ideology typically does not (10). In other words, good theory might work for thinkers of very different political persuasions, like political decentralization in the hands of John Calhoun, Students for a Democratic Society, and the Black Panthers. This, of course, is not to say that there are not genuine and thoughtful liberals who believe that their approach and work represent important and much needed additions, reforms, or clarifications to a healthy and living liberalism. This essay, however, is directed at the political thinkers and theorists who are somehow complicit either directly or indirectly in the drastic dilution of the liberal tradition by what they are not doing. To them, I would like to extend a challenge to reclaim lost ground for the sake of liberalism itself.

Among the more prominent thinkers I am talking about is someone like Richard Rorty, who has spoken about both liberal theory and liberal practice. He and many others have been successful in persuading their fellow citizens of at least the public utility of treating their commitments as "contingent," *insofar as arguments from authority or first principles are not considered socially persuasive or definitive*. While for many this plays out in an increase in toleration for difference and a renewed respect for diversity, it has also had the unintended consequence of allowing those uninterested in such things to hold their authoritarian beliefs with more security and with less need of sustained or rigorous defense. If the left is freed from accountability to public reason, so too is the right. In turn, the progressive political agenda that Rorty in particular has linked himself to in his recent book *Achieving Our Country*, an agenda that requires a high level of commitment and sacrifice, is, in all likelihood, going to fall on deaf ears because he gives no better reason for thinking like he does politically than that he thinks that way. Sadly, for all his philosophical power, Rorty's most enduring contribution to the public realm will probably be an increase in indifference and perhaps even seriously decreased levels of tolerance.

On the other hand, there are other contemporary thinkers who understand this problem quite well. Will Kymlicka begins with what I would term a self-evident, though often overlooked, truth as it relates to the liberal world:

*Our essential interest is in leading a good life, in having those things that a good life contains. That may seem to be a pretty banal claim. But it has important consequences. For leading a good life is different from leading the life we currently have to be good—that is, we recognize that we may be mistaken about the worth or value of what we are currently doing. We may come to see that we have been wasting our lives, pursuing trivial or shallow goals and projects that we had mistakenly considered of great importance.*

William Galston echoes this idea by asking us to consider two ideal types, "Liberal" and "Traditional." In his words:

*Liberals live her life in full awareness of the truth value of pluralism. She knows that her way of life, although a source of meaning and satisfaction, is but one among many defensible lives she might have led under different circumstances. ... By contrast, to the extent that he is even aware of ways of life other than his own, Traditional regards them as inferior or even contemptible. He does not see his own way of life as a choice, and because he believes there is only one right way to live, he sees no particular value in the fact of individuals' identification with ways of life other than his own. If value pluralism has objective validity, the Liberal knows something that*
Traditional does not. (773)

Among the things that Liberal must consider that Traditional either need not or cannot is that her way of life might be wrong. If she "forgets" this by preventing inquiries into her reasons for the choice she has made, the distinction between the two types disappears and even Liberal's liberalism becomes "traditional."

Liberal states and liberal citizens are precluded from forcing us into living a different kind of life even if they think we are mistaken. Indeed, they are precluded from using force of any kind, even if we ourselves claim we are mistaken. Even if we ourselves claim we are mistaken.

Change, if it is to come, must be the product of a free choice on the part of the individual or else the change is illiberal. However, this does not mean that external entities are not allowed to influence the choices of an individual as an extension of their own liberty. In fact, friends, and perhaps others as well, may even have a duty to provide such input out of either self-interest or benevolent concern. In America, however, liberal practice and some liberal thought has progressively fallen deeper into an illogical trap best symbolized by what we as a culture have decided is not to be discussed in polite company (or at the dinner table for that matter)—namely, politics and religion (Neuhaus). For some, this silence is the product of a strategy of conflict avoidance, but for others, it is the product of a mistaken understanding of what I have called liberalism's teleological imperative. As argued above, for our individualism to be robust, meaningful, and authentic, it must be dialogical; this idea is supported still further by the fact that our current beliefs about the good life can be mistaken (and, hence, in need of reform). As such, not only are we allowed to talk about these things in a critical manner with others, self-interest and/or friendship demands that we do so. Some liberal theorists and thoughtful liberal citizens have mistakenly assumed that the requirement of some form of neutrality (here to be read as simply non-suppression) on the part of a liberal state requires the same neutrality on their part. However, what liberalism precludes the state from doing is not meant to be precluded altogether, but rather such power requires transferred to the citizenry itself, including, of course, political theorists and critics. If both the state and the citizenry are precluded from engaging individuals critically, then we must ask, "Who is left?" The answer is, obviously, no one. The result of this is to create a monological vacuum in which (to steal a phrase from Tocqueville) each of us is shut up in the solitude of his or her own heart, and, hence, rendered incapable of the authentic individualism that liberalism was meant to facilitate in the first place. In turn, when viewed through the lens of human happiness, there is no longer a good answer to the question why liberalism? The inability to give a good answer to that question is effectively to have lost the soul of liberalism.

Americans used to know this. From the Church pulpit to the political platform, and in many places in between, Americans confronted each other as citizen-friends and articulated in conversation an answer to the root question, "How ought I to live?" Even if we grant the premise of Rorty and his fellow-travelers that there is no foundational or "final vocabulary" that can be referenced in answer to the "why" question, it does not mean we must accept his assertion that "the vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to arguing..." (Contingency xiv). Indeed, the very lack of such a vocabulary points toward the Emersonian dictum that "frequent self-examination is the duty of all" (qtd. in Abbott 14). The lack of our ability to definitively settle the question does not logically imply that the question itself and our repeated, varied attempts to answer it are without value; as Camus cautions us at the close of his short story, "We must imagine Sisyphus happy."

When all is said and done, Rorty's faux-Cartesianism that points toward something like I am therefore I am, makes the distinction between the examined life and the unexamined life all but irrelevant; roll the rock up the hill, don't roll the rock up the hill, it's all the same. Yet, however true this might be from the outside-in-perspective of the philosopher, it is not the same from the inside-out-perspective of the searching individual. The argument thus far has been that happiness depends on the dialogic search itself. Liberalism, rightly understood, requires that same perpetual question and struggling on the part of its adherents. To help in the partial recovery of the "soul" of liberalism, I suggest that we look to what one theorist has termed the "sermonic tradition" in American political thought as an example of the deeper sort of liberal tradition being described in this essay, liberalism with a purpose. In his States of Perfect Freedom, Philip Abbott argues that the "sermonic tradition" that links the work of American political actors and thinkers as diverse as Benjamin Franklin and Malcolm X represents a "common form of political thinking in America" that should be viewed not as "defective or truncated political thought" but as "one that originates from America's unique historical position" (10-11). Abbott argues that the essential features of the sermonic tradition can be summed up in the following manner:

First, it repeatedly asks the same type question: "How can I be saved/successful/virtuous/nic/healthy/happy?" Emerson once remarked that each person was confronted with a very practical question: "How ought I to live?" That a question such as this should be regarded as practical reveals a central aspect of American political thought. The sermonic tradition suffers less from an inability to grasp political categories than from a belief that this "practical" question is a logically (and morally) prior one. Thus the question "How ought I to live?" involves a conscious attempt to politicize personal life and indirectly (and often unwittingly) challenges the liberal distinction between state and society and public and private. . . . But most of all, the sermonic tradition . . . assumes that each individual is responsible for the rightness and wrongness of an issue, that he or she must make a decision on the issue in question, that upon making that decision must act on it at once, that while such action has national, even worldwide import, above all it has personal significance. Those who do not accept such a change of heart are regarded with suspicion and often open hostility (11-12).

Where Plato suggested in the Republic that we look to the larger city in order to see the individual soul, Abbott sees the American strategy as the inverse: we look to the smaller individual in order to understand the city. With its emphasis on content and the social contract, such a view seems perfectly appropriate in the context of liberal political theory. When we look to those individuals, however, we should not see static, unchanging selves, but rather individuals searching and offering...
themselves up as examples, as living, breathing counter-intuitives for other individuals. Viewing autobiography as "sermonic assertion," Abbott argues that it is the larger tradition it represents in American culture "not only tells us about the process of individual political commitment but it also reveals a great deal about the formation of the self in liberal society" (13).

Extrapolating from this particular representation of the tradition, it is my contention that "sermonic assertion" aimed at producing periodic changes of heart is at the root of a properly understood "dialogical" liberalism. Hence, the onus would seem to be on those who want to argue from within the tradition that the unexamined life is worth living, and that it is just as valuable and theoretically coherent as the examined life. Yet, there has been little in the way of a sustained defense of this position, and it is my argument that from within the liberal tradition no such defense can effectively be made. I would assert that while coercion regarding the good life is not allowed, mutual "proselytizing" is not only desirable, but necessary and perhaps even required. Oddly enough though, much current public thinking and practice rejects public proselytizing as impolite at best and anti-liberal at worst. The "sermonic tradition" and the dialogic, contentious, and liberal tradition it represents, has all but been vanquished from the contemporary American public square in favor of a significantly thinner, more insular and bourgeoisified individualism. (It seems that today we must now be kept safe from the opinions and questions of others as well as their actions.) Below, I will sketch some partial evidence of this phenomenon and discuss what I see as the current and long range political and cultural problems of this transformation as a rationale for recovering and embracing the demands of an earlier "thicker" American liberalism.

The Challenge of Fight Club

There is any number of films, books, or other cultural representations that could serve as a conduit for my purposes here. The film American Beauty comes quickly to mind. Indeed, there is a whole genre of films that I would call American angst movies, movies that call the thinness of bourgeois life into question to various ends. Yet, a good many of them ultimately rely some version of that which they seek to criticize by choosing something like bourgeois love over bourgeois career, and so on. In American Beauty, for example, Kevin Spacey's trek back into the counter-culture lifestyle that his suburban existence had all but vanquished is ultimately rejected. In place of his idealized bohemianism, we are asked by the now dead protagonist to see beauty everywhere, even in the "dance" of a discarded plastic bag.

This is where Fight Club departs from its species and itself attempts to "evolve." Fight Club winces at the end, but it does not flinch. On the other hand, the wince itself is all too telling and representative of America's problems. The basic story is rather simple. The narrator "Jack" (played by Edward Norton) is, as he puts it, "a thirty year old boy" who has become a "slave to the IKEA nesting instinct" and asks questions like "what sort of dining set defines me as a person?" As he explains after an explosion wipes out his apartment, "When you buy furniture you tell yourself, 'O.K. that's the last sofa I'm gonna need. Whatever else happens I've got that sofa thing covered.' I had it all. I had a stereo that was very decent, a wardrobe that was getting very respectable. I was close to being complete." Jack, a recall administrator, paints a rather disturbing picture of a corporate America, where the decision by a car company to recall a particular line of cars is the product of a simple mathematical equation that works like this: take the number of cars of that make on the road (A), the rate of failure (B), the average cost of an out-of-court settlement (C), multiply them together and compare to the cost of a recall (X). If $A \times B \times C < X$, then there is no recall no matter how many deaths and injuries may result. Instead of using this information in any Silwoodesque manner, however, Jack uses it to leverage his employer into paying him not to work or come to the office.

Plagued not by his conscience but by the extreme banality of his bourgeois existence, Jack creates a swaggering alter ego named Tyler Durden (played by Brad Pitt). Together, he and Tyler create a phenomenon called "Fight Club," where men get together in dank basements and beat each other bloody. The fights are as brutal as Jack's daytime incarnation is banal, but no one dies and at the close of the fights there is a cathartic embrace and praise heaped on the founders for creating this opportunity to feel alive. In Jack's words, "Fight Club wasn't about winning or losing; it wasn't about words. The hysterical shouting was in tongues—like a Pentecostal church. When the fighting was over nothing was solved, but we all felt saved." Fight Club is both the antithesis and ultimate expression of the contemporary support groups that the movie openly mocks. As the phenomenon spreads and new fight clubs begin springing up all over the country, the movie turns haphazardly towards the political. The fight clubbers are slowly molded into a prankster army of corporate saboteurs who don the black fatigues and boots and haircuts of a neo-fascist movement and worship Tyler Durden while renouncing their own identities to better serve the cause. That cause is the destruction of corporate (bourgeois) America in the form of blowing up credit card companies to create the "collapse of financial history" that will move us "one step closer to economic equilibrium." While the violence early in the film and crude politics of the movie's end led many critics to denounce the film as an apology for fascism, no one other than the most piously anti-ironic viewer could really take the visible "politics" of the movie's end seriously. One need only ponder for a moment the fact that the only member of the fight club "army" that was known by name was Robert Paulson (played by Meat Loaf). Paulson was a 300-pound man with extremely large breasts and no testicles. While his character is certainly the representative of the movie's social emasculation sub-text, he is no one's poster-boy for the master-race. Even the would-be "Hitler" in the bunker, Jack, is a screw-up; his attempt to kill himself by placing a gun in his mouth and pulling the trigger results in blowing out the side of his face. He is left disfigured and bloody but not badly injured, and, as the financial district explodes around them, he reassures the love interest, Marla, that "Everything is going to be fine. . . You met me at a very strange time in my life." (This is the "wince.")

For all its raw power and emotion, Fight Club ends in a wink when the viewer had expected at least some sort of vision. While it doesn't let us off the hook completely, it does lack the nerve, will, self-confidence, or perhaps, in the mind of the writer, the right to point out a direction of its own. While telling us that we are
"not unique snowflakes," we "are not the car [we] drive, the contents of [our] wallets, [and] not our khakis" and that it's "only after we've lost everything that we are free to do anything" it never stoops to give us a real hint about what we are or what we should be. It is a screeching jeremiad without the "good news." It is bereft of "sermonic assertion." Many will, of course, say quickly that that is precisely the point—to strip away the seductive and protective sheathing of the contemporary world and expose its raw acidic reality to a complacent and desensitized audience-public. Many may even be quick to say that the movie is playing the Socratic role I praised earlier. But, this is wrong. Socrates' questioning was designed to show individuals where they had perhaps reasoned incorrectly. Where Socrates ostensibly took neither a position nor a side, Fight Club has taken a side but not a position. We know what Jack (and Fight Club) is against, but we do not know what he is for. As such, he is both a product of contemporary liberalism's failure and a co-conspirator in its continued demise. Almost as if conscious of this he exclaims in a third-person reference to himself, "This is Jack's wasted life."

After pummeling the audience and, literally, himself; after calling on us to "consider the possibility that God does not like you, that he never wanted you, that in all probability he hates you;" and after rallying us to "fuck ambition" and "fuck redemption" and accept our fate as "God's unwanted children," he leaves us on our own and without example. Because, even though "you weren't alive anywhere like you were at fight club," there is no sense that Jack was happy in the fight club. And while certainly living counter-culturally in the extreme, he was still not living deliberately in Thoreau's sense of the term. The film's passionate depiction of the problem of bourgeoisification resonates, I believe, with many younger and early middle-aged Americans (especially men). Tyler exclaims to his fellow-travelers:

An entire generation wasted. Slaves with white collars. Advertising has us cherishing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so that we can buy shit we don't need. We are the middle children of history. No purpose or place. We have no great war, no Great Depression. Our great war is a spiritual war; our great Depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we would all be millionaires, movie-gods, and rock-stars. But, we won't. We are slowly learning that fact and we are pissed off. While the bluntness of this speech and others like it tends towards the didactic, it is ultimately an impotent didacticism. In academic language, Anne Norton's allusion to a similar problem captures the sorrow but not the rage of the Durden character, "The individuality we prize is realized in purchases that deconstruct it" (4). One step forward, one step back; the game is rigged. We are consumers for whom consumption has become an end rather than a means because the act itself "deconstructs" the goal of the initial act. This elusiveness is a formula for unhappiness.

As I said at the outset, there are bigger problems in the world. Much of the world would be hard pressed to feel sympathy for this plight. But, like it or not, these "middle children of history," our "motorcycle boys and girls," represent an important problem for liberalism and American society and a challenge to American political thinkers and theorists. It is a problem going unaddressed and a challenge going mostly unmet. First and foremost, in terms of reasons for that neglect, is the fact that the situation has developed incrementally and, for the most part, unconsciously over the last 30 years. Only recently has what used to be called "decadence" become a more general possibility in our culture. Like the self-made man of American lore who out of good fortune managed to produce only indolent children, our culture is ill-prepared to deal with a problem that no one imagined would be a problem and that we are embarrassed to talk about seriously lest we be thought boorish or insensitive. While many of us may loathe the unironic Tyler Durden in our midst when they claim, "We're by-products of a lifestyle obsession. . . . What concerns [us] are celebrity magazines, televisions with 500 channels, some guy's name on [our] underwear, Rogain, Viagra, Olestra," we ignore them at great peril. Like it or not, what Fitzgerald said about the rich, we can now say about many Americans—they're different. Once we realize this, we are faced with three general choices regarding them: we can ignore them, indulge them, or confront them. The first strategy is the one I associate with a failing contemporary American liberalism. The second strategy describes a post-liberal or bourgeois approach. The third is the strategy I associate with Mill and traditional liberalism. As Norton's argument above makes clear, there are numerous interests that benefit from the perpetual grasping and losing and grasping again. Ultimately, the silence on the question of the good life by thinkers and theorists does not go unanswered, but rather is answered by those who are either non-liberal or aliberal. As such, in America the "good life" most often gets merged into what was once called the "high life."

Fight Club shows that this merger, this "bourgeoisification" of American culture, has failed to create the happiness of liberalism, but the film has apparently not found a reasonable substitute. Simply being anti-bourgeois leaves us in a void where we do not know what we are for. It would have almost been a relief if the writers could have taken their "fascism" seriously as an alternative rather than mocking it—at least then there would have been something to talk about. As it is, however, there is no conversation or dialogue about anything; indeed, viewers are told, "The first rule of fight club is don't talk about fight club . . . . The second rule of project mayhem is don't ask questions." So it is on the verge of its grand narcissistic success that our protagonist kills the voice of Durden while simultaneously trying to kill himself. His road has led to nowhere and we are too polite, indifferent, or self-interested to suggest where else he might go. This is not friendship.

Under a mistaken and expansive view of liberal neutrality, we leave our "Jacks" and "Jills," our "middle children of history" cum "Motorcycle boys and girls" in a monologal cage from which we once had the ability, the right, and perhaps even the duty to release them. Furthermore, we impoverish ourselves because they, in turn, refrain from intervening in our lives and constructions of self. Liberalism, the selves it was designed to help nurture, and the happiness that was its end are thus frustrated and eventually thwarted. Some form of "sermonic assertion" or Socratic confrontation might have rescued us from the very thing we now leave in the hands of advertisers and other monetarily inclined thinkers who have no interest in seeing us or anyone else saved. We (and the film itself) have answered the question "how ought I to live?" with a shrug that symbolizes at worst "what do I care" and at best "it's not for me to say."
Conclusion

In a 1940 essay in *The New Republic* titled “The Corruption of Liberalism,” Lewis Mumford drew a sharp distinction between what he called “ideal liberalism” and “pragmatic liberalism.” Although he was writing about America’s position regarding WWII and American neutrality, I believe that his basic distinctions and arguments can be applied to our contemporary “spiritual war.” Mumford argued that “liberals no longer act as if justice mattered, as if truth mattered, as if right mattered, as if humanity as a whole was any concern of theirs: the truth is they no longer dare to act” (568). Pointing to foundational thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau, Mumford traces the initial corruption of “ideal liberalism” to excessive concern with “the machinery of life” to the neglect of “esthetics, ethics, and religion” (569). This excessive concern resulted in people who are “unconscious . . . of the sources of their ethical ideas” and who “pick up more or less what happens to be lying around them, without any effort at consistency or clarity . . . here a scrap left over from childhood, there a fragment of Kant or Bentham, or again a dash of Machiavelli, pacifist Quakers one moment and quaking Nietzscheans the next” (569). To the “pragmatic liberal,” the idea that there might be “internal obstacles to external improvement seemed absurd.” In turn, those same thinkers rejected the idea that “there was a field for imaginative design and rational discipline in the building of a personality as in the building of a skyscraper” (570). To wit, according to Mumford, “immature personalities, irrational personalities, demoralized personalities are as inevitable as weeds in an uncultivated garden when no deliberate attempt is made to provide a constructive basis for personal development” (570).

While for some this lack of effort is simply the product of indifference or fear of confrontation, for others, including contemporary liberals, it is a principled position. Extrapolating from the assertion of neutrality on the part of liberal states (Kukathas), liberal citizens fallaciously assume that they too are required to remain neutral and silent in the face of other citizens’ choices and commitments or lack thereof. The notion of “sermonic assertion” is viewed suspiciously as just another form of quasi-authoritarian intervention into another’s right to pursue happiness. This is, of course, an exact inversion of what I have argued is the rationale for liberalism in the first place, not to mention an attempted transfiguration of its dialogical nature. As Mumford himself puts it: “Liberalism, by and large, has prideed itself upon its colorlessness and its emotional neutrality; and this liberal suspicion of passion is partly responsible the liberal’s ineptitude for action” (571). To move beyond that “ineptitude” and meet the challenge of *Fight Club*, the rightful limits on the liberal state must be de-conflicted from the inappropriately self-imposed limitations on liberal citizens. Failure to do so leaves a vacuum that, if in the unlikely event it is left unfilled, robs our friends in the liberal state of the chance to achieve true happiness. More likely, however, that vacuum will be filled by those who are not “friends” of individual happiness, but are instead commercial partisans interested in their own pecuniary gain.

Not only is “dialogical intervention,” “sermonic assertion,” or Socratic interrogation perfectly consistent with the neutral liberal state, they are exactly the intended outcome of limiting the state in such a way in the first place. Liberals could learn much by re-reading Aristotle’s *Ethics* and then thinking about the difference between the phrases “self-interest” and “interest of a self” (Smith; Duncan). The commonplace political understanding of the first term suggests that each person readily knows “what’s best for him or her,” while the second should be seen as suggesting that selves may have certain interests that they can only come to know through learning vis-à-vis conversations with others and with various social “texts.” A corrupted liberalism is one that has discarded the latter and carelessly refied the former; a healthy and historically grounded liberalism is one that will reverse this transfiguration. Will Kymlicka is right when he claims that in a liberal society “individuals must have the cultural conditions conducive to acquiring an awareness of different views about the good life, and to acquiring an ability to intelligently examine and re-examine these views” (13). Without this, liberal happiness is not only elusive but, for many individuals, unattainable. The lives of such people will be metaphorically like Jack’s when he looks to his apartment and laments: “A house full of condiments and no food.” Without dialogic or sermonic prodding toward a richer more fulfilling diet, America will continue to eat only the thinish gruel of bourgeois life. If America’s liberal citizenry or her theorists and intellectuals do not attempt to supply more substantial “liberal” nourishment to those living non-deliberatively and, hence, in a state of perpetual spiritual hunger (Myers), they will undoubtedly search elsewhere for “food.” If the money holds up, chances are most will look to even more consumption for their spiritual “calories.” However, increasingly that will not suffice, at which point anything is possible.

In a 1940 review of *Main Kampf*, George Orwell asserts that Hitler “grasped the falsity of the hedonistic attitude to life” (14). Though the context was different, I believe that his sentiments are still sound; he explains, “Socialism, and even capitalism in a more grudging way, have said to people ‘I offer you a good time,’ Hitler has said to them ‘I offer you struggle, danger and death,’ and as a result a whole nation flings itself at his feet” (14). An older liberalism could meet such a challenge and win; I am not convinced that its contemporary iteration in the work of some theorists and “practitioners” is as sound.

Notes

1. In a response to the philosophic stance of Richard Rorty, Jean Elshtain makes a very important argument concerning the centrality of certain foundational ideals to the moral and even heroic actions of people in various historical situations like the Holocaust. Her persuasive claim is that for the actors themselves, their actions make little sense if detached from the essentialist grounding or “first vocabularies” they assumed as the basis for taking action. Elshtain offers a challenge and a critique of those who would attempt to wholly deny or suppress those “first vocabularies”: “It might be an interesting exercise for Rorty to rewrite the declaration of human rights so that it retains its power to condemn, separate, and define yet abandons the basis on which it now does so. Celebrating the decline of religious faith, which served initially to underscore natural law and natural right, Rorty wants to maintain and sustain the injunctions imbedded...
2. While the literature surrounding this period is vast, the following are among the most important and comprehensive works. Issac Kramnick's "Republican Revisionism Revisited" (1982); Robert E. Shalhope's "Republicanism and Early American Historiography" (1982); Bernard Bailyn's The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution; Gordon Wood's The Creation of the American Public, 1776-1787 (1972); J. G. A. Pocock's The Machiavellian Moment (1975); Thomas L. Pangle's The Spirit of Modern Republicanism (1988); Sheldon Wolin's The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and Constitution (1990); Joshua Miller's The Rise and Fall of Democracy in America, 1630-1789 (1991).


4. Aristotle argues in Book VIII of the Ethic that "perfect friendship" is based upon desiring "the good of their friends for the friend's sake...because each loves the other for what he is and not for any incidental quality" (263).

5. Joseph Cropsey associated this process with the teachings of Thomas Hobbes, who argues taught a softer version of modernity's lesson than thinkers like Machiavelli by extolling the "virtues" of "survival, security, and freedom to cultivate private and privately felt predilections" (7) to the neglect of any greater or higher ambitions. See also Catherine Zuckert's "The Role of the Spiritedness in Politics" (1988).

6. In an extended essay on the relationship between philosophy and politics, Hannah Arendt argues that "the plurality of men can never entirely be abolished" because, "even if I were to live entirely by myself I would, as long as I am alive, live in the condition of plurality. I have to put up with myself, and nowhere does this I-with-myself show more clearly than in pure thought, always a dialogue between the two who I am" ("Philosophy and Politics" 86).

7. On this point I take my cue from Charles Taylor, who in part takes his from Tocqueville's distinction between "individualism" and "egoism." At the root of the notion of the "examined life" is, I would argue, at least the possibility or recognition that one could be wrong about the ends he or she has selected and not just about the means for achieving those ends. But, in either its "expressive" or its "possessive" form, liberalism cannot brook the sort of limits that are implied by the notion that one could have been wrong about what one wanted because (tautological though it is) it was what one wanted then, even if one wants something else now. There is no need for conversation per se but rather an announcement or enactment of one's desires followed by the actions needed to achieve the desired ends. As Taylor puts it, "Freedom allows you to do what you want, and the greater application of instrumental reason gets you more of what you want, whatever it is" (21).

8. Among the more important works in this vein are Roberto Mangabeira Unger's Knowledge and Politics (1975); Michael J. Sandel's Liberalism and the Limits of Justice (1982) and his edited volume Liberalism and Its Critics (1984). See also, Robert N.

9. See Stanley Fish's Doing What Comes Naturally (1989), "Mission Impossible: Settling the Just Bounds Between Church and State" (1997) and There's No Such Thing at Free Speech (1994). For an interesting response to much of this line of thought in Fish's work see J. Judd Owen's "Church and State in Stanley Fish's Antiliberalism."

10. Although the 10th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is often read in light of questions of federalism, i.e., the power of the national government versus the powers of the states, the last clause reserves powers not delegated to the people. Read as a communitarian or "republican" document rather than a libertarian one, the Bill of Rights, including this clause, should be seen as authorizing exactly the sort of public confrontation on behalf of individual citizens that liberal constitutionality denied initially to the national government and subsequently to the states.

11. While it might be correctly pointed out that the movie itself is engaged in exactly the sort of cultural conversation I am arguing for when viewed from the perspective of the book's author (Chuck Palahniuk) or the film's director (David Fincher), the internal dynamic of the film or the "story" itself may be criticized for failing in its instructive, constructive or dialectical mission in such a way that it ends up at least partially reifying exactly what it was intended to deconstruct. Perhaps one piece of admittedly anecdotal and cursory evidence that could sustain this line of thought were the instances of actual "fight clubs" that formed in the immediate wake of the movie, thereby stripping the film in reality of the irony necessary to sustain its own deconstructive effort. Indeed, upon hearing of such "clubs," I was reminded of the people's call to Nietzsche's Zarathustra "to make us into these last men" (130). To which he responded, as perhaps Palahniuk himself might have, "They understand me not: I am not mouth for these ears" (130).

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Liberalism and the Challenge of Fight Club


*Saturday Night Live*. Episode #480, November 6, 1999.


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Sara Sahni
America Spirit

Rachna bunches her shoulders, exhaling a breath of sweetness from syrupy khoa galiyo jaman, her after school snack. She slumps in the kitchen chair while looking out the bay window, her complacent gaze serene like lotus flowers. She's forgotten about the wrinkled notebook paper sandwiched between the pages of her spelling book. Her body, dimpled with baby fat, shifts methodically, slightly rocking the feet of the chair. The house is still. Only Rachna and I are home. While I fry Ranjeet's favorite meal for hot sticky days like today—spinach and potato fried *pakoras* rubbed in curry topped over sweet-smelling *basmati* rice—I see Rachna from the corner of my eye, intermittently nursing the ball of her thumb in her lily-thin mouth. The Arizona blistering September heat rubs up against red-hot oil, splaying my skin with a clinging, indiscernible smell.

"Rachna baby, what's wrong?"

"Mummy, when is Papa coming home?"

"Soon, beta. Only an hour or so more. Papa is very busy."

"The Chevron is busy, Mummy? No, Papa promised he'd take me for pizza Today. He said so yesterday at the store!” She throws her arms over her head in protest, her chapped lips ballooning into a pout. "I don't want Indian food! I want pizza!"

"Chap! Quiet! Start your homework. Enough daydreaming. Time for news now. You sit with me or do your homework. Your choice."

"Sit with you!" she bellows, her bright eyes snowy with anticipation. I turn off the wok; I have made plenty of *pakoras* for now. My body moves slowly to the living room couch, my ankles swollen and too heavy to hold me up. Rachna bounces like all happy little girls do, pulling at the hem of my sari. Her truthful, innocent eyes cannot grasp the week's terrifying ache. She says her schoolteacher talks about the twin towers collapsing and lets