

Twilight Of the Left

2012-12-19 22:32:41 by Southern

The president represents the fourth—and final—phase of the Progressive experiment begun at the turn of the 20th century.

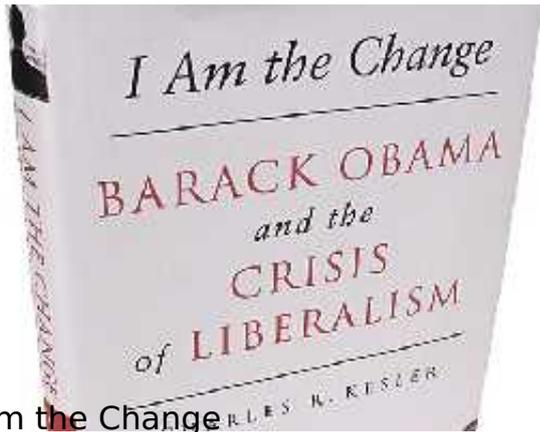
[FRED SIEGEL](#)

It is a cliché of modern American politics that the word "liberal" is still slightly toxic and that "progressive" is a better, more upbeat, way of describing left-of-center politicians and their causes. In "I Am the Change," Charles Kesler, a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College, says that "progressive," in fact, neatly captures President Barack Obama and his political outlook, although Mr. Kesler intends a more precise definition of the term than is usually employed. Drawing on his wide reading in philosophy and American political thought, Mr. Kesler argues that Mr. Obama has been shaped by the political tradition of Progressivism and that his 2008 triumph has helped, in turn, to reshape it.

Until the Progressive Era of the early 20th century, Mr. Kesler notes, American politicians referred in reverential terms to the Constitution and to the natural rights cited in the Declaration of Independence. But the Progressives, influenced by the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin and by German idealist philosophy, viewed the traditions of the Founders as hopelessly outdated. They insisted on a new set of governing principles adapted to the modern age, principles requiring a "living Constitution" and, for the betterment of society, an ever greater role for government.

Mr. Kesler traces Progressive thought to its first flowering, with Woodrow Wilson as its emblematic proponent, and then forward to its second and third "waves," in FDR's New Deal of the 1930s and LBJ's Great Society of the 1960s. Mr. Obama, in this outline of history, is the leader of Progressivism's "fourth wave."

Mr. Kesler reminds us that Wilson was a professor at Princeton (and its president) before he entered politics, an intellectual with an evolved political philosophy. He wanted a new outpouring of "political genius" to supplant the dusty precepts of the Founders. For Wilson and other Progressives influenced by Hegel's idealism (including John Dewey and Richard Ely), natural rights were to be replaced by the judgments of history; and history itself was to be guided by Hegelian processes, with reason and wisdom unfolding into a bright future. As a candidate for the presidency, Wilson explained that Progressives "think of the future, not the past, as the more glorious time, in comparison with which the present is nothing."



I Am the Change
By Charles R. Kesler
(Broadside, 276 pages, \$25.99)

Wilson's idea of "political genius" became, under Franklin Roosevelt, a government of experts and social scientists. And once government was based on credentialed wisdom, Mr. Kesler explains, "it no longer needed to be limited." The key was its intentions. "Governments can err, Presidents do make mistakes," Roosevelt conceded, "but the immortal Dante tells us that divine justice weighs the sins of the cold-blooded and the sins of the warm-hearted in different scales."

Mr. Kesler is at his best in showing how Lyndon Johnson elevated governmental warm-heartedness into a kind of creed. Johnson had astral aspirations for the great Great Society and its programs. After the 1964 landslide election, he announced that "these are the most hopeful times in all the years since Christ was born in Bethlehem." He hoped (in the words of an aide) to "out FDR-FDR." Mr. Kesler believes that LBJ and "the kids" were "really on the same page" culturally, even if the kids disliked the president. ("He was not cool and could never become cool.") In 1964, Johnson asked University of Michigan students "to join the battle" to "build a society where the demands of morality, and the needs of the spirit, can be realized in the life of the nation."

As we know, the demands of morality and the needs of the spirit did not usher in a New Jerusalem. In fact, post-Great Society America featured an ugly dystopian reality in the cities, a violent, nihilistic radicalism on campus and, within a decade, an end to the booming affluence that had implicitly underwritten so many utopian dreams. Eventually the political left in America, Mr. Kesler says, "broke free of its faith in progress, in science and the democratic process itself" and embraced cultural relativism.

Liberalism, in short, began to experience a crisis, not least because the failures of the Great Society programs had weakened the policy pretensions of liberal social science. But the many local institutions that the Great Society spawned had greatly expanded the state's reach. Patronage and the rise of public-sector unions kept a liberalism of sorts alive, along with identity politics. Local avatars of multiculturalism were cut in on government contracts but were never confronted with the common

values necessary to maintain civic order. Crime in the cities became liberalism's most crippling legacy.

Thus Mr. Obama faced a special challenge when he ran for president. He could hardly celebrate Chicago, the city where he lived, with its corruption scandals and a murder rate three times that of New York. Nor could he point to liberal policy successes, as his Progressive forebears had done. But with his hope-and-change rhetoric, he could speak the language of the Progressive spirit, with its emphasis on limitless possibility. He could act as if he held "the keys to the kingdom of history." He could offer his cool persona, not policies, as the path to a bright future: "I am the change." And so he did.

And what about now? Mr. Obama still has his winning persona to count on. And it is possible, Mr. Kesler says, that the citizenry will accept the president's lurching efforts to maneuver America "into a Scandinavia-style überwelfare state." But it is more likely that "we stand, instead, at the twilight of the liberal welfare state" and that the limitless future so dear to Progressives—very much including Mr. Obama—is, in fact, bounded by the very real threat of insolvency.

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A version of this article appeared September 11, 2012, on page A11 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Twilight Of the Left.

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