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Race and Liberty in America: The Essential Reader

Edited by C. Jonathan Bean; Oakland, CA/Lexington, KY: Independent Institute/University of Kentucky Press, 2009, p. 352.

In this edited volume, Jonathan Bean, a professor of history at Southern Illinois University, introduces the classical liberal perspective on race and civil rights in American society. This perspective, he argues, rests on principles that transcend racial affiliations, namely, individualism, equal justice under law, a colorblind Constitution, the Golden Rule of Christianity, limited government, and free-market economics. These principles, Bean asserts, inspired the earliest efforts to end slavery, Jim Crow laws, and other forms of discrimination, including the dispossession of Native Americans, restrictions against immigrants from Asia and Southern and Eastern Europe, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. In making this assertion, Bean aims to amend what he believes is a distortion of the historical record. “Politically correct” scholars, he maintains, have created the popular yet inaccurate impression that the civil rights movement in the United States originated in modern liberalism, a perspective which, he suggests, promotes group rights at the expense of individual freedom and encourages the redistribution of resources by an activist government.

Bean clearly outlines the differences between classical liberalism and right-wing conservatism. Right-wing conservatives, he claims, have often advocated government actions that grant unearned privileges to favored groups. Case in point: many right-wing conservatives have called for immigration restrictions that limit the supply of foreign-born workers and, therefore, give an unmerited advantage in the job market to the native-born. Classical liberals, in contrast, have a long tradition of agitating for an open border that allows labor to flow freely to the nation. In addition, Bean points out, right-wing conservatives have frequently opposed legitimate government interventions to defend individual rights. For example, many right-wing conservatives objected to the Civil Right Act of 1964 on the grounds that it would limit freedom of association. Classical liberals, on the other hand, staunchly supported the Act because it was designed to protect the Constitutional rights of the individual. By drawing these salient distinctions, Bean makes the point that debates about race and civil rights need not be constrained to the well-known format of liberal versus conservative or Democrat versus Republican.

The heart of Bean’s volume is a compilation of a wide range of materials dating from colonial times to the present, including over 90 speeches, newspaper editorials, scholarly writ-

ings, government documents, legal briefs, and judicial opinions. These and other materials are organized into chapters that correspond to significant turning points in national debates about race and civil rights, namely: Antislavery (1776–1853), The Republican Era (1854–1876), Colorblindness in a Color-Conscious Era (1877–1920), Republicans and Race (1921–1932), The Roosevelt Years (1933–1945), Classical Liberals in the Civil Rights Era (1946–1964) and Individualists in an Age of Group Discrimination (1965–present). All chapters and individual readings are prefaced by Bean’s thoughtful and well-footnoted commentaries, which provide an intellectual and historical context for the material under consideration. Each chapter concludes with a list of recommended readings for additional study on the topics and historical events in question.

From these readings, we learn that classical liberals are a diverse group of individuals whose contributions to thinking about race and civil rights, according to Bean, have been overlooked in mainstream academia. They include (with examples in parentheses): abolitionists (Frederick Douglass, William Wilberforce), authors (Zora Neale Hurston, H.L. Mencken), entrepreneurs (S.B. Fuller, Branch Rickey), scholars (Milton Friedman, Nathan Glazer), Supreme Court Justices (John Marshall Harlan, Clarence Thomas), U.S. Presidents (Thomas Jefferson, Ronald Reagan) and political commentators (Stanley Crouch, Ben Wattenberg). From these readings, we also learn about well-established facts that are usually omitted or glossed over in discussions of the history of race and civil rights. Consider the following examples: nearly all of the most prominent abolitionists cited their religious faith in Christianity as the motivation for their opposition to slavery. The major civil rights initiatives by the federal government in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were championed by Republicans and opposed by Democrats, southern and northern. Booker T. Washington was not a passive accommodationist but a strident critic of those whites who opposed anti-lynching legislation. Many white business owners in the South objected to Jim Crow laws on the grounds that enforcement of such laws increased operating expenses and reduced profits. The principle of colorblind law espoused in the dissenting opinion of Justice Harlan in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) was the intellectual foundation for the arguments of Thurgood Marshall, lead attorney for the NAACP, in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).

Bean’s volume has a number of potential uses. It could be a supplemental textbook or reader in upper level courses on such subjects as political science, public policy, political economy, and the history of political and social thought. It could, furthermore, be a reference book for students and scholars who wish to undertake an in-depth study of the classical liberal perspective and its proponents. In this regard, the volume’s frequent citations to sources on the Constitution and to famous Supreme Court cases would make it especially useful to those law students or pre-law students who wish to understand how classical liberalism has influenced judicial decision-making and case law in the U.S.

In his conclusion, Bean states that, while the future of classical liberalism seems bleak, the long-run viability of this perspective is favorable because of immigration and racial intermarriage. The growth of the Latino and Asian populations through immigration, he argues, will render as obsolete the “black-white” issues that have traditionally dominated public discourse about race. And intermarriage, he asserts, will erase popular notions of fixed racial or ethnic boundaries. Some observers, however, will see Bean’s assessment as simplistic. They will point to his neglect of civil rights issues surrounding language (e.g., the challenge by Latino advo-

cacy groups to proposed “English-only” laws) and to evidence of the balkanization of racial and ethnic groups in those regions of the country that are experiencing the greatest increases of immigrants.

Bean has made a Herculean attempt to assemble an extensive collection of materials and to provide thoughtful commentary upon them. His efforts to set the record straight will be appreciated by those classical liberals who are seeking to ground their position in the history of the nation’s struggles for civil rights. His efforts will also be appreciated by those students and scholars who are looking for a reference book on the history of classical liberal thought as it relates to race and civil rights. Unfortunately, though, few if any modern liberals, particularly those who are committed to promoting racial and ethnic diversity, will be swayed by his arguments. Indeed, such modern liberals are likely to be offended or angered by many of Bean’s assertions—for example, that affirmative action policies in college admissions are morally and legally equivalent to the Jim Crow laws of the Old South. Nonetheless, all open-minded readers will find this volume to be a useful introduction to an important ideological view that, as Bean appropriately notes, receives much less attention than it deserves in legal and public policy debates on race and civil rights.

Robert L. Boyd

*Department of Sociology, Mississippi State University,
P.O. Box C, Mississippi State, MS 39762-5503, USA*

E-mail address: boyd@soc.msstate.edu