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TOMPAINÉ.COM BOOK REVIEW: The Promise of American Life (Revisited)

John Judis's *The Paradox of American Democracy*

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John Judis's latest book is not what I expected. *The Paradox of American Democracy* (Pantheon Books) reads like a political science dissertation (before the discipline was overrun by mathematicians and game theorists). Early on Judis reviews a few of the canonical theories of how twentieth-century American politics works and drops the big names in the discipline (Clinton Rossiter, Arthur Bentley, David Truman, etc.). Judis also occasionally displays the young scholar's habit of slipping from analysis to description, especially when his analysis breaks down.

Most striking, though, is that Judis, a senior editor at the *New Republic*, has, in youthful fashion attempted to say something really big. Rather than count the number of angels on a pinhead, Judis wants to call our attention to a grand paradox in American politics. Judis declares that the paradox of American democracy is that politics is most democratic when a gaggle of unelected, progressive elites by force of their earnestness and grand ideas commandeer federal policymaking. Judis then points to the Progressive Era and the New Deal as examples of this and christens them the golden times for American democracy.

While Judis's effort to say something grand is refreshing, unfortunately, he has not told us anything new. Two centuries ago James Madison sought to overcome the great diversity of interests in the American polity that threatened

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to tear apart the country by creating an electoral system that would place men of wisdom and virtue in office who would refine and enlarge the public's opinions. Like most of the Founders, Madison was hostile to democracy and tried to erect the federal government as an elite trust that was accountable to the public. The proof would be in the pudding, and if Americans didn't like the policy they got, they could vote the bums out.

In the past century and a half, political theorists like Mosca, Pareto and Schumpeter wrote lengthy treatises that argued that elites would inevitably rule. And Walter Lippmann showed that as for the people, they have settled opinions on few issues and hence any talk of the "popular will" or "public opinion" risks conjuring up a "phantom public."

So elites have always ruled. Thus, in some measure the question boils down to which elites shall rule. Judis, in grad student fashion, hands out hats of two colors. Black hats go to businessmen and capitalists, white hats to union leaders and social liberals. In pseudo-marxist fashion, he argues that twentieth-century politics has been dominated by greedy businessmen, their rule only occasionally punctuated by the arrival of benign elites who ride in from Northeast think tanks and Ivy League schools and bring with them an era of popular reform.

How do these reformers come to power? Deus ex machina? Judis does not explain this, though clearly it is not by way of the ballot box. In which case, how to justify their rule? Judis fudges the moral issue and says "[t]hey were not subverting the public will, but acting upon it in an area where the public had extended them its proxy." This is hokum. Had the people gathered under a great roof and come to a decision to hand discretion over policy to a few reformers? Of course not. In which case, the best Judis might be able to do is to say that though unelected, the policy preferences of the elites were shared by the masses; thus, we can overlook the whole legitimacy issue.

But to make this argument one has to close one's eyes to the historical record. Yes, FDR's New Deal reforms may have been exactly what the people wanted, but, to take a glaring example, what of America's entrance into World War II? Did the American common man really want to spill his blood in foreign lands? Indeed, if one wants to divide politics into a battle between capitalists and labor, then he might come to the

conclusion that far from being benign saviors of the working classes, FDR and company were really doing the bidding of big money by entering World War II. This very point is raised by Michael Zezima in his radical history, *Saving Private Power* (Soft Skull Press, 2000).

Happy though the Progressive days were, Judis laments that they may be gone forever. The reason is that Washington has been invaded by hordes of lobbyists who represent nothing more than the narrow economic interests of a few businessmen. With all their money they have influence over policymaking they thwart reform. This leads Judis to unleash this whopper:

"Some American leaders had difficulty adjusting to the prosperity of the late 1990s. They were overcome by caution. But the main reason for failure was that the political system was dysfunctional. It continued to be dominated by lobbyists and irresponsible elites backed by conservative Republicans. Their presence on Washington's K Street discouraged reform and discouraged active public participation in politics."

To this one can only reply, the Contract with America. Reform? Radicalism? You had it there. Apparently, this sort of reform does not count.

Here we see the problem with Judis approach. By positing a struggle between capital and labor as the heart of American politics one can only see reality through marxist goggles. This inevitably leads to the tar and feathering of anyone who does not push for liberal, big-government-type reform as a hack for the capitalist class. So while influential left-leaning think tanks like the Century Fund and Brookings (in previous decades) are labeled good and disinterested, the American Enterprise Institute and Gary Bauer's the Family Research Council are venal and "irresponsible."

Worse, the capital vs. labor paradigm leaves Judis without a grasp on the fundamental insight that Jonathan Rauch provided in *Demosclerosis* (Times Books, 1994) - that in a giant diverse nation like ours there are interests of all stripes and everyone of them is fighting to keep their pieces of the pie. Teachers unions, for example, have fought efforts to reform their profession by weeding out incompetents and demanding accountability. They also have filed lawsuits and lobbied heavily to prevent policy reforms that would help parents pay to remove their children from failing public schools to private schools.

How do they fit in this grand labor vs. capital paradigm?

And what of the pro-choice and anti-abortion groups, gay rights and the pro- and anti-Israel interest groups? That politics is more complex than a struggle between capital and labor is clear. That Judis has rendered it so simple is lamentable. If I sat on his dissertation committee I would commend him for his audacious attempt at saying something significant. I would also advise him to return to James Madison's writings and attempt a rewrite.

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