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I

Nothing lasts forever. We've had the long 19th century and the short 20th century. What does this century bring us, this period? The short answer is: we don't know. But the old issues and questions have surely not gone away or have not been answered. 'Now it is evident that the form of government is best in which every man, whoever he is, can act best and live happily,' was said almost 2500 years ago by Aristotle in his *Politics*. It is evident we have not achieved that. In that sense politics is alive and well: the search for the best society and government.

Of course, history defines this search. It was never an absolute, and was always defined by 'the possible.' But how does one interpret 'the possible?' That is the issue. Possible/impossible are rhetorical and historical terms. I've always liked the line attributed to the great anarchist Bakunin: 'I shall continue to be an impossible person as long as those who are now possible remain possible.' That seems fair enough.

The point is this: 'the possible' is what is judged, thought, or imagined what it is possible. **This changes. This is historical.** The new book by Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of*

Poverty (I have not read it) has been linked to my own (very different) *Picture Imperfect* inasmuch as he believes world poverty can be ended. His proposal may be completely invalid, but that is not the point here. He believes it can be done; it is possible soon. Again, 'the possible' bears the full brunt of history. Today we tend to think very little is possible: to chip away at air pollution or end one local war but why? **Maybe we have surrendered our thinking and imagining.**

My previous book (*The End of Utopia*) returns to the period of the 50s as an especially illuminating moment. Obviously looking back, historians and others have studied or understood how the political and rebellious sixties was rooted in the fifties, yet it is critical to realize that few - virtually no one - at that time saw or felt the transformation. In other words: what was possible and impossible altered within a very few years. We passed almost overnight from what was generally (but superficially) seen as the conformist and apathetic fifties to the committed and political sixties. How? Why? Daniel Bell's classic *End of Ideology*, which convincingly announced the exhaustion of the big political ideologies, is published just as the big ideas and hopes convincingly re-emerge. History never repeats itself, yet surely we can learn some things; how quickly some of these issues change overnight - or, what is possible and impossible alters in a historical moment.

Of course, ideas shape politics. 'Shape,' not dictate. I think one of the failures of a left - past and present - is not to fully understand the role of ideas in society. Conservatives have been much better at understanding this. It is something I take up in my *The Last Intellectuals*. A conservative tradition has taken seriously intellectuals or, at

least, the notion of the independent intellectual. As a result conservatives have very successfully supported intellectuals in various conservative think tanks to study and write - and define public debate. The corresponding liberal or leftist think tanks hardly exist - or, to the extent they do, they are policy orientated and much more technical or specialized. To put this differently, a multi-millionaire on the left would generally prefer to fund a practical project - reading for inner city kids, or college prep for drop-outs - than a bunch of intellectuals to sit around and write books. Yet it can be argued that choice has proved short-sighted. A classic conservative book (by Richard M. Weaver) was titled *Ideas Have Consequences*. We still have to understand that.

Anti-Utopian thinking has its own history; it is something I take up in *Future Imperfect*; and I find an anti-utopian ethos already in the origins of modern utopianism - Thomas More, who became a rabid anti-Utopian. Here I would highlight the role of the refugee intellectuals like Karl Popper, Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin - and again the role of ideas. They drew up an historical account sheet in which Nazism, Communism and Utopia were just variants of each other. (And they also - to some degree like More - had utopian pasts.)

II

I am not especially impressed with 'what appears to be a popular engagement in politics.' Where? The role of Internet 'debate' and blogs is all to the good, but the upshot is not clear. On the other hand, let me say that I have always been suspicious of what I might call the paranoid leftist vision of a homogenous and hegemonic media: dissent is possible and exists. Nor do I especially see a repoliticization or artificial polarization.

Some of this politicization may be an optical illusion, as it were. As a left retreats, grows confused, or loses confidence, conservatives become increasingly militant and demanding. Look at the debate or politicization of scientific evolution today. There is or should be no debate, but conservatives have successfully turned this into an issue or problem, as if 'intelligent design' needs to be taught. Look at the Terri Schiavo story, a case that should have been private turned into a circus by conservatives. Look at the claims that the universities are bastions of left-wing power, and we need new laws protecting students in classes, the so-called academic bill of rights. From one angle these could be viewed as examples of acrimonious politicization. From another, and I think more accurate vantage point, they can be viewed as examples of an aggressive conservatism.

III

The topic of public and private contains a nest-egg of issues. I sometimes ask my history students, which of two (imaginary) books might they pick-up, 'John F. Kennedy's Foreign Policy' or 'I Slept with Jack Kennedy.' There is little doubt. **Personal life claims an immediacy with which other subjects poorly compete. The mass media feeds this inclination. The absence of vibrant political discussions compounds it. The latter is what we need.**

On this very subject of presidents, we know the press at the time of Kennedy avoided his sexual life, unlike that of Clinton. Is this progress? We now have a president whose personal life, presumably, is unblemished or uninteresting. Is his politics better?

I always thought that the slogan 'the personal is political' was misleading. No, the personal is personal. To be sure, the personal is political inasmuch as it is enmeshed in wider social and historical relations from which it cannot be severed. That is obvious. But at what point is a personal life relevant to a political profile or choices? Rarely. It is easy enough to say that, however, and to believe otherwise. If a politician mistreats his wife, girlfriend or children, we draw certain conclusions. The problem is that we are moving into the 'Hollywoodization' of everything: life style, gossip, and insider information supplant **real issues and judgments**.