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BOOK SYMPOSIUM: *Return of the “L” Word : A Liberal Vision for the New Century* by Douglas S. Massey

Liberals and Leftists: Where Massey’s Vision Falls Short

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It’s big news when one of the leading demographers in American sociology, Douglas S. Massey, a past president of both the American Sociological Association and the Population Association of America, suddenly decides to put aside his scholarly research and write a fighting liberal manifesto. It’s called *Return of the “L” Word: A Liberal Vision for the New Century* and it’s meant to inject new ideas and passion into the Democratic Party. Mainstream academicians such as Massey usually don’t do things like that.

Massey says he wrote *Return of the “L” Word* in a white heat because he was “mad,” as in very angry, about the ineptness of the Democrats in 2000 and 2002, and was driven by a “lingering irritation with liberals who continued to support Ralph Nader” (p. ix). His goal is to provide Democrats with a new liberal program. He wants those who are accused of being liberals to stand up and be counted, not “shrink and dissemble.”

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Are There Really No Hard Choices for Liberals?

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I agree with almost all of the substantive arguments in Douglas Massey’s new book, *Return of the L Word*, and I am impressed with the presentation. So initially I found it difficult to develop much of a response beyond admiration and a hope that lots of Americans would read the book and take it to heart. Nevertheless, academics are trained (and perhaps congenitally inclined) to be critical even of works that they admire, so my efforts to identify some concerns have borne fruit. In the end, I worry that Massey’s prescriptions elide or confuse some critical trade-offs that the left must negotiate if it is to deserve to win the game of partisan politics.

Before explicating that worry, however, let me describe just what I admire about *Return*. First, Massey challenges liberals to resist the temptation to blame conservatives for consistent defeats in elections and policy disputes. Perhaps it is the case that conservatives are racist, sexist, elitist, or more willing to unfairly manipulate the political system than we egalitarian, honest, well-meaning liberals are – but perhaps not. Perhaps poor people who vote for Republicans are deluded or tricked – but perhaps not. After all, conservatives believe that they have an equally deep commitment as liberals do to human flourishing; conversely, liberals might be just as prone to self-righteousness and moral evasions. And if professors vote against our own economic self-interest in supporting the Democratic party, why should we be surprised if manual laborers vote against their own economic self-interest in supporting

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and to say “Damned right I’m a liberal and this is what I stand for” (p. xiii).

So what’s the result? It’s a mixed verdict. There’s a very informed, spirited, and convincing argument for markets as pathways to real advances if they are properly shaped and managed by government. Massey also presents a strong case for reorganizing and fully financing education from pre-school through high school. He provides ample justification for national health insurance as a “public good” and for other programs that protect all citizens against a variety of “market failures.” Markets are a “public resource” to be managed by a government that also makes large investments in the capabilities of all Americans (e.g., p. 88).

But aside from accurately pinpointing racism as the key wedge issue in the success of Republicans after 1965, his analysis of the rise of the right is not very strong because he does not fully analyze the complex nature of the New Deal coalition. More importantly, he actually claims that liberal mistakes were a major factor in the rise of the right, second only to the Republican use of racial appeals, which is surely a form of victim blaming. The indictment is even more off base because it doesn’t always focus on actual liberals, but rather mostly on the corporate-based foreign policy establishment that took the country into the Vietnam War and the socialists, Naderites, anti-globalization activists, and postmodernists to the left of liberals. The Vietnam warriors were centrists at best and those to the left of

Massey don’t think of themselves as liberals and usually don’t support the Democrats. In essence, Massey has defined “liberals” far too broadly, simply as people who want to use government to promote the “common good” and give everyone the same “opportunities,” which leads him to underestimate the gap between liberals and leftists (p. 11).

Most unfortunate of all, many of the liberals and leftists Massey criticizes probably won’t be able to hear his message because of the way he presents it. He just says they are all wrong, citing his social science and historical evidence, and that’s the end of it. However, his style of presentation probably won’t matter that much because he has nothing to say about the key problems of building bridges among the rival liberal and left factions so that they might be able to pull in the same direction for a change.

But let’s start with the positives and work downward from there, concluding with some suggestions on how a program very similar to Massey’s could become a common ground for everyone left of center if both liberals and leftists, not just leftists, could accept some ideas and realities they have previously resisted.

Liberalism and Markets

Massey provides a detailed history and sociology of markets based on research and theorizing by economic sociologists, whose key insight, he frequently tells us, is that markets are “not free states of nature” (e.g., pp.

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6,40,59,63,117). Contrary to free-market advocates, markets are said to be “constructed,” a product of human activity within the context of large-scale urbanized societies (pp. 40-41). In discussing the evolution of markets in the 18th and 19th centuries, Massey provides a plausible explanation for why some leftists gave up on markets and became socialists. He claims the socialist vision of an egalitarian non-market economy, which he thinks is unworkable, mistakenly arose because early markets were unstable, led to a high degree of inequality, and often failed completely (p. 41).

Despite the dark side of markets, Massey stresses their usefulness and argues that they can be made fair and transparent so as to work for everyone in a society, not just the wealthy few. In fact markets will collapse if they aren’t improved because people will rebel against them. He repeatedly notes that the rich and powerful, left to themselves, will rig and wreck the very markets that benefit them so handsomely, which makes it necessary as well as morally right that the government shape and police markets for the benefit of everyone. From a liberal perspective, markets are a “tool” chosen by citizens as the best way to produce and distribute goods and services while preserving freedoms (p. 62).

It is within the context of his vision of how markets could operate in a democratic society that Massey addresses those he calls “people of liberal sentiment” who believe that “rational planning would do a better job of ensuring the general social and economic welfare” (p. 37). Such people, of course, are not liberals in the usual sense of the term; they are socialists. Massey’s first argument concerning the need for markets, namely, the horrendous and murderous nature of the efforts at economic collectivization by Stalin and Mao, is not likely to prove convincing to those who claim that non-market planning could work in a fully developed capitalist economy within the context of a democratic government. Everyone agrees that the Soviet Union and China were neither developed capitalist countries nor democracies, so they don’t count according to classical socialist texts.

Massey makes his argument against non-market planning more specific by claiming it has two fatal defects. First, it does not provide sufficient individual motivation to engage in work, an assertion that underestimates the cooperative side of human beings in egalitarian social settings (Boehm, 1999). Second, and more importantly in Massey’s view, such plan-

ning bureaucracies require a great concentration of power to be effective, which means they soon become oligarchies.

Although I agree with this second argument, I would start at a more basic level by questioning whether even the most powerful planning bureaucracy could be effective. Effective planning is impossible without various kinds of markets because it is not possible to compile or process the vast amount of necessary information (e.g., consumer preferences, availability of raw materials, and production schedules) or to adjust fast enough to unexpected economic changes. These information failures cause inefficiencies that foster corruption as planners and factory managers begin to cut corners, hoard supplies, adulterate products, and buy on the black market in order to meet planning goals. It is this process that reduces the desire to work for the collective good. Unrestrained bureaucracies certainly have their problems, but lack of information and other economic issues are even more important in explaining why planned economies have failed (Lindblom, 2000; Nove, 1991; Pierson, 1995).

Thus, I would argue that non-market planning would not work even in democratic polities because the information problems are too great. Markets on the other hand, have the virtue of being a relatively decentralized form of cooperation in which people can obtain what they need with a limited amount of information and without endless planning meetings, and they have the potential of promoting equality and fairness if government controls them in ways it cannot do when capitalists control government. As for the many socialist doubters, democratic markets may not end exploitation in the classical Marxist sense, but they could greatly lower the rate of exploitation.

The Rise of the Right: Are Liberals of Any Stripe to Blame?

Massey says loud and clear that racial appeals were the key wedge issue in creating the new Republican majority. I couldn’t agree more. However, he doesn’t make it clear enough that it was the actions of the Civil Rights Movement that forced the Congress to finally pass civil rights legislation, and doesn’t explain how the Voting Rights Act of 1965 changed the American power structure in such a way that racial resentments

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could be used by the Republicans.

Such an analysis begins with the fact that the Democratic Party back then was first and foremost the party of the Southern rich, not of liberals, who used their position in it to keep African-Americans powerless. Moreover, their determination to exclude African-Americans was tacitly supported by machine Democrats in large Northern cities, who often had liberal voting records on legislation that made it to the floor, but usually helped the Southerners to gut such legislation behind the scenes and in committee. Most critically, they had no real appetite for encouraging African-Americans to register and vote because they were likely to lose their seats to African-Americans if more of them voted. Thus, the liberal-labor coalition, with fewer than a majority of Senators and only 100 or so seats in the House, had far less power within the pre-1964 Democratic Party than Massey implies.

The Civil Rights Movement dynamited the whole power structure of that era, which rested on the acceptance of African-American exclusion by the liberal-labor coalition and the machine Democrats as well as by the Northern Republicans and Southern Democrats. Once that tacit bargain was exploded by in-the-streets activism that forced Northern Republicans to desert the Southern Democrats on a filibuster of civil rights legislation, racism could be used by conservatives to forge a new dominant power coalition. In the process, moderate conservatives in the corporate community joined with their ultra-conservative counterparts to support political candidates who could bring everyday Southern whites, racist whites in the North, religious fundamentalists, anti-feminists, and the rest of the conservative right into the Republican Party.

If Massey's analysis of how racial appeals came to matter in Republican politics is incomplete, his claim that the "other reasons for liberalism's decline are internal to the movement itself" is flat-out wrong (p. 26). He says that after 1965 liberals made mistakes on (1) race, (2) class, (3) war, (4) peace, and (5) ideology. To take an especially strong example, he accuses them of "using courts and bureaucracies to force unpopular and coercive measures -- school busing, public housing, affirmative action -- down the throats of the middle and working classes" in support of African-Americans (p. 71). But were these liberal choices or simply what was possible after conservatives exerted their power? And wasn't affirmative action a product of worried corporate

elites and the Nixon Administration?

Massey hits his lowest note in his mistaken bill of particulars when he claims that "the same liberals... also prosecuted a costly foreign war on the basis of lies, deception, and subterfuges" (p. 28). But the people who made foreign policy and decided to escalate the war, with the exception of Johnson himself, were centrist Democrats and moderate Republicans from think tanks, foundations, and corporations, hardly the same crowd that was for economic and social liberalism at home. Massey echoes the right-wing revisionists of the 1970s when he says that "liberal lawmakers" were for the war "as long as someone else's children were serving and dying as soldiers..." (p. 29). But liberals inside and outside the government including vice president Hubert Humphrey -- perhaps the most visible liberal in the United States at the time -- along with liberal Democrats in the Senate were opposed to the war from the time serious escalation was contemplated in 1964 (Logevall, 1999). What liberals can be accused of in the face of Johnson's determination to persevere in Vietnam is timidity (Logevall, 2004). However, most of them soon came to be outspoken critics well before the draft ended, contrary to another one of Massey's inaccurate accusations.

Massey thinks that personal fulfillment and rights were overdone by liberals. He claims that while a switch to moral politics "achieved many legislative successes... it also triggered a fundamentalist backlash and brought about the desertion of the Democratic party by the white working class" (p. 159). But what would he have had the liberals and feminists do differently? The reality is that the anti-war and feminist movements accelerated the fragmentation of the New Deal coalition because there were genuine differences of opinion on highly emotional issues -- such as equal rights for women, an end to the war, greater religious and sexual freedom, and greater regulation of the industries causing environmental pollution -- that could not be easily compromised.

Massey believes the liberals split in two directions in the face of the rising right-wing challenge. Some went with the conservative Democratic Leadership Council, whereas those in and around academia became postmodernists who fought culture wars within the universities. But the members and staff of the Democratic Leadership Council were always conservative. As for the postmodernists, they tend to see themselves

as leftists, not liberals, and rarely are now or ever have been supporters of the Democratic Party. Massey ends his brief summary of this large body of academic work by declaring postmodernism “a neo-fascist ideology that seeks little more than to replace one tyranny for another” (p. 31). For a person who says that “patient argument and sympathetic understanding are more effective than strident sermonizing” in dealing with those who resist changes in attitude and policy towards “minorities, women, and gays,” Massey is remarkably harsh in dismissing fellow “liberals” that he does not agree with, once again underestimating the size of the gap between most liberals and most leftists (p. 4).

To my way of thinking, the changes forced on the white South and the Northern white working class by presidential executive orders and congressional legislation in the first five years of the 1960s, along with divisions over the Vietnam War, were the main factors in the initial rise of the right, which then appealed to racial resentment and super-patriotism to gain support. The gains made by feminists and the gay-lesbian movement further alienated traditional and highly religious whites. To the degree that I would assign any blame to a “liberal” of any stripe within Massey’s overly general category, it would be to the proponents of property violence or armed struggle within the anti-war and civil rights movements, who contributed to the turn towards the law-and-order Republicans by dismayed liberals in the Democratic Party and by many centrists who usually supported the Democrats.

But Why Should Liberals Be Democrats?

Massey provides a detailed argument for why everyone left of center should favor markets, but he does not explain why liberals and leftists should be Democrats. He does say that “Insisting on the right to vote for Nader was like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.” However, it needs to be demonstrated, based on cross-national and historical literatures on the effects of electoral rules, that the American electoral system -- a single-member-district plurality system -- sets up a series of winner-take-all elections in which a vote for a third party of the left -- or right -- is a vote for your least preferred party. This system, along with the election of a president in what is in effect a giant winner-take-all plurality election, makes third parties all but impossible for any extended period of time.

Nor does Massey explain how liberals and left-

ists could have an impact within the party. He seems to assume that Democratic candidates should adopt his very liberal program right now as the way to win elections, but there’s no way candidates vying for major offices in regular elections are going to run as out-and-out liberals any time soon. They are going to mix and match, and tailor things around the edges, in order to eek out enough votes in the center to win. The Hillary Clinton of 2006-2007, positioning herself for a run for the presidency in 2008, is the ideal case against Massey’s strategy: centrism all the way. But there is a way to enter the debate and move it in the liberal direction Massey advocates, and that is to run candidates on strong liberal or leftist platforms in the primaries, a strategy for which there are many good precedents (Domhoff, 2006, pp. 143-144). I return to this issue as part of the final section.

Potential Bridges Between Liberals and Leftists

“If liberals are to win,” Massey says, they must stop their “internecine bickering” (p. 9). But he does not suggest how the factions within his liberal-socialist-leftist-Naderite category might overcome their differences, except through the implication that adopting his program would solve just about everything. Unlike Massey, I think some new understandings have to be developed among the various left-of-center groups, that is, among both liberals and leftists, before liberalism can become a winning creed.

There need to be three essential changes in the thinking of various leftist orientations. First, the left has to abandon its vain hopes for a third party, which cannot succeed and cannot help but be divisive because a vote for a third party of the left is a vote for the right. Second, there has to be an explicit rejection of the use of violence that is implicit in any call for “revolution” and in the concept of “diversity of tactics” adopted by the anti-globalization movement. Violent means don’t make any moral sense within the context of representative democracies with the level of freedom that Americans enjoy. Furthermore, they alienate the great majority of Americans and play into the hands of the powers that be. Third, the socialists on the left have to realize that non-market planning cannot work.

Liberal Democrats, on the other hand, have to make some adjustments in their thinking as well. First and

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foremost, they have to recognize that demonizing or ignoring the various people to their left is not a smart strategy, if only because the left can sink them via a third party, as the Nader campaign of 2000 tragically showed. On a more positive note, liberals should come to recognize that the energy and dedication leftists bring to the battle could be of great help to the Democrats if there was no possibility of leftists deserting to a third party at the last minute. Within that context, liberals should attempt to recruit the left by calling for far bolder initiatives on progressive income taxes, health care, job opportunities, and other bread-and-butter issues than they have for a long time. Liberals also need to accept the fact that non-violent social movements outside the electoral arena have played a large role in social change in the United States, and often made liberal electoral and policy victories possible.

If these various understandings were accepted on both sides, it would leave one key issue open for continuing discussion and contestation: the degree to which markets can be used to create greater equality. Massey calls for “democratic markets” monitored by government to assure access and fairness for everyone, which is a good starting point. But the use of markets might be more attractive to socialists and other leftists if the idea of government planning through markets by using subsidies, taxes, government purchases, and regulations as planning tools (Lindblom 2000, p. 259) could also be incorporated, along with government ownership of some enterprises. The leftist economist Robin Hahnel (2005) argues that those who think that markets can be “tamed” as if they were wild horses do not realize that they are riding tigers that will devour them, but I believe that metaphor underestimates the power of government and the degree to which all markets, including present-day markets, depend on government rules.

However, the likely continuing differences of opinion between liberals and leftists over the degree of government planning and ownership within a liberalized market system would not have to be resolved beforehand if it could be agreed that these difference would be discussed and contested within the framework of Democratic primaries. The only necessary prior agreement would be the willingness of the losing side to support the winner in the regular election, which is already implied in the essential agreement to forego participation in third parties under any circumstances.

If these various bridges could be built, which would

by no means be easy given the history of acrimony and mutual suspicions, then I agree with Massey that liberals could do much better. I think a coherent liberal vision rooted in a “materialist politics” and a commitment to full access to all markets could be successful as one part of a larger program. But without the incorporation of the various types of leftists, or at least a significant portion of them, I doubt that the possibility of reaching the voters in the middle with a liberal message can be realized. Massey claims that many centrist Americans will vote for candidates who stand up for their liberal principles, but I don’t think they’ll be willing to bet on a divided and contentious set of liberals and leftists who cannot develop new strategies to work together in the face of their ongoing failures in bringing about greater equality and access to markets.

Liberals cannot do it alone and leftists have to re-focus their energies.

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the Republican party? In short, as Massey emphasizes, if the good guys lose elections, maybe it's because their policy proposals or political strategies simply weren't as persuasive as those of the opponents – at least, that's what a deep belief in democratic decision-making arguably should imply. It's a salutary lesson.

Second, Massey provides clear, brief, historical summaries of hugely complex events and trajectories in a way that makes the summary look effortless but is really very difficult. The brief analysis of the rise and fall of globalization in the long nineteenth century, or the explication of how markets are fundamentally political and social institutions that are legitimately subject to public control are compelling. Other short set-pieces in *Return* show a similar ability to move quickly to the heart of a complex phenomenon and show how and why it matters. Whatever else it gives us, *Return of the L Word* provides terrific material for everything from undergraduate lectures to arguments with the in-laws about the next election.

Third and more substantively, in my view Massey is right on the major policy issues and political stances. Liberals, who are supposed to stand for change and progress, cannot oppose the rush of globalization if it is properly managed. Liberals should not retreat into postmodernist nihilism, the shallowness of pure relativism, or the hypocrisy of a safe upper middle class castigating the insecure working class for holding the “wrong” views. Liberals should embrace the extraordinary power of markets, after insisting that the government properly regulate and direct them. Liberals should, more abstractly, welcome the dynamism of uncertainty in some arenas of life if it is coupled with the security of stability and public support in other arenas. In short, in *Return of the L Word*, Doug Massey proposes the right political stance in general and many of the right policy proposals in particular.

Nevertheless, I have two concerns about *Return of the L Word*, both of which involve trade-offs, or at least difficult negotiations, that Massey is reluctant to discuss. The first has to do with whether liberals should champion the worst-off or the not-quite-so-badly-off segments of the American population. Massey argues against elite liberals' proclivity to impose the “correct” values and policies on a polity full of people who oppose them. In a book I published 22 years ago (*The New American Dilemma: Liberal Democracy and School*

Desegregation, Yale University Press, 1984) I was one of those elitist liberals, arguing for authoritative imposition of racial desegregation in public schools despite public opposition. My view was roughly “the more the better, and the faster the better;” if schools can be desegregated through democratic means that would be best, but there is little in American history or contemporary racial politics suggesting that whites will voluntarily give up power to or integrate with blacks. Thus we must frequently rely on unelected judges and bureaucrats to take the desegregative steps that elected officials will not or cannot take. I argued that Americans of all races can and frequently do benefit from desegregation, at least in the long run; they will eventually come to realize that a well-implemented desegregation plan is in their interests and in the interest of the nation as a whole, even if they do not now have that realization.

In *The New American Dilemma*, I was not only a liberal elitist. The book expresses considerable concern about well-off suburban whites ordering low-income urban whites to desegregate their own lousy schools, and it pays a great deal of attention to ways in which school desegregation could be implemented to benefit badly-off whites as well as all black students. Nevertheless, a friend told me that I would not have written that book, at least in that way, if I had had children potentially or actually affected by my recommendations -- and his comment has stuck with me.

Would I write about school desegregation differently now? If I were to urge its implementation (as I probably would), I would now pay more attention to the people whom Massey frequently champions in *Return* – working-class white families who are too often asked to bear all of the burdens of racial change with no apparent rewards, and who are scorned by those of us more insulated from the costs of change for resisting it. As an example of the way a more genuinely egalitarian policy might work, I believe that the United States should have a universal draft that includes all young adult men and women, and that people should not be able to obtain exemptions based on schooling or other race- or class-biased terms. (What kind of public service draftees should perform is a separate issue, not relevant here.) So Massey is arguably right that the Democratic party needs to speak more to the concerns of working-class whites, and that such a shift would be not only moral

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but instrumentally valuable in re-establishing the party as the champion of the majority of the people.

But this elides a crucial concern: given that the Democratic party should speak to and for the majority of the population, how far out on a limb should and can it go to speak to and for the dispossessed? Massey gives us too little help in deciding how to weigh the claims of the worst-off against the claims of the not-quite-so-badly-off. What if, for example, there were convincing evidence that standardized achievement tests with high stakes for students and teachers really do improve the quality of education for many or most American teenagers – but also make students in the bottom quintile of achievement more likely to fail to graduate. Should liberals see this as a good or bad policy? To put roughly the same point a different way, should teachers' (or college professors') salaries depend more than they now do on whether their students succeed or fail in school? After all, students— especially those who are poor, not native English speakers, residents of low-income neighborhoods, nonwhite, or simply young -- are much more vulnerable than are teachers or professors, who are middle-class, well educated, and unionized. So, how should the Democratic party weigh the claims of vulnerable students against the claims of somewhat-less-vulnerable adults in the school system, especially when those adults usually vote in large numbers for the Democratic party? (It is not fair to evade these questions by asserting that some other reform would benefit both the worst-off students as well as the slightly-better-off students and teachers; perhaps so, but educators and politicians have been singularly unsuccessful in developing and promoting such a reform.)

More analytically, Massey shows clearly and persuasively how concern for the worst-off has sometimes led Democrats into the moral and instrumental fiasco of castigating the slightly better off. But he does not give us enough help in deciding when liberals should accept the likelihood of further loss for the worst-off in order to respond, politically and substantively, to the voters who are in a marginally or somewhat better situation.

This dilemma for liberals is worsened when the worst-off are formally or informally disfranchised. On the one hand, liberal principles should surely encourage enfranchisement and political mobilization of actual or potential citizens such as illegal immigrants, those convicted of a felony in many states, legal immigrants who are not naturalized citizens, people who speak languages not covered by the Voting Rights Act,

or people who live in neighborhoods that political parties shun. On the other hand, liberal Democrats need to win elections in order to implement any of the good ideas propounded in *Return of the L Word*. In principle these two values need not conflict; in practice, given the fact that some enfranchised Democrats are threatened by some disfranchised potential voters, it is not clear how liberals should proceed. At present, the greatest perceived conflict lies between low-income blacks and immigrants in gateway cities; many in those two groups believe that they are competing for the same jobs, housing, and social space. How should the Democratic party negotiate between undocumented immigrants, who need support but cannot vote, and slightly-better-off African American citizens, who also need support and can vote? The right answer is not obvious, and *Return of the L Word* gives us little help in sorting out where liberals' priorities should lie.

The other issue raised, perhaps inadvertently, by *Return of the L Word* is the nature of class politics. The main thing to say about class politics in the United States is that there aren't any, or at least not much. Americans agonize over racial disparities, and increasingly attend to immigration status and religious difference; occasionally our politics include an explicit discussion of gender or sexual orientation. But despite the fact that much political dispute revolves around economic standing and resources, we lack even a shared or coherent language to discuss class relations. The concepts of working class or middle class are much vaguer than the concepts of, say, "black" and "white." Any possible debate over class differentiation is hampered by a lack of conceptual clarity about what we are discussing; Americans do not comfortably engage with any class-related terminology, whether that of class conflict, mobility, or something else. Most importantly, Americans frequently deny that discussion of class relations is a legitimate subject of political discourse; Republicans are quick to accuse Democrats of engaging in class warfare, and Democrats are even quicker to change the subject.

Massey is clearly concerned about divisions by class and argues that overcoming them is crucial to a rejuvenated liberalism. I completely agree. But how? Just what strategic and substantive role should class play in the revitalization of liberalism? Massey is unclear on this point. For example, his list of the Democratic party's four central constituencies -- professionals,

women, minorities, and workers – is far from a class-based framework. One of the elements, workers, is the locus classicus of class-oriented politics; professionals fit into a politics of the left only by being traitors to their class; women can be of any class; and identity as a “minority” has traditionally been seen as antithetical to identification with the working class. I think Massey’s main goal is to create a new understanding of “class” -- a majority segment of the population who are willing to embrace a high level of insecurity in the market so long as they are assured security in personal life through public policies such as health insurance, unemployment insurance, child care, and high-quality education. But that is an idiosyncratic definition, to say the least, of class. Furthermore, Massey’s empirical analyses of economic standing frequently revolve around quintiles – top 20%, next 60%, bottom 20% -- which are analytically and substantive important, but not anything close to a class as that idea has traditionally been understood or as he is reformulating it.

So *Return of the L Word* seeks to reorient liberal politics around political issues and institutions that are traditionally associated with class – markets, economic well-being, governmental policies of social insurance, global trade – but in ways that bear little resemblance to our usual notions of class. That may be a great virtue of the book, not a defect, but it does call for more sustained development. And it may be problematic in ways that Massey ignores, if minorities line up against workers (say, with regard to employment discrimination) or if women line up against professionals (say, with regard to child care or family leave policy).

At the “author meets critics” session in which we discussed *Return of the L Word*, I asked Doug Massey if there were any difficult trade-offs that a rejuvenated liberal Democratic party would need to wrestle with. He said no. I would love to believe that, but I don’t, and my two concerns about the book suggest why, unfortunately, I think I am more correct than Massey is. That is a highly unusual state of the world.

Finding our Voice: A Response From Douglas S. Massey

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For me, there is no greater compliment than to have my work taken seriously by people I respect, whether they agree or disagree. I therefore appreciate very much the time and effort that went into the comments made by William Domhoff and Jennifer Hochschild and accept them as contributions to a critical yet collegial debate.

When one writes a book like *Return of the ‘L’ Word* one does not expect to get universal praise and acclaim. The book is polemical and in my rhetorical writing as well as my social science, I believe in stating a case forcefully and then backing it up with the best analysis and data I can marshaled and then giving it over to the public for critique. Insights emerge more from the ensuing debate and subsidiary work done to attack or defend the thesis than the thesis itself.

The ‘L’ Word was thus written to provoke people, and in this it appears to have succeeded admirably. There has been an interesting pattern of reaction to the volume, however. My interlocutors on the left are

almost always upset by my chapter, “Where Liberalism Went Wrong,” whereas those on the right rail against my chapter “Liberalism and its Discontents,” which offers a critique of what Hilary Clinton labeled “the vast right wing conspiracy” (what I call the VARWICON in the book).

Neither observers on the right nor the left offer much of a critique of the substantive arguments I make about the nature of markets in contemporary society or the relevance of government to their proper constitution to achieve democratic and egalitarian outcomes. My critics largely elide the reality that markets are socially constructed and just hope no one pays attention, but on the left many seem to have agreed with my views. Thus Hochschild states openly that she “agree(s) with all of the substantive arguments” and Domhoff argues that “the socialists on the left have to realize that non-market planning cannot work.”

Reactions to the book mostly appear to be in response to my critiques of the right and the left, and in this sense it appears that what matters most is whose ox

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Finding Our Voice, cont'd ...

is being gored. I do not agree with Domhoff's assertion laying some of the blame for liberalism's decline on liberals themselves constitutes "blaming the victim." In my view, the left needs to acquire a more critical view of itself and understand why so many working class voters deserted it during the 1980s and 1990s. We have got to stop intoning the shibboleth "blaming the victim" every time a pet liberal notion is challenged. If the challenge is upsetting, then marshal arguments and evidence to show why it is wrong. Don't demonize the messenger in some ad hominem way. What happened to Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Oscar Lewis in the 1960s was a travesty that, as I have argued elsewhere, set back social science back decades and left the field clear for conservatives to assume the high ground in the 1970s and 1980s.

I thus continue to stand by my critiques of the left. What I find most amazing is how little attention left-leaning readers have paid to the my exegesis of the American VARWICON. I sought to lay out in clear and unambiguous terms the formidable array of institutions, foundations, and individuals funders that underlie the right wing's surge to prominence over the past two decades. My purpose in documenting the anatomy of the VARWICON was to impress upon liberals the daunting forces arrayed against them in the public arena. I still see the dispute between Naderites and Gore supporters in the 2000 election as something akin to rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Liberals and progressives of all stripes have to close ranks to meet the challenge from the right.

Both Domhoff and Hochschild take me to task for what I indeed consider to be the weakest link in the book: where to go from here. In the last chapter I tried to sketch out a plan for reassembling a broad coalition capable of governing the country progressively, but I was less satisfied with this aspect my work here than with any other part of the book. I thus find Domhoff's adumbration of potential bridges between liberals and leftists to be very insightful and useful, and I cannot argue with Hochschild's identification of the risks of my call for a class-based politics.

Since writing The 'L' Word, however, I have been reading the works of George Lakoff and have come to appreciate the importance of linguistic and conceptual framing in political debates. I continue to be more

optimistic than Hochschild about pulling together a coalition based on the material interests of the vast majority of Americans, one that transcends the politics of race and appeals to basic tenets of American political ideology.

Indeed, I think that Michael Tomasky was onto something in his recent American Prospect essay when he suggested that liberals need to develop a philosophical framing of politics based on the idea of the common good. My suggestion for a political slogan is "Invest in America." By fixing health care, improving schools, expanding day care, devoting more resources to research, and increasing access to training we are not engaged in wasteful government spending but investing in ourselves to ensure our future prosperity.

The last democratic politician to accomplish a strong, interclass coalition that transcended race was Robert F. Kennedy. Bill Clinton has something of his charisma and political ability, but his personal foibles limited his legacy. What seems to be lacking at this juncture is strong leadership within the democratic party, and this is something I don't know how to manufacture. I can only hope that someone picks up the gauntlet to lead the party forward to power and progressive reform.

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Duina, Francesco. 2006. *The Social Construction of Free Trade: The European Union, NAFTA, and Mercosur*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Stephen C. Poulson. *Social Movements in Twentieth-Century Iran: Culture, Ideology and Mobilizing Frameworks*. Lexington Books. 2005.

Winders, Bill. 2005. "Maintaining the Coalition: Class Coalitions and Policy Trajectories." *Politics & Society*. 33(3):387-423.

Conference Reminder

Talcott Parsons. Who now reads Parsons?

An interdisciplinary meeting to assess the ideas of the great American social theorist Talcott Parsons. 17th-18th July 2006, University of Manchester, England

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Postgraduates are welcome at a (subsidized fee). A selection of papers presented will be published in a special edition of the journal *Classical Sociology* and others in a book.

It is difficult for us to realize how great a stir he made in the world... in theory and the practice of the social sciences and humanities. Sociology, politics, psychology, anthropology and economics would be much the poorer if it were not for Parsons. He was the ultimate Puritan Scholar: determined and disciplined with a keen interest in knowledge.

Data Archives:

The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), located at www.thearda.com, provides free access to high quality quantitative data on religion. The ARDA allows you to interactively explore American and international data using online features for generating national profiles, maps, church membership overviews, denominational heritage trees, tables, charts, and other summary reports. Over 400 data files are available for online preview (including the International Social Survey Program and multiple years of the General Social Survey and) and virtually all can be downloaded free of charge. The ARDA has also developed a series of tools for education. Learning modules provide structured class assignments and the many online tools allow students to explore religion across the globe or in their own backyard. Housed in the Social Science Research Institute at the Pennsylvania State University, the ARDA is funded by the Lilly Endowment and the John Templeton Foundation.

An Outrageous Proposal-- A WPA for Hurricane Cleanup and Reconstruction

Kathleen Schwartzman
University of Arizona

Hurricane cleanup is a perfect candidate for a 21st Century WPA (Work Projects Administration). Not only would it direct U.S. tax dollars to needed reconstruction but it would also benefit U.S. citizens caught in a poverty trap. The labor force is being remade but it won't look like the WPA.

In the height of the depression, the WPA employed more than eight million workers to produce bridges, roads, buildings, airports, and parks. By providing useful work for millions of victims of the Great Depression, it attended to the financial needs of individuals, and by restoring some of their purchasing power, it also put money back into the economy.

So why not bring back the WPA?

First, the U.S. Government has already dedicated billions to recovery and reconstruction. Congress opened with a \$62 billion down payment on post-Katrina reconstruction work and more followed.

Second, pre hurricane Louisiana already had high rates of poverty. Katrina media coverage attached faces to the findings of the U.S. Census Bureau. On 30 August 2005 it reported that the U.S. was experiencing a rise in poverty, that the rate for the Southern region was higher than other regions, and that among racial and ethnic groups, African-Americans had the lowest median income. States most affected by the hurricanes, Mississippi and Louisiana, rank in the bottom five for average real medium household income, and in top four for average poverty rates. A WPA reconstruction program that hired economically marginal residents would provide income, skills, and dignity for those caught in a poverty welfare cycle.

Third, the ranks of the previously poor were augmented by the hurricane-poor. Clean-up and reconstruction jobs for the recently impoverished and displaced could make a small dent in the horrendous financial tragedy that all the hurricane victims suffered.

A WPA for hurricane cleanup and rebuilding sounds like common sense, doesn't it? Nope.

The 1930's model is not possible in 2006.

Despite the recently-released White House study (Feb, 2006) describing the federal government response to Katrina as flawed, there would be little public support for a WPA type of government spending. The American public embraces the sentiment that the government is inefficient, bloated, and must be downsized. Politicians heeded this call by reducing and privatizing government operations, even parts of the U.S. Armed Forces. If there were protests in 2001 against hiring airport security personnel as government employees, there would certainly be objections to adding hurricane rebuilding personnel to the government payroll. Big government is discredited despite the billions of tax dollars being spent, and despite the reports of millions in fraudulent claims.

Second, downsized governments are less prepared and able to address crises of this magnitude. So, where the government has spent, it has been directed toward those businesses that are well established. Contracts for clean up and rebuilding went to companies that also appeared on the Iraq reconstruction list. Bechtel, Fluor, and CH2M Hill all signed on to construct temporary housing in New Orleans, and Halliburton (and its subsidiary BK & R) signed contracts with the Pentagon to begin rebuilding Navy bases in Louisiana and Mississippi (Wall Street Journal 12 September 2005; Mother Jones 14 September 2005). Some local firms have complained about being left out, but let's accept, for the sake of argument, that these larger private enterprises are leaner, more efficient, and better prepared to do the job than either the government or the local businesses.

The third obstacle to creating a WPA is the use of undocumented workers. Part of "leanness" of those large companies derives from their ability to keep down labor costs, and they do so by drawing from a labor pool which includes undocumented workers. Perfectly legal. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a notice on September 6, 2005 that it would not sanction employers for hiring workers who were unable to provide documentation normally required under Section 274A of the Immigration and Nationality Act. Employers were given a 45-day grace period for completing and retaining Employment Eli-

gibility Verification (I 9). Federal installations were the one exception.

When federal agents identified suspected illegal immigrants working at the naval base where the Haliburton subsidiary KB&Root is leading reconstruction, thirteen workers were barred due to a lack of proper papers. However, many worry that demanding documentation, and the early reinstatement of Davis-Bacon will inflate reconstruction costs.

As early as 13 September 2005, the Mexican paper *La Jornada* reported that undocumented workers from Mexico and Honduras were hired to clean out contaminated water and debris without tools, gloves, and other protective covering. After being evacuated from New Orleans to Houston, they were contracted by Belfor of Houston to work in cleanup activities and returned to New Orleans in company buses. The workers repeat the commonly heard phrase “if we don’t do it, who will?” *La Jornada* reported that the Mexican government calculated that there were approximately 100,000 Mexicans already in the affected zones, and they were given a “letter of recommendation” from President Fox who said that Mexicans are good at construction (NYT 5 September 2005). The press has been filled with reports of undocumented workers arriving from other parts of the U.S. and from Mexico and Central America. Defenders of immigrant labor complain about the low salaries, the living conditions, or the working conditions—particularly the relaxed occupational and health standards.

Both those critical of the hiring of undocumented workers, and those critical of the treatment of Hispanics, complain about the salaries. (Clearly the comparison is with the pre-hurricane salaries, not the salaries in Honduras, or the \$5. hour that one undocumented worker reported that he earned in the tobacco fields of NC). The LA Regional Carpenters Council said it had received complaints from union members who had been replaced, and unionized electricians say they were let go by BK&R in favor of lower wage immigrant workers after the suspension of Davis-Bacon.

Those who are critical of the treatment of Hispanic workers also point out that they are living in tents or crowded quarters, often without running water or electricity. Other write that the working conditions were so bad that “Some workers ended up going to MS because

the conditions in LA were unsafe, unclean, and hot”.

The labor force is being remade but not to look like a WPA-style .

Following an exceptional tragedy, corporations are successfully restructuring work and transforming the labor force. Under the umbrella of “extraordinary urgency”, jobs offer less compensation for regular and overtime hours, regular jobs are transformed into day labor, and work takes place without attention to occupational and safety conditions.

We will have missed the opportunity to think creatively about how to integrate the marginal and poor populations that resided in the hurricane-damaged areas. A WPA-like solution would not only attend to the cleaning and rebuilding of damaged structures, but also contribute to the building the economic self-sufficiency and spirit of the residents in that impoverished region.

Many will object to a WPA-like endeavor for the reasons outlined above. But many may also agree that there is something myopic, and even socially irresponsible, about programs that distribute millions of tax dollars to the unemployed and displaced who are currently residing in other cities on the one hand, and millions more to contractors and newly arriving non-citizen workers on the other. Instead of using this tragedy to reduce the gap between society and what Wm. J. Wilson once called the “underclass”, we are pursuing a policy which further marginalizes one already-marginalized population and fortifies a labor force built on marginalize immigrant labor.

Social Security: A Debate in Context

John Myles

University of Toronto

[*Editor's note: this piece is excerpted from the author's 2005 ASA Convention presentation. To obtain an unabridged version of the article, contact the author.*]

My mandate for this session was to place the U.S. Social Security debate within a comparative context. Specifically, what have other nations actually been doing?

Let me begin with a few facts and observations about what drives pension politics.

Lesson #1: Pension costs are like gas prices.

The first lesson I've learned from studying pension reform across multiple countries is that pension costs are like gas prices. It's not so much price levels that get people upset but rather change in prices.

In the late 90s I spent time in both Italy and Australia. At the time Italy was spending about 13% of GDP on old age pensions and spending was projected to rise to 21% of GDP. Australia was spending 3.9% of GDP with projected increases to 4.6%.

Despite dramatically different spending levels, the political rhetoric of the day was identical: the projected increase in spending levels was declared "unsustainable." In my discussions with Australian officials I pointed out that most European treasury officials would think they had died and gone to heaven if they faced the Australian scenario. The response I got was: "That won't cut any ice here." Australia isn't Italy.

The U.S. situation is similar. According to the 2004 report of the Social Security Trustees, the current payroll tax level of 12.4 percent would have to be increased to 14.29 percent to keep the plan in balance until 2078. A European observer might ask: What's the big deal? Current payroll taxes for pensions in Germany are already 22 percent. The likely response would be: That doesn't cut any ice here. The U.S. isn't Germany.

Lesson #2: But Size Matters Too

All this is not to say that size is unimportant. Big reforms are much more likely to occur in high spending countries like Germany or Sweden than in low spending

countries like Canada, Australia or the U.S. Moreover, for distributive reasons, the drive for reform in the big spending countries is as likely to come from the left as from the right. We'll see why in a moment.

Lesson #3: Payroll taxes—not total expenditures—drive reform

Some countries, like Germany, France and the U.S. fund most of their pension expenditures with payroll taxes. Some countries like New Zealand and Australia rely exclusively on general revenue. For others, like Canada, the shares are roughly 50-50.

Countries that rely more on payroll taxes than on general revenue are also more likely to experience dramatic reform. Indeed, the aim of most European reforms has been to freeze payroll taxes, not total levels of taxation. And the attack on payroll taxes has mainly come from social democrats, not right-wingers in the style of Thatcher or Bush. And, for the most part, these reforms have been passed with the consent of organized labour. Why is that? The reasons have to do with inter-generational equity and intra-generational justice.

What would the U.S. do if it were Europe?

1. Freeze payroll taxes at current levels

At 12.4%, U.S. payroll taxes for Social Security are not particularly high by international standards. If we exclude the disability portion, the total contribution rate is closer to 10% for pensions. Nevertheless, as in Europe, a progressive Democrat could make a respectable case for resisting further increases in payroll taxes.

Taking this route, however, poses a new problem. If this is all you do, benefits for future retirees must inevitably fall. This is not especially worrisome for higher income earners for whom Social Security represents a small fraction of total retirement income. But it is very worrisome for low wage earners who depend a lot on Social Security. We'll see how the U.S. might deal with this problem in a moment.

2. Add general revenue financing to fund Social Security.

If the U.S. were Europe, it would relieve some of

the pressure on payroll taxes by adding general revenue financing for Social Security. General revenue would be used to finance and improve the redistributive components of Social Security.

Roughly speaking, most countries use payroll contributions to finance the earnings-related bits of old age security. General revenues from income and other taxes are used to finance redistribution. In the U.S., however, the use of general revenue is prohibited by law despite Social Security's redistributive features.

Once the door is open to general revenue financing, other redistributive mechanisms can be introduced to compensate the least advantaged for lower benefits.

4. Dramatically reform SSI to provide “basic security” for those at the bottom.

Most importantly, the U.S. would drastically reform SSI and coordinate it with Social Security to create a “basic income security” system for seniors, something it does not have today.

Tim Smeeding and Susanna Sandstrom (2005) compare old age poverty rates using two different cut-offs. The first – 40% of median family income – is close to the official U.S. poverty line. By this standard, old age poverty has been virtually eliminated in Canada, Finland and Sweden. Italy and Germany are not far from this state.

If we use the more common international yardstick – 50 percent of median income – a quarter of the U.S. elderly live in poor households.

Neither social insurance nor social assistance work very effectively for U.S. seniors. Social Security leaves almost a quarter of U.S. seniors in poverty and SSI reduces this rate by less than a percentage point.

5. Would the U.S. “privatize”? It depends on what you mean.

Europeans now speak a lot about “privatization,” but the meaning of the term is very different from Mr. Bush's plan. In Mr. Bush's plan, the aim is to divert some fraction of current payroll contributions from Social Security into private accounts.

In effect, this does much more than “freeze” the contribution rate, it lowers the rate that supports Social Security expenditures while adding considerable “risk” into the system. Margaret Thatcher took this route in

the 1980s and the results have largely been described as a disaster.

“Privatization” in Europe refers to the creation of new incentives and mechanisms for middle and upper income earners to offset reduced social security benefits with more savings in occupational and private retirement accounts. Unlike the U.S. or Canada, these institutions have been either marginal or non-existent in many European countries.

In summary:

Population aging does raise the cost of financing current retirement practises. Pressure for reform arises because of the way these additional costs will be distributed under the status quo.

Pressures for reform are especially strong in systems that rely exclusively or mainly on payroll taxes to finance benefits because of the way such systems distribute the additional cost within and between generations. If the U.S. were Europe, it would be seeking ways to limit future growth in payroll taxes.

If the U.S. were Europe, however, it would also be taking steps to ensure these additional costs do not fall disproportionately on either low income seniors or low income workers.

To help low income workers, it would shift some of the burden of these additional costs from payroll taxes to general revenue.

To protect low income seniors, the U.S. would be busy enhancing its basic security provisions for low income seniors inside Social Security and with radical reform of SSI.

The U.S., of course, isn't Europe. And one can reasonably ask to what extent any of these strategies pass the litmus test of political feasibility, if not under this administration, then under the next one.

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