

THE TRIUMPH OF LIBERALISM

Roger Rosenblatt

Roger Rosenblatt is an editor and writer whose essays have appeared in the New York Times, Time magazine, the New Republic, and other magazines, as well as on The Lehrer Report, a PBS television news show. He has received a number of awards for journalism and is the author of five books.

In this article, published in the New York Times in 1996, Rosenblatt defends liberalism against some of its recent critics. Arguing, in part, that liberalism is "robust and established," he first reviews some of the criticisms of liberalism and then defines what he means by the term. He discusses some of the misunderstandings (as he sees it) that have lessened the reputation of liberalism and ends with a review of its accomplishments.

As you read, note what rights Rosenblatt believes that liberalism has protected and how he thinks liberalism fosters equality.

The America I heard singing^o when I was a teen-ager in the late 1950s forced homosexuals into hiding, ignored or derided the disabled, withheld rights from suspects of crimes and kept women in their place, which was usually the kitchen and sometimes an abortionist's back room. It foisted prayers on schoolchildren, paid no attention to the health needs of the impoverished or the elderly, endangered endangered species and threw people out of work because they held an un-American ideology.^o In certain places, it denied black Americans the right to sit where they wished to on a public bus, to drink from a public water fountain, to eat in restaurants, to stay in hotels, to go to public schools with whites or to vote.

Every one of these conditions has been corrected or improved by laws and attitudes derived from a philosophy that is held in such low esteem it dare not speak its name. Today, as America enters the 1996 Presidential election year, it is singing two different tunes. One is "Liberalism Is Dead and I'm Feeling So Sad." The other is "Liberalism Is Dead and I'm Feeling So Glad." If this keening and gloating sounds familiar, it is. You last heard it in the election year of 1992. The gloating came most elegantly from Irving and William Kristol, the formidable father-son team of conservative thinkers. In an article in *Commentary*, William, the son, stated that "liberalism is in a deep crisis" and has "a hollowness at the core." Irving wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that "the beginning of

^oI heard singing: An allusion to "I Hear America Singing," a poem by nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman. ^oun-American ideology: During hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s, some Americans were accused of being Communists and consequently lost their jobs.

political wisdom in the 1990's is the recognition that liberalism today is at the end of its intellectual tether."

Regrets over liberalism's death arrived in defensive books from equally thoughtful people who celebrated the New Deal and the Great Society as brave last stands against the inevitable, and in statements like that of the former Democratic Presidential candidate Walter Mondale that liberals "kind of used up the old agenda." The final draft of the Democratic Party platform in 1992 openly spurned liberalism by trying to stake out a middle ground between laissez-faire capitalism and the welfare state.⁹ Respected authors sought to redefine the term. Jim Sleeper; Mary D. and Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mickey Kaus, among others, produced books that searched for a liberalism that repudiated liberalism.

What is interesting about these two kinds of attacks, since both are attacks with different motives, is that underneath it all, they take their ardor from the presumption that liberalism is not dead, but robust and established. They are right. "Liberal society is in trouble," says the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "but I would be surprised at a retreat from a basic liberal ethos."...

Liberalism dominates the debate and defines the terms of the debate. The conservative assaults on the L word, which were made most effectively by President Reagan, have been so routine over the past 16 years that there is a whole generation of people under 35 who have never heard "liberal" uttered as anything other than a joke or an insult. Yet they live in a liberal country. Conservatives may have ruined the word but have adopted most of the content of liberalism....

The liberalism I am thinking of is a kind of general cultural-political liberalism, a mixture of the New Deal programs of the 1930's and the individual rights movements of the 1960's, which knocked the wind out of all the callous, restrictive and narrow-minded conditions that I grew up with a few decades ago. It is a malleable philosophy, generous and socially responsible, that governs how people ought to live with one another in a healthy democracy. It is not the specific liberalism of the Franklin Roosevelt era, or the Lyndon Johnson era, or explicitly that of voting rights laws or expanded civil liberties, though it creates and encourages such developments. Rather, it is the sentiment that may be traced back to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution... and to the moderate Enlightenment¹⁰ from which those documents sprang, that people are inherently equal, that they have a right to pursue their individuality in an open society and that the state must use its power and authority to secure their rights and to help the needier among them.

⁹ laissez-faire capitalism and the welfare state: Laissez-faire is capitalism unrestrained by government regulations or safety nets. Welfare state is a general term for a government that takes responsibility for the well-being of its citizens through Social Security, medical insurance, or welfare.

¹⁰ Enlightenment: The eighteenth-century philosophy that emphasized individual rights.

This liberalism is neither dead nor on the run. The country backs away from it in frightened and hardscrabble times. Most observers concede that it needs to make some corrections in its details and attitudes. And from the viewpoint of liberal candidates seeking office, it needs to regain political power to further its aims. But in its competition with conservative thinking for the soul of America, it has won hands down.

"People say that the Great Society failed," says Robert Caro, the historian of the Lyndon Johnson Presidency. "That really is nonsense. Is anyone today suggesting that we resegregate public accommodations, that we have 'colored' and 'white' toilets? It is unthinkable that we would make such retreats. Those aspects of liberalism are now so much a part of America that they are indistinguishable from America. In that sense, America is liberalism."...

In a cultural atmosphere in which liberals are assumed to support the purveyors of sacrilege and dirty talk, the purveyors of simpleminded virtue come off as moral leaders, and the public has a choice between the tasteless and the boring. In fact, most liberals who favor the protections of an open society are appalled by its excesses, but they have not made that clear. It has been said that they are in favor of every subculture except that of married, hard-working, home-buying, church-going Americans. The themes raised by conservatives that have been warmly welcomed by the rest of the country are not taxes or a trickle-down economy, but rather an evocation of communal values and morals....

Liberalism is most scorned for its association with big government, even though liberals were against the abuses of Presidential power under President Johnson in Vietnam and President Nixon in Watergate. While originally fearing a too-powerful state, it has been seen as willing and eager to give the state power in order to realize egalitarian^o goals. In "Liberal Purposes" (1991), Prof. William A. Galston of the University of Maryland wrote: "A government too weak to threaten our liberties may by that very fact be too weak to secure our rights, let alone advance our shared purposes."

Yet the fact remains that with all of liberalism's missteps and inadequacies, America has signed on to it. There are major areas of activity, like the rights of women and of members of minorities, and the environment, that could not have changed the American landscape without great numbers of people agreeing that they wanted government in their lives. Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the presence of minority-group members in the work force has grown from 11 percent to 23 percent. "Of course we don't have social justice," says Robert Caro, "but we have moved a long way toward it."

Women today make up nearly half the managerial and professional ranks. This is because of big government—Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974. Suzanne

^oegalitarian: Promoting equality.

Braun Levine, editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, said, "There has not been a single woman in this country who has not been changed by the last 30 years of activism, and even those who resist what used to be called 'women's lib' are beneficiaries of it."

Even affirmative action, one of the most fragile and hotly contested of liberal programs—debated by both conservatives and liberals—has proved to be wanted, at least in some form, by most Americans. . . .

One of the less noted but highly significant areas in which government has proved indispensable is the environment. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the effects of the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990, signed by President Bush, will reduce the country's air pollution by more than 49 billion pounds per year. The number of regions violating the air-quality standards for carbon monoxide has dropped to 9 from more than 40 in the past five years. Sulfur dioxide emissions, which cause acid rain, have been reduced by 2.6 million tons since 1990.

In short, since the 1960's, the public, rather than seeking to reduce a govern- 15 mental presence in the environment, has sought to ratchet it up. Bipartisan support passed the Clean Air Act Amendments in 1990 by 401 to 25 in the House and by 89 to 10 in the Senate. Industry has experienced no serious loss. Du Pont and other chemical companies have been given incentives to develop substitutes for ozone-depleting chemicals. The timber interests in Oregon originally claimed that forest-saving efforts would threaten jobs in the state, but keeping the trees vertical has so increased tourism—while making the state attractive as a corporate location—that now Oregon has the lowest unemployment numbers in a generation.

None of this is to claim that the country is not genuinely concerned with the amount of big government in its life—although there often seems to be as much formulaic reaction against it as there is against "knee-jerk liberalism," or "big business." The reality is that the country very much wants to keep government big.

The triumph of liberalism is not a political victory. Rather it is a triumph of temperament and attitude; it reflects how America wishes to exist. It has been said that liberalism is confounded by an unrealistic optimism about the possibilities of human advancement. But the idea was born in 18th-century rationalism. It picked up 19th-century Romanticism along the way as it moved forward, and the combination of thought may be read in the Constitution—an 18th-century document with 19th-century riders.

The truth of liberalism is that it is both optimistic and pragmatic. It believes in improvement but not in perfectibility. It is often embarrassed by the freedoms it supports and encourages, and by the unwieldiness of the government it promotes. But it believes in the dream of human nobility, which historically has proved equally fanciful and reasonable.

Perhaps, as happens from time to time, America appears to be fed up with liberalism and prepared to shut down its normal impulses for a while. But

every such period is followed by a further advance of both freedom and equality, because this is the way the country has wanted to go. Within my lifetime, America has progressed from a nation that quashed human rights and diminished human dignity to one that worries about cultural influences and a budget. Most people would call that a triumph.

THEY ONLY LOOK DEAD: WHY PROGRESSIVES WILL DOMINATE THE NEXT POLITICAL ERA

E. J. Dionne Jr.

E. J. Dionne Jr. is a columnist for the Washington Post. His first book, Why Americans Hate Politics (1991), won several awards and reportedly influenced Bill Clinton in his 1992 presidential campaign. This reading comes from Dionne's 1996 book They Only Look Dead: Why Progressives Will Dominate the Next Political Era. Using the term progressive as a synonym for liberal, he predicts that the United States is on the verge of a new era of liberalism, or progressivism.

Dionne begins by refuting the typical conservative and libertarian argument against government, which he characterizes as a negative argument because it emphasizes freedom from interference. In contrast, Dionne characterizes liberalism's support of energetic government as positive because it emphasizes freedom to—that is, it emphasizes government's role in helping citizens to be free to enjoy good health and not be impoverished in old age; in preserving the environment; and in providing public schools, police protection, parks, and other services.

As you read, try to understand why Dionne thinks that the marketplace, or free-market capitalism, needs to be regulated. Also keep in mind his distinctions between size of government and kind of government, and freedom from and freedom to.

Those who believe in government's possibilities cannot pretend that they share the new conservatism's view of the state. At the heart of the new conservatism is the belief that government action is not only essentially inefficient but also inherently oppressive. Democratic government, in this telling, has interests all its own that have nothing to do with what the voters want. What's especially important about this idea is that it ultimately sees no *fundamental* distinction between free government and dictatorship. The differences are only a matter of degree, not of kind: The more limited democratic government is, the better; the

more active democratic government is, the more it begins to approach the evils of Nazism or communism. "Behind our New Deals and New Frontiers and Great Societies," writes [conservative U.S.] House majority leader Dick Armey,^o "you will find, *with a difference only in power and nerve*, the same sort of person who gave the world its Five Year Plans and Great Leaps Forward^o—the Soviet and Chinese counterparts." [Emphasis added.]

This an extraordinary and radical claim, effectively equating Roosevelt, Kennedy and Johnson with Stalin and Mao.^o If the problem is stated like this, then there is only one choice: Preserving freedom means having government do as little as possible. A government that might levy taxes to provide health care coverage for all or pensions for the old is seen as marching the people down "the road to serfdom," in the evocative phrase of the libertarian economist Friedrich A. Hayek. Better, in this view, to have no health care and no pensions than to have the government embark on this terrible path. Environmental regulations are seen not as preserving streams and forests for future generations; they are viewed as ways of interfering with the free use of private property. Work safety regulations are no longer ways of providing employees with some protections against hazardous machines or conditions; they are seen as "interference in the right of contract."^o

This sort of thinking is now so common that it has been forgotten how radically different it is from the tradition on which the United States was founded—a tradition to which contemporary liberals, moderates, conservatives and libertarians all trace their roots. As the political philosopher Stephen Holmes has argued (Holmes, 18, 23), the entire project of freedom going back to America's founders rests not on *weak* government, but rather on an *energetic* government, government strong enough to protect individual rights. Free government is different in *kind* from despotic regimes because its fundamental purpose—to vindicate the rights of individuals—is different.

Imagine on the one side a dictatorship that has no government-provided social security, health, welfare or pension systems of any type. It levies relatively low taxes which go almost entirely toward supporting large military and secret police forces that regularly jail or kill people because of their political views, religious beliefs—or for any other reason the regime decides. Then imagine a democracy with regular open elections and full freedoms of speech and religion. Imagine further that its government levies higher taxes than the dictatorship to support an extensive welfare state, generous old-age pensions

^oDick Armey: Conservative U.S. House majority leader at the time of Dionne's writing and an unsuccessful candidate in the 1996 Republican presidential primaries. ^oFive Year Plans and Great Leaps Forward: The economic plans of, respectively, the Soviet and the Chinese Communists. ^oStalin and Mao: Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong, repressive past Communist leaders of, respectively, the Soviet Union and China. ^oright of contract: The right of individuals to enter freely into contracts, an important element in the political theory of libertarians like Hayek.

and a government health system. The first country might technically have a “smaller government,” but there is no doubt that it is *not* a free society. The second country would have a “bigger government,” measured as a percentage of gross domestic product,^o yet there is no doubt that it is a free society. This point might seem obvious, but it is in fact obscured by the presumptions that underlie the conservative anti-government talk now so popular. The size of government is an important issue, but it is not as important as — and should not be confused with — the kind of government a society has.

Because the anti-government ideology of the new conservatism views almost all forms of government intervention (beyond basic police protection) with suspicion, it misses entirely the fact that democratic governments can intervene in ways that *expand* individual liberty. At the extreme, it took a very strong national government (and very forceful intervention) to end slavery and literally free four million Americans from bondage. It's worth remembering that supporters of slavery saw abolitionists as “enemies of liberty” interfering with the “property rights” of slaveholders and imposing the federal government's wishes over “the rights of states.” Similarly, it took a strong federal government to end segregation in the 1960s and vindicate the right of African-Americans to vote. Such actions were well within the liberal tradition of free government which, notes Stephen Holmes, accepted that there were occasions when “only a powerful centralized state could protect individual rights against local strongmen and religious majorities” (20).

In the current cacophony of anti-government sloganeering, it is forgotten that the ever-popular slogan “equality of opportunity” was made real only by extensive government efforts to offer individuals opportunities to develop their *own* capacities. As Holmes points out, Adam Smith,^o the intellectual father of the free market, favored a publicly financed, compulsory system of elementary education. After World War II the government's investment in the college education of millions through the GI Bill simultaneously opened new opportunities for individuals and promoted an explosive period of general economic growth. As Holmes puts it: “Far from being a road to serfdom, government intervention was meant to enhance individual autonomy. Publicly financed schooling, as Mill wrote, is ‘help toward doing without help’” (Holmes 23). John Stuart Mill^o offers here a powerful counter to those who would insist that government intervention always and everywhere increases “dependency.”

Government also fosters liberty by doing something so obvious that it is little noticed: It insists that certain things cannot be bought and sold. We do not, for example, believe that justice in the courts should be bought and sold. We presume that votes and public offices cannot be bought (even if expensive political campaigns raise questions about the depth of our commitment to this

^ogross domestic product: The total value of goods and services produced within a country during a year. ^oAdam Smith: Late-eighteenth-century philosopher and economist. ^oJohn Stuart Mill: Nineteenth-century British philosopher, author of *On Liberty*.

proposition). We now accept, though we once did not, that it is wrong for a wealthy person to buy his way out of the draft during a time of war. And, of course, we do not believe that human beings can be bought and sold.

But these do not exhaust the instances in which a free people might decide to limit the writ of money and the supremacy of the market.^o As the political philosopher Michael Walzer has argued, one of the central issues confronting democratic societies concerns which rights and privileges should not be put up for sale. As an abstract proposition, we reject the notion that a wealthy person should be able to buy extra years of life that a poor person cannot, since life itself ought not be bought and sold. Yet the availability of health care affects longevity, and by making health care a purely market transaction, we come close to selling life and death. This was the primary argument for Medicare^o and remains the central moral claim made by advocates of national health insurance. Similarly, we do not believe that children should be deprived of access to food, medicine or education just because their parents are poor. As Holmes puts it, "Why should children be hopelessly snared in a web of under-privilege into which they were born through no fault of their own?"

The current vogue for the superiority of markets over government carries the risk of obscuring the basic issue of what should be for sale in the first place. In a society characterized by growing economic inequality, the dangers of making the marketplace the sole arbiter of the basic elements of a decent life are especially large. Doing so could put many of the basics out of the reach of many people who "work hard and play by the rules." The interrelationship between the moral and economic crises can be seen most powerfully in families where the need to earn enough income forces both parents to spend increasing amounts of time outside the home. One of the great achievements of this century was "the family wage," which allowed the vast majority of workers to provide their families with both a decent living and the parental time to give their children a decent upbringing. The family wage was not simply a product of the marketplace. It was secured through a combination of economic growth, social legislation and unionization. If the marketplace becomes not simply the main arbiter of income, as it will inevitably be, but the *only* judge of living standards, then all social factors, including the need to strengthen families and improve the care given children, become entirely irrelevant in the world of work.

Two questions are frequently confused in the current debate: whether marketplace *mechanisms*^o might be usefully invoked to solve certain problems, and whether the solution of the problems themselves should be left *entirely* to the market. This confusion afflicts Progressives and conservatives alike.

On the one hand, applying marketplace logic to government programs can be highly useful. One of the most telling criticisms of government is that it does

^othe market: The free, unplanned economy responding to economic supply and demand.

^oMedicare: Government program of medical care for those over sixty-five. ^omarketplace *mecha-*

nisms: Free-market economic features such as supply and demand or the profit motive.

not live by the disciplines of the market, and can thus—in theory at least—deliver services as shoddily as it chooses, with as large a bureaucracy as it wishes. This argument can become a parody of itself, denying that there are, in fact, good public schools, fine police forces, excellent public parks, great public libraries and the like. But the argument does point fairly to certain limits on the government's capacities. . . . There *are* instances when it is more efficient for government to give each citizen a voucher to purchase services in a competitive marketplace than to provide the services directly. The GI Bill, for example, did not prescribe where veterans would go to college. It let them choose and gave them the means to pay for the education of their choice. Clinton's housing secretary, Henry Cisneros, proposed ~~scrapping federal subsidies for local public housing agencies and turning federal aid into housing vouchers that would go directly to poor people.~~ If a given public housing project was so crime-infested and run-down that poor people would choose not to live in it, it could be closed and sold off. An abstract fear of marketplace logic should not impede experiments of this sort.

But supporting market-oriented solutions to problems is not the same as suggesting that the market itself, left to its own devices, will solve all problems. If the government had not given the education vouchers to the GIs, many of them would never have gone to college. The market can break down, recessions can throw people out of work, families can lose their health insurance, poor people can lack the money to buy food and shelter for their children. The answer to the most rabid free-market advocates is that the free market is a wonderful instrument that also creates problems and leaves others unsolved. To assert as a flat rule, as Representative Armev does, that "the market is rational and the government is dumb" (Armev 316) is to assume that it is rational to accept problems created by unemployment, low wages, business cycles, pollution and simple human failings; and dumb to use government to try to lessen the human costs associated with them. Mr. Armev might believe that; most Americans do not.

The difference between this era's conservatives and the American Progressive tradition lies in the distinction between two phrases, "freedom from" and "freedom to." Free-market conservatives are very much alive to the importance of what the philosopher Isaiah Berlin called "negative liberty," defined as freedom *from* coercion by the state. American Progressives and liberals share this concern for negative liberty, which is why they accept with the conservatives the need for limited government. Historically, however, Progressives have been more alive to the promise of "positive liberty" and to free government's capacity for promoting it. To be the master of one's own fate—a fair definition of liberty—means not simply being free from overt coercion (though that is a precondition); it also involves being given the means to overcome various external forces that impinge on freedom of choice and self-sufficiency. It means being free to set one's course.

From the beginning, therefore, the Progressive project has involved the use of government to give men and women the tools needed for achieving positive

liberty, beginning with free elementary and secondary education and moving in the Depression and postwar era to Social Security, unemployment compensation and access to college and to health insurance. (The Progressives, beginning with women's suffrage, were also at the forefront in expanding the realm of freedom for women.) . . .

In our era, conservatives have monopolized the concept of liberty and given it a particular and largely negative definition. Progressives have been cast—and have sometimes foolishly cast themselves—as defenders of coercion and bureaucracy, of government for government's sake. The imperative for Progressives is to rediscover their own tradition as the party of liberty. In a free society all parties to the debate should be arguing about the best ways to enhance and advance human freedom. For Progressives, that is and always has been the central purpose of government. . . .

The Progressive's goal is not to strengthen government for government's sake, but to use government where possible to strengthen the institutions of civil society.^o Those institutions need protection against the state, but they also need protection from market forces. How, for example, can families be liberated from some of the pressures of the marketplace—through more “family-friendly” tax laws, through better rules on parental leave, through incentives to create more flexible workplaces so parents feel less conflicted between the obligations of work and home? How can government policies strengthen rather than weaken the voluntary sector? Can the poor who live in public housing projects be given more control of their surroundings and a larger stake in their communities? Can rules be written so that employers who feel a sense of loyalty and obligation to their employees will not be punished by the marketplace? Given that the American charitable sector prospered for years on the unpaid labor of women volunteers, how can it be revitalized now that so many women both want and need to work for wages and salaries? . . .

Progressives—liberals—thus need to embrace a politics of liberty and community. They cannot leave the definition of liberty to their conservative adversaries. They need to contest the negative definition of liberty as incomplete. Yes, individuals need to be protected against omnipotent, abusive government. But they also have a right to look to government for help in defending their autonomy and expanding the possibilities of self-reliance. Government should not weaken the bonds of civil society. But government *can* step in to strengthen civil society and protect it against the disruptions created by the normal workings of the economic market. Surely anyone who claims to believe in “family values” should want to relieve families of some of the pressures placed upon them by work and economic distress. As Theodore Roosevelt put it: “No man”—he could have added women—“can be a good citizen unless he has a wage more than sufficient

^oinstitutions of civil society: Structures like families, neighborhoods, clubs, or volunteer programs that are important in our lives but are not controlled or financed by government.

to cover the bare costs of living, and hours of labor short enough so that after his day's work is done, he will have time and energy to bear his share in the management of the community, to help in carrying the general load" (Roosevelt 146). Long before "civil society" was a fashionable phrase, TR understood its meaning.

A New Progressivism based on these principles would take seriously Bill Kristol's^o talk about "the politics of liberty and the sociology of virtue." But it would contest the effectiveness of the new conservative program supported by Kristol and his allies, arguing that liberty and virtue require not only freedom from government coercion, but also the active support of a government that understands not only its limits but also its obligations. It is not enough to preach virtue to a family that finds its living standard falling despite its own best efforts to work, save, invest and care for its children. Such a family surely deserves some support for its own efforts to expand its opportunities—and, at the least, some insurance against the worst economic catastrophes that might befall it.

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DUBIOUS CONCEPTIONS

Kristin Luker

*Kristin Luker is a professor of sociology and jurisprudence and social policy at the University of California at Berkeley. She is the author of *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (1984) and a number of articles on teen pregnancy. This reading comes from her 1996 book *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy*.*

You will see that Luker shares one assumption with Jacqueline R. Kasun: that women who become pregnant as teenagers are less likely to complete their education and take advantage of the opportunities available to those who pursue an

^oBill Kristol: William Kristol, an influential contemporary American neoconservative.

education first and marry later. Beyond that assumption, however, Luker's views on sex education differ markedly from Kasun's. When Luker writes that "some people think that sex education is part of the problem," you can assume that she has conservative writers like Kasun in mind.

As you read, identify and think about the assumptions that Luker makes about whose responsibility it is to promote the welfare of teenagers. How does Luker's answer to this question differ from Kasun's? Also note that Luker's argument shares some of the same liberal assumptions that are evident in E. J. Dionne Jr.'s reading—the distinction between freedom from and freedom to.

In the past twenty years we have acquired a great deal of knowledge about preventing involuntary pregnancy and childbearing among teenagers. But it's the young people who voluntarily get pregnant (although we've seen how passive this "voluntary" choice can be) who elicit the most concern and whom we know the least about helping. And many of the current public-policy proposals seem likely to reverse the gains of the recent past.

This is a dispiriting time to be thinking about teenagers and their pregnancies. We know more than ever about how to help young people avoid getting pregnant and having babies they don't want. We can point with pride to effective public policies that since the 1970s have helped keep early childbearing from reaching truly epidemic proportions, though the numbers of sexually active teens have increased enormously in the United States, as they have in most industrialized countries. Despite their success, these policies have never really addressed the plight of young women who want a baby or of those who don't much care whether they have one or not. Yet here, too, accumulating research has begun to suggest ways of encouraging even these teens to postpone pregnancy, while other research... shows that the reasons for postponement are much less urgent than once thought....

But the dismay and anxiety of the American public in an era of rapid shifts in the economy, in family structures, and in social well-being have led the public discourse about teenagers to become more mean-spirited and irrational than ever. To take one example, government programs have in fact reduced pregnancy rates among teenagers. The political consensus in the 1960s among traditional liberals and traditional conservatives on public funding of contraception has paid off handsomely: today, poor and minority women have the sort of control over their fertility that only middle-class women used to enjoy. And young women have benefited from such programs to a greater extent than most people realize. More and more teenagers have begun using contraception, and using it effectively. Teens can now obtain low-cost or free birth control from a variety of sources (including hospitals, local health departments, and Planned Parenthood clinics), and they make good use of this access: according to one study, about 53 percent of all teenagers—and 72 percent of black

teenagers—obtain their first contraceptive from a clinic, whereas about 40 percent of all teens obtain it from a private physician.¹ Between 1969 and 1983 the number of teenagers using family planning clinics increased more than six-fold. By 1988 the figure had doubled again, to approximately 3 million,² two-thirds of all teens using contraception identified a family planning clinic as the most recent source of their contraception.³ During the 1980s, as the economy worsened and medical care became more expensive, clinics became an ever more important source of contraception for teenagers, especially poor ones.⁴ In 1983 more than 80 percent of teenage users of clinics came from families living below the poverty level and 13 percent from families on public assistance. Overall, clinic users are likely to be poor and black, and they are younger at first intercourse than people who go to a private physician.

Since the number of sexually active teenagers doubled between 1970 and 1990, it is unlikely that any sort of contraceptive services would have effected a substantial decline in pregnancy rates among teenagers, given that the population at risk doubled. Yet a doubling of the population of sexually active teens did not lead to a doubling of the pregnancy rate, and public funding of contraception is the reason. This enormously successful program—one that has made teens less likely to get pregnant than ever before and one whose effects are most visible in poor and minority communities—has been rewarded by having its funding cut almost in half.⁵ In part this is due to a resurgence in political opposition to publicly funded contraception, opposition based to some extent on the fact that federal programs have slowed but not reversed the acceleration in the pregnancy rates among teenagers, leading people to see these programs as a failure rather than the considerable success that they are. . . .

[Another] public policy—sex education—seems to be making some progress in preventing teenagers from getting pregnant in the first place. Although sex education has been a feature of American public schools since the Progressive Era, we are just beginning to understand what makes a successful

¹Melvin Zelnik, M. A. Koenig, and Y. J. Kim, "Source of Prescription Contraceptives and Subsequent Pregnancy among Women," *Family Planning Perspectives* 16 (1984): 6–13.

²A. Torres and J. D. Forrest, "Family Planning Clinic Services in the United States, 1983," *Family Planning Perspectives* 17, no. 1 (1985): 30–35; Alan Guttmacher Institute, *Organized Family Planning Services in the United States, 1981–1983* (New York: Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1984); M. Chamie, S. Eisman, J. D. Forrest, M. Orr, and A. Torres, "Factors Affecting Adolescents' Use of Family Planning Clinics," *Family Planning Perspectives* 14 (1982): 126–139; R. Levine and L. Tsolffias, "Publicly Supported Family Planning in the U.S.: Use in the 1980s," Henry J. Kaiser Foundation, 1994.

³U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Centers for Disease Control, "Use of Family Planning Services in the United States, 1982–1988," *Advance Data from Vital and Health Statistics*, vol. 184 (Hyattsville, Md.: National Center for Health Statistics, 1990).

⁴Levine and Tsolffias, "Publicly Supported Family Planning in the U.S."

⁵Leighton Ku, "Financing of Family Planning Services in Publicly Supported Family Planning Services in the United States" (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute and Child Trends, Inc., 1993).

program. In 1938 Benjamin Gruenberg, a noted Progressive reformer, found that a majority of the nation's high schools had instituted sex education programs, and most of the rest were considering doing so.⁶ In his day "sex education" meant everything from brief lectures about menstrual hygiene to complex discussions of the social, ethical, and moral dimensions of relationships between the sexes—and things are not very different now. At least thirty-one states and the District of Columbia have policies that mandate or encourage sex education, but curricula vary widely in their length and their content, and relatively few have been systematically and rigorously evaluated.⁷ We do know from surveys that a great many students receive sex education in school and that the number is increasing over time. One study from the 1970s found that 36 percent of public high schools offered a sex education course; another found that 80 percent of large school districts with junior or senior high schools offered such courses, either separately or as part of another course (say, health or biology).⁸ Surveys in the early 1980s found that about 60 percent of young women and 52 percent of young men had taken a course on sex education, and longitudinal surveys suggest that this number is growing—that junior high and high school students today are more likely to have received some sex education than their older brothers and sisters were when they were in school. An analysis of the 1988 National Survey of Family Growth, for example, found that almost 90 percent of teenage girls reported having had sex education by the time they graduated.⁹ When asked, even more young people than this report having had sex education, since they include information they have received in nonschool programs such as scout troops, Girls' Clubs and Boys' Clubs, church groups, family planning services, and health clinics, as well as in conversations about sexuality and contraception with their parents.¹⁰

Some people think that sex education is part of the problem—that by addressing and "normalizing" sexual activity among teenagers, sex education encourages it. This belief has a certain logic, but if sex education does have such an effect at all, it is very weak. One study suggested that taking a sex education

⁶Benjamin C. Gruenberg, *High Schools and Sex Education* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940).

⁷U.S. Senate, Committee on Labor and Human Resources, *Reauthorization of the Adolescent Family Life Demonstration Projects Act of 1981: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Family and Human Services of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources*, 98th Congress, 2nd sess., 1984.

⁸Freya L. Sonenstein and Karen J. Pittman, "The Availability of Sex Education in Large City School Districts," *Family Planning Perspectives* 16 (1984): 19–25.

⁹Calculations by Jane Mauldon and Kristin Luker, based on the 1988 National Survey of Family Growth. See Jane Mauldon and Kristin Luker, "Contraception at First Sex: The Effects of Sex Education," Working paper no. 206, Graduate School of Public Policy, University of California at Berkeley, 1994.

¹⁰William Marsiglio and F. L. Mott, "The Impact of Sex Education on Sexual Activity, Contraceptive Use and Premarital Pregnancy among American Teenagers," *Family Planning Perspectives* 18, no. 4 (1986): 151–162.

course would increase by 2 percent the odds that a teenager, especially a very young teenager, would be sexually active.¹¹ Another study found that young men who received some instruction in contraception had their first intercourse slightly earlier than other students, whereas those taking courses that covered AIDS education and "resistance skills" (how to say no) tended to have first intercourse at later ages.¹² Still another study found that students taking sex education courses were less likely to have sex than those who did not take such courses.¹³ But careful and rigorous review of all the various studies on the matter suggests that, in general, taking sex education courses has virtually no effect on an individual's propensity to become sexually active.¹⁴

This is good news, because it is becoming apparent that some sex education programs can reduce pregnancy under certain circumstances. Today, as in Benjamin Gruenberg's time, sex education (or "family life" education, as it is often called) covers a wide range of topics in a variety of formats, and most sex education courses in the United States are less than comprehensive in their approach and substance. Some are extremely short, lasting only five to twenty hours, and they often limit themselves to the safer topics, such as anatomy and physiology; in one family life program offered in New Jersey, students were taught how to fill out the state's income tax form.¹⁵ Teachers may be wary of or feel uncomfortable about discussing contraception, and may do so abstractly and euphemistically rather than directly and concretely. Information about reproductive anatomy is certainly educational, but in the absence of other information it is unlikely to prevent pregnancy.

Another factor limiting the potential effectiveness of sex education courses is the fact that many school districts postpone sex education until the later years of high school, when students are thought to be more developmentally mature. But about one-fourth of Americans do not finish high school, and in some urban areas the figure approaches one-half. This means that a substantial number of young people, and disproportionately high-risk ones at that, may never reach the grade level at which sex education courses are offered. Furthermore, many students become sexually active prior to the grades in which sex education is offered: one study in the 1980s found that about 50 percent of

¹¹Ibid.

¹²L. C. Ku, F. Sonenstein, and J. Pleck, "Factors Affecting First Intercourse among Young Men," *Public Health Reports* 108 (1993): 680-694.

¹³Frank Furstenberg et al., "Sex Education and Sexual Experience among Adolescents," *American Journal of Public Health* 75, no. 11 (1985): 1331-1332.

¹⁴Deborah A. Dawson, "The Effects of Sex Education on Adolescent Behavior," *Family Planning Perspectives* 18 (1986): 162-170. Melvin Zelnik and Y. J. Kim, "Sex Education and Its Association with Teenage Sexual Activity, Pregnancy and Contraceptive Use," *Family Planning Perspectives* 14 (1982): 117-126. Kirby et al., "School-Based Programs to Reduce Sexual Risk Behaviors," pp. 339-359.

¹⁵Lana D. Muraskin with Paul Jargowsky, *Creating and Implementing Family Life Education in New Jersey* (Alexandria, Va.: National Association of State Boards of Education, 1985).

young women and 65 percent of young men received their primary sex education from a partner, not from a course. Among young black men, 81 percent had had intercourse before ever receiving any sex education; among white men the figure was 61 percent; and among Hispanics it was 73 percent.¹⁶ Delaying sex education until the later years of high school, therefore, can seriously compromise whatever effectiveness it may have, because some students never get the information at all and others get it after they have already become sexually active. Not surprisingly, when sex education is given to young people who are already sexually active, it seems to have little effect on their contraceptive and risk-taking behavior.

Increasing worries about early pregnancy and AIDS have led many school districts in recent years to offer sex education courses to younger students and to make such courses mandatory rather than elective. Consequently, many more people are receiving sex education these days, and many more of them are receiving it prior to their first sexual experience. One study found that among women who turned twenty between 1983 and 1985, only 56 percent had had sex education prior to first intercourse; among those who turned twenty between 1991 and 1992, the figure was 81 percent.¹⁷

After the Adolescent Family Life Act was passed in 1984, the federal govern-¹⁰ment established about two dozen projects based on a new concept—that of preventing sexual activity rather than providing contraception. One fairly typical example is the Sex Respect curriculum, developed in Illinois and now used in many school districts throughout the country. It is much more prescriptive than other sex education programs, advising that students abstain from sex if they wish to avoid pregnancy. As a group, such “abstinence-based” programs encourage young people to abstain from sex, warn them of the dangers of sexual activity, and, through discussion and role playing, try to give them the communication skills they need in order to implement their decisions. Proponents of this approach believe that providing information about contraception would undermine the goals of these programs.¹⁸ Some of the techniques used, particularly the resistance skills that help teens say no, have been incorporated into other sex education curricula, and some school districts have adopted abstinence-based sex education while also teaching about contraception. The purely abstinence-based curricula (those that give no contraceptive advice or education) are fairly new and have not yet been rigorously evaluated. Like other sex education programs, they can improve students’ knowledge and attitudes, but their effects on behavior are less clear.¹⁹ Early research suggests that some parts of

¹⁶Marsiglio and Mott, “The Impact of Sex Education Programs,” pp. 151–162.

¹⁷Mauldon and Luker, “Contraception at First Sex.”

¹⁸Respect, Inc. For an overview, see Colleen Kelly Mast, *Love and Life: A Christian Sexual Morality Guide for Teens* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986).

¹⁹S. E. Weed and J. A. Olsen, “Evaluation Report of the Sex Respect Program: Results for the 1988–1989 School Year,” Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs, Office of Population Affairs, Department of Health and Human Services; S. Christopher and M. Roosa, “An Evaluation of an

the abstinence-based programs can be quite effective. More conventional programs that have incorporated the teaching of resistance skills, for example, do seem to have some success in encouraging young people to postpone their first sexual involvement, but often the postponement is not very great—on the order of six months or so. Other research suggests that conventional programs which are clearly directive in their teaching (as are the abstinence-based programs) rather than neutral in their approach are more likely to change students' behavior. Preliminary data, however, suggest that all of these programs may entail something of a tradeoff: the ones that focus on helping young people say no have little effect on subsequent contraceptive use, and the ones that impart contraceptive skills do not teach young people how to avoid sex.²⁰ Since American teenagers face one to two decades during which they are sexually mature but not married, programs that urge postponing sex but that have no effect on contraceptive use may worsen the situation.

According to new research, effective sex education programs *can* change adolescents' behavior. Such programs typically begin before students have become sexually active and they are usually strongly prescriptive in nature. Effective programs focus clearly on goals and carefully evaluate what works. Not only do some programs delay the onset of sexual activity, but others lead to greater use of contraception. In comparison to people who have had no sex education, those who have attended a good sex-ed program are more likely to use contraception the first time they have sex, to obtain effective contraception sooner, and to use contraception more reliably in general.²¹

Thus, in view of all the evidence that public policies have done a reasonably good job of containing early pregnancy despite a vast increase in sexual activity among teens, the current conservative initiatives seem paradoxical at best and self-defeating at worst. There are powerful pressures to cut public funding for contraceptive programs, even as these programs are becoming recognized for the success story they are. . . . Finally, just as we have begun to sort out which sex education techniques work and which ones don't, the very notion of sex education is more contested than it has ever been. In the face of accumulating evidence which suggests that more students than ever are receiving sex education and that well-designed programs can indeed modify adolescents' risk-taking behavior, politically mobilized activists all over the United States are pushing for hasty adoption of abstinence-based programs before rigorous evaluation has been able to show whether they are capable of doing anything other than making adults feel better.

Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program: Is 'Just Say No' Enough?" *Family Relations* 39 (1990): 68–72; M. Roosa and S. Christopher, "Evaluation of an Abstinence-Based Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program: A Replication," *Family Relations* 39 (1990): 363–367.

²⁰Kirby, "School-Based Programs to Reduce Sexual Risk Behaviors," pp. 339–359.

²¹Mauldon and Luker, "Contraception at First Sex."

To put this in the bluntest terms, society seems to have become committed to increasing the rates of pregnancy among teens, especially among those who are poor and those who are most at risk. Affluent and successful young women see real costs to early pregnancy and thus have strong incentives to avoid it; but poor young women face greater obstacles, both internal and external. Cutting funding for public contraceptive clinics, imposing parental-consent requirements, and limiting access to abortion all increase the likelihood that a young woman will get pregnant and have a baby. Conversely, providing widespread contraceptive services (perhaps even making the Pill available over the counter), extending clinic hours, and affording greater access to abortion will give at least some poor young women an alternative to early childbearing.

The news is even grimmer when it comes to preventing or postponing childbearing among teenagers who are not highly motivated in the first place. Even as we amass evidence showing that early childbearing is not a root cause of poverty in the United States, we are also realizing more clearly that the high rate of early childbearing is a measure of how bleak life is for young people who are living in poor communities and who have no obvious arenas for success. Here, too, just as we are developing a better sense of what it would take to offer these young women and men more choice in life, the political temper of the times makes even modest investments in young people seem like utopian dreams. Far from making lives easier for actual and potential teenage parents, society seems committed to making things harder.

A quarter-century of research on poverty and early childbearing has yielded 15 some solid leads on ways to reduce early pregnancy and childbearing. But because the young people involved have multiple problems, the solutions aren't cheap. In order to reduce the number of teenagers who want babies, society would have to be restructured so that poor people in the United States would no longer be the poorest poor people in the developed world. Early childbearing would decrease if poor teenagers had better schools and safer neighborhoods, and if their mothers and fathers had decent jobs so that teens could afford the luxury of being children for a while longer. If in 1994 the United States had finally succeeded in creating a national health care system^o (becoming the last industrialized country to do so), this change alone would have had a dramatic impact on poor people generally and poor women specifically. Providing wider access to health care, for example, would have eliminated some obstacles to contraception and possibly even to abortion. More fundamentally, it would have meant that young women and men, even if they did have babies and even if they did have them out of wedlock, could have afforded to raise them without going on welfare.

^o national health care system: In 1994 the Clinton administration's proposed health care system was defeated. Conservatives objected to it as being too large, expensive, and bureaucratic.