



**The Dark Side of the Left: Illiberal Egalitarianism
in America (American Political Thought)
(American Political Thought (University Press of
Kansas))**

Richard J. Ellis

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Why do people who identify themselves as liberal or egalitarian sometimes embrace intolerance or even preach violence? Illiberalism has come to be expected of the right in this country; its occurrence on the left is more paradoxical but no less real. Although equality lies at the heart of the liberal tradition, the earnest pursuit of egalitarian goals has often come at the expense of other liberal ideals.

In this provocative book, Richard J. Ellis examines the illiberal tendencies that have characterized egalitarian movements throughout American history, from the radical abolitionists of the 1830s to the New Left activists of the 1960s. He also takes on contemporary radical feminists like Catherine MacKinnon and radical environmental groups like Earth First! to show that, even today, many of the American left's sacred cows have cloven hooves.

Ellis identifies the organizational and ideological dilemmas that caused Students for a Democratic Society to transform itself from a democratic to an elitist organization, or that allow radicals to justify illegal acts as long as they are free of self-interest. He explains how orthodoxy arises within a group from the need to maintain distance from a society it views as hopelessly corrupt, and how individuals committed to egalitarian causes are particularly susceptible to illiberalism even poets like Walt Whitman, who celebrated the common people but often expressed contempt for their mundane lives. Political correctness, idealizing the oppressed, and an affinity for authoritarian and charismatic leaders are all parts of what Ellis calls "the dark side of the left."

Building on the groundwork laid by Richard Hofstadter in his pioneering book, *The Age of Reform*, Ellis exposes the shortcomings of today's left and provides a badly needed historical perspective on the contemporary debate over "political correctness." *The Dark Side of the Left* is a gutsy book that is essential reading for anyone who occasionally feels dark forebodings about seemingly noble causes.

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