

anything or anyone they don't like as "socialist" or "communist"; it's just that the accusations fail to resonate and simply don't seem to stick anymore.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century progressivism placed a premium on active government, not only in the economy, but in morality as well. It promoted fair dealing in markets (which required a degree of market regulation) and unflinchingly advocated the cultivation of virtue in citizens. Prominent progressives such as Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann argued that in an increasingly complex world, technical expertise must replace bumbling amateurism, and technical "mastery" must surpass planless "drift." Little heed was paid to such Cassandra during the boom times of the Roaring Twenties, but (as in the *Iliad*) Cassandra proved prophetic. As financial markets crashed and the Great Depression ensued, free-market ideology was discredited and progressivism came into its own. By the time of Franklin Roosevelt's election in 1932, the country was receptive to new and nontraditional approaches to governance—to increased regulation of banks, of financial markets, of production for use (instead of profit); to planning and large-scale government programs.

But, as Ciepley notes, the coming of the New Deal coincided with the rise of totalitarian regimes in Russia, Germany, and Italy. These regimes engaged in extensive planning and exerted considerable control over production and other economic matters. Under the guise of educating citizens, they indoctrinated them and made them march in lockstep. Conservative critics of the New Deal were quick to draw unflattering comparisons between these regimes and the Roosevelt administration, claiming that Roosevelt would soon be a dictator, if he wasn't one already. The Hearst and Gannett newspapers beat this drum at every turn, and with some success (pp. 139–40). The coming of the Second World War provided something of a respite from such attacks, as it made such appeals less appealing, and a world war on two fronts could hardly be fought without extensive federal funding and central planning. One result of the war was a shift away from "social Keynesianism" (welfare and workfare programs) to "military Keynesianism," i.e., government spending on weapons of war (p. 97). Spending of the latter sort soon dwarfed social-welfare expenditures, and finally ended the Great Depression.

As the Soviet Union swallowed up Eastern Europe and threatened Western Europe as well, the "totalitarian" stigma returned with a vengeance. Liberals inside and outside the American academy were cowed by red-baiting politicians—Richard Nixon and Joseph McCarthy were only two of the most vocal among them—who often equated liberalism with communism, or at least with being "soft" on communism. Eager to establish their patriotic *bona fides*, liberals beat a hasty retreat from their own cherished beliefs and principles, leaving liberalism so watered down as to

be almost unrecognizable. In economics, liberalism went from being a vigorous defender of planning for the public interest to defending a new kind of liberalism—a pluralistic liberalism of contending interest groups (Part 3)—and in law and morality, from a politics of virtue to a political philosophy of state neutrality (Part 4), which, in turn, created the conditions for the "culture wars" of recent years (Chapter 16).

Ciepley's is a plausible and interesting story, and he tells it well. But an equally plausible alternative explanation might invoke the idea of "reform fatigue." As Arthur Schlesinger Sr. noted in "Tides of American Politics" (*Yale Review*, Dec. 1939), the United States has historically oscillated every sixteen years or so between reform and retrenchment, between governmental activism and quiescence. He predicted (correctly) that the era of liberal activism would end in 1947–48. Never once invoking the threat of totalitarianism, Schlesinger held that political moments and movements run their course. So it was with the progressive politics of the New Deal. So now it seems to be with free-market conservatism's long run. The tide, it appears, has turned.

#### **Provisional Politics: Kantian Arguments in Policy**

**Context.** By Elisabeth Ellis. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. 208p. \$50.00 cloth.  
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— Chad Lavin, *Virginia Tech*

A companion rather than a sequel to Elisabeth Ellis's rightly celebrated *Kant's Politics: Provisional Theory for an Uncertain World* (2005), this slimmer volume is an initial payment on the promise of that earlier book. *Kant's Politics* argued that Kantian political theorists should not strive to establish conclusive political principles, but rather to establish the conditions under which "actually existing publics" might determine and apply their own principles. The point was to refute the familiar claim that Kantianism promotes abstract principles divorced from the messy realities of political life or, more broadly, to deny that Kant's politics can be derived from his ethics.

*Provisional Politics*, however, "is not a book about Kant" (p. 4). Instead, this book responds to the common complaint that liberal theory writ large begins with lofty ideals and conclusive principles (like property rights) instead of the concrete realities and specific dilemmas of particular political contexts. Ellis situates her work between an abstract moralism that derives political judgment from such principles and a cynical *realpolitik* that refuses moral arguments outright. Provisional theory, she explains, admits the inconclusiveness *and* the unavoidability of moral claims in politics (p. 20); it does not ask whether any policy tends toward justice or any other abstract political ideal, but whether it might "multiply rather than foreclose political possibilities" (p. 20). Ellis proposes three basic structural arrangements that can multiply these possibilities:

protected enclaves for citizen interaction, overlapping authoritative institutions that can be appealed to and be mobilized, and citizen empowerment to effect real political change. These arrangements are themselves provisional, she claims, as she presents them as “likely candidates” for increasing political agency rather than abstract panaceas to be promoted in all contexts.

*Provisional Politics*, then, occupies a difficult position, rejecting both the ideal pursuit of abstract principles and the potentially paternalistic drive to come up with specific solutions to actual dilemmas. The project rejects the overwhelming ambitions of so much political theory in which the social contract, class consciousness, or a cosmopolitan ethics offer the solution to the world’s problems. As a result, the book offers some concrete proposals that are, in a word, underwhelming: “[P]roperty rights have no conclusive authority” but they are “often provisionally useful” (p. 54); voting rights should be allocated differently across different contexts depending on what allocation will “promote the conditions of political agency and plurality” in any particular time or place (p. 112). But indeed, the point is precisely that the overwhelming alternatives operate at a level of abstraction that cannot but prove antidemocratic.

In this sense, her argument for Kantian provisionality is of a piece with George Klosko’s work on Plato (which she discusses) and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s work on Marx (which she does not). More generally, it is consistent with the turn toward “contingency” or “irony” in political thought of the past few decades. Indeed, her basic argument for provisionality in democratic theory (Chapter 2) will be unsurprising to those familiar with Sheldon Wolin’s claim that democratic decision making is always “partial and provisional.” But in the closing pages of the book, Ellis even invokes Thomas Jefferson’s warning about letting a constitution bind future generations as an example of provisional politics. This reflects her belief, stated much earlier in the book, that though provisionality has animated various strains of political thought, it has been largely absent from the history of social contract theory (pp. 15, 20).

The book comprises a series of exercises in provisional theorizing, beginning from the pathological position of entrenched political controversies and considering what policies might promote greater political agency and plurality. Ellis notes that some of these exercises are more encouraging than others; provisional theory offers clear benefits to the understandings of public reason (Chapter 2) and voting (Chapter 4), but is more ambivalent in the case of property rights among Kenyan widows (Chapter 3), and positively discouraging to a campaign for species preservation in Southern California (Chapter 5). The cases prove more difficult as they get more specific. But Ellis sticks to her provisional guns, demonstrating the difficulty of maintaining a commitment to democratic poli-

tics above any particular outcome. Ellis admits that she is far less optimistic than Kant himself, describing a series of provisionally useful interventions instead of, as she sees in Kant, an “asymptotic” progression toward peace. Notably, of course, her “muted pessimism” is anything but fatalism; in rejecting teleology, she envisions persistent, rather than episodic, opportunities for political engagement.

Provisional theory makes its strongest case in the chapter on deliberative democracy, where Ellis posits a virtuous cycle of democratic participation in which each opportunity for meaningful political engagement ends provisionally and thus serves as an invitation to more engagement. This cycle, however, meets its polar opposite in the final substantive chapter focusing on environmental politics, where Ellis describes a “ratchet effect” (p. 116) resulting from the specific dynamics of species extinction. Because any decision to protect a species is always subject to reversal, whereas every decision to let a species go extinct is necessarily irreversible, Ellis admits that endorsing provisional rather than conclusive policies in the environmental realm “amounts to a preemptive, substantive decision against species preservation” (p. 144), and that “species extinction on a large scale is the overwhelmingly likely outcome” (p. 146). Even in the face of this bleak realization, however, Ellis proves reluctant to abandon provisionality for a “paternalistic” embrace of substantive outcomes, surely because such paternalism carries its own frightening ratchet effect.

Provisional politics is not merely inconclusive; it endeavors to reconcile morality and politics by offering judgments that are declarative, open about their groundings, and admittedly fallible. Provisionalism is not a refusal to take a stand (or a denial of the ultimately contentious grounds of one’s stand), but a willingness to take a stand that invites, rather than seeks to forestall, disagreement. By the end of the book, Ellis has replaced Kant’s edict “Let justice reign, even if the world should perish” with her own: “Let there be provisional right, so that the possibility of politics in the world remains” (p. 158). Ellis makes no guarantees, and no promise of redemption. But then, what democrat would?

**The Theological Origins of Modernity.** By Michael Allen Gillespie. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 368p. \$35.00. doi:10.1017/S1537592709091051

— John M. Parrish, *Loyola Marymount University*

Michael Allen Gillespie tackles a perennial topic in the history of ideas—the emergence of the “modern” worldview and its relation to the theology of the premodern past—with originality and insight. The sweep of his book is particularly ambitious and impressive. Gillespie manages the difficult task of balancing more than a dozen sharply drawn intellectual portraits of major Western thinkers, while at the same time fitting each of these individual