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Punitive liberalism

by Roger Kimball

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It has long been recognized that liberalism and feelings of guilt go together as predictably as tea and crumpets. In the title essay of his remarkable book The Chatham House Version, Elie Kedourie criticizes the anti-Western bias of Arnold Toynbee's multi-volume *A Study of History*. ("In my eyes," Toynbee wrote in his concluding volume, "the west is a perpetual aggressor.") Kedourie points out that behind Toynbee's impressive erudition ("the far-fetched analogies, the obscure references, the succession of latinate, polysyllabic words") one discerns "the shrill and clamant voice of English radicalism, thrilling with self-accusatory and joyful lamentation. *Nostra culpa, nostra maxima culpa*: we have invaded, we have conquered, we have dominated, we have exploited."

One finds the same emotional compact among liberals in this country: a conviction of superior virtue punctuated by declarations of unappeasable guilt. Whose guilt? Ours--or, to be more precise--*yours*: all you who have not yet fully acknowledged the miserable condition of Western society, especially the more affluent purlieus of Western society, and above all those parts of affluent Western society that happen to be white, male, and Christian.

This phenomenon, though long recognized, has not been properly named--not, at any rate, until now. In the current issue of The Weekly Standard, James Piereson does us the service of finally naming this beast: "punitive liberalism."

In an article called Punitive Liberalism: What Reagan vanquished, Piereson describes the way Ronald Reagan provided an antidote to the poison of liberal guilt that had circulated through the body politic since the 1960s.

From the time of John Kennedy's assassination in 1963 to Jimmy Carter's election in 1976, the Democratic party was gradually taken over by a bizarre doctrine that might be called Punitive Liberalism. According to this doctrine, America had been responsible for numerous crimes and misdeeds through its history for which it deserved punishment and chastisement. White Americans had enslaved blacks and committed genocide against Native Americans. They had oppressed women and tyrannized minority groups, such as the Japanese who had been interned in camps during World War II. They had been harsh and unfeeling toward the poor. By our greed, we had despoiled the environment and were consuming a disproportionate share of the world's wealth and resources. We had coddled dictators abroad and violated human rights out of our irrational fear of communism.

Piereson's great insight is to stress the punitive, the chastising side of this orgy of guilt. Liberals come telling us they are making a better world; they omit to mention that what they mean by "a better world" is a world that is distinctly worse for certain groups, in particular groups that liberals decided had hitherto been unfairly privileged. "The punitive aspects of this doctrine," Piereson writes, It was, as Piereson

were made especially plain in debates over the liberals' favored policies. If one asked whether it was really fair to impose employment quotas for women and minorities, one often heard the answer, "White men imposed quotas on us, and now we're going to do the same to them!" Was busing of school children really an effective means of improving educational opportunities for blacks? A parallel answer was often given: "Whites bused blacks to enforce segregation, and now they deserve to get a taste of their own medicine!" Do we really strengthen our own security by undercutting allied governments in the name of human rights, particularly when they notes, one of Reagan's great achievements to overcome, at least temporarily, the emotional mandate of punitive liberalism. Piereson quotes an answer was - "is the price we have to pay for coddling dictators." And Reagan said, "I utterly reject that view. The American people, the most generous on earth, who created the highest standard of living, are not going to accept the notion that we can only make a better

world for others by moving backwards ourselves." What a breath of fresh air, especially after four years of Jimmy "Mr. Malaise" Carter!

The question that confronts us now is what reservoirs of confidence we still can draw upon. Did Reagan really "vanquish" punitive liberalism, or did he merely rebuff it momentarily? It seems pretty clear that "we have scotched the snake, not killed it." But at least now we know what we are fighting. Punitive Liberalism is alive and well in the Democratic Party, at *The New York Times*, in our courts and universities. It would be nice if another Ronald Reagan were to appear and remind us that we cannot move forward by moving backwards. Until then, we can be grateful for Piereson's attack on euphemism. The first step towards freedom is calling things by their real names. With the phrase "Punitive Liberalism," we at last have a truthful name for the toxic doctrine that would have us believe success is a form of failure.

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Critical Temper: Interventions from The New Criterion at 40* (Encounter Books) and *Where Next? Western Civilization at the Crossroads* (Encounter Books).