



Debating the American State: Liberal Anxieties and the New Leviathan, 1930-1970

Anne M. Kornhauser

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The New Deal left a host of political, institutional, and economic legacies. Among them was the restructuring of the government into an administrative state with a powerful executive leader and a large class of unelected officials. This "leviathan" state was championed by the political left, and its continued growth and dominance in American politics is seen as a product of liberal thought—to the extent that "Big Government" is now nearly synonymous with liberalism. Yet there were tensions among liberal statists even as the leviathan first arose. Born in crisis and raised by technocrats, the bureaucratic state always rested on shaky foundations, and the liberals who built and supported it disagreed about whether and how to temper the excesses of the state while retaining its basic structure and function.

Debating the American State traces the encounter between liberal thought and the rise of the administrative state and the resulting legitimacy issues that arose for democracy, the rule of law, and individual autonomy. Anne Kornhauser examines a broad and unusual cast of characters, including American social scientists and legal academics, the philosopher John Rawls, and German refugee intellectuals who had witnessed the destruction of democracy in the face of a totalitarian administrative state. In particular, she uncovers the sympathetic but concerned voices—commonly drowned out in the increasingly partisan political discourse—of critics who struggled to reconcile the positive aspects of the administrative state with the negative pressure such a contrivance brought on other liberal values such as individual autonomy, popular sovereignty, and social justice. By showing that the leviathan state was never given a principled and scrupulous justification by its proponents, *Debating the American State* reveals why the liberal state today remains haunted by programmatic dysfunctions and relentless political attacks.



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