

The Future of Liberalism, Alan Wolfe

06 June 2009

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The Future of Liberalism

By Alan Wolfe

Knopf

335 pp.; \$30

Reviewed by Patrick Keeney

For Alan Wolfe, liberalism means, “As many people as possible should have as much say as is feasible over the direction their lives will take.”

In *The Future of Liberalism*, the author, the eminent Boston University political scientist, has put a lifetime of erudition in his attempt to breathe life into this vision.

There is much that is admirable here.

He does a worthy job of recounting the history of modern political philosophy while at the same time showing how political theories have real-world consequences.

The book is also a treasure trove for collectors of arcane knowledge.

Wolfe lures the reader down some little-known and fascinating byways of intellectual history and, for the most part, the reader is well rewarded by these wanderings.

Here, for example, is John Adams writing to Jefferson, railing against the newly minted word, “ideology”: “Please explain to me this neological title! What does it mean? ...

“Does it mean idiotism? ... the science of lunacy? ... or the elements of vanity?”

In his examination of liberalism, Wolfe is unequivocal: “We need liberalism if we are to respect the integrity of human beings, design institutions that serve their needs and enable them to shape their destinies.”

Yet, as he acknowledges early on, it is a slippery and contested concept — one that needs to be fleshed out if we are to move beyond platitudes.

He posits a tripartite meaning of the word.

For him, liberalism is marked by a substantive commitment to freedom and equality; a moral commitment to procedures that are fair and impartial; and a temperament that is optimistic and generous.

Taken together, these form the foundations of contemporary liberalism.

Stated so broadly, it would be difficult for anyone of any political stripe to disagree.

The problem with adopting such a capacious definition is, liberalism becomes the political equivalent of “all things bright and beautiful”.

Liberals, or so it would appear, have a monopoly on all the virtues.

They are “robust, optimistic and forward-looking” and “open to the world”, while conservatives, in Wolfe’s estimation, are suspicious, inward-looking and xenophobic.

Similarly, he writes, it “strains the imagination to charge liberals with mass murder, cruelty or thirst for war.”

Perhaps this is true.

But those politicians who led the United States into Vietnam were men with what most of us would recognize as impeccable liberal credentials.

So, Wolfe has loaded the rhetorical dice.

Too frequently, the reader encounters sentences like this: “Understood in its broadest sense, liberalism is open to conservatism in ways that conservatism, understood in its narrowest sense, is not open to liberalism.”

Well, yes.

But this is unfair.

Why should we read liberalism in its broadest sense while correspondingly understanding conservatism in its narrowest?

Too many of these straw man arguments are scattered throughout the text.

Wolfe recommends liberalism in large part for its robust realism, and its rejection of absolutist, abstract principles: “The best approach to an open society is not one that relies on abstract principle but one that judges policies by the actual extent they contribute to human development.”

But how are we to know what “contributes to human development” except by invoking abstract principles?

Political theories are, by definition, abstractions, and liberalism is no exception.

Wolfe's liberalism derives from the late John Rawls, the Harvard professor whose theories form the template of the modern liberal project.

Rawls' work pivots on the belief liberalism needs to cast aside any substantive understanding of the "good life".

Instead, it needs to build a neutral procedural framework, one that affords citizens maximum freedom.

The liberal state should afford all citizens an equal chance to prosper, while protecting those freedoms that ensure that individuals are masters of their own lives.

It is a vision with great intuitive appeal.

Yet as commentators from Tocqueville on have pointed out, freedom and equality are opposites.

Like counterweights on a cuckoo clock, the more one rises, the more the other falls.

Wolfe stands firmly for a more egalitarian distribution of society's resources than the market allows, and so argues for robust government intervention.

For Wolfe, equality, not freedom, should be seen as the primary liberal value.

"Liberals believe in government", and a beneficent government should endeavor, above all else, to ensure equality for its citizens by intervening wherever necessary in society's institutions.

But two unfortunate consequences follow from such intervention.

First, those social institutions the liberal state relies upon for its robustness and vitality — the family, community, church and so forth — become withered and enfeebled.

Secondly, it erodes those individual freedoms that are the very *raison d'être* of the liberal state (as, for example, our Human Rights Commissions have done in Canada).

Simply put, the dilemma is this: Can liberals have equal parts freedom and equality?

Can they have their cake and eat it, too?

Wolfe thinks so, and has devoted great intellectual vigor to show how this can be achieved.

Political theories are difficult and fluid entities, and none more so than "liberalism".

Wolfe's plea for his particular understanding of liberalism may be unconvincing, but he has nonetheless provided us with a book that repays study, if only to better understand the contradictions of the modern liberal state.

- Patrick Keeney is the North American editor of *Prospero*, and is the author of *Liberalism, Communitarianism and Education: Reclaiming Liberal Education*.

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