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Wolfe in sheep's clothing?

by [William D Gairdner](#)

On *The Future of Liberalism* by Alan Wolfe.

A political ideology may usefully be defined as a structure of interdependent ideas. It is like a building: if you can falsify the foundational notions in critiquing it, the whole structure will collapse. Readers already comfortable with the political leanings and beliefs of Alan Wolfe, a political scientist at Boston College, will enjoy *The Future of Liberalism* because it will make them feel—especially since the election of Barack Obama—that they are safely ensconced on the cozy side of history. [1] His critics—I am one—will appreciate the book because it is rare to find quite so much earnest and contestable special-pleading for modern “liberalism” between two covers. It is a book that calls to mind the droll complaint that to do things like physics, or mathematics, or chemistry, you need a pencil, some paper, and a wastebasket. But to do political science, you don’t need the wastebasket.

A reviewer’s first duty to potential purchasers of a book, however, is to give them a clear sense of what it is about—and for that I am definitely going to need the wastebasket. Professor Wolfe has written a book interesting as much for its occasional nuggets of wisdom as for his display of polemical energy. From cover to cover he is galloping as hard as he can on what Laurence Sterne in his rollicking novel *Tristram Shandy* would certainly have described as his “hobby-horse.”

With respect to topic, tone, balance, and what Wolfe repeatedly calls “fairness,” he has done his evangelical best. He begins by defining and defending his terms by pigeonholing his mostly conservative enemies with humorless caricature, and throughout the book, he tries hard to distinguish and promote his personal and often heartfelt understanding of “liberalism” as the salvation of Western civilization. To his credit, what helps a reader stay the course until the end is Wolfe’s awareness of the objections he may be stimulating. He curtsseys to them in a timely way, just as the reader has mentally lined them up. He also makes a point of frequently scolding liberals, not for being wrong, but for not being sufficiently Wolfian in their liberalism.

One of my main objections to the book as a whole, however, is that with the exception of a few of the better chapters that manage to stay on topic, page after page of this book feels like a rambling lecture from someone who has launched himself into the field of debate like a steel ball into a pinball machine of ideas. The ideas light up when the ball happens to hit them, but there is no hint of where it will head next. So I think the best way forward is to follow the ball and react to some of his core ideas.

Wolfe writes that *liberalism* should be championed “as a reminder of Americans’ connection to basic values that stretch back centuries.” The two core liberal values, he insists, are “freedom and equality,” and he locates them principally in the thinking of John Locke. The first objection to this

statement is historical and moral. Locke himself and almost all the American Founders had a conception of virtue and the common good that was as clearly distinguished as can be imagined from the merely individual good and that, as President Clap of Yale asserted in 1765, demanded “conformity to the moral perfection of God.” The most important “basic value” back then was that anyone uttering Wolfe’s brand of hyper-individual, modern secular “tolerant” liberalism would have been considered an anti-social abominator out to destroy the bonds of community. The second objection is philosophical and was voiced in 1850 by Frédéric Bastiat when his philosophy of *liberty* was attacked by Alphonse de Lamartine because it did not include *equality*, and so, Lamartine argued, could not proceed to *fraternity*. Bastiat replied that the second part of such a program would always destroy the first, making the third impossible.

I have always told my children that liberty and equality (in the substantive sense of the latter that Wolfe says distinguishes liberals from conservatives today) are joined like a teeter-totter. As one goes up, the other must go down. This doesn’t seem to bother Wolfe, who in discussing the rights conceived by the French and American Revolutions claims that “there is a direct line from the ideals of those revolutions to the welfare states of the contemporary world.”

There is insufficient space here to demonstrate adequately the profoundly erroneous nature of this assertion. Suffice it to say that the American founding principle of equality had nothing to do with equalizing outcomes, and the French meaning of equality (spelled out in Article VI of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*) specifically stated that equality meant *before the law* only, and that all citizens are admissible to “dignities, positions, and employments, according to their ability, and on the basis of no other distinctions than that of their virtues and talents.” Not a scrap of affirmative action there (which did not, however, prevent the French from trying it).

Wolfe’s brand of liberalism is something else. He asserts that “as many people as possible should have as much say as is feasible over the direction their lives will take,” and that “if this requires an active role for government, then modern liberals are prepared to accept state intervention” (in the economy, moral life, sexual life, family life, regulation of speech, education, hiring, affirmative action, and many more domains). So there is the plain and simple—very simple—and quite contradictory, equation: government direction (that is, coercion) will make you free. Wolfe justifies this pro-state position with repetitive litanies of the fears and horrors consequent upon the folly of conservatism: unemployment, low pay, disease, old age, ignorance, hunger, poverty, war, prejudice, and so on. For good measure (just to show more “fairness”), he does offer plenty of policy directives by which even liberals “ought” to abide. (“Ought” is the most frequent word in his polemic). There is some honest insight, too. With respect to the “direct line” to the welfare state he imagines, Wolfe does mention the real reason for it, and it has to do with crass opportunism, and not with theory: “Once people get the idea into their heads that they deserve dignity and respect, they will see no reason to stop with procedure and [will] go all the way to substance.” But he has no objection to this.

Hence, two conclusions. As Harvard’s Professor Harvey Mansfield has put it:

From having been the aggressive doctrine of vigorous, spirited men, liberalism has become hardly more than a trembling in the presence of illiberalism. Who today is called a liberal for strength and confidence in defense of liberty?

Just so, by this standard, Wolfe is a modern anti-liberal, with a touch of the old Marxist nonsense thrown in about how free markets always keep wages in “a vicious spiral” of low earning. By now he is so lost in theories, he deplures the “dependencies” created by markets (the yearning for higher wages) and by charities (that cause us to “beg for more”) and says the welfare state is “an exercise in self-governance” (he really did say this) that seeks to bypass such dependencies.

But it is when he states that “the welfare state is an institutionalization of the moral idea of empathy”

that I realize we are just thinking past each other, because for me the welfare state is the institutionalization, not of empathy but of political power in the wily *guise* of empathy. Its real operation—aimed at capturing the allegiance of all citizens—is to substitute progressively its own programs and functions for those voluntarily created by the people themselves in their civil associations, thereby to so weaken and atomize the myriad little platoons of a once-free society that individuals will be bribed into gradually letting go of the real ties that bind and will switch allegiance to the coercive humanitarianism of the state, the supposedly all-providing benefactor of their lives. Just so, modern politics, Wolfe admits,

is all about dividing up and relying upon what the state has to offer, not about cutting back what it provides.

At this point, some understanding of how the original heroic anti-statist liberalism became Wolfe's groveling statist type is essential, for he seems unbothered by sacrificing the freedom of some, who ought to have "as much say as is feasible over the direction their lives will take" for the "equality" of others. The answer is that the modern liberal Director General will always decide what is "feasible," and Wolfe is unfazed by the fact that this is largely a zero-sum game in which governments that have no money of their own must first take it from taxpayers (or print it or borrow it to create deficits, which are just deferred taxes) and then distribute it to those they deem worthy. In other words, to get modern liberalism you always have first to rob a Peter to pay a Paul. A true classical liberal was someone who began by protesting just this sort of legal plunder and would have despised Wolfe's program. So what happened? How did classical liberalism mutate into its triumphalist modern form?

Partly it was because there was afloat at the time a corollary anti-Christian idea, a belief that all humans are born pure and without sin. Rousseau had famously argued in his *Social Contract* that we are born free and naturally good but soon a rotten society corrupts and enchains us, such that we must create a better world by bonding together in a unanimous General Will. In his novel *Emile*, he urged all free individuals to

transport the I into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole.

Wolfe seems blind to the terrible consequences of this idea. Indeed, he mocks Edmund Burke's prescient warning of the time that Rousseau was "an insane Socrates" and accuses conservatives of believing that *The Social Contract* "contained a plot outline for the French Revolution." More careful historians such as Robert Nisbet have indeed concluded that Rousseau's theories supplied the foundation for the plot:

It is in Rousseau's absorption of all forms of society into the unitary mould of the state that we may observe the first unmistakable appearance of the totalitarian theory of society.

Rousseau wanted to unify the people in a democracy of the One, and the French Revolution and the Terror were its predictable consequences, a historical demonstration awash in blood of the impossibility of producing fraternity by conflating liberty and equality.

John Stuart Mill, another of Wolfe's heroes, also argued in his famous if self-contradictory tract *On Liberty* against a host of tangled social and moral "oppressions." But he was aware of the horrors of the Terror and so took an alternative approach (even as he turned increasingly socialist). He opted for a democracy of the Many. Not for him any common moral bond or mystical General Will. Instead, he insisted that morality is entirely a private matter unless we harm someone else and initiated the modern doctrinal erosion of the ancient notion that morality is a public good held in

common. Mill's revolutionary notion has proved so attractive that we no longer expect to have, nor can we any longer identify, a unified communal, or national, moral ground—except Mill's private moral relativism.

Just as this privatization of morality was taking place, those original freedom-fighting liberals saw that the human flourishing they expected to arise from more freedom was a resounding disappointment. With more freedom came more inequality of condition. As many people got poor as got rich. Most galling of all, they saw that many freely preferred the luxuries of laziness, ignorance, and charity to the sacrifices and demands of work and education. So embarrassed and ashamed were they by this result, this insult to their theory of freedom, that they turned to the state for support. They were still convinced we are free, but that for the creation of their earthly paradise some prodding or social engineering would be necessary.

Hence, our Wolfian “libertarian socialism,” by now a condition in which most moral and sexual issues are considered under a libertarian standard of total privacy and freedom, while matters such as social security, medical care, income distribution, welfare, material standards of living, and the like are considered public objectives to be secured by the state. Another way of putting this is to say that we now have a polity in which citizens are assumed to have all the rights and governments, all of the duties. This is, alas, our world, and in defending the indefensible Wolfe amply illustrates its moral and political confusion. Let us turn to just a few examples from the hundreds in his book.

The first irony arises when Wolfe asks us to remove our individual rights and to

imagine a world in which religion (or irreligion) is coerced, freedom of speech curtailed, economic activity directed and controlled by the state, and no one [he means unions] allowed to organize and bargain collectively to improve their economic condition—and you have a political system that can only be called illiberal ...

Well, I took his suggestion and did try to imagine it, and, with the exception of the bit about unions, I recognized illiberal Canada, where I live, and much of the United States, which, for decades, has been trying to catch up with Canada's headlong embrace of libertarian socialism.

To wit: Christianity, the religious and moral foundation of both nations, has been all but forced from the public square, and secular humanism is mandated by law and edict in its place (irreligion is coerced). All Canadian provinces and the federal government now have “Human Rights Commissions” that specifically, and with considerable zeal, curtail all speech that is not deemed sufficiently “liberal.” The embarrassing, illiberal public prosecutions of the well-known author Mark Steyn for his critiques of Islam and of Ezra Levant for republishing the Danish cartoons are cases in point. Most American jurisdictions have versions of these same extra-legal tribunals, and the universities in both countries—once bastions of free speech—are now among the most illiberal purveyors of political correctness imaginable: mini-Star Chambers dotted all across our once-free lands, everywhere fining people and mandating liberal “re-education” as a cure. In Canada, not a few mayors have been fined thousands of dollars for refusing to stage gay-pride parades in their towns, and one woman has spent a total of six years in prison for peacefully and repeatedly protesting abortion on the public sidewalk in front of a clinic. Some curtailment.

As for economic activity, the history of both nations over the past century has been unidirectional: increasing control over enterprise by way of massive centralization and regulation of economic policy and law—over states/provinces, municipalities, individuals, and corporations—combined with tax regimes (and public debt) so onerous and punitive that neither country can be said to be economically free in any original sense of the word. I sold my first business because the government was telling me whom I had to hire (under policies of affirmative action, feminism, and multiculturalism), what wages I had to pay (under “pay equity”); it was even dictating the maximum

allowable price of my product. I surrendered and got out. In terms of total tax burden (all forms of tax, obvious and hidden, from all levels of government), the citizens of both countries are now working for their governments almost six months of the year. I don't have to "imagine" Wolfe's illiberal world, because millions of us have been living in it for some time, and it is structurally and morally dangerous to true liberal values.

Structurally, we are endangered because many of the Western democracies are becoming tripartite states in which one-third of all taxpayers are employed by government at some level, one-third of the people are crucially dependent in some way on government support (welfare, Medicare, Medicaid, farm subsidies, and a gazillion other untrackable support programs), and one-third produces the income (the tax base) paid out in supports for the first two-thirds. Anyone can see that, as this develops in a mass "democratic" system, the first two-thirds will always gang up on the last.

The grievous moral hazard of so many modern welfare states that now carry so-called structural debt (because no political leader will risk demanding cuts in state services or that the people start sacrificing and working harder to pay it off) is that the cost of much of our current consumption will have to be paid by future generations of citizens who are not here to defend themselves against our appetites. In short, as a direct consequence of what Wolfe calls "liberalism's commitment to improving who we are," liberals are willing to treat the children of tomorrow as a means to his "liberal" ends today. Shame on them.

Wolfe then proceeds to argue we ought to improve who we are by eschewing, where possible, the "nature" arguments of many conservative biologists and sociobiologists (he rightly exposes Darwinists such as the intemperate Richard Dawkins as flounders in their own philosophical contradictions). Instead, we must rely on the nurture of "artifice"—on man-made social, moral, and political improvements. To his credit, he is aware that in this area there are "profound questions for which there are no easy answers," and he even scolds the left for having fallen for biological schemes of improving nature via the artifice of "liberal eugenics." He does not mention that about 36 percent of all U.S. abortions are of black children, nor does he complain of abortion being used everywhere for sex selection against females.

At this point, he ought to be squirming, because although he supports a woman's "choice" in abortion—"under liberalism women must be allowed to control their own bodies"—he fails to explain why his own moral standard ought not to apply just as surely to an unborn child's body. Now modern liberals must be pushed to drill down here. They froth in outrage that slavery was/is a perniciously anti-liberal institution. And yet the fundamental legal device that makes slavery possible is the formal declaration in law of the non-personhood of the slave. But this is exactly, in every last detail, the same legal device liberals such as Wolfe rely upon to justify abortion. Beyond the sole distinction of the existence of the victim either inside or outside the womb, there is no effective difference between a declaration of non-personhood that creates a class of born-alive victims that enables, sustains, and makes invisible to its perpetrators a regime of chattel slavery and a declaration of non-personhood that creates a class of alive, but not-yet-born imminent victims, and thereby enables, sustains, and makes invisible to its perpetrators the abortion regimes currently defended in the name of liberal democracy.

I have dwelt mostly on the first part of Wolfe's book, because his theoretical understandings and misunderstandings condition all his later policy prescriptions. In successive chapters that are not without interest, he zeroes in on the nationalistic militarism inspired by Romantic poetry and art to which he feels too many neoconservatives and even liberals have fallen prey. His chapter "Mr. Schmitt Goes to Washington" was the most engaging for me, because Carl Schmitt's ideas about the faults of liberal democracy are so interesting to thinkers both left and right. We can only guess, however, what Wolfe would say about "liberal democracies" such as the United States and Canada, where so much legislative authority has passed from the elected representatives of the people to

judges, that is—What would he say is “self-directed” about our passage from parliamentary (or congressional) sovereignty, to judicial sovereignty? He also argues extensively that conservatives cannot govern because they don’t want as much government as liberals do. But that is because they prefer what used to be liberal principles of self-reliance, local control, and personal responsibility to a controlling central government that sweeps in to solve all their problems, thus to rob them of the ability to direct their own lives toward their own ends.

I close by saying that in the shameless—or rather, in the proud—guise of political and moral neutrality and openness, Mr. Wolfe’s *The Future of Liberalism*, though claiming to follow a venerable individualist liberal tradition, instead augurs for the soft-socialist and oppressive statism that is its badly deformed child. Those who welcome this state of affairs will find all the usual saccharine justifications between these covers, and those who deplore it will find that Wolfe offers plenty of material with which to criticize it.

Notes

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1. *The Future of Liberalism*, by Alan Wolfe; Knopf, 335 pages, \$25.95. [Go back to the text.](#)

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