Freedom from and for

From political scholar Alan Wolfe, a definition and defense of liberalism

By Glenn C. Altschuler  |  March 8, 2009

THE FUTURE OF LIBERALISM
By Alan Wolfe
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"Some of the ideas emanating from the rive droite may be far-fetched. Still more may be shop-soiled," the British journalists John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge acknowledged in 2004. But in generating practical policies, "the Right clearly has more intellectual vitality than the Left." And "the sound that we have been hearing in the background of American political life for the past thirty years is the melancholy, long, withdrawing roar of liberalism."

Alan Wolfe does not agree. Although they are not, as John Stuart Mill dubbed them, "the stupid party," 20th-century conservatives have actually developed few fresh or effective ideas, Wolfe insists. By contrast, one of liberalism's oldest precepts - "that government exists to help people attain control of the conditions under which they live - remains as viable as ever." A professor of political science at Boston College and one of America's preeminent public intellectuals, Wolfe provides in "The Future of Liberalism," his 20th and most important book, a learned and lucid examination of the traditions and the trajectory of the dominant political philosophy of modern times. This book is particularly timely, coming as it does after the election of Barack Obama, an event that many on the left hope presages a national shift away from a three-decade-long embrace of the right.

Unlike conservatives, who put too much stock in God or genes, predestination or pre-programming, Wolfe maintains, liberals at their best hold that freedom, equality, and "the ability to realize them, depend upon the determination of human beings to govern nature so that they will not be governed by it." Liberals have good reasons to believe that people can use social institutions, including the press and public schools, to add to or modify their "original capacities" and direct them to "ends collectively determined by themselves."

Shaken by the Reagan Revolution, Thatcherism, religious fundamentalism, global warming, and globalization, liberals have lost their nerve. Inclined to believe that "progress is an illusion, self-direction impossible, pessimism appropriate, and the future unknowable," they have gone into a defensive crouch, struggling to stave off "everything destabilizing and unsettling." When liberals remember that the existence of the bad does not preclude the realization of the good, Wolfe suggests, they can once again embrace the now-dreaded "L-word" as a badge of honor.

Drawing on political philosophers from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to John Rawls, Wolfe defines and defends liberalism as a guide to modernity, which asks people to reach higher in order to live better. At times familiar, his analysis is always forceful and formidable. Liberalism's endorsement of individual autonomy, Wolfe reminds us, is inextricable from a conviction that society and the state, while placing some limits on freedom, exchange the uncertainty of natural liberty for civil liberty - and create a context in which rights can be demanded. For this reason, liberalism's commitments to freedom and equality do not contradict each other. Equality for liberals is neither an absolute condition nor an end in itself: It is the means through which formal freedom becomes effective freedom, as people gain the capacity to realize the goals they set for themselves.

Liberal proceduralism, Wolfe adds, is our only protection against a Hobbesian world where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." A moral ideal, the insistence on subjecting everyone, including presidents and paupers, to the same rules and regulations is vulnerable to the criticism that government has not, cannot, and (maybe) should not be neutral among competing conceptions of the good life. But compared with the alternatives, procedural due process wins by default: How else, "after all, would we even make such a comparison unless we all agreed on the procedures for doing so?"

Wolfe challenges liberals to face squarely conflicts that may arise between their values and the will of the majority. Instead of asking believers to check their faith before entering the public square, he writes, liberals should, with confidence and conviction, encourage them to try to influence policy, even and indeed especially on contentious issues like abortion, gay marriage, and stem-cell research. In the United States, he adds, the religious right, by and large, uses "liberal democratic means - elections, pressure groups, appeals to public opinion - relied on by everybody else." No single group has been able to use state power to impose its views on those from other traditions and nonbelievers. Since "religion has made its accommodation with liberalism, it is time for liberals to make their accommodation with religion."

On occasion, Wolfe believes, liberals should oppose what the majority wants, even if doing so makes them elitist. In accord
with their philosophy of individual autonomy and equality of opportunity, he indicates, liberals were right to use undemocratic branches of government to forge a consensus (instead of waiting for one to develop) to end segregation, promote affirmative action, and legalize abortion. However, they must anticipate attacks by conservative populists, understand that in a democracy persuasion is better than coercion, and know when to back off.

The future of liberalism ought to be bright, Wolfe concludes, passionately and persuasively. Liberalism has already defeated its challengers. Socialism and communism are bankrupt. Conservatism tries in vain to manage modernity by barking and "Borking" at the hands of time. Liberalism, however, has the tools and the temperament to take on the realities of contemporary life, even when they bite, and bend them to the benign ends. It is "too good a political philosophy to dare not speak its name."

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