

E.J. DIONNE, JR.

# Liberalism Lost and Found

*Claiming the future means embracing the full complications of the past.*

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**THE FUTURE OF LIBERALISM** • BY ALAN WOLFE • KNOFF • 2009  
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**L**iberalism takes less courage than it once did to defend liberalism. Liberal restraint looks better than ever after the excesses of the Bush years. Liberal skepticism of the unfettered market seems wise after the economic meltdown. Liberal tolerance is increasingly valued in a society that grows ever more diverse, and it is a virtue particularly honored among the young. Liberal jurisprudence seems restrained in the face of a wave of conservative judicial activism. Even liberal empathy—good, old-fashioned, bleeding-heart liberalism—seems less contested now, after conservatives tried to steal the word “compassion” as their own.

And yet few politicians dare to call themselves liberal. They fear, as Alan Wolfe writes, that too many Americans still see liberals “as carriers of infectious political diseases.” It’s certainly very hard to imagine any politician, notably including our current president, who would dare to say what John F. Kennedy said shortly before the 1960 election (and remember that Kennedy wasn’t all that liberal).

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“What do our opponents mean when they apply to us the label ‘liberal?’” Kennedy asked. “If by ‘liberal’ they mean, as they want people to believe, someone who is soft in his policies abroad, who is against local government, and who is unconcerned with the taxpayer’s dollar, then the record of this party and its members demonstrate that we are not that kind of ‘liberal.’”

“But,” Kennedy went on, “if by a ‘liberal’ they mean someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reactions, someone who cares about the welfare of the people—their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights, and their civil liberties—someone who believes we can break through the stalemate and suspicions that grip us in our policies abroad, if that is what they mean by a ‘liberal,’ then I’m proud to say I’m a ‘liberal.’”

The statement is bold by today’s standards. Yet it also suggests that a half-century ago, liberals were already on the defensive. Before he spoke of liberalism’s virtues, Kennedy felt obligated to knock down liberal stereotypes that are with us to this day—the fear that liberals are “soft” on national security, profligate with the taxpayers’ dollars, and relentless centralizers of power. There was also a certain calculated vagueness about what constituted the “good” liberalism (have you ever met a politician who would claim not to care about “the welfare of the people”?). Kennedy was engaged in what proved to be an agonizingly close election campaign, so he was careful in his choice of words. But it is the measure of how embattled liberalism has been, and for how long, that this was the best defense of the creed that one of our most eloquent political leaders could muster in times that were more hospitable to the enterprise.

**L**iberalism’s problems do not arise simply because liberals aren’t fervent enough in embracing their faith and persistent enough in evangelizing on its behalf. There are, in fact, deep tensions in contemporary liberalism, as there are in any philosophy that is put to practical use in the political realm. Conservatives face even more profound contradictions and have suffered mightily because of them. But liberals would do well in this period of reconstruction and rebirth to face their own contradictions squarely. American liberals yearn to be in favor of both moderation and radicalism. They respect Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s *The Vital Center* and understand they have to govern in a complicated world. Yet they also love the FDR who castigated “economic royalists,” a labor movement that disrupted traditional capitalist relationships, and a civil rights movement that refused to bow down before the demands of “gradualism.”

Liberals are also ambivalent in their relationship with populism. Wolfe acknowledges that American populism “shares something substantive with

liberalism” in its calls for economic reform, but he concludes that “it is deeply illiberal temperamentally.” He adds: “Populism attempts to rouse people out of fear rather than to appeal to them through hope.” Of course *some* forms of populism are exactly what Wolfe says they are. But he would have done well to give more respect to the strong strain running through American populism—I’d even argue it is the dominant thrust—that is inspired more by hope than fear, and by a profound faith the capacity of ordinary people to achieve self-rule. On this point, I think, the historian Michael Kazin has it right when he argues that American progressives have succeeded in improving the “common welfare” only when they “talked in populist ways—hopeful, expansive, even romantic.” Kazin cites the line popularized by Ralph Waldo Emerson, “March without the people, and you march into the night,” adding, “Cursing the darkness only delays the dawn.”

Yet if Wolfe does not resolve all of the tensions within liberalism, he does at least grapple with many of them, and it is truly refreshing to read a liberal who writes without hedging his bets. *The Future of Liberalism* is admirable because it pulls no punches, disdains defensiveness, and refuses to water down or compromise core liberal commitments. It is also a pleasure to read: It’s smart, hopeful, clear-headed, and beautifully crafted. And it is a sign of the times. Wolfe stands in a distinguished line of scholars who have recently offered volumes on behalf of liberalism’s virtues to general audiences because they were tired of seeing their distinguished tradition cast as a type of psychological disorder. Before Wolfe came Paul Starr, whose thoughtful and persuasive 2007 volume, *Freedom’s Power: The True Force of Liberalism* (reviewed in Issue #5 of *Democracy*), was a comparable call to arms. “The story of America is of a nation that has grown greater and stronger by becoming more diverse and inclusive and extending the fruits of liberty more widely among its people,” Starr wrote. “American liberals do not have to invent something new or import a philosophical tradition from abroad. They have only to reclaim the idea of American greatness as their own.”

Wolfe picks up the cry. His opening chapter pronounces liberalism “the most appropriate political philosophy for our times.” Toward the end of the book, he pleads with liberals to embrace their faith without apology. “The challenge facing liberalism in the future...is not to beat out its rivals; because of modernity, it has already done that,” he writes. “Its biggest challenge is to get liberals to once again *believe* in liberalism.” Central to Wolfe’s argument is the emphasis he places on equality, which he sees as no less essential to a proper liberalism than liberty itself. And he uses equality to show how contemporary liberalism differs from classical liberalism, which in our time has become “leave us alone” libertarianism. Wolfe notes that “it is not sufficient for me merely to be left alone, I must also have the capacity to realize the goals that I choose for

myself. If this requires an active role for government, then modern liberals are prepared to accept state intervention into the economy in order to give large numbers of people the sense of mastery that free market capitalism gives only to the few.” Exactly right.

His treatment of religion is marvelous; believers and atheists alike have much to learn from Wolfe’s capacious sense of respect in a sphere where there is so much mistrust. “Liberalism’s enemy,” he writes, “is not religion but religious oppression and its friend is not skepticism but freedom, including religious freedom.” Again, exactly right.

And I must pause to praise the following sentence: “No one is more temperamentally conservative than a Manhattan leftist living in a rent-controlled apartment and holding tenure at a university; his or her way of life is inevitably bound to breed a sense of complacency that is incompatible with liberalism’s historical commitment to be open to the new.” Since many book reviews are written by Manhattan leftists living in rent-controlled apartments holding tenure at a university, that is indeed a brave thing to write.

Compared with Marxism, romantic forms of conservatism, and assertive varieties of nationalism, liberalism can seem terribly boring. For Wolfe, this is an asset, not a liability. While we all like poetic speeches, Wolfe is right to warn about the dangers of allowing poetry to define politics. “Let the passions reign in the museums and concert halls,” Wolfe writes. “In the halls of government, reason, however cold, is better than emotions, however heartfelt.” Is Wolfe channeling No Drama Obama?

Like Obama, Wolfe gives Reinhold Niebuhr’s realism its due. He also embraces the two classic formulations appreciated by all—notably but not exclusively liberals—who do not expect politics alone to save us: Immanuel Kant’s view (often cited by Isaiah Berlin) that “out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made,” and Max Weber’s definition of politics as “a strong and slow boring of hard boards.”

**T**here is much more here that will make liberals cheer, and most liberals who read Wolfe will come away, as he hopes, wanting to believe in liberalism again. But because Wolfe’s project is to demonstrate liberalism’s compelling coherence, I think he understates the extent to which liberalism has changed. In particular, he does not pay as much attention as he might to how much contemporary American and British liberalism differs from the European variety and from the original liberal idea. For the same reasons, he overstates his criticisms of socialism, the anti-globalization movement, the American progressive tradition, and communitarianism. As a result, he underestimates the crucial

role played by ideas and forces outside liberalism in creating the very form of liberalism he rightly commends to us.

Wolfe does justice to the role played by the turn-of-the-century New Liberals—T. H. Green and Leonard Hobhouse—in moving liberalism away from pure *laissez faire*. He writes well about the Christian roots of Green’s ideas and the importance of Walter Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel. But he acknowledges less fully than is appropriate how liberalism was changed by its encounter with progressive Christianity and a prophetic contemporary Judaism; liberalism needed the corrections they offered. He likewise understates the degree to which liberalism profited from its encounter with democratic socialism and social democracy. Wolfe is so eager to push back against those who try to tar all efforts at social reform as “socialism” that he ends up presenting his own parody of social dem-

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ocrats and democratic socialists. He grudgingly concedes: “Some forms of socialism moderated their revolutionary character in the nineteenth century and found ways to make themselves compatible with liberal democracy in the twentieth.” It’s more than “some forms,” I think. The most successful socialist and social democratic regimes,

notably in Western Europe and also in Chile, Brazil, and India, have made peace with both liberalism and the market. And American liberalism of the New Deal variety successfully introduced what the late Richard Hofstadter called a “social democratic tinge” to American politics.

Indeed, the great turn in liberalism’s history has been a convergence between liberalism on the one side and democratic socialism and social democracy on the other—it’s no accident that the one self-professed socialist in the Senate, Vermont’s Bernie Sanders, votes regularly with the Democrats. The New Liberalism of Green and Hobhouse made liberalism more social. Irving Howe, the American socialist, once underscored this point by citing a Hobhouse observation highly congenial to Wolfe’s overall argument: “Liberty without equality is a name of noble sound and squalid result.” At the same time, social democrats long ago stopped criticizing “bourgeois liberties” and instead embraced them. All this, Howe observed, “suggests that the difference between social liberalism and democratic socialism keeps growing smaller, so that at some point it may become no more than incremental.” That point has arrived.

Wolfe has a similar problem with the American progressive tradition, which he denigrates in passing because he is so eager to rescue the word “liberal.” I have

some sympathy for his underlying purpose here: There is something unseemly and even cowardly about the way so many liberals have adopted the word “progressive” simply to escape the opprobrium that now attaches to liberalism. (A progressive might thus be defined as a liberal who has looked at the polls.) But Wolfe could have criticized this tendency without pretending that a clear line can be drawn between liberals and progressives in American history. He writes that “progressivism’s firm insistence that it knows what is right conflicts with temperamental liberalism’s lack of certainty, and its preference for ends undermines procedural liberalism’s respect for means.” This is nonsense. There is a great gap between the temperamental liberalism Wolfe rightly praises and the actual behavior of liberals who are typically just as insistent as progressives are in their claim to sure knowledge of what is right. And progressives have often been attacked as procedural reformers who care more about the process itself than the ends they seek—exactly the opposite of the sin that Wolfe ascribes to them. American progressives were no more (and no less) than the modern, new liberals Wolfe respects. “Progressives” became “liberals” during the New Deal in large part because the progressive Franklin Roosevelt helped engineer the label change for his own political reasons. The latest rebranding effort is also, at heart, political in motivation.

As for the foes of globalization, Wolfe criticizes and even mocks them—and then takes on a good part of their argument. The key problem with global markets is that they are not subject to the very process of democratic deliberation that Wolfe commends in the domestic sphere. He is right that many of the critics of globalization do not have a fully worked out alternative. He’s also right that no one should pretend that globalization be stopped or abruptly reversed. But in the end, Wolfe acknowledges that “[n]one of this means that globalized free markets should rule without any attempts to control them.” That, of course, is exactly what those who would reform the globalization process are saying.

In some ways, the strengths of *The Future of Liberalism* mirror liberalism’s strong points. Wolfe does a good job, for example, reconciling liberty and equality, and on the whole, contemporary liberal politicians and liberal policies do a fair job of this, too. But Wolfe is not willing to face up fully to the tensions within contemporary liberalism created when its reverence for individualism conflicts with the quest for community. Many of the practical problems confronted by liberal politicians also flow from the difficulties in reconciling the two.

Liberalism is always in need of a communitarian correction, and it has survived precisely because its advocates have usually understood this. Liberalism succeeds when it reconciles interest group politics with a politics of the

common good. It fails when its purpose is defined entirely by the specific goals of its constituent parts. Liberalism triumphs when it champions a healthy individualism that also recognizes the need and desire of individuals for attachments to communities and to their civic obligations. It loses ground when it allows the right to do all the talking about family, neighborhood, religion, and patriotism. Liberalism's emphasis on liberty and equality sometimes shortchanges the importance of building a community in which each of us is prepared to come to the defense of the liberty of all of us—and in which all of us are prepared to vindicate each other's calls for justice. Without fraternity, liberty and equality are in jeopardy. I thus have more sympathy for the communitarian critique of liberalism offered by the philosopher Michael Sandel than Wolfe does, though I suspect both of us agree with Sandel's signature assertion: "When politics goes well, we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone."

But it's hard (for me at least) not to cheer when Wolfe writes: "We need liberalism because without its politics, we are less free and less equal. But we also need liberalism because without its morality, we are less fair, and because without its psychology, we are less generous. Our goal should be the recovery of liberalism in full." That's a trifle self-congratulatory, perhaps, but it's also a great relief after a long period in which liberals were so intimidated that they wouldn't even use their own name.

No one book can resolve all the tensions of liberalism. And the truth is that liberalism fell into disrepute not even primarily because of its ideas but because American voters decided that those ideas did not work in practice—or did not answer the questions they were asking. Liberalism will therefore be fully revived only when its principles are seen offering practical guidance to successful government. That, finally, is the job of liberal policy analysts and, above all, liberal politicians. But Wolfe deserves credit for arguing passionately and thoughtfully that the effort itself is well worth undertaking. **D**