

# The (confused) Future of (a) Liberalism

Andrew Kemp reviews

## *The Future of Liberalism*

by Alan Wolfe

(Random House, 2009, 352 pages)

Delivering a paper to the University of Oxford in 1958, Isaiah Berlin talked of two concepts of freedom—‘negative’ liberty, the absence of restraints, and ‘positive’ liberty, the liberty which empowers an individual to act on their desires.

In his new book, *The Future of Liberalism*, the prolific and influential American political scientist Alan Wolfe talks only of one. *The Future of Liberalism* is a manifesto for ‘liberalism’ (in the American sense of the word) in the age of Barack Obama.

There is nothing inherently wrong with approaching political philosophy from a ‘centre-left’ perspective—centred on what Berlin would have categorised as ‘positive’ liberty—except that Wolfe is unsure as to whether any such distinction can exist in the first place. At one point during the first chapter Wolfe acknowledges the possibility of speaking ‘of many different liberalisms’, but concludes that ‘this is a suggestion that ought to be resisted’.

By focusing on only one of liberalism’s meanings, inconsistencies can be avoided. But there is also a significant cost to be paid: liberalism loses the appeal that did so much to make it the dominant political philosophy of modern times.

This argument demonstrates an enormous inconsistency in the book as it tries to be both a history of ideas and a forward-looking polemic—the title after all is *The Future of Liberalism*.

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*Andrew Kemp is a Researcher at the Institute of Public Affairs.*



But this near-impossible balancing act means it is anything but tightly argued. At times it is simply a mess.

The best way to approach this book is to grant Wolfe his focus on American liberalism. This makes sense after all, as the opening quote Wolfe chose to begin with was John Locke’s—‘In the beginning, all the world was America’.

Indeed, Wolfe has more than a passing interest in American affairs. Consider the titles of his other books; *America at Century’s End*; *America’s impasse*; *Christianity and American Democracy*; *Does American Democracy Still Work?*; *Return to Greatness: How America lost its sense of purpose and what it needs to do to recover it*; and *One nation, after all: how middle-class Americans really think about: God, country, family, racism, welfare, immigration, homosexuality, work, the right, the left, and each other*.

Understanding this makes it easier to understand the book, but only just. It is probably why Wolfe is able to make such a smooth transition from a discussion on Rousseau’s romantic critique of ‘civilisation’ to a discussion on Jerry Falwell’s critique of American society, or why he moves so briskly from a description of the ‘Romantic militarism’ of the poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron to the ‘romantic imagination’ of Ronald Reagan and the neoconservative movement.

Indeed, Romanticism makes a frequent appearance in *The Future of Lib-*

*eralism*, and it’s interesting that Wolfe should associate it so strongly with the modern conservative movement. It is especially interesting considering Isaiah Berlin’s argument that positive liberty derives itself from the Romantic thinkers—a contention that would seem contradictory to Wolfe’s hearty endorsement of positive liberty.

It is worthwhile comparing Berlin’s influential essay with some of the arguments made in Wolfe’s book. By far the most noteworthy section in *The Future of Liberalism* is the author’s extraordinary attack on ‘evolutionary psychology’, which he calls ‘the single most illiberal current of our time’.

This is no light charge to make. One might have otherwise considered something more threatening than applied evolutionary theory—perhaps Islamofascism or some other ideology that encourages acts of terrorism against peaceful civilians.

Wolfe argues that it is the implicit deterministic nature of the evolutionary argument that makes it so incompatible with the liberal ideal. He talks of thinkers ‘united in their contempt for the quintessential liberal idea that human beings have the capacity to create that monument of artifice called “culture”, which, in turn, enables them to bring meaning and direction into their lives.’ Wolfe contrasts the ‘self-help’ nature of religious books which advise people on how they ought to live, with

books written by scientists or by those popularizing science... [which] characterize how we actually do live—indeed, once we understand the science involved, how we must live. Reading the former, we aspire to do better. Reading the latter, we learn why we cannot.

This kind of existential crisis experienced on paper by Wolfe is not new. In his 1958 paper, Isaiah Berlin described two distinct worlds conceived of by

thinkers more neurotic than us.

The first world was physical, determined by scientific laws, and the second was 'spiritual', or 'moral', where humans could create their own ideals or imagine the physically impossible. The struggle for freedom was seen by some as the struggle between the ideals developed in the spiritual world and their attempted application in the mechanic world of the physical. This is why Berlin argued that the Romantic thinker believes 'freedom... consists in dominating the matter which obstructs his free-realisation'.

Just as the Romantic thinkers were concerned about the limitations presented by the laws of nature in the physical world, Wolfe resumes the fight against reality one more time. But what is especially irritating is that Wolfe provides no real attempt at arguing against these scientific hypotheses in any real way—he simply dismisses them as 'highly speculative' and concentrates most of his attack on why the implications are bad. This is akin to the religious debater ignoring the question of whether or not God exists only to focus on what the implications of His (or Her) absence would be.

Wolfe is not ignorant of Berlin's arguments, but he may be unaware that his version of liberalism is a textbook example of the kind Berlin sought to criticise. To the author, dependency is the greatest threat to liberalism, defined by Wolfe as where 'as many people as possible should have as much to say as is feasible over the direction their lives will take'.

This is how Wolfe is able to reconcile the great divide between so-called 'classical' liberalism and 'modern' liberalism in America. If it is dependency we are to focus on, argues Wolfe, then clearly the laissez-faire approach of the nineteenth century classical liberal was more conducive to liberty when feudalism was the norm, as opposed to today, 'where people are too poor or too much the objects of invidious discrimination to develop sufficient autonomy'.

Dependency is a big deal in Wolfe's vision of what liberalism should be. He doesn't like us being dependent on the laws of nature, as his contempt for evolutionary theory demonstrates. Nor



Spectators hold placards at the 2009 Minnesota Tax Cut Rally in St. Paul, May, 2009  
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does he like us being dependent on the laws of 'the market'. Indeed, there is really only one solution to combating the dependencies of today:

In seeking to bypass the dependencies associated with both markets and private charity, the welfare state aims to give individuals the autonomy they need to make their own choices about the kind of life they wish to leave.

It would be worthwhile to get Wolfe's views on how welfare policy has handled the dependency issue in many of Australia's indigenous communities—surely one of the great policy failures of modern times. But these complexities are not addressed in this book.

Indeed, there are moments where it feels as if Wolfe hasn't properly engaged in the material on which he is writing. His comments on Hayek's influential essay 'The Use of Knowledge in Society' are downright confusing,

He argues that because individuals make decisions under conditions of imperfect knowledge, any form of social order, because it arises spontaneously from the uncoordinated actions of so many, cannot be designed to reach a predetermined course. It is in that sense not just socialism to which Hayek objects but the fundamental premise of modernity.

In other words, Wolfe characterises Hayek's argument as 'planning is un-

achievable because purposiveness is impossible'. It is a criticism that is strikingly similar to his attack on evolutionary psychology and the threatening prospect of somehow not being masters of our fate.

But Hayek was not talking about 'our' fate in the collective sense. He described individuals as signalling their own values to others so that institutions are developed 'spontaneously' from this harmonisation, rather than being directly designed.

Wolfe's holistic approach to understanding liberty means that he misses this fundamental distinction. Instead he writes that 'we are quite capable of deciding what moral purposes we want our societies to serve and then designing our economic arrangements accordingly.' But what does this mean? How do we design our economic arrangements? Through government? What if our 'moral purposes' are different? It's as if public choice theory never existed (it's certainly not considered in this book).

When Berlin described the motivations for positive liberty he wrote of 'an attempt to impose something—himself, his way of vision, his methods of operation, his ideal his purpose—upon the foreign and indeed hostile outer world of matter or other persons'.

He might as well have been describing Alan Wolfe.

