

Liberalism in the Progressive — and in the Larger — Sense

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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The term “liberalism” ranks among the most contested in our political lexicon. It should also be regarded as among the most vital.

In the large sense, liberalism names the modern tradition of freedom. Liberalism so understood was the dominant strand in our nation’s founding. Appreciating the standard accusations against it and why it is worthy of defense is crucial to conserving the best of the American constitutional tradition.

Since Marx and through today’s purveyors of identity politics, critics on the left have condemned liberalism for supplying an ideological justification for a corrupt status quo. The left accuses liberalism of feeding off of, and perpetuating, exploitation and inequality. It asserts that members of the privileged class — the bourgeoisie in the 19th century, white men today — wrap themselves in claims about universal reason, fundamental rights, and the rule of law that supposedly apply to everyone but in reality advance the interests of the favored few while oppressing the rest.

Since the rise in the late-18th and early-19th centuries of the romantic and Catholic reactions against the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, critics on the right have denounced liberalism for falsifying human nature, dissolving the organic bonds of family and community, and undermining devotion to transcendent ends and sacred duties. Taking up these themes in much-discussed books last year, [Patrick Deneen](#) and [Yoram Hazony](#) both identified 17th-century Englishman John Locke as the intellectual mastermind who defrauded modernity by grossly exaggerating the powers of reason

to guide human affairs, reducing politics to a matter of contract and the formalities of rights and rules, and debasing freedom into the satisfaction of appetites and doing as one pleases.

Few have risen to liberalism's defense against the assaults from the left and right.

This is partly because the term came to be associated narrowly with the tax-and-spend, big-government wing of the Democratic Party. Thanks to, among others, Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, that wing has undergone a rebirth and radicalization and flies now under the flag of socialism.

It is also because knowledge of the modern tradition of freedom is fast fading. From K-12 through college, our educators prefer to inculcate a divisive and intolerant version of diversity, equity, and inclusion that privileges a progressive perspective and harshly reproaches departures from it. When our colleges and universities are not depicting liberalism as the root of all evil, they generally either teach an arid, abstract version of liberalism whose principal relevance seems to be in justifying an aggressive redistributionist and regulatory state, or they present it as a curiosity in the history of ideas that should be studied like all the other systems that have come and gone over the centuries.

One seldom encounters in higher education, let alone in pre-college studies, a course that explains that liberalism is interwoven into the core of the American experiment in self-government; that to know ourselves and our politics we must study it with care; that liberalism deserves to be honored for the remarkable gains in freedom, equality, security, and prosperity that it has yielded; that it should be criticized for the injustices perpetrated under its cover; and that it ought to be corrected where it continues to go astray.

That is something like what Adam Gopnik sets out to accomplish in "A Thousand Small Sanities: The Moral Adventure of Liberalism." A best-selling author and longtime staff writer at The New

Yorker, Gopnik has again and again over the years dedicated his elegant essays to the exposition and defense of the liberal spirit.

An extended, heartfelt letter to his college-age daughter about his love for liberalism, his new book was inspired by a late-night walk they took on Nov. 8, 2016. After it became clear that Donald Trump had been elected the 45th president of the United States, Gopnik sought to comfort his teenager in the face of the fear they shared for the future of their country. His message that evening was that humanity's hope lies in preserving liberalism. His book elaborates the fundamental convictions and concrete achievements of the "liberal humanists" with whom he aligns himself. It does not always resist the temptation to confuse his distinctive version with liberalism pure and simple.

Gopnik distills his understanding of liberalism into a single sentence: "Liberalism is an evolving political practice that makes the case for the necessity and possibility of (imperfectly) egalitarian social reform and ever greater (if not absolute) toleration of human differences through reasoned and (mostly) unimpeded conversation, demonstration, and debate."

With characteristic brio, he acknowledges that that sentence is "anticlimactic, and possibly uninspiring to the point of fatuity, not to mention rage." At the same time, he insists proudly that the sentence's hesitation, ungainliness, and qualification heaped on qualification reflect a splendid, if exasperating, reality: "Liberals get nothing accomplished — except everything eventually. In Western Europe, in America, certainly in Canada, in Australia, too, vistas of general social and legal equality far outstripping anything previously known to mankind, and largely achieved by peaceful and parliamentary means, have been won."

Gopnik recounts the history of liberal humanism's triumphs through a charming blend of evocative depictions of the liberal spirit in action and nimble explorations of leading liberal ideas. In some cases, the two merge.

He offers finely drawn sketches of the greatest of British liberals, John Stuart Mill, and Mill's beloved wife, Harriet Taylor, an accomplished intellectual in her own right; the 19th-century polymath journalist George Henry Lewes and the novelist George Eliot, who boldly lived together as a married couple; the American slave turned abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass; and Bayard Rustin, black and gay, who early on championed the nonviolent quest for civil rights. In addition, Gopnik lucidly reconstructs arguments about morals, politics, and society developed by the 16th-century French essayist Michel de Montaigne, the 18th-century Scottish philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith, and contemporary scholars Jürgen Habermas and Robert Putnam.

The result is a liberalism that emphasizes equality over individual freedom. It stresses the fallibility of human judgment along with the capacity of reason to understand the world and improve the quality of life. It highlights the sympathy for others that is sown into human nature and it counsels sobriety in expectations concerning oneself and fellow human beings. It is driven by a strong predilection for incremental egalitarian reform over revolutionary leftism and stand-in-place conservatism. And it cherishes a democratic politics that encourages a vibrant public sphere in which citizens meet, exchange views, and engage in unending debate.

In the spirit of this liberalism, Gopnik examines in companion chapters "Why the Right Hates Liberalism" and "Why the Left Hates Liberalism." The crux of the conservative criticism, he argues, is that liberalism undermines the core human need for order and stability. The left's central complaint is that liberalism's faith in reform is a mirage, because it depends on the "despoiling of other people's cultures, environments, and goods" even as at home it "is not merely incidentally exploitative and inequitable, it is intrinsically and incurably exploitative and inequitable."

Even where one must quarrel with Gopnik's characterization of the criticisms and his evaluation of their merits, one must applaud his generous and principled determination to give liberalism's critics a say, understand their discontents, and learn from their insights. In defending the liberal spirit, Gopnik displays the liberal spirit.

Most of the time.

On occasion, particularly when it comes to contemporary politics, Gopnik falls short of his professed devotion to sympathetic understanding of the variety of human types and sensibilities. His inability to get beyond his revulsion at President Trump to comprehend the democratic forces that resulted in Trump's election exhibits a failure of imagination. His sneering asides about Fox News reveal a smugness all-too-typical of his fellow Manhattanites. And his fashionable exclusion of hate speech from protection by the principle of free speech demonstrates a neglect of the lessons of fallibilism, since experience emphatically teaches that authorities empowered to police speech will tend to classify as hateful those utterances and thoughts that conflict with their beliefs and interests.

A more basic shortcoming of Gopnik's reconstruction of the liberal spirit is the narrowness of his conception. In the end, he confuses an idealized portrait of the progressive side of the liberal tradition with liberalism itself.

To understand why liberalism in the large sense is vital, however, it is also necessary to appreciate that it roots individual rights in the natural freedom and equality of all, that it secures individual freedom and equality before the law through limited government, and that it depends on an education that fosters the virtues of freedom. These are essential aspects of the liberalism woven into the foundations of the American constitutional order.

That liberalism in the large sense enables the spirit of progress and improvement and the spirit of conservation and order not only to coexist in the public sphere but to cooperate to advance the public interest.

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