

# In Search of Liberals of a More Liberal Persuasion

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## COMMENTARY

A central character in the hit sitcom “Parks and Recreation” (2009-2015), Leslie Knope serves as deputy director of her office in the city hall of the fictional town of Pawnee, Indiana. She is also a distinctive sort of liberal.

Leslie believes fervently in her pure intentions and government’s capacity under her direction to improve people’s lives. A Democrat, she idolizes Hillary Clinton and Madeleine Albright. Quirky, cheerful, warm, and caring, Leslie is prone to clueless interventions in colleagues’ and friends’ lives owing to her failure to imagine that others could be unmoved by or averse to her well-meaning plans. She loves her small town and searches for projects to promote community even as her initiatives often proceed contrary to Pawnee citizens’ expressed preferences.

In “Liberalism as a Way of Life,” Alexandre Lefebvre argues that Leslie represents “a singularly compelling representation of the liberal spirit.” For Lefebvre, a professor of politics and philosophy at the University of Sydney, that is high praise. Liberalism is not merely one

attractive option among many moral and political outlooks, according to Lefebvre, himself an unabashed liberal. He contends in his new book that contemporary liberalism coincides with progressive politics and constitutes the one best way of living. At the same time, Lefebvre paradoxically maintains that liberalism's superiority consists in part in its affirmation that there is no single path that leads to happiness and human flourishing.

This paradox – that academic liberalism denies a greatest good or authoritative set of virtues but claims that true liberals embody both – fuels the disparity between how liberals often see themselves and how others frequently see them. Especially among professors, self-proclaimed liberals typically consider themselves high-minded, empathetic, reasonable, humble, and open to diverse viewpoints. Yet they come across to many as high-handed, moralistic, dogmatic, arrogant, and intolerant.

That drastic mismatch between self-perception and others' perceptions stems from academic liberalism's characteristic conceit. It insists on its exclusive prerogative to determine who is enlightened while holding that everyone is equal. And it is prone to regarding as more enlightened and more equal those who excel in proclaiming that government must pursue progressive social and economic policies.

Lefebvre's book manifests many virtues. The author writes amiably and gracefully. His erudite and accessible arguments distill the main points of complex theories and bring them into focus with arresting examples and vivid analogies. His humor disarms and his self-deprecation charms. He underscores the threat posed to liberty by the individualism, materialism, and conformity fostered by democracy. He explains that for a liberal the common good consists in protecting shared rights. And he captures in multiple formulations and from numerous angles liberalism's core commitment to that free and generous spirit that discerns the common humanity and unique individual in every person.

But Lefebvre cannot escape his academic discipline's gravitational force. He identifies John Rawls (1921-2002), the most influential academic political theorist of the last half century, as his book's hero. In the spirit of Rawls' two major works, "A Theory of Justice" (1971) and "Political Liberalism" (1993), Lefebvre identifies the progressive interpretation of liberal democracy as the genuinely reasonable political perspective. And in the spirit of his many academic colleagues who specialize in political theory and seek to build on Rawls' achievements, Lefebvre goes beyond the master. A true liberal manifests liberal values and virtues through and through, argues Lefebvre – with all one's heart, with all one's soul, and with all one's might. Indulging such excesses, however, turns liberalism into an illiberal scheme that disparages dissenters from liberal orthodoxy and institutes moral hierarchies in the name of egalitarian social and political arrangements.

Lefebvre begins with an astute observation: Liberalism serves as the moral and intellectual horizon within which most citizens in English-speaking liberal democracies operate. It "saturates the public and background culture" of our political societies. Like the air we

breathe, it is ubiquitous and taken for granted. Lefebvre does not insist that liberalism is the authoritative religion in our secular public world, but he does maintain that liberalism's grounding in individual freedom and human equality supplies overarching values and norms, shapes widespread habits and behaviors, and underlies basic beliefs, attachments, and aspirations. It stands "at the root of all things us."

In defining liberalism, however, Lefebvre introduces an ambiguity. In contemporary political jargon, liberalism refers to the political left. Liberalism in the broader sense serves as a synonym for the core elements of the modern tradition of freedom. In its formative era, and as enshrined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, that tradition revolved around the conviction that human beings are by nature free and equal. The key political implication was that government's primary responsibility was to protect unalienable rights, the rights that all human beings share. At times, however, Lefebvre emphasizes that liberalism's foundation is "the idea that society should be a fair system of cooperation." Starting there, rather than with the rights persons share, risks giving an illiberal priority to society over the individual and – considering Lefebvre's equation of the fair with the progressive – partisan precedence to one major party to an enduring political debate about how best to secure individual rights.

Lefebvre indicates that equating fair with progressive takes place on a plane above political disputation. It reflects, in his view, an imperative of reason and can be recognized by anyone who will adopt as "spiritual exercises" three Rawlsian heuristic devices. The "original position" determines the fundamental institutions of political society from the perspective of persons stripped of the knowledge and characteristics that make them particular individuals. The practice of "reflective liberalism" aligns our moral principles with our desires, emotions, and conduct. And "the idea of public reason" specifies the range of reasonable political arguments. Taken together and assiduously practiced, argues Lefebvre, these three heuristics reveal that progressive practices and reforms are objective, universal, and necessary in rights-protecting democracies.

Lefebvre's Rawlsian arguments are powerful but problematic. A chief problem is that they model or assume the conclusions they purport to discover or validate. For example, Lefebvre approvingly quotes Princeton Professor Stephen Macedo on public reason: "Political legitimacy – and our own peace of mind, morally speaking – depends on our ability to discern basic principles of political morality that we believe on reflection could be justified to all reasonable people." But who decides what counts as sound reflection, legitimate justification, and reasonable standards of reasonableness?

Although he obscures the issue, by Lefebvre's account one human type stands out as supremely qualified to determine the basic principles of political morality. The best among the best among us, Rawlsian liberals, not only embrace "a liberal way of life" that "is uniquely unified." They also are, Lefebvre believes, uniquely good, reasonable, just, and complete. "We alone combine, in our lived existence, the right and good, the reasonable and rational,

and the just and desirable,” he writes. “We alone are whole, and not riven by tensions between our personal and public moral commitments, or divisions between what we privately desire and what we publicly profess. We are liberal all the way down.”

Notwithstanding the almost otherworldly moral and spiritual integration that he attributes to them, Lefebvre’s all-the-way-down liberals will find it difficult from their commanding moral heights to relate to lesser individuals. Particularly vexing to them will be those who believe that division inheres in the human soul and that the imperfections of human nature and inevitable partiality and incompleteness of human experience entail unending conflict about rival conceptions of justice.

Despite his confidence in the superiority of his morality and politics, and much to his credit, Lefebvre visits weekly the right-wing website Breitbart. There he finds criticism of immigration policy and political correctness that he thinks wrong but within the boundaries of public reason’s requirements. He surpasses many of his fellow academic liberals by recognizing that prominent conservative arguments qualify for a hearing in the public sphere, but he gives little indication of learning anything important from them.

That is a far cry from John Stuart Mill’s classical liberalism. In his masterpiece, “On Liberty,” Mill argued that in view of human limitations, “a party of order or stability, and a party of progress or reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life.” And not as a formality, but because both conservatives and progressives champion truths that the other typically overlooks, belittles, or suppresses.

Both also tend to neglect the variety of ways of being liberal, as does Lefebvre. While he acknowledges that “a different shape and texture” than what he espouses could be given “to a liberal way of life,” he misses a splendid opportunity to demonstrate his liberality toward liberalism. Having extolled Leslie Knope’s liberalism, Lefebvre omits mention of her boss, the great comic figure Ron Swanson. Ron is a rugged individualist, a man’s man, a lover of sports, tools, guns, meat, and whiskey. He is taciturn and gruff, but also tolerant, good-hearted, and a shrewd judge of character. True, he takes to ridiculous extremes the belief that that government is best that governs least. Yet a liberalism unable also to delight in Ron Swanson’s principles and virtues is too cramped to guide a free and generous way of life.

Contrary to both progressive defenses and conservative critiques of liberalism, our liberals are not liberal enough.

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