
Illiberal Arguments

William English - 05/13/09

Part 2 of a symposium on James Kalb's [The Tyranny of Liberalism](#), new from ISI Books. Read [Part 1](#).

James Kalb's *The Tyranny of Liberalism* is a frustrating book. On the one hand it is filled with many penetrating insights into the paradoxes of liberal thought and action, and some of Kalb's intuitions regarding the general pathologies of liberalism are no doubt right. Yet, on the other hand, Kalb's analysis is much less persuasive than it might be because he paints with such broad brush strokes, and the ultimate "solution" he arrives at contains a number of loose ends. Nonetheless, while the execution leaves much to be desired, Kalb identifies many dangers within contemporary liberal politics that merit our attention now more than ever.

The project does not lack ambition. Kalb aims to show: 1) that we are dominated by a unitary, progressive ideology called liberalism 2) how this tyrannizes us in every aspect of life and will inevitably destroy all that is good, 3) why all challenges to it fail, 4) except for what Kalb calls "traditionalism," 5) which is the only viable alternative, because 6) traditionalism resolves all fundamental questions of ethics, politics, and epistemology by reconciling "faith and reason" and giving meaning and structure to human life.

"Liberalism," according to Kalb is based on the ultimate goals of freedom and equality, which may sound good in the abstract, but become pernicious because their total achievement requires the destruction of other substantial goods. Moreover, the ideal of equality within liberalism masks a serious sleight of hand. Ostensibly, equality ought to entail treating everyone equally. That is, it should mean being tolerant of all and neutral between our specific claims. But, of course, this notion of neutrality can't go all the way down. Your freedom comes to into conflict with my freedom, and government needs to draw a line somewhere to demarcate legitimate boundaries. All laws constrain some parties, and the idea that government can remain neutral with regard to all of our particular claims is chimera. At the end of the day all governments must make decisions about the hierarchy of goods that will be expressed in legal protections and administrative decisions.

So, liberalism, in Kalb's view, wreaks havoc in two ways. First, it promotes a vision of itself as substantially neutral, with the implication that it is illegitimate for citizens to publicly advocate (and in some cases even privately act) on behalf of their own particular ethical convictions. Thus it has the effect of robbing our communal life of recourse to our deepest sources of meaning. Second, liberalism in fact holds and advances its own ethical system, based on what Kalb calls the "equal

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satisfaction of preferences”—a kind of vulgar, hedonistic utilitarianism that is dismissive of many “traditional” boundaries. Kalb thinks liberalism’s intrinsic values are ultimately nihilistic and destructive of “higher” human goods, and that these liberal values find increasingly expression in and power through government bureaucracies, judicial elites, and technological rationality.

So far, so good. Many prominent critiques of liberalism have developed variations on these precise themes. Indeed there is a vast, and sometimes turgid, literature out there debating the nature, limits, and worth of liberalism. Kalb’s critique is somewhat refreshing in that it takes shape outside of these narrowly academic debates. However, there are points at which Kalb might have strengthened his argument by reference to this literature. Moreover, those attuned to these debates will likely think that some of Kalb’s claims are exaggerated and lack adequate precision.

The first half of Kalb’s book is a somewhat repetitive examination of the evils of liberalism. Kalb divines a fatalistic logic inherent in liberalism, more oppressive and vicious than anything Marx ever saw in Capitalism. Kalb asserts, “The vices of liberalism are intrinsic, progressive, destructive, and irreversible (150).” Moreover, liberalism as Kalb conceives it is not just one of many political orientations in our midst, rather “liberal doctrine is the basis of everything recognized as authoritative today (111).” So we are truly in a bad way. We are ruled exclusively by liberalism, and it inexorably destroys all human goods, which will ultimately lead to the collapse of our civilization.

One wonders, however, if Kalb’s account is too “black and white,” if it adequately reflects the complex reality of our present situation. For example, consider a typical treatment of one of liberalism vices:

[Liberalism] gives special justification only to equality and self-centered satisfactions that do not require others to give of themselves. Things as basic as love and loyalty lose their sanction and become morally questionable because they impose enduring demands and obligations. Marriage, among other things, *becomes impossible* even though the name may remain. *To the extent society becomes liberal it becomes inhuman*, and as the process approaches completion the society becomes unable to function or survive (141).
[emphasis mine]

On the one hand, Kalb has a valid point. Marriage issues enable to him to sustain some of his strongest claims, as “the liberal state” has done much to undermine the institution of marriage and the goods associated with it. On the other hand Kalb claims too much. “Real” marriage today is still very possible, and equating liberalism with inhumanity is premature, if not plainly false.

Moreover, despite the long exegesis Kalb develops of liberalism’s vices, which includes numerous comparisons to Soviet tyranny, the limited examples he draws on lead one to think that if a handful of still debated policies were reversed, he wouldn’t have much to complain about. Absent affirmative action, abortion, gay marriage, and bureaucratic overregulation liberalism might not look so bad. Their inevitability in a liberal regime needs to be better established, although Kalb is certainly right that these issues won’t be resolved to his satisfaction anytime soon. Nonetheless, before lobbing the polemic accusations of liberal tyranny, Kalb might consider the old moral of the “Boy who Cried Wolf.” Hyperbole has long been a strategy of many of the leftists Kalb despises, who equate any inequality with racial apartheid and every military action with genocide. Likewise, it is perhaps a stretch to see in every gauche display of political correctness a systematic march towards tyranny.

Much of Kalb’s analysis would also benefit from drawing a clearer distinction between liberalism

as a state project, and liberalism as a cultural phenomenon. To be sure, both can be oppressive, and widespread liberal cultural convictions are likely to find expression in law. However, it makes a great difference whether expressing one's disapproval of homosexuality lands one in jail or simply means there are certain social circles in which one can't make friends. The liberalism of Canada is moving towards the former, whereas the liberalism of America is likely to stay with the latter, for reasons that are both cultural and constitutional. Kalb laments the "denial of public respectability to non liberal principles (19)" but public respectability is not something the state manufactures. The distinction between cultural and state liberalism would undoubtedly require Kalb's diagnosis to be more complex, but it has even larger implications for his proposed solution.

We are all familiar with Winston's Churchill quip that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the rest. In order to indict liberalism, Kalb has to suggest what sort of alternative arrangements would be better, alongside the catalogue of goods that liberalism destroys. Throughout the first half of the book, Kalb employs phrases that are rather theoretically loaded to describe why liberalism is so wrong. Liberalism is opposed to "what people find natural, comprehensible, and satisfying (12)," to "popular understandings (102)," and to "settled habits and natural tendencies (132)." An obscure populism runs through this diagnosis, as if liberalism isn't what "the people" really want. But one problem with liberalism, as Kalb describes it, is that it gives the people exactly what they want. In fact, at certain points Kalb suggests that "the people" are on board with liberalism: "all classes favor liberalism (29)." Nonetheless he recurrently returns to the idea that liberalism is at odds with the natural understandings people have. This poses serious theoretical problems that are compounded in his account of "tradition" as the antidote to liberalism.

Despite frequently invoking "the people" as the arbiter of good government, Kalb does not embrace majoritarian democracy as a political solution. Part of the problem as he sees it is the way in which liberal elites control institutions of government and the media. They can insulate themselves from effective popular oversight. However, Kalb has a deeper objection to democracy, namely that the people don't really know what they want. In this respect his criticisms of democracy mirror his criticisms of global capitalism. The problem with each is that they fulfill the unenlightened desires of the masses. Liberalism is in fact the combination of democracy and markets, which have conspired to enable the greatest satisfaction of individual preferences. So Kalb, like many theorists of politics, is pushed towards something like an account of false consciousness, taking as normative not what most people now desire, but what they ought to desire if they were clear headed.

How do we know what the genuine goods are that "the people" would want if they truly understood them? One answer to this question is suggested in Kalb's use of the phrase "natural tendencies." Perhaps nature can be our guide. Kalb, however, is suspicious of grounding too much in reasoning about nature. After all, nature is ostensibly the starting point for John Locke and many other liberal theorists. Kalb cautions that reason is limited; in fact "too much reason destroys reason (194)." This leads him to develop a complicated account of the interrelation of reason, faith, and tradition in the second half of the book. "Tradition" as it comes to be defined in these later chapters is the great alternative to liberalism, as well as the only hopeful moderating force to be found within liberalism.

Kalb's account of the relationship between tradition and reason leaves much to be desired and its loose ends undermine the larger arguments of the book. Moreover, the particular way in which Kalb proposes "tradition" as the solution, evades the real political challenges that he earlier identifies—ironically, not unlike the high theorists of liberal neutrality.

The ultimate problem with liberalism according to Kalb is its “rejection of moral authorities that transcend human purposes (20).” Now, one way of justifying moral authorities is to show how they support human purposes, but Kalb closes off a direct approach of that sort. Rather, he needs to provide an account of how we come to know the most important, “transcendent” sources of authority, which rightly trump our individual desires, given that there are no demonstrative ways to establish these authorities through reason. The epistemological account is complicated, as these sorts of accounts necessarily are, and at the end Kalb emerges with claim on behalf of the superiority of “tradition,” understood as the “crystallized experience of the society to which we belong (198).” But appeals to tradition are notoriously circular, and Kalb struggles to give some account of how traditions change and in what sense changes (or even alternative traditions) can be better or worse.

Taken in its minimalist form, the claim that all reasoning takes place within a tradition is easily granted, but it does not help us distinguish one set of reasons from another. If all reasoning is inherently traditional, then everyone is a traditionalist. But Kalb wants to say that traditionalism is unique, something like the uniqueness of common law when compared to Roman law. So, sometimes he flirts with an evolutionary account of tradition—“traditions” are constellations of beliefs/institutions that have proved stable over a long period and thus have a presumptive advantage over alternatives. However, the evolutionary analogy is perilous both because it admits of radical progress through experimentation and because it provides little ground from which to attack whatever is presently dominant (in this case liberalism). Finally, Kalb draws an intrinsic connection between tradition and faith, claiming that these are the “natural modes” of meaningful human being in the world. Faith indeed becomes synonymous with tradition in the last section of the book. However, this move seems more like an avoidance of the questions that confront Kalb than an answer to them. In any case, he certainly dodges a whole range of important problems concerning the relationship between rationality and tradition posed by philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre.

It's not as if the reader hasn't seen this solution coming. Earlier, Kalb asserts, “The fundamental political question is the nature and purpose of authority, and thus the nature of man, the world, moral obligation, and the human good—in other words, which religion is correct. Liberalism cannot get by without answering that question (93).” Kalb's specific answer to that question is something like medieval Catholicism, although he never states it plainly. He does, however, lament that “in the absence of a nobility or hierarchical church we have no widespread and well developed tradition of non-liberal thought to provide a counter weight (168).” But there is a disconnect between the specific authority he himself recognizes and his appeals to “tradition and faith” as generic categories for what's good. The problem is that there are few partisans of tradition in general. Rather we see people attached to particular traditions, and a brief survey of human history shows that these particular traditions frequently disagree with each other about rather profound matters. Setting up the modern political contest as one between liberals devoted to inhuman, abstract reason and traditionalists devoted to humane, sensible faith is not entirely convincing.

First, liberalism itself constitutes something of a tradition, regardless of how Kalb defines the term. More importantly, however, the scope of disagreement between various religious traditions alone makes it implausible that “traditional faith” can serve as the basis of a political consensus. On various cultural policy issues one may indeed find an overlapping consensus between *conservative* Muslims, Catholics, Mormons, Protestants, and Jews. However, when it comes to questions of who will rule and how they will rule, Evangelicals are likely to view Mormons with

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suspicion, to give but one example. So the question for politics cannot simply be “tradition, yes or no?” but “which tradition?” It is somewhat ironic that the best reason Kalb identifies for recommending Catholicism as a ruling tradition is that it has a clear method of arbitration—a final decision maker as it were. Kalb likes a Pope for the same reasons that Thomas Hobbes liked an all-powerful sovereign. But Kalb recognizes the looming accusation of theocracy and takes pains to avoid it by assuring his reader that no church should have direct political power and that religious influence should come through persuasion. He does believe that there ought to be something like an established “public religion” but that it “should be based on the understandings accepted in society generally (252)” —a minimally doctrinal Protestant Christianity, according to him.

Kalb would like a society unified by a shared understanding of the good. His erudite ruminations illuminate why such a shared understanding would be so valuable for politics. But the precise problem of politics is that the people in our society don’t have a shared understanding of the good. The modern world is characterized by a number of different and in certain respects incompatible conceptions of what is good. Moreover, any genealogy of liberalism would have to acknowledge its roots in the inability of Christians to settle their political-theological disputes in a civilized manner. So, how should we deal with the undeniable fact of ethical pluralism that confronts us today? One answer given by a number of liberals is that that we ought to have a somewhat minimal constitution whose moral substance can be endorsed by a wide range of particular ethical traditions and whose procedural rules should leave further political determinations open to popular persuasion and electoral representation. In the last few centuries people from a diverse range of ethical orientations have come to believe that if their own people can’t rule then this sort of liberalism might not be bad terms for a truce.

At times it seems as if Kalb’s fundamental criticism of liberalism is precisely that it doesn’t let people like him rule. Among many of his fellow citizens, however, liberalism could hardly ask for a better defense. But in the final chapters of the book, Kalb disavows any desire to rule through force, advocating instead a strategy of persuasion in terms that would comfort even Habermas. Kalb puts forth a basic outline of the sort of institutions he thinks would be decent and politically feasible and emphasizes that “the institutional approach suggested here is procedural and does not guarantee any particular outcome (271).” I read that sentence twice just to make sure Kalb was characterizing his own proposal and not liberalism. The institutional vision Kalb lays out is basically a blend of two positions he had earlier criticized, namely libertarianism and Roger Scruton–style conservatism. These focus on reducing the scope of the national government’s management of society and giving widespread deference to local customs, along with a wish list of more “conservative” arrangements, desirable if people can be persuaded to sign on.

That is all to say that by the end Kalb sounds like something of a liberal himself. He would like the state to be more tolerant towards people like him, accepts that there needs to be a political compromise that prevents any group from seeking perfection through politics, and believes in persuasion. It just happens that a state in which relative freedom exists for people to meaningfully practice any number of doubtful traditional religions (they can’t all be right) will also provide freedoms that enable (at least in the current configuration of culture) what Kalb loathes, namely a “field of impersonal technical rationality oriented towards the satisfaction of arbitrary individual desire (18).” Of course, there is nothing wrong with defending the political institutions of liberalism, while at the same time despising and criticizing those who embrace “freedom and equality” as ethical absolutes.

Even if Kalb’s ultimate relationship to liberalism remains ambiguous and his grand project less coherent than he had hoped, he does make a number of valuable points. His greatest concern is

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to be heard, and he is critical of high liberals who won't let him into the conversation. He illuminates the poverty of one sort of comprehensive conception of liberal ethics. He calls our attention to the reality that many citizens endorse the liberal state out of concern for goods that exist prior to and separate from it; and he cautions comprehensive liberals that they neglect concern for such goods at their own peril. Finally, his insights into the dehumanizing effects of technological rationality are extremely perceptive.

Ultimately, the idea that animates this book remains profoundly important. So-called liberals increasingly employ state power to realize particular, radical visions of equality and liberation. Moreover, they advance these agendas under the false guise of neutrality, moderation, and bipartisanship through elites who are ignorant of the virtues of and fragility of existing social practices. In reality, these are dangerous political developments and they are also, arguably, a betrayal of the only form of liberalism worth defending. This book raises the question of how to how to diagnose and mitigate these and other totalitarian temptations latent in liberal culture that increasingly undermine institutions of free government and personal responsibility. These are challenges to which we should all be better attuned.

The weakest part of the project is undoubtedly its attempt to reconcile reason, faith, and tradition into a unified epistemological account, a task which would have benefited greatly from more exchange with academic literature. Despite this and the sometimes polemic tone of the book, it will profitably frustrate both liberals and non-liberals alike.