

The League

of ordinary gentlemen

The Rise of the Wonky Left

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~by Conor P. Williams

I. What's wrong?

Remember back, if you can, to January 2009. It seemed to be a completely untainted transformational moment. To hear the Beltway chatter, this was the final unraveling of the Reagan Era and the dawning of a new progressive movement that could redeem the Bush Administration's multifarious failures. Four years on, and those memories are sepia-stained by an infusion of Tea Party vitriol. Indeed, for all that 2009 resembles the Left's current situation, it could be a story from the *original* American progressives a century ago.

American leftists are divided on what caused the collapse. Yes, our current national challenges are vast. Yes, the Bush Administration left the economy and our global standing in even worse repair than most realized. Yes, American politics is pendular—it usually repays a list to the left with an ensuing roll to the right. All of these are facts, though there's little that progressives of the electoral class of 2008 could have done to avoid or alter them.

But if the eclipse of the new progressive era has many causes, one stands out: *the American Left has no coherent or compelling moral vision to justify its policy aims. It frequently can't articulate why it is it believes what it does. Leftists are philosophically adrift.* To a substantial degree, this is because American liberalism has become a haven for wonks. Many prominent leftists seem to believe that political debates are won and lost by econometric analysis. This undercuts their willingness (and their capacity) to justify their projects.

Take President Obama's various defenses of health care reform, for example. He only emphasized the justice of the effort after first emphasizing that it would save the country money (and that many prior presidents had failed to fix the health care system). By the time he got around to defending its moral worth, his opponents had conclusively painted health care reform as a dictatorial power grab. Even though conservative rhetoric about "state socialism" and "death panels" was egregiously untrue, it was still a powerful moral indictment of the president's (alleged) goals. The president explained that health care reform would *work*, and his opponents replied that it was *unjust*. Obama carried the votes and still lost the public debate.

Of course, wonks are sometimes essential. Once everyone's on board with a political objective—developing green jobs, say—wonks assess the efficiency of the available policy options. But they have little to say to someone who doubts that the given objective is worth pursuing. They're more or less out

of ammunition. “Coal is the energy of the past! What about our natural resources?” the wonks splutter. “Ethanol is an emerging market!” Without any principled explanation of *why* Americans ought to sacrifice their dollars or short-term comfort, it’s a rhetorically toothless position.

Why? Political arguments are always about *both* means and ends, but wonks think almost exclusively about means. Though there are plenty of efficient policy proposals out there, we can’t choose one unless we’ve settled the ends we want to pursue. For example, eliminating the Department of Education would reduce federal paper consumption, but most of us would argue that this is a wrongheaded approach to fiscal and education policy. However, if we’re trying to support the American logging industry, a ban on federal workers’ email usage might do the trick. We can’t really measure a proposal’s effectiveness unless we’ve settled the end we’re pursuing.

Even if we have a clearly-defined goal, the most *efficient* policies aren’t always the *right* policies. For example, if we want to promote economic growth for our ethnic community, it might be “effective” to slaughter or expel other ethnic groups, but most of us realize that efficacy is irrelevant when it leads to injustice. When a political fight boils down to a choice between “efficacy” and “freedom” (or “life,” or “dignity,” etc), the argument’s over. That’s because we always consider the ends we’re pursuing in terms of other powerful moral considerations.

We don’t pursue goals in a simple sequence or in isolation; when we choose a path, we consider (for example) whether it is just, compassionate, *and* efficient. We make political choices by weighing any number of incommensurable, competing goods against one another. For example, we balance mutual prosperity against individual freedom, the rule of law, human dignity, and much more. We evaluate our actual options in terms of our various moral ideals—“our moral vision.” Without a comprehensive, coherent moral vision, these sorts of arguments are easily overlooked. Contemporary leftists rarely reflect on their moral vision.

For comparison’s sake, take a gander at the conservative rhetorical armory. Many decry the last three years of right-wing foot-dragging, but few notice the rhetorical discipline sustaining it. Conservatives have spent many decades explaining that the federal government threatens freedom—this is a project that dates back at least to Barry Goldwater, if not before. The Right reaps the rewards of this discipline every day (while the country reaps the ugly economic consequences). They win public debates because they work exceptionally hard at setting the ethical parameters of discussion within the confines of their moral vision. This means that leftists usually start from a rhetorical deficit. Whatever else they think of conservatives’ anti-tax, anti-regulation, anti-government rhetoric, they can’t deny its appeal to a broad swath of the American population. This isn’t some stroke of conservative good fortune—it’s the product of decades of coordinated effort.

His own struggles notwithstanding, the president’s rhetoric is actually better organized than most left-wing leaders. Few leftists do this well—especially after Anthony Weiner’s self-incapacitation. That’s why exceptions like Massachusetts Senate candidate Elizabeth Warren attract so much attention. No one loves Warren because of her sophisticated understanding of the technical intricacies of federal regulation. On the contrary, they love that [she is uniquely willing to make a strong moral case for liberalism](#).

The breakdown in the blogosphere is similar: from Ezra Klein to Matthew Yglesias to Mike Konczal and beyond, nearly all of the most prominent leftists are concerned with the *technical* details of public policy. Mainstream media pundits are no different: Paul Krugman occasionally ventures into justifying

a left-wing vision for the future, but he is usually content to demonstrate the empirical debility of various conservative canards. E.J. Dionne's communitarianism stands out as a lonely example of left-wing commentary with a vision.

Still not convinced that leftists have a justification problem? Take a gander at the resources that conservatives invest in developing a compelling moral vision to justify their objectives. The list of right-wing think tanks working these fields is long and diverse: the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, Hoover Institution, Claremont Institute, Liberty Fund, Intercollegiate Studies Institute, American Enterprise Institute, and many other organizations *all* work on justifying why conservative policies are the moral answer to America's troubles. Call it a vast right-wing conspiracy, call it the "Kochtopus," call it whatever you'd like—but rest assured that it's *real*. Conservatives take moral arguments seriously. The left-wing response? Mostly crickets. There's not much beyond the [Progressive Studies Program](#) (PSP) at the Center for American Progress (disclosure: I've co-authored [several PSP essays](#) with [John Halpin](#)). Most left-leaning think tanks spend their time on policy development and analysis. Scan their websites: you'll see a rainbow of policy ideas with precious few moral arguments behind them. Check the event listings: you'll see a panoply of roundtables on social media's effects on elections, new strategies for improving federal foreign aid programs, comprehensive studies on teacher efficacy, and so on and so forth. You *won't* find many events exploring why political leaders or voters ought to care.

II. How did this happen?

When (and *why*?) did leftists get so uncomfortable with mounting a moral defense of their vision for the country? It's partly due to a division within the American Left—one which philosopher Richard Rorty spelled out in *Achieving Our Country*. Some leftists are concerned with addressing public exclusion or bigotry. Rorty called them the "cultural left." Other leftists are more concerned with preventing economic exploitation, defending collective bargaining rights, and defending progressive taxation. Rorty termed them the "reformist left."

Each of these projects requires a different approach. The contemporary cultural left often aims to limit the scope of government. Those facing public intolerance fundamentally want to be left alone. Whatever else they support, cultural leftists want government out of their bedrooms and medical dispensaries. But hands-off government doesn't fit the reformist left's project. Reformists are concerned with protecting the American middle class from wealthy rapaciousness. They argue that democracy needs a baseline of economic justice to survive. As we've learned over the last few decades, even minimal levels of equality disappear without government regulation.

The reformist left has always aimed to rehabilitate the American tradition, while the cultural left hopes to redeem and supercede its blemishes. Reformist leftists generally frame their arguments in terms of restoring the American democratic wager. They often take American archetypes as their guiding lights, from Jefferson's "yeoman farmers" to the blue-collar middle class. Meanwhile, the cultural left's focus on sadism led naturally into cultural criticism. By exposing and delegitimizing sadistic treatment of African-Americans, women, immigrants, and other marginalized groups of human beings, the cultural left highlighted the American tradition's sins.

It's hard to develop a compelling moral vision with this disagreement at the core. Should government be vilified? Defended? Does it empower us? Does it limit freedom? It's no wonder that the answer is muddled: "All of the above, but not all of the time!" Since leftists can't agree on these questions, they've stopped trying to answer them.

This is hardly all. Many leftists also suffer from victors' complacency. Whatever else divides the cultural and reformist wings, most agree that history is progressing (hence the resuscitation of the term "progressive") towards leftist goals. Why waste time explaining your objectives when history's on your side? After all, cultural leftists can proudly point to a long-running American trend towards broader tolerance of humans of all races, genders, and sexual orientations. Meanwhile, reform leftists could (until the 1980s) proudly celebrate decades of increasing social mobility. Leftists won big chunks of the twentieth century—and promptly forgot that victories don't come cheap. Leftists of all stripes are only just waking up to the fact that history doesn't move in a single direction.

There's undoubtedly more behind left-wing discomfort with moral arguments. Here are a few other possibilities:

- Perhaps it's the legacy of the original American progressives' enthusiasm for political *science*. John Dewey, progressivism's leading intellectual, argued that Americans could save democracy from the nineteenth century's ills simply by applying the scientific method to politics (and ethics).
- Perhaps it's due to the proliferation of technical policy degrees and jobs requiring these credentials. In the professional political world, an M.P.P. (Masters in Public Policy) usually trumps a liberal arts degree.
- Finally, perhaps it reflects neo-liberalism's enormous influence on recent American politics. Neo-liberals accept conservative accounts of political economy, which makes alternative conceptions of political economy both unnecessary and unconvincing.

The list of possible causes is endless, but the wonky left is clearly here to stay. Fortunately, its technical work is *unnecessary* to political success. Unfortunately, it is not *sufficient* on its own. Political success requires both facts and persuasion. These reinforce one another. So—how do leftists rejuvenate their moral rhetoric?

III. What's the lesson?

Leftists of all stripes need to put more thought and resources into defending their moral vision from increasingly radical conservative arguments. If they don't, political irrelevance will be the rule, not the exception. But how?

Here's an obvious first step: leftists need to reverse the Reaganomics equation. For thirty years, conservatives have argued that politics preys upon individual freedom—which they usually view in economic terms. They view humans as primarily economic beings, which permits them to denigrate politics. Most American conservatives believe that government hovers parasitically above humans'

natural producing, trading, and consuming activity. That's why they believe that every political problem is best abandoned to market forces. If leftists have the argument within these confines, they'll win only by default—when conservatives are hamstrung by catastrophic baggage like the Bush Administration's compulsive mismanagement or wholesale candidate ineptitude (Cf. O'Donnell, Sharron Angle, etc).

Instead, leftists should remind Americans that politics is a primary human activity. The politics we have affects the economic activity that we get. In other words, *actual* liberty rests upon public institutions. Life isn't freer without government—it's chaotic. Markets only work in the presence of public goods like social peace, a working infrastructure, untainted common resources like air and water, and much more. Stable and effective political institutions make modern economic life possible. Absent government, markets cannot function, develop, or grow. From Aristotle to the original American Progressives, numerous political philosophers have argued that political institutions are a prerequisite for meaningful individual liberty and robust economic activity.

Fortunately, leftists have made this argument before (and lonely exemplars like Elizabeth Warren and E.J. Dionne still do). For example, the Left had to justify a public safety net before it could be built. When energy companies resisted regulation of leaded gasoline in the name of free markets, leftists argued that public health was a collective *and* individual good worth protecting. Leftists explained how government action was linked to moral principles like freedom, justice, equality, and prosperity. Such arguments have huge potential. They allow leftists to shift the ground of political arguments by refusing to define government in opposition to individual liberty. This reveals debates over the [size of government](#) to really be debates over the *type* of community life we want. Cultural leftists are often most interested—and justly so—in establishing a decent society where differences are tolerated. While this often requires less government, that's not always the case. Civil rights legislation is proof positive that properly configured public institutions can actually encourage cultural pluralism. Put simply, if leftists effectively explain how public institutions make freedom possible, they can focus on arguments about the quality of these institutions instead of getting bogged down in arguments over the quantity of regulation.

But in the post-*Citizens United* world, it's not enough for an idea to be *good*. Only ideas with organizational backing get a public hearing. Leftists must build a counterweight to balance conservative investment in developing strong moral arguments. This sort of energy isn't spontaneous. It takes committed resources. When prominent conservatives—from the Heritage Foundation to Glenn Beck to [The National Review](#)—launch wild-eyed attacks equating the American Left with Marxism, fascism, elitist technocracy, support for eugenics, etc, the Left needs to defend its history and its moral vision (to say nothing of its backbone). This requires progressive institutions that can balance the slate of conservative think tanks doing this work.

It all boils down to a simple problem: *leftists need to think harder about why they believe what they do*. Elected leftists and left-wing pundits should be prepared to creatively (and repeatedly) explain why their political goals are worthwhile—rather than solely trotting out novel policy tools for pursuing them. As the world clammers from the ruins of recent economic troubles, this case is easier than ever to make. It's time to re-explain liberalism to a country that's frustrated and ripe for its message. Otherwise leftists will be doomed (or *damned?*) to have the 2012 argument on conservatives' turf.

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