

Veil Politics in Liberal Democratic States

In this exciting and challenging account of the development and sustainability of the liberal democratic state, Ajume H. Wingo offers a completely new perspective from that provided by political theorists. Such theorists will typically argue for the basic values of liberal democracies by rationally justifying them. However, there is a significant gap between what people are rationally justified in believing and what they are actually motivated to do. Neglect of what actually motivates us to political action carries a great risk by leaving the motivation of citizens open to manipulation by opportunists.

This book argues that it is non-rational factors – rhetoric, symbols, traditions – that more often than not provide the real source of motivation. Drawing from both historical and philosophical sources, Wingo demonstrates that these “veils,” as he calls them, can play an essential role in a thriving, stable liberal democratic state. This theory of veil politics furnishes a conceptual framework within which we can reassess the role of aesthetics in politics, the nature and function of political myths in liberal democracies, and the value of civic education.

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With Preface by

JEREMY WALDRON



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*To my matrilineal ancestor, Ngonnso,
my late father, Wirngo,
and to Anna, Wirndzenyuy, and Leopoldine
– to my source and destination*

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In order that we should love our country, our country ought to be lovely.
– Edmund Burke

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Preface

Jeremy Waldron

Maurice and Hilda Friedman Professor of Law,
and Director of the Center for Law and Philosophy,
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Liberal political philosophy sometimes seems beset by a curiously naive literal-mindedness. We write as though the tasks of politics were reducible to the choice of principles, and as though principles formulated in the theorist's study could constitute the basic structure of a well-ordered society. We know, of course, that the articulation of principles for a liberal order is a tricky business; they have to be sensitive to all sorts of things, such as the tensions between liberty and equality, equality and opportunity, rights and efficiency, and stability and justice. And so we spend years – collectively we spend decades or generations – debating them, elaborating them, refining them. All this is done in the hope that *if only we could get the principles right*, we would have a basis for a decent, just, and prosperous social order, which could be enshrined in our laws and constitution.

Occasionally, in the wee small hours of the morning, it occurs to some of us that principles, formulated and refined by theorists, are not necessarily the key to a well-ordered society; laws and constitutions are often eclectic and half-coherent accumulations of wisdom rather than embodiments of well-worked-out principles; and anyway, laws and constitutions are not all that there is to social order. There is also the real world – the world of human nature in its more sordid or less calculable aspects, the world of chance and fortune, of crime, fanaticism, and war, of tears of pride and rage, the real world of faith, patriotism, and other creeds we would like to be able to dismiss as non-rational. Sometimes, it seems, these make a mockery of our devotion to principle-mongering. One response to these misgivings is to attempt a further refinement of our principles – attempting to make them more sensitive to various issues and vicissitudes of the real world. We might incorporate incentives into our theories or make greater provision for exceptions or sanctions or

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whatever. But a response of that kind seldom allays the nocturnal mis-giving. What torments some of us is the possibility that there might be something wrong with our entire orientation to politics. For example, there might be something awry with the idea that governance shares with theory an orientation *towards propositions*. Let me explain what I mean. A principle is a normative proposition that says that things ought to be thus-and-so. A law inspired by a principle is supposed to be an imperative proposition: Let things be thus-and-so (and let this-or-that person be responsible for making them thus-and-so). And the law (and the principle it embodies) is supposed to work when things actually *are* thus-and-so, that is, when the society in question is actually governed, through its laws, by the principles we have formulated in the way that the principles say it ought to be governed. Maybe – and this is the thought that, as I said, comes to us in the small hours of the morning – there is more (and less) to the good ordering of society than this. Think of it this way: A society is not just a set of states of affairs, corresponding (or failing to correspond) to the content of a given set of normative propositions. It is a congeries of relations, dispositions, and emotions that are implicated with one another and with shared arrays of fear, hope, and history, in ways that defy any tidy propositional scheme. Now perhaps it is the error of communitarians and nationalists to pretend that this congeries represents an homogenous body of experience rather than something rich, ragged, and variegated. But liberal political philosophers are always in danger of making the opposite mistake – of thinking that it can be ignored altogether, or simply dragooned into the service of efficiency or justice.

These thoughts are not original. Since Edmund Burke complained about “all the decent drapery of life” being “rudely torn off” by those who would reduce the science of government to a priori speculation, there has been no shortage of critics to challenge liberal theory on this ground. They line up around the block. But there has always been a shortage of thinkers willing to do the hard work of giving an *affirmative* account of what is supposed to be lacking in the liberal picture, thinkers who are not content merely to carp, but who set out to show what a richer and more adequate philosophy of politics would look like. Ajume Wingo is one of the very few who are willing and able to do this, and for that reason I believe this book marks the emergence of a refreshing new voice in political theory.

As you read on into *Veil Politics*, you will find a deep, subtle, and sometimes disconcerting account of the role of myth, symbolism, monument,

Preface

and ritual in modern politics. Much of it is about the United States: Dr. Wingo begins at the Lincoln Monument and proceeds down the Mall to end with some reflection on the racially rather sanitized depiction of American history in the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. In between, you will read about classroom history, war memorials, the inscriptions on our currency, the Confederate flag, the Great American Seal, and the Gettysburg Address. These are sites and emblems of a politics – and of a kind of legitimacy – that goes much deeper than proposition or principle. “To make us love our country,” wrote Burke, “our country ought to be lovely.” Well, these are places where the love is elicited or withheld, and where loveliness or its opposite are put on display for all to see. It is places like these we must recur to if we want to develop an aesthetics of governance.

But I don’t want to give the impression that *Veil Politics* is just about America, or that the part that is about America is an uncritical celebration. Quite the contrary – this book is also an account of the evasion, shame, dispute, and false consciousness embedded in this country’s iconography. What Wingo insists, however, is that these too are not just matters of the truth or falsity of propositions, or the satisfaction or violation of principles. They are not just about what lies behind the veil; they are features of the veil itself.

And *Veil Politics* is not just a study of America. The fact that it is above all a work of theory – a fine work of political theory – is an irony, I guess, in light of the way I began these comments. But Wingo has succeeded not just in his critique of contemporary theory; he has succeeded in his ambition to theorize the very matters whose absence from our conventional theorizing is the premise of his work. The veil politics of the United States may be the starting point, but what is important about this book is the reflection that they stimulate and the way that Dr. Wingo is able to fold that reflection back into the traditions and experience of existing theory, to complement it and enrich it. He is helped in this by a remarkable openness and generosity of spirit. I mentioned already that Wingo’s contribution is affirmative, rather than merely critical. His aim is not to discredit liberalism, as though that were worth doing for its own sake. Perhaps more generously than we liberal thinkers deserve, he sets out to nurture themes in liberal thought that have been subdued, and to push a little into the background those jagged aspects of our political philosophy that we have tended stupidly to exaggerate. He seeks to enrich and contextualize our discussions of legitimacy, autonomy, justice, even transparency, and to

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make us ponder their significance. He does not seek simply to discredit them.

At the dawn of our tradition, we learned from Aristotle that the best political theory is the offspring of comparative politics; we see how to theorize our own politics when we make it strange to ourselves by comparing it to the politics of another society. Now, as I said, Ajume Wingo writes about the United States, and it is contemporary American liberalism that he is seeking to enrich. But he does so as an outsider, an African, a Cameroonian, of royal blood and considerable political experience. Those who remain inward-looking quickly learn to miss or blur the most interesting features of the politics of their own society. There is no chance of that with this book. We should be grateful to Ajume Wingo for teaching us to see things new and for showing us – in a way that many of us would do well to imitate – how the new things that we see can be incorporated into our reflection on the things that for too long have been dominating our vision.

New York
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Acknowledgments

The satisfaction I take in having completed this book is like that of a gardener looking over his own small plot, seeing in its fruits his own labor and sweat and remembering not a few sleepless nights worrying over killing frosts, choking weeds, and withering droughts. But a gardener knows that the end of his labor depends on its beginnings; no amount of sweat and labor will yield a crop when the soil is barren, and no amount of restless tossing and turning in bed can help when the sun doesn't shine or the rain doesn't fall. In the course of writing *Veil Politics*, I've had the exceptionally good fortune of teachers, friends, and colleagues who have provided me with a fertile plot to work, helped me till and plant that plot, and pushed me to weed and nurture my ideas and arguments.

Two people deserve special mention for their role in the writing of this book. The first is Jeremy Waldron, whose kind encouragement so many years ago helped to germinate the first seeds of this book. He was the first person who listened to me talk about my ideas, and when he said "these are good ideas, stick to them," I heard and believed him. I can only hope that this book – in many ways the fruit borne of that first encouragement – adequately reflects how much his generosity and support have meant to me.

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