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 do 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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Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and Public Policy

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Veil Politics in Liberal Democratic States

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With Preface by
JEREMY WALDRON
To my matrilineal ancestor, Ngonnso,
my late father, Wirngo,
and to Anna, Wirndzenyuy, and Leopoldine
– to my source and destination
In order that we should love our country, our country ought to be lovely.
– Edmund Burke
# Contents

*Preface by Jeremy Waldron*  
*Acknowledgments*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface by Jeremy Waldron</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Introduction to Veil Politics</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Political Veils</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Structural and Functional Features of Veils</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.1 Veils as Aesthetic Adornment</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.2 Veils as Temptations</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.3 Veils as Idealizations</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.4 One Veil, Multiple Functions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Veil Politics in Practice</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Veils and Liberalism – An Essential Tension?</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.1 Opacity and Transparency Politics</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.2 Reason and Transparency</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Veil Politics in Political Philosophy</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Conclusion</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 History, Culture, and Persons</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Persons and Cultural Contexts</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Luck and Liberalism</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Liberal Democratic Theory and Rationality</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1 On the Problem of Pluralism</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2 On the Limits of Rationality</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Conclusion</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Liberalism and Veil Politics</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 A Challenge to Autonomy?</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Veils and Liberal Purposes</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

3.3. Tradition and Autonomy  
3.3.1. Autonomy through Tradition  
3.3.2. Tradition and Coercion  
3.4. Justification for Veils  
3.4.1. Actual Justification  
3.4.2. Hypothetical Justification  
3.5. Conclusion  

4. The Art of Liberal Politics  
4.1. Nonparticipatory Regimes  
4.1.1. Manipulative Regimes  
4.1.2. Pure Mythic Regimes  
4.1.3. Colonized Regimes  
4.2. Participatory Regimes  
4.3. A State in Search of a Nation  
4.3.1. Jefferson and the Design of a Veil  
4.3.2. Lincoln: Redefining a Political Veil  
4.3.3. Race, Equality, and the Declaration  
4.4. Conclusion  

5. Civic Education in a Liberal State  
5.1. Models of Liberal Civic Education  
5.1.1. Education for Autonomy: Gutmann on Civic Education  
5.1.2. The Problem of Implementation  
5.2. In Praise of a “Useful Past”  
5.2.1. Useful Pasts, Liberal Purposes  
5.2.2. Truth in False History  
5.2.3. Useful Pasts as Civic Ideals – The Myth of the Melting Pot  
5.3. Civic Education beyond the Classroom  
5.3.1. Civic Monuments and Memorials  
5.3.2. Slavery Reparations  
5.4. Civic Education beyond the Liberal State  

Bibliography  
Index
Preface

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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
Jeremy Waldron

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 gov-
erned, 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, correspond-
ing (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 pre-
tend 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 some-
times 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
Jeremy Waldron

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
July 30, 2002
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.

The second is Michael Kruse, a friend who stood by me from the beginning to the end of this project. He made valuable contributions to this book, reading each word of each draft, spending countless hours discussing, criticizing, and commenting on the arguments and ideas contained in this book. His critical eye forced me to think hard about – and sometimes, rethink entirely – many of the issues in the book, and while he reveled in playing devil’s advocate with respect to the details, maintained an abiding faith in me and the project.
Acknowledgments

The first recognizable ancestor of this book was my doctoral dissertation at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and my sincerest thanks go to the members of my committee for their support and encouragement: my advisor Patrick Riley, David Weberman, Paula Gottlieb, Yi-Fu Tuan, and Allen Buchanan. Since coming to Boston in 1997, I have been extremely fortunate to have access to some of the best minds in the field whose talents and abilities have been matched only by their generosity. Among these, I am especially grateful to Kwame Anthony Appiah and Kwasi Wiredu for the conversations we’ve had over the years on some of the ideas contained in this book. Thanks also to Jane Mansbridge, with whom I have had regular conversations on these issues, and my colleague Larry Blum, who read the entire manuscript and whose comments greatly improved Chapter 3. Sally Haslenger’s comments on Chapter 2 were also very useful, as were comments, criticisms, and suggestions from Meira Levinson, David Lyons, Valeria Ottonello, Mary Sarko, Steven Teles, and Flavio Baroncelli, all of whom generously read all or parts of the manuscript. To Sanford Levinson, a friend with whom I share an interest in public monuments, I owe many thanks as well, not just for his input on the manuscript, but also for the opportunity to present parts of Chapter 3 at a seminar at the Law School at the University of Texas at Austin.

I am grateful to Neal Bruss and Larry Foster at the University of Massachusetts for helping me make a case for a reduced teaching load for a semester that gave me time to complete the book. The W. E. B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard, the Institute on Race and Social Division at Boston University, and the McCormack Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Massachusetts–Boston also provided invaluable assistance in the form of fellowships that allowed me access not only to the superb research facilities at these institutions, but more importantly to their phenomenal academic communities. In particular, Glenn Loury, the director of the Institute on Race and Social Division, has helped me tremendously by organizing forums that allowed me to present and discuss my ideas with others. During my tenure at the Institute, I spent countless hours with him, discussing ideas that have helped me both in the writing of this book and beyond, and his sharp mind was one of the most important forces that helped me hone and clarify my arguments.

The names of two of my most insightful critics are, alas, unknown to me, being the anonymous referees for Cambridge University Press. Their candid observations and suggestions helped me greatly to improve the organization and arguments in the text. Their thoughtful
input has been but one part of the exemplary work Cambridge University Press has done in producing this book. To Douglas MacLean and Terence Moore (general series editor and general editor, respectively), I can only begin to express how grateful I am for their confidence in and support of this project from beginning to finish.

Finally, I would like to give a special acknowledgment to those who placed me on the path to this project. To Dennis O’Reilly, Janet Allen, Paul and Emy Gartzke, Elisabeth Bienert, Aaron Hyman, and Daniel Baker, I am especially grateful for the friendship and support they so freely offered to a newcomer to this country. To Bernard Williams, Janet Broughton, Samuel Scheffler, and John Searle, I offer heartfelt thanks for their inspiring example as teachers and wise instruction that first led me to political philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley.