

*Review Essay:*

**AN AMERICAN POLITICS OF PARADOX?**  
The Legacy of Wilson Carey McWilliams

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*Redeeming Democracy in America.* By Wilson Carey McWilliams. Edited by Patrick J. Deneen and Susan J. McWilliams. Lawrence, KS: UP of Kansas, 2011.

*The Democratic Soul: A Wilson Carey McWilliams Reader.* By Wilson Carey McWilliams. Edited by Patrick J. Deneen and Susan J. McWilliams. Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 2011.

**I**n *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville worried that individualism would eventually threaten American democracy. Citizens would become increasingly “self-absorbed” and increasingly less concerned with the commonweal. They would retreat into their own endeavors and their own homes. Individualism would slowly leech away the rich associational life that Tocqueville saw as the lifeblood of the American polis.

The late political theorist Wilson Carey McWilliams (1933-2005) made this insight a cornerstone of his project. He held that, despite its express liberalism, American democracy has been built on relationships and sociality—on family, association, community, and church—not on the atomistic individuals of liberal theory. McWilliams thus stressed the importance of an “equality of spirit” or “equal dignity” that moves us to care about and act on the behalf of our

neighbors, fellow citizens, and the common good.<sup>1</sup> McWilliams claimed that such an equality of spirit long animated American life, but has been in decline:

Throughout American history, equality—with all its ancient heritage and associations—has rivaled liberty, the gonfalon of modernity. But their political battles have been fought on a modern field and by rules that the framers devised. Gradually, equality has retreated. Even those who are attracted find it an increasingly stern ideal, for equality is distant from our present life, demanding sacrifice, patience, and devotion, and all of these qualities are in short supply in our contemporary life.<sup>2</sup>

The gradual erosion of equality of spirit has contributed to our current predicament, one warned against by Tocqueville, in which “the associations to which Americans have turned for identity and meaning—love, the family, and communities of all sorts—are increasingly weak and short-lived.”<sup>3</sup> In a time when “power must expand to answer power,”<sup>4</sup> the fragile ecosystem of associations has been increasingly dominated or usurped by the “superpowers” of corporation and state.<sup>5</sup> It has been further undercut by mass media and marketing, which can be “effective instruments of control.”<sup>6</sup>

McWilliams was often critical of the American founding’s debt to liberal individualism. He claims that “Democratic citizenship requires that we love our fellows enough to sacrifice for them, when necessary abridging our natural rights to liberty, life, and property out of a sense of civic obligation.”<sup>7</sup> McWilliams’s equality ties individual rights to social and civic duties. It is not an “equal treatment founded in a combination of individualism, self-concern, and felt

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Democratic Soul: A Wilson Carey McWilliams Reader*, ed. Patrick J. Deneen and Susan J. McWilliams (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 33. The classic study of this trend is Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). For Alexis de Tocqueville, see *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> McWilliams, *The Democratic Soul*, 212.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson Carey McWilliams, *Redeeming Democracy in America*, ed. Patrick J. Deneen and Susan J. McWilliams (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 60.

weakness.”<sup>8</sup> It is instead a “civic, or communitarian, equality, based on a sense of equal worth.”<sup>9</sup> It depends on character and virtue. McWilliams valued the Anti-Federalists in part because they emphasized this. They drew more on classical and Christian notions of citizenship, while the Federalists drew more on liberalism.<sup>10</sup>

Equality of spirit and sacrifice are not absent from the Declaration of Independence, but it does stress individual rights more than civic duties.<sup>11</sup> McWilliams highlights this by comparing the Declaration to an earlier foundational document—“A Modell of Christian Charity,” the 1630 sermon delivered by John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, aboard the *Arabella*. While the Declaration begins by asserting “self-evident” equality, “A Modell of Christian Charity” begins with the rather more obvious fact that we are all born with different abilities and positions. Yet Winthrop uses I Corinthians 1:10 to argue that Christian charity can “knit” together the disparate Puritan colonists into one body, allowing them to care for each other and serve the community. McWilliams paraphrases Winthrop: “God made human beings different so that they would be forced by need to recognize communality and prodded toward equality.”<sup>12</sup> The Declaration uses an appeal to equality to justify individual rights. Winthrop begins with the reverse, material and physical inequality, in order to highlight the need for social obligations. McWilliams sees a spirit of equality and sacrifice similar to Winthrop’s echoed in the Gettysburg

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 150. McWilliams again follows Tocqueville in drawing the distinction between these two forms of equality.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-150.

<sup>10</sup> McWilliams notes, though, that the Anti-Federalists often express these older sentiments in the liberal terminology of their day.

<sup>11</sup> In McWilliams’s reading the Declaration, though obviously indebted to Lockean liberalism, contains “artful ambiguities” that allow for a Calvinist reading. He claims that “the Declaration does not say there is no authority prior to government; it does not refer to a ‘state of nature’ or even to a ‘social contract.’ Rather, Jefferson used a term with grand, Calvinist associations, saying that ‘to secure these rights, governments are *instituted*.” McWilliams claims that both the Declaration and the Constitution contain “silences and ambiguities” that allow for a more overtly religious (and more overtly communitarian) readings. Still, they tilt toward liberalism. They “change the terms of the debate between two visions of equality and political community, giving the ‘spirit of liberty’ a comfort in the laws that is denied to ‘the spirit of religion.’” See *Redeeming Democracy in America*, 59-61.

<sup>12</sup> McWilliams, *Redeeming Democracy in America*, 60.

Address and elsewhere in the American political tradition, but “the Declaration and the Constitution accept a lower standard, a more diffuse and diverse communion, its union relying on cooler sentiments and calculations of interest.”<sup>13</sup>

Throughout his career, McWilliams sought to discern an “alternative” American political tradition, made up of figures like the Anti-Federalists and John Winthrop, which champions equality of spirit, fraternity, and associations. This tradition at times complements but often critiques the dominant liberal tradition. For McWilliams, the dialectic between the two traditions is important. He does not want to jettison liberalism altogether. He would not deny, for instance, that the Puritans could be intolerant, and violently so.<sup>14</sup> Like Marcia Pally, McWilliams sees the value and danger of both “situatedness” and “separability,” the two opposed but interlocking “strains of Western modernity.”<sup>15</sup> McWilliams worries, though, that in America the advocates of “situatedness,” the figures in his alternative tradition, are always in danger of being drowned out by the liberal tradition’s champions of “separability.”

The Bible, especially Calvinist readings of the Bible, frequently animates McWilliams’s alternative tradition. He calls these biblical appeals the “second voice in the grand dialogue of American political culture, an alternative to the ‘liberal tradition’ set in the deepest foundations of American life.”<sup>16</sup> This “second voice” warns against “self-idolatry.”<sup>17</sup> It contends that “paradoxically, self-centeredness is really self-denial. Human beings need to be brought to justice—to the recognition that they are dependent parts of a good whole—in order to be

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>14</sup> Nor would he deny that the two traditions can always be easily divided. The work of Thomas Jefferson, for instance, cuts across both traditions. Indeed, many of the figures McWilliams discusses are still liberals of some stripe, but they are liberals who recognize the importance of fraternity, associations, and sociality.

<sup>15</sup> Marcia Pally, “Opposing Strains of Western Modernity: Situatedness and Separability,” *TELOSscope* (blog), Telos Press, December 5, 2012). Accessed online: <http://www.telospress.com/opposing-strains-of-western-modernity-situatedness-and-separability/>.

<sup>16</sup> McWilliams, *Redeeming Democracy in America*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 35.

reconciled to themselves.”<sup>18</sup> It warns not only against self-idolatry, though. The Calvinist Bible also teaches that “all regimes can become idols.”<sup>19</sup> While churches in America were too often “persuaded to moralize competitive individualism, material success, and historical progress and to elide, if not deny, the limits to human mastery and perfectibility,” “the Bible was always some sort obstacle to the ‘spiritual mobilization’ of the church in support of liberal, commercial, and political society. The very existence of the text, with its all-too-different message, was a standing reminder of moral compromises and betrayals of the faith.”<sup>20</sup> The “second voice” is also suspicious of secular utopianism, which forgets “that most empirical of biblical teachings, the observation that human beings are imperfect creatures, in whose hands power for good always involves power for evil.”<sup>21</sup>

McWilliams hears deep resonances of the “second voice” in the Puritans and the Anti-Federalists. But his wider alternative tradition is polyphonic, including perspectives both religious and secular, and extends closer to contemporary radicals. It is made up of an eclectic cast of key figures, as different from each other as Alexis de Tocqueville and James Baldwin, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Walt Whitman, Henry Adams and Martin Luther King, Jr., union members and divines.

McWilliams explored this alternative tradition at length in his 1973 magnum opus *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, but he also explored it in many essays, a generous sampling of which are gathered in these two posthumously published volumes edited by Patrick Deneen, McWilliams’s student and a Notre Dame political theorist, and Susan J. McWilliams, his daughter and a political theorist at Pomona College.

The two volumes have different emphases. Both include a number of sweeping essays on American political thought that sketch out McWilliams’s project in broad strokes. Both also include more narrow thematic essays on subjects ranging from censorship and democratic multiculturalism (*The*

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 53.

*Democratic Soul*) to science and political parties (*Redeeming Democracy in America*). *The Democratic Soul* is distinguished by an extended critical introduction and a number of essays on political thinkers: George Orwell, Reinhold Niebuhr, Amitai Etzioni, Bertrand de Jouvenel, and Leo Strauss. One of the best essays in the volume, “Power After Power,” responds to the seminal work of Sheldon Wolin, who was one of McWilliams’s teachers at Berkeley. *Redeeming Democracy in America*, on the other hand, is focused more on the “second voice” of religion in American politics. It includes provocative essays such as “The Bible in the American Political Tradition” and “Protestant Prudence and Natural Rights.” It also includes a helpful bibliography of McWilliams’s many publications. Both volumes are carefully edited and each includes an extensive index.

Deneen and Susan McWilliams’s introductions to these two volumes (especially the lengthy introduction to *The Democratic Soul*) constitute an excellent critical biography of McWilliams. They show that he did not just write about associational life in America; he lived it. He was a dedicated teacher at Rutgers University and an active citizen in his local community. His critiques of capitalism and his concern for social justice drew him to the Democratic Party, but his “relationship to the left was itself anguished”: “His defense of family and other ‘traditional’ arrangements, his criticisms of the idea of a ‘right to choose’ or a ‘right to privacy,’ and his defense of the ‘great books’—among other positions—made him at least as often a critic of modern ‘liberals’ and ‘progressives’ . . .”<sup>22</sup>

McWilliams’s political sensibility is one with deep roots, but it is also a sensibility that is often eyed warily. It is indebted to the Aristotelian premise that humans are political animals, that true freedom does not mean unlimited license but participation in the good. It is often Calvinist in tenor, with an emphasis on “the fact of human fallenness, our partiality, our pride, and our need for stern but loving guidance.”<sup>23</sup> McWilliams’s shared this sensibility with fellow traveler Christopher Lasch, who sought to recover his own “alternative” tradition in works like *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics*.<sup>24</sup> The radical politics

<sup>22</sup> McWilliams, *Redeeming Democracy in America*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001). See also Eric Miller’s *Hope in a Scattering Time: A Life of Christopher Lasch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

of McWilliams and Lasch could anger both social libertarians on the left and economic libertarians on the right, while offering insights to those disenchanted with liberal orthodoxy.

There is of course a spectrum of what are often called communitarian thinkers (some of whom would name that label a dudgeon), spanning liberal communitarians and anti-liberal communitarians. At one end of the spectrum, there are those like E. J. Dionne, Amitai Etzioni, Michael Sandel, and Charles Taylor who see communitarianism as the social corrective that will sustain liberal political institutions.<sup>25</sup> At the other end of the spectrum are figures like Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas who see this as the equivalent of trying to staunch a gaping wound with a Band-Aid. For MacIntyre, the liberal apparatus cannot be redeemed. Principled retreat into intentional communities—or for Hauerwas the “alien church”—is the only hope.

Harsh critics, McWilliams and Lasch straddle the contentious middle of this spectrum.<sup>26</sup> They see much antagonism between liberalism and associations. Yet they do not argue for a retreat from active engagement but instead advocate renewed attention to civic virtue and civic participation, along with the recovery of alternative traditions that challenge liberalism’s assumptions and narrative. McWilliams and Lasch are perhaps close on the communitarian spectrum to Catholic Social Thought and to political thinkers of the Radical Orthodoxy movement like John Milbank and Adrian Pabst.<sup>27</sup> RO has articulated a “politics

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<sup>25</sup> This is evident in E. J. Dionne, Jr.’s recent study of American communitarianism, *Our Divided Political Heart: The Battle for the American Idea in an Age of Discontent* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012). This is a useful study, but it consistently downplays the tensions between left-communitarianism and left-liberalism. This tendency is clearest in Dionne’s historical narrative when he emphasizes the continuity between populism and progressivism, a move that defangs the former of its radicalism. See pages 189-226.

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that the later Lasch leans more toward anti-liberalism than does McWilliams. Their projects are certainly not identical. McWilliams’s alternative tradition focuses on equality of spirit; Lasch’s alternative tradition focuses on critiques of progress.

<sup>27</sup> This is not to deny significant differences. The major difference is between the Catholic sensibility of RO and the Calvinist sensibility of McWilliams and Lasch. McWilliams, for instance, puts a greater emphasis on human fallenness. Original sin is more central to his political project than it is to RO’s. RO turns frequently to metaphysics, McWilliams to biblical narrative. Christopher Lasch argues that a growing awareness of ecological limits dealt the deathblow to liberalism’s narratives of progress. Pabst and Milbank, on the other hand, have joined Benedict XVI in being sensitive to ecological concerns but also opposing a potentially misanthropic “secular logic of scarcity of resources.” Adrian Pabst, “Introduction: The Future

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of paradox” in which a radical communitarian emphasis on relationality contests the binary of left and right liberalism. McWilliams and Lasch challenge political categories in a similar way. For RO, which has at times dismissed the United States as a hegemony of the crassest liberalism, these two thinkers may suggest that the U.S. has a more textured political past and some resources for self-critique and renewal.

Questions can be asked about the make-up of McWilliams’s “alternative tradition.” It is light on Catholic thought in the United States, especially from the early decades of the twentieth century, such as John Ryan’s work on the living wage and Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker Movement. McWilliams also sidesteps the problematic territory of southern political thought. Antebellum defender of slavery George Fitzhugh’s trenchant and troubling critiques of liberalism, for instance, deserve more careful treatment than they receive from McWilliams.<sup>28</sup> One can understand his hesitancy to follow the late Eugene Genovese into this thicket, but it is perhaps the obligation of anyone constructing an alternative communitarian tradition in America to do so. At the same time, it seems unfair to criticize such a capacious project for what it leaves out.

After stirrings of localism and of democratic movements like Occupy Wall Street at the beginning of the recession, left and right in the United States now seem to be more dominated than ever by liberalism. Bush’s compassionate conservatism on the right is a distant memory. Gone too is the grassroots communitarianism of Obama’s first presidential campaign. We are left with libertarianism, utilitarianism, technocracy and a populace that seems to have little interest in the hard work of governing itself. McWilliams’s writings thus remain timely and incisive. These volumes will introduce the “alternative tradition” to a new generation of citizens. If a “politics of paradox” ever gains steam in the United States, the big-hearted and insightful McWilliams will most certainly be remembered as one of its prophets.

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of Political Economy,” in *The Crisis of Global Capitalism: Pope Benedict XVI’s Social Encyclical and the Future of Political Economy*, ed. Adrian Pabst (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 1-26, here at 15.

<sup>28</sup> See Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), 260-270.