Sacrificing Liberty: George Grant on Liberalism, Technology, and Progress

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Abstract: This article explores and responds to George Grant's analysis of the tension between liberalism and progressivism, particularly with respect to the "progress" of technology. The promise of liberal pluralism, namely a diversity of tastes and values, often comes up short against the reality of a public unity of taste and value in favor of progress and the spread of technology and its foreseeable consequences. Liberalism has, perhaps paradoxically, fostered the spread of illiberal phenomena with the aid of technology. While Grant's critiques have intuitive appeal and explanatory power, I argue that Grant underemphasizes a strain of liberalism that has a moral core that could provide a limiting principle against technology on liberalism's own grounds. That is, a certain liberal concept of freedom could provide the resources to critique technology as threatening to that freedom's development and exercise. Liberalism's much-remarked-upon "failure" may then not be an inevitability, though liberals attempting to preserve human good against technology would do well to grapple with Grant's analysis.

Keywords: George Grant, Technology, Liberalism, Progressivism, Liberty, Freedom

INTRODUCTION

On the question of technology, progress, and the relationship of liberalism to both, George Grant was in many ways a forerunner of our contemporary postliberal moment. In prefacing his chapter on technology in the infamous *Why Liberalism Failed,* for example, Patrick Deneen alleges that liberalism contains no internal limiting principle that would allow itself to oppose the progress of even the most inhuman technologies. As with other developments in liberalism, the spread of technology is one of the "[bases] of liberalism's success" which almost paradoxically "ushers in the conditions for [liberalism's] own demise" (Deneen 2018, p. 90). That is, technology expanded many kinds of liberty in obvious ways, but ultimately did not uphold or sustain the ideals of liberalism. The unified embrace of one kind of freedom, freedom to do as one wishes, as the highest human good, or at minimum the highest political good, and the faith in a kind of progress ultimately leaves liberalism impotent to address some of its most pressing problems at the hands of technology: alienation, oppression, expansion of state and corporate power over the individual, and more.

This and other critiques are, in many ways, echoing arguments advanced by Grant many decades ago. These views get an early statement in Grant's landmark work *Lament for a Nation* and gain fuller expression in his later writings on technology specifically. The tension between liberalism and progressivism that Grant presciently identified is a tension between competing, contradictory claims of highest goods, or perhaps denial of the ability to discern highest goods. By embracing what Grant calls "open-ended freedom," freedom without an end goal defined with reference to human goods, North American liberalism paradoxically entrenches a homogenous, conformist culture. While ostensibly allowing maximal free choice, in reality, the public sphere embraces the dogma of progress which can hardly be questioned. The diversity championed by liberalism is or will be swallowed up by technological progress at its expense. Grant thus asks his readers seriously to consider that the growth of liberty and the spread of technology, though often happening together in historical fact, may ultimately be at odds in principle and in demonstrable ways.

Where Grant perhaps errs, and where other critics might unfortunately follow him in that error, is in the firm statement that "Liberalism… denies unequivocally that there are any given restraints that might hinder pursuit of dynamic dominance" (Grant 1965, p. 57). While it may be historically true that limiting principles within liberalism were in some sense on the "losing" side, at least in the grand march of the history of ideas, there are ideas internal to liberalism that can oppose the relentless pursuit of "dynamic dominance."[1] Namely, a view of liberty as a normative good that requires some education or training to be prepared for it would be capable of maintaining principles by which it could criticize or actively oppose certain forms of progress if they were found to be limiting to that liberty. To the extent that liberalism may lack the teeth to actually bring about this resistance, Grant's criticism may hold, but I will argue that liberalism's failures against progress are at least partially due to a liberal self-forgetting, forsaking or sacrificing principles previously considered integral to it, or at least to certain forms of it.[2]

I will begin by surveying and summarizing Grant's argument, then assessing its persuasiveness and accuracy some 60 years since its formulation and finally conclude by suggesting that even students and appreciators of Grant can find some grounds for hope in portions of the liberal tradition.

PROGRESS AND/OR PLURALITY

Grant's *Lament for a Nation* begins in a way likely to feel foreign for most contemporary readers. To start, for many readers the concerns feel literally foreign; Americans encountering Grant might puzzle over the relevance of Canadian election results from the distant decades past. The political concerns, too, might feel outdated. Debates over the wisdom of NORAD, the extent of Canadian entanglement with United States foreign affairs, these are issues that are at least not perceived as ones of pressing contemporary relevance.[3] Readers struggling to latch on to the abiding relevance of the work may find, when Grant turns specifically to broader political ideologies and new technologies, that they have found the meat of the case.

When Grant turns to the doctrine of progress midway through *Lament for a Nation,* he begins with a claim liable to shock some readers: "North American liberalism expresses the belief in open-ended progress more accurately than Marxism" (Grant 1965, p. 56). I say this claim might be shocking because, by many common understandings, Marxism represents a belief in progress *par excellence,* an embrace of progress in history driving humanity toward a future paradisical vision of an absence of scarcity and the presence of real equality. Communism and utopian thinking are, in many minds, synonymous, both forms of what Eric Voegelin so memorably identified as modern manifestations of Gnosticism (Voegelin 1987). In what sense, then, does North American liberalism embrace and express a belief in progress that is "open-ended" in a way that Marxism does not?

Grant clarifies: the doctrine of progress itself within liberalism has become divorced from any substantive concept of the good for human beings or what is good for them. In a measured kind of praise, Grant says that "In Marxism, technology remains an instrument that serves human good" (Grant 1965, p. 56). That is, Marxism maintains a concept of what is good for human beings and sees the progress of history and the unfolding of material conditions in history as ultimately ending at some "human good." While new

productive technologies are, indeed, alienating to the worker under capitalism, they represent a marked improvement in the situation of man's life in the world prior to the capitalistic mode of production. Of life prior to the advent of this period or in the absence of new productive means of production, Adam Smith could say, and Marx could follow, that "Such nations, however, are so miserably poor that, from mere want, they are frequently reduced, or at least thing themselves reduced, to the necessity sometimes of directly destroying, and sometimes of abandoning their infants, their old people, and those afflicted with lingering diseases, to perish with hunger, or to be devoured by wild beasts" (Smith 1981, p. 10). In contrast, what Smith calls "civilized and thriving nations" produce a surplus that enables care even for those who do not work. Continuing in the progress of history, in the long run it is technology that enables material and spiritual progress on the Marxist account. As Grant understands Marxism, this "progress," is understood as such with reference to a potential end state, an end state which is itself defined by the needs and goods of and for human beings.

Liberalism, in contrast, embraces "an open-ended progression in which men will be endlessly free to make the world as they want it… It understands more fully the implications of man's essence being his freedom" (Grant 1965, p. 56). Liberalism, on this understanding, becomes a kind of political philosophy of existentialist essence-creation, where what is "good" is measured not with reference to any conception of human nature, but with reference to the increased power of men to remake the world in whatever manner they choose. Grant continues: "As liberals become more and more aware of the implications of their own doctrine, they recognize that no appeal to human good, now or in the future, must be allowed to limit their freedom to make the world as they choose. Social order is a man-made convenience, and its only purpose is to increase freedom" (Grant 1965, pp. 56, 57). By purging any substantive account of human goods or ends, liberalism is freed to single-mindedly seek progress without an ideal or end goal in sight.

This full-throated embrace of progress for the sake of progress, freedom to progress against any appeal to human good, is seen in Grant's later essay "Thinking About Technology." Exploring what he calls the "co-penetration of knowing and making" (Grant 1991, p. 12), Grant argues that in the modern approach to science, flowing from modern philosophy, the mere ability to do something is cleanly taken as the necessity of doing something, competing claims about what is "good" for human beings notwithstanding. In fact, the progress of modern political philosophy has led to

> … a great change… in the public conceiving of goodness…. The modern conception of goodness is of our free creating of richness and greatness of life and all that is advantageous thereto. The presently popular phrase in the modern account is 'quality of life.' The modern conception of goodness does not include the assertion of a claim upon us which properly orders our desires in terms of owing, and which is itself the route and fulfilment for desire. In the prevalent modern view, owing is always provisional upon what we desire to create. Obviously we live in the presence of the existence of others, and our creating may perforce be limited because of what is currently permitted legally to be done to others. However, the limitations put upon creating by the claims of others, whether nationally or internationally, are understood as contractual: that is, provisional. (Grant 1991, p. 30).

Whatever works to improve my quality of life, in other words, is desirable regardless of what it might do to the quality of life of others, and does not permit reference to any outside, constraining standard of goodness, no higher cause. No arguments about the good of local independence, diversity of communities, or preservation of nature or the cleanliness of the environment could be advanced against automobiles and the highways on which they drive; the imposition of homogenizing interstates and rapid-speed transportation could not be held back by arguments about the rooted, embodied needs of human beings. As Grant put it in the earlier essay, "What matters is that men shall be able to do what they want, when they want" (Grant 1965, p. 57).

FREEDOM OR IMPOSITION?

Returning to *Lament,* Grant continues:

> Liberalism is the fitting ideology for a society directed toward these ends. It denies unequivocally that there are any given restraints that might hinder pursuit of dynamic dominance. In political terms, liberalism is now an appeal for "the end of ideology." This means that we must experiment in shaping society unhindered by any preconceived notions of good. "The end of ideology" is the perfect slogan for men who want to do what they want. Liberalism is, then, the faith that can understand progress as an extension into the unlimited possibility of the future. It does this much better than Marxism, which still blocks progress by its old-fashioned ideas of the perfectability of man (Grant 1965, pp. 57, 58).

But it is precisely this imposing character of the products of North American liberalism that cuts against many liberal intuitions. Liberals once defended an appealing picture of taste pluralism that would obtain in a society freed of objective standards of human good: if "The human good is what we choose for our good," (Grant 1965, p. 57) and our choices are matters of taste, which are subjective, then a liberal order considered good with reference to its own ideals ought to preserve at least the possibility of a plurality of tastes and values. This is precisely what other liberals have defended: "In an earlier generation, liberals such as John Dewey claimed that this doctrine improved upon the past because it guaranteed a society in which all could do what they wanted, in which the standards of some would not be imposed upon others. Tastes are different, and we should have a society that caters to the plurality of tastes" (Ibid.). But has this plurality of tastes been preserved? Grant argues no.

As perhaps a trite example, related to the homogenization occasioned by the proliferation of automobiles mentioned above: Though car drivers are trivially in control of the direction in which their car is driving, their use of the car is dependent on a much larger system with assumptions that go far beyond the mere individual choice to use a car or not use one, and for which purposes. This leads inexorably to a smoothing-over of traditional distinctions between places, visible in the common commercial institutions, loss of local traditions, decline in traditional cultures, and so on. This can easily be seen by the presence of familiar corporate coffee chains and fast-food restaurants in even some of the most historic cities on earth. This is precisely the baked-in assumptions inherent to technology that Grant articulates so well in "Thinking About Technology," where automobiles and computers alike are cast as having an intended use, a normative directionality, and foreseeable consequences that cut against our intuitions of their supposed "neutrality" as tools. The ubiquity of these new tools then represents the widespread imposition of their use and the assumptions inherent in that use, namely a homogenization both of consumer taste, represented in commercial homogeneity, and of acceptable values themselves.

Grant argues that the dominating faith in technological progress and the engineering of humanity's destiny has, in contrast to earlier liberal faith in the union of progress and plurality of tastes, actually imposed a unified approach to the world. Where the Deweys of liberal history promised free expression of a broad variety of tastes,

> This is not what is happening in our state capitalism. In the private spheres, all kinds of tastes are allowed. Nobody minds very much if we prefer women or dogs or boys, as long as we cause no public inconvenience. But in the public sphere, such pluralism of taste is not permitted. The conquest of human and non-human nature becomes the only public value (Ibid.).

The pluralism of private taste, in other words, cannot simultaneously admit fervent public opposition to the central doctrine of progress. If tastes are to be free and unfettered and diverse, they must be so in the domain of the "private." Publicly speaking, Grant argues, no "taste" or "value" that opposes the march of

technological progress will be entertained or admitted. In a seemingly strange but ultimately foreseeable way, two parts of the modern story, liberal pluralism and technological optimism, seem to have come to oppose one another.

This is precisely the story that Grant is telling both in *Lament* and elsewhere. In his *English-Speaking Justice,* for example, Grant outlines a central tension in what he there calls English-speaking liberalism, which I take to be roughly identical to what Grant in *Lament* calls North American liberalism. Grant there distinguishes English-speaking liberalism from progressivism in that modern liberals are concerned with "much more than a justification of progress in the mastery of human and non-human nature" (Grant 1998, p. 5). Rather, moderns have "affirmed that any regime to be called good, and any progress to be called good, must include political liberty and consent" (Ibid.). That is, progress within liberal politics is, or at least ought to be, weighed against the liberal value system. Progress is not viewed as an inherent good. This is an important distinction, crucial to the tension Grant develops as he delves further into John Rawls' theory of justice throughout the work. Mere progressivism apart from an affirmation of contract-based liberty would be a fundamentally consistent political philosophy, toward which things may be trending. However, modern man often finds himself in a tense position of paradoxically affirming both liberalism and technological progress.

Part I of *English-Speaking Justice* begins with an exposition of the interrelation between liberalism and technology. Grant writes:

> Over the last centuries, the most influential people in the English-speaking world have generally taken as their dominant form of self-definition a sustaining faith in a necessary interdependence between the developments of technological science and political liberalism. Most of our scientists have been political (and indeed moral and religious) liberals (Grant 1998, p. 3).

Grant goes on to note that "some convinced modern liberals" speak of their political philosophy as if it is a "product of modern science itself" (Ibid.). However, Grant challenges this innate notion by presenting two propositions:

> On the one hand, [liberalism] is the only political language that can sound a convincing moral note in our public realms. On the other hand, there are signs that modern liberalism and technology, though they have been interdependent, may not necessarily be mutually sustaining, and that their identity may not be given in the nature of reason itself. These two propositions are fundamental to this writing (Grant 1998, p. 6).

To simply summarize, modern man in the English-speaking world believes the "best expression of moral truth" is found in liberal philosophy (Grant 1998, p. 7). However, a simple glance at our current technological situation tells us that "technological development does not sustain political liberalism" (Grant 1998, p. 8). Technology, while aided in its progress by liberalism, has created illiberal phenomena. Grant here refers to Heidegger and argues, "the sciences are now organized around cybernetics—the technology of the helmsman…. Technology organizes a system which requires a massive apparatus of artisans concerned with the control of human beings" (Grant 1998, p. 9).

Of course, Grant is fully aware of the dark irony of Heidegger's role as a critic of technology and a simultaneous unflinching proponent of perhaps the most machine-like political system of extermination in human history. But this use of Heidegger is intentional and reflects a key point of concern for Grant: in their fundamentals, in the spirit that drives them, in their reference to or rather rejection of substantive concepts of the Good, both liberalism and fascism enable the worst abuses of humanity technology enables.[4] Moving beyond Grant's technological time, we might say that a Nazi could only dream of the species-shaping opportunities enabled by ever-more-powerful reproductive technologies that have found a market and a welcome society under liberalism.

A BRIEF LIBERAL REPLY

It may be, however, that Grant's criticism of liberalism, though compelling and accurate in fact, misses components of liberalism that its proponents would do well to resuscitate. Namely, Grant argues that liberal freedom requires freedom to relentlessly pursue progress regardless of the cost. But both before and since Grant's time, this system of control was or has been under scrutiny by those within the liberal tradition.

As a relatively contemporary example, Francis Fukuyama's *Our Posthuman Future* (Fukuyama 2002) offers a kind of liberal Aristotelian argument against new biotechnologies, namely that in their attempts to modify human nature, these technologies have dramatic implications for all nature-based ethical systems and the concept of human equality itself. By bringing a modified teleological approach into his liberal democratic theorizing, Fukuyama thus offers a rejoinder against Grant's claim that no opposition to dynamic freedom is available. Whether or not Fukuyama's argument would be persuasive to Grant or will be persuasive to those who share his views is a separate matter from the simple fact that rejoinders have been made and ought to be grappled with by those critics of liberalism who suggest there are none.

Surely Grant cannot be faulted for failing to respond to a work out of time, but there are those with whom Grant was familiar who could be marshalled to similar purposes. Adam Smith, for example, fits neatly into the history of English-speaking liberalism that Grant identifies, and as such is likely to fall beneath his critiques of the same. But it is Smith who, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith 1982), suggests that one who has honed the twin virtues of sympathy and self-command will have achieved the "perfection" of human nature. This form of liberalism, championed by thinkers like Smith and noted of late by thinkers like Kahan, has a moral dimension that guides its approach to progress much in the way Grant grudgingly credits Marxism with doing the same. In other words, though it may still share failings with other thinner forms of liberalism, not all liberalism lacks the limiting principles that leave it impotent in the face of progress.

This moral dimension to liberalism may be somewhat unfashionable. A strident critic such as Grant would also likely suggest that the moral dimensions, such as they existed within liberalism, were untenable in the face of the singular embrace of freedom as the highest knowable good for human beings. The fact remains, however, that within liberalism there remains a strain that argues that freedom properly conceived is not merely the freedom to do as one wishes, but the freedom to develop into the proper enjoyment of that freedom. This approach to liberalism is conceived by its proponents not, at core, "an open-ended progression in which men will be endlessly free to make the world as they want it," but rather as an opening of the avenues of the development of virtue.

Grant's reply to such a suggestion might also come from *English-Speaking Justice,* namely that the English-speaking liberalism that ultimately gave birth to Rawls, who he so roundly critiques, is an inheritor of a Lockean turn that dismisses the Aristotelian tradition's belief in a *summum bonum* based on man's nature. "To Locke, the untruth of the traditional teaching means that there is no such highest good given to human beings in their recognition of the way things are" (Grant 1998, p. 17). Instead, the "way things are" lends itself to contractual justice. Justice, on both the Lockean and Rawlsian accounts, is rendered an artifact created to solve problems of inconvenience inherent in nature, not a virtue related to the nature of man and his highest good. Rawls does, Grant argues, strongly differ from Locke, in that the Rawlsian original position is entirely an abstraction from reality, while Locke believes the state of nature is a truth about reality. Nevertheless, in the absence of the older teleology, is it not clear that the better form of liberalism would lead to its lesser, later counterpart? Like his measured praise for Marxism in *Lament,* Grant's concessions to certain liberals in *English-Speaking Justice* are heavy with criticism.

Grant's thorough-going critique of liberalism would likely put to rest the notion of trying to resuscitate the virtues of liberalism by returning to other sources within the same flawed tradition. But if we contemporary citizens of liberal democratic societies are unwilling fully to follow Grant down his own homogenizing path, if we are unwilling to equate the ideas, institutions, and outcomes of liberalism and totalitari-

anism, it is possible that we can constructively receive his criticisms and seek at the very least for the best, neglected parts of the tradition in which we live.[5]

CONCLUSION

In Plato's (1991) *Republic,* Socrates memorably describes the different types of regimes as reflective of the different types of souls that inhabit them. Each soul has a sort of ruling chief concern, a fundamental care it values above all else. This fundamental care is echoed in the political arrangement of the corresponding city. The democratic soul is of particular note for contemporary readers, as Plato seems to have been given prophetic insight into the habits of mind and character of the contemporary college students to whom the text is often taught. One whose soul is democratic embraces the principle of equality, unable to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures, and unable to determine what is noble and worthy with any constancy. Instead, the democratic man is one who:

> Lives along day by day, gratifying the desire that occurs to him, at one time drinking and listening to the flute, at another downing water and reducing; now practicing gymnastic, and again idling and neglecting everything; and sometimes spending his time as though he were occupied with philosophy. Often he engages in politics and, jumping up, says and does whatever chances to come to him. . . And there is neither order nor necessity in his life, but calling this life sweet, free, and blessed, he follows it throughout (561c-d).

Though this man, "attached" as he is to "the law of equality," is obviously not an ideal man, the analogous city may have something to commend it: the democratic man, Socrates says, is "all-various and full of the greatest number of dispositions, the fair and many-colored man, like the city" (561e). The democratic city is "fair and many-colored" because it represents all the variety of human dispositions, perhaps even the best and noblest while admittedly making space for those with worse, disordered dispositions.

By straightforwardly embracing the "fairness," or beauty, of this city without a hint of Socratic irony, liberals like Dewey favor the diversity and variety offered by a pluralism of tastes. However, Grant argues, this pluralism is actively undermined by the progressive spirit, where distinction and difference are trampled alike in the absence of a limiting principle. Though liberalism has provided political freedom for those who pursue progress, progress will not willingly submit itself to liberal principles. Thus, Grant's criticism of the march of progress and technology in liberal political communities is as powerful today as it was when it was written. It was given greater heft in his later work on technology and requires serious attention from both critics and proponents of liberalism. There are points both in principle and in practice, however, when one might feel constrained to question Grant's doomsaying and look to the liberal tradition with a slightly friendlier eye.

NOTES

1 Alan S. Kahan's helpful recovery or elucidation of the "three pillars" of liberalism, namely political liberty, market freedom, and morality, is one example of a thinker within the liberal tradition attempting to excavate those parts of liberalism that do not unequivocally make this categorical denial that Grant describes. See Kahan (2023).

2 Grant's totalizing summary of liberalism broadly could be subject to many of the critiques or rejoinders offered against more recent critics of liberalism. See, e.g., Cherniss (2021) and Rosenblatt (2018).

3 Or, at least, they may not have been relevant until the political events of recent months. Coincidentally timed, Donald Trump's escalation of a kind of trade war with previously friendly neighbors like Canada may provide the impetus for many to revisit Grant's classic work in the year of its anniversary.

4 Grant's willingness to elide perhaps important distinctions between liberalism and other 20th century political ideologies is the subject of a recent penetrating critique. See McKinnell (2023) and the articles by Chamberlain and McKinnell in this issue.

5 It may likewise be true for Grant that certain aspects of liberal theory have merit (e.g. political liberty, Grant says, is a good to be sought even in Plato, contra Karl Popper's misreading of him), but that the outworkings of liberalism themselves are evidence against the likely success of resuscitation within the liberal tradition. That is, despite any good ideas latent in the tradition, the universalization and homogenization he decries throughout his works, from *Lament* onward, nonetheless came. However rosy we might be about the ideas of certain liberals on paper, the facts on the ground weigh heavy. My thanks to Tyler Chamberlain for helpful suggestions on this point.

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