

LIBERALISM

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Summary

In this article, liberalism will be distinguished into two broadly defined categories: political liberalism and economic liberalism. An attempt to articulate the basic tenets comprising the two categories will be made through a historical inquiry which seeks to adumbrate the various strands and historical trajectories of the liberal ideas and theories which appeared from around the early modern period in Europe.

With regard to political liberalism, particular attention will be paid to the origins and developments of the ideas of toleration and the freedom of conscience, contractarianism and natural rights, demystification of political authority, and limited constitutional government. The discussion on economic liberalism will revolve around the issue of the relationship between laissez-faire economic policy and the scope and limits of government intervention. The above accounts will be followed by a brief analysis of the various ways in which liberals have responded to the criticisms directed against liberalism. In this discussion, the contrast between the traditions of English liberalism and French liberalism will be suggested. In the final section, after briefly pointing out some of the fundamental points of disagreement between the contemporary liberals and their adversaries mainly in North America, there will be attempts to articulate some of the foreseeable challenges posed against liberalism in the twenty-first century.

1. Introduction

Given the polysemy and inherent ambiguity of the term “liberalism,” any attempt to provide a coherent, comprehensive definition of liberalism seems forlorn. A brief survey of the diverse expositions rendered in various dictionaries, encyclopedias and scholarly works will most likely attest to this claim. It is therefore more instructive to adumbrate the various strands and historical trajectories of liberal thought and ideas, without attempting to identify or devise a conceptual framework that purports to capture a common core. However, while there is much to be gained from this taxonomic, historical approach, attention should also be paid to the ongoing struggles by some contemporary liberals to redefine or modify liberalism in the face of numerous challenges from various opposing perspectives (such as communitarianism, post-modernism, and environmentalism). Situating liberalism within such a discursive context yields a better understanding of its general characteristics or tendencies (however incomplete and tentative they may prove to be). Thus what follows consists of brief accounts of the various strands of liberal thought, their historical origins and paths of development, and how liberals are today pressed to respond to various new (as well as old but recurring) challenges.

2. Various Liberalisms

It is commonly acknowledged that relations between words and concepts are not always characterized by a one-to-one correspondence. The word “liberalism” is a case in point, since the word itself did not come into existence until the early nineteenth century, while many of its underlying concepts had appeared a few centuries before (though some would argue that they can be traced back to the ancient Greek era). As for related words such as “liberal” and “liberality,” they have been in use since the fourteenth century, though signifying rather different things at different times—in the fourteenth century, “liberal” referred to a class of free men, and “liberality” meant generosity. In view of such intricacy surrounding the word “liberalism,” it is more helpful to focus on the historical identities of the various concepts that have come to be associated with liberalism, rather than simply to study the etymology of the word itself.

The matter is complicated further by the fact that liberalism is sometimes employed as a politically infused term of praise or obloquy, depending on the user’s ideological allegiance. For instance, for most Marxists (as well as for many conservatives), liberalism has remained a dirty word. Not surprisingly, then, liberalism has often been described as an ideology that is antithetical to socialism and communism (see *Socialism and Communism*).

However, upon closer examination, this contrast proves less instructive since it mirrors more the crude mentalities of the Cold War era than any lucid conceptual or theoretical distinctions. In the post-Cold War era, liberalism seems to have ascended to an unprecedented and indisputable position of universal acclaim; indeed, many victorious proclamations were issued soon after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. For instance, amidst the brief euphoria that followed such a dramatic event, Francis Fukuyama, a former US State Department policy-planning official, went so far as to proclaim that the victory of liberalism over communism signified “the end of history”.

However, it is worth noting that liberalism has not come out of this ideological strife unscathed. Some commentators have pointed out the costs of victory by describing how liberalism as an ideological weapon has frequently in practice undermined its own foundation. Hence there arose the term “Cold War liberalism,” defined by Anthony Arblaster as “the belief that Communism posed such a serious, fundamental and immediate threat to liberalism that liberals were justified in abandoning or abrogating their own basic values or principles in the struggle against it”.

Another source of ambiguity surrounding liberalism stems from its metamorphic nature. As terms such as “liberal democracy” and “social liberalism” suggest, liberalism often merges with other ideas and ideologies to form highly eclectic systems of thought. Furthermore, while it would not be impossible to point out a set of ideas and principles that are typically and indispensably liberal (i.e. centrality of individual freedom and civil equality, rule of law, limited government, government by consent, etc.), they are by no means solely attributable to liberalism. For instance, individual freedom is no less cherished in socialism and anarchism (though its underlying meanings may differ considerably), while the Hobbesian theory of absolute sovereignty as well as Rousseauian theory of the general will (neither of which is unreservedly liberal in its political implications) would begin with recognizably liberal premises (see *Anarchism*).

3. Historical Origins and Development

Despite the intractable nature of the subject matter (or because of it), it is helpful to distinguish between two broadly defined categories: (1) political liberalism, and (2) economic liberalism. While there is little consensus among scholars as to what extent the two categories (as well as the various tenets that comprise them) are internally related, many would agree that they emerged from a relatively similar historical setting in a relatively confined geographical region; that is to say, in Europe from around the early-modern period. This was a period of dynamic change not only in terms of the socio-economic, political and religious climate but also in terms of the language of political legitimacy. A fusion of various factors such as the Reformation and the ensuing wars of religion, the rise of absolutism and the territorial state, the emergence of commercial society, and advances in science and technology, all conspired to yield the legitimacy crisis of the feudal order. This subsequently led to a long and agonizing process, whereby it was sought to establish stable foundations for a new kind of political society based on a new set of legitimizing principles. Many of the so-called liberal ideas and principles such as toleration, freedom of conscience, individualism, rule of law, limited government, and government by consent emerged from this context, often in opposition to the various ideas (e.g. patriarchy, divine rights theory, absolute sovereignty, mercantilism, etc.) emanating from an absolutist regime.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that liberal ideas and institutions appeared suddenly out of nowhere during this period, their emergence signifying a decisive break from the past. On the contrary, there was considerable continuity, at least at the level of language and forms adopted. For instance, contractualism (the kind of which was premised on a contract of subjugation, *pactum subjectionis*, made between the rulers and the ruled), constitutionalism and limited government had been widely known well before the period in question (particularly during the feudal era) (see *Constitutionalism*).

But it is equally important to realize that their substance or their political significations underwent radical transformation. In the case of contractualism, *pactum subjectionis* was replaced by the *social* contract, wherein the contracting parties (gathered to establish a civil society) are assumed to be free and equal individuals in the pre-social state. Thus to inquire into the origins of liberal ideas and institutions would require an examination of the specific ways in which such changes occurred.

3.1 Political Liberalism

3.1.1 Toleration and the Freedom of Conscience

Toleration is often seen as the central dispositional value of liberalism. This value is, of course, not solely associated with liberalism, but it becomes distinctively liberal when stressed as a principle that demands the guarantee of the freedom of conscience for all believers, later, the freedom of expression for all citizens alike. The most eloquent early exponents of the principle of toleration are Spinoza (*Tractatus theologico-politicus*, 1670), Bayle (*Commentaire philosophique sur paroles de Jesus Christ, "Contrains les d'entrer,"* 1686) and Locke (*A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 1689). But while they vigorously promoted the principle of toleration for the purpose of guaranteeing the freedom of conscience, it is worth noting that they were first and foremost concerned with religious freedom (including the freedom of association), not the freedom of expression in the secular sense of the term. This no doubt reflects the historical situation in which these thinkers lived. Having witnessed how religious intolerance gave rise to a series of bloody conflicts that severely divided and afflicted both the religious and political communities; they sought to secure religious freedom as well as political stability by promoting toleration. The limited scope of tolerance, however, is most typically illustrated in Locke's argument, which excluded both the atheists and Catholics. Toleration that permits a wide range of freedom of expression (including, but not limited to religious worship) had to wait until the eighteenth century; the most eloquent proponent being Voltaire, though even he could not dispel all apprehensions about atheism.

Another important tenet related to the principle of toleration is the idea that no religious or political authority could claim monopoly over the interpretation of truth (religious or otherwise). This is a typical liberal outlook, founded on the recognized fallibility of human reason, and one that has continued to reverberate. As the philosopher Bertrand Russell once claimed: 'The essence of the Liberal outlook lies not in *what* opinions are held, but in *how* they are held; instead of being held dogmatically, they are held tentatively, and with a consciousness that new evidence may at any moment lead to their abandonment'. Isaiah Berlin's emphasis on the pluralistic foundations of politics and morality and his diatribe against monism is another paradigmatic example. This kind of self-critical stance does not, however, imply that liberals cannot take a firm stand on any viewpoint, though it has been sometimes caricatured as such, as for instance by Robert Frost who stated that liberal is someone who cannot take his own side in an argument. Very few liberals are relativists, since they have a strong commitment to, say, the inviolability of basic human rights for all humans *qua* humans. But this does not imply that they are necessarily committed to a strong form of universalism *a la* Kant. As Berlin (who incidentally criticized Kant for his rationalist

metaphysics) tried to argue, liberals are essentially committed to pluralism (the kind of which assumes the plurality of ultimate—but not necessarily compatible—truths, values and ends), while sticking firm on those ideas that preserve human dignity. However, there remains considerable room for debate among liberals as to the scope and limits of plurality and as to the specific contents of basic rights indispensable to preserving human dignity.

Notwithstanding the above assertion, it would be somewhat unfair to exclude Kant from the liberal tradition. While it is true that Kant does not admit the kind of pluralism mentioned above, he is nonetheless emphatic in stressing the equal dignity for all human beings. Kant famously propounded the following two principles (categorical imperatives), which combined, become more or less conterminous with the basic premises of liberalism: (1) “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature,” (2) “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end”.

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Biographical Sketch

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