

The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

Recent issues of this Newsletter were dedicated to democracy, debate and nationalism. A term that is related to each of those ideas is liberalism which is the topic for this Newsletter. A half dozen significant books on liberalism came out this past year but they do not seem to be about the same idea. In fact, they sometimes seem to be writing on opposite ideas. The term liberalism is not going away; it is central to politics so it would be helpful to pin down an understanding of it.

The excerpts below from the recent books by Adam Gopnik, *A Thousand Small Sanities*, Deirdre McCloskey, *Why Liberalism Works*, and Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* show the spectrum of meaning for liberalism. Liberalism/liberal is a protection of “liberty.” However, there are conflicting ideas on how liberty is best protected which is the reason for conflicting meanings of liberalism.

One issue which is never raised in books on liberalism – or any book in the United States – is whether liberty itself is a flawed ideal. There are few words in U.S. history that are held in higher esteem than liberty, starting with Jefferson’s assertion that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are self-evident rights and the basis of government.

It should be noticed, however, that “liberty” is a negative term meaning non-interference in human willing. Is that the best ideal for human life? Liberty (*libertas*) in the Roman Empire was compatible with slavery, as was also true in the United States. Why not a national ideal that is positive, communal and inclusive of all citizens?

WHY LIBERALISM IS TWO THINGS

By Gabriel Moran

There are two almost opposite meanings of liberal in the United States. Knowing that fact is not much help to understanding if we do not know why. The way to find that out is to seek the original meaning of the term and trace its history. The word liberal is an ancient one, originally meaning generous. But the birth of “liberal” related to liberalism is in the late 18th century when it took on economic and political meaning. The first influential use is by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* which was published in the same year as the Declaration of Independence.

The Wealth of Nations is still cited as the founding document for “the free market” and in opposition to government interference in the acquisition of wealth. What is seldom taken account of is that Smith was a product of the Scottish philosophy in which sympathy was the central category. His first book was *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The context for acquiring wealth is the good of the community. I think Smith would be horrified if he could see the people who cite him in support of unbridled capitalism. But it is undeniable that liberalism was first mainly conceived in economic terms.

Today’s liberals in the United States would reject this close association but it has never gone away. In the first half of the nineteenth century liberals were people who defended the American and French Declarations that liberty was primarily about protecting the right of the individual to acquire and keep property. Jefferson had listed life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The French Declaration was more influential in listing the rights as “liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression.”

In June 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the formation of a commission for “an informed review of the role of human rights in American foreign policy.” This review was to determine whether human rights were conflicting with the country’s natural or “unalienable” rights. To a great many people this announcement was puzzling to the point of absurdity. Most people assume that “human rights” is just another name for the natural or unalienable rights of the 18th century. How could human rights conflict with natural rights?

One has to follow the histories of these two terms to understand what Pompeo (and Trump) are up to. The eighteenth-century discussion was about

“natural rights.” Medieval canonists had discussed unalienable or natural rights as derived from the practice of natural law. The eighteenth century affirmed these rights as a gift of nature. The meaning of “property” in the medieval discussion, as well as in John Locke’s writing, referred to what a person needs for one’s self-possession. The medieval canonists and Locke could not have imagined someone owning billions of dollars which obviously is not what anyone needs.

A natural right to property became very popular in the nineteenth century. For the liberty to acquire property it was necessary to keep out interference by the government. Natural rights are not dependent on any government and therefore not under the control of the government. Individuals should be free to pursue their dreams of success and wealth. The American and French revolutions had set men free.

It was not, of course, the case in the United States that all men were set free. In fact, one of the most important applications of a natural right to property was the ownership of slaves. The government had no right or power to interfere with the individual’s right to possess slaves. Even Abraham Lincoln held that view at the beginning of his presidency.

Early in the nineteenth century, the term “human rights” was coined. It emerged from the abolitionist movement and it did imply a conflict with natural rights, at least the way that the natural right of property was being used. Frederick Douglass was one of the first users of “human rights.” The term shows up at the women’s conference at Seneca Falls in 1848. “Human rights” was simply the demand that human beings, whatever their race, gender, ethnicity or religion, were deserving of respect and dignity.

Liberalism in the middle of the nineteenth century, therefore, had a clear meaning, namely, the liberating of “man” from the control of government and religion. The Catholic Church was the obvious enemy of liberalism and Pope Gregory IX issued a Syllabus of Errors in condemnation of liberalism. If the Pope had aimed his criticism at the economic results of the liberal attitude he might have had a good place to stand. Instead, he came across as condemning the whole modern world.

The claim of liberalism to protect the individual and his liberty fed a distrust of government which was present from the beginning of the United States. The Bill of Rights was attached to the U.S. Constitution by people who

thought that the individual had to be protected from the government. The rights (or liberties) in the first ten amendments state all the things that the government will *not* do. The second amendment, for example, does not grant a right to bear arms. It says the government will not infringe on the right to bear arms. People regularly assert that the right is “God given.” Government regulations are always suspect. The choice is individual liberty or government control.

A funny thing happened to liberalism in the United States on the way to the twentieth century; it nearly reversed its meaning. Liberalism had made possible the development of corporations. Starting around 1890 it was becoming evident that the individual was no match for the power of the big, new corporations. A “progressive movement” took up the battle against the tendency of the corporation to take over people’s lives. The government was the only countervailing power that could restrain the power of the business world. For the necessities of life, starting with safe drinking water and health care, the conflict was no longer between the individual and the government but between the government and the business corporation. If government regulations were directed at the corporation, the individual liberty of workers could be the beneficiary.

This shift in who the enemy of liberty is caused confusion in the idea of liberalism. Progressives were skeptical of rights. The progressive movement seemed at first to be led by Republican conservatives. It took several decades for liberalism to completely shift its focus. The progressive movement stumbled at the time of World War I and liberals picked up the mantle of government reform in defense of individual liberty. Franklin Roosevelt sealed the deal in giving liberalism a platform for government actions in defense of the individual’s human needs.

Liberals became the people who favored government programs to help vulnerable populations to compete. For conservatives, the business world is a friend and government rules are an interference with liberty. Their claim is that when the business corporation succeeds the individual person shares in the profit. Thus, the economic conservative in the mid-twentieth century was the liberal of the mid-nineteenth century.

There seemed to be two clear-cut ideologies in the country; both of them claimed to be a defense of liberty. Conservatives had an inner tension between economic and social conservatives. Policies advocated by economic

conservatives. which removed all restraints, could undermine the morality and religion of the past that social conservatives were trying to protect. Economic conservatives recognized a link to “classic liberalism” of the nineteenth century and began a movement called “neo-liberalism.” By the 1980’s the economic struggle was between liberals and neo-liberals. Ronald Reagan proved to be a clever politician who played on these confusions.

So now the U.S. is stuck with two meanings of liberal that are almost opposites. Usually the term’s meaning is clear when a politician in the United States is called liberal. It is not so clear in references to the opposition between autocratic governments and the liberal governments of the west. Liberal is often a reference to capitalism and governments that are friendly to the corporate world.

The only way out of this morass would be to go back to liberty as the value around which both liberal and conservative revolve. “Liberty” is a term negative in meaning; freedom *from* something. It is also individualistic in its concern with human individuals. Would it not be better to have our most cherished value something positive and communal?

Mike Pompeo’s commission to examine whether human rights are in conflict with natural rights gets it backwards. The question should be whether natural rights, preeminently individual liberty to pursue wealth, are in conflict with the human rights of a decent life for all people.

Abraham Lincoln’s liberation of the slaves was a good first move. But liberated slaves needed an education, a job, a home, if they were to have a decent life. The United States failed miserably. Well-off people in the U.S. today celebrate the blessings of liberty while one out of five babies are born into poverty and the streets of big cities are lined with the bodies of the homeless. The home of liberty has two million (mostly non-white) people incarcerated, the highest per capita prison population in the “advanced world.”

The answer to a lack of liberty is not necessarily more government programs, although such programs are surely needed. More needed is a questioning of liberty as the country’s supreme value. Why not the human rights of security of person and the right of movement.

WHAT IS LIBERALISM

By Adam Gopnik

Liberalism has many mouths, but the liberalism that those of us who think of ourselves as liberal humanists want to defend—opposed both to the leftists with whom we sometimes make common cause and the right wing with which we sometimes share common premises—has one true point, equally potent, equally plain. Liberalism is an evolving political practice that makes the case for the necessity and possibility of (imperfectly) egalitarian social reform and ever greater (if not absolute) tolerance of human difference through reasoned and (mostly) unimpeded conversation, demonstration, and debate.

Liberalism depends on shadings and qualifications, on “evolvings” and “imperfectlies.” It has a soft and awkward rhetoric. Yet what liberalism has in its favor are the facts. Liberals get nothing accomplished—except everything, eventually. In Western Europe, in America, certainly in Canada, in Australia, too, vistas of general legal and social equality far outstripping anything previously known to mankind, and largely achieved by peaceful and parliamentary means, have been won.

That these new vistas of equality are under assault now does not alter the scale of the accomplishment. When we get a Social Security check, or attend a gay friend’s marriage, or simply exercise the right to vote as a woman or hold office as a Jew or Mormon, we are the beneficiaries of Bayard Rustin’s three simple dance steps of liberalism: 1) Non-violent tactics 2) Constitutional means 3) Democratic procedures.

We may see, and say, for instance, that LGBTQ rights are being attacked in America by a revanchist right wing—but we need also to stop and think that the very idea that these capital letters would enclose a party of people who have rights worth protecting is entirely and exclusively a recent invention of liberal countries.

Homosexuality has flourished elsewhere—it is part of the human condition—but has never been specifically protected and even nurtured before as it is now even in the public high schools of New York. Militant activism was certainly responsible for the achievement of many of these reforms. But it was specifically liberal activism. It wasn’t trying to change everything at once. It was trying to fix what was wrong now.

WHY TRUE LIBERALISM WORKS

By Deirdre McCloskey

The word liberalism is not taken to mean US “liberalism,” the distressingly anti-liberal, lawyer-driven politics of increasing governmental planning and regulation, and physical coercion. It is instead the rest of the world’s “liberalism,” economist driven, “the liberal plan,” as old Adam Smith wrote “of social equality, [economic] liberty and [legal] justice, with a modest restrained government giving real help to the poor. True modern liberalism.

I am arguing for the continuing desirability of a liberalism conceived in the eighteenth century, an idea slowly implemented after 1776, with many hesitations and false starts. A liberal rhetoric explains many of the good features of the modern world compared with earlier illiberal regimes – the economic success of the modern world, its splendid arts and sciences, its kindness, its tolerance, its inclusiveness, and especially its massive liberation of more and more people from violent hierarchies ancient and modern.

Progressives, conservatives, and populists retort that liberalism also explains numerous alleged evils, such as the reduction of everything to money and markets or the loss of community and God or the calamity of immigration by non-whites and non-Christians. But they are mistaken.

From the Philippines to the Russian Federation from Hungary to the United States, liberalism has been assaulted recently by brutal, scare mongering populists. A worry. Yet for a century and a half the relevance of liberalism to the good society has been denied in a longer, steadier challenge by gentle or not so gentle progressives and conservatives.

The point here is to convert you to a “humane true liberalism” which you probably harbor anyway. Modern liberalism. You don’t really favor pushing people around with a prison-industrial complex, or with regulations preventing people from braiding hair for a living, or with collateral damage from drone strikes, or with a separation of toddlers from their mothers. This book includes interviews by earnest doubters, who sometimes put forward well-intentioned but often illiberal objections to a free society.

It is mischievous to attack, as many political theories do, a capitalism that has done more than anything else to help the poor. That does not mean that little bits of other systems are to be scorned. But it does mean that replacing the “system” as a whole would be disastrous for the poor.

WHY LIBERALISM FAILED
By Patrick Dineen

A political philosophy conceived some 500 years ago and put into effect at the birth of the United States nearly 250 years later, was a wager that political society could be grounded on a different footing. It conceived humans as rights-bearing individuals who could fashion and pursue for themselves their own version of the good life. Opportunities for liberty were best afforded by a limited government devoted to “securing rights,” along with a free-market economic system that gave space for individual initiative and ambition. Political legitimacy was grounded on a shared belief in an originating “social contract” to which even newcomers could subscribe, ratified continuously by free and fair elections of responsive representatives.

Today, some 70 percent of Americans believe that their country is moving in the wrong direction, and half the country thinks its best days are behind it. Most believe that their children will be less prosperous and have fewer opportunities than previous generations.

Every institution of government shows declining levels of public trust by the citizenry, and deep cynicism toward politics is reflected in an uprising on all sides of the political spectrum against political and economic elites. It is evident to all that the political system is broken and social fabric is fraying, particularly as a growing gap increases between wealthy haves and left-behind have-nots, a hostile divide widens between faithful and secular peoples, and deep disagreement persists over America’s role in the world.

Nearly every one of the promises that were made by the architects and creators of liberalism has been shattered. The liberal state expands to control nearly every aspect of life while citizens regard government as a distant and uncontrollable power, one that only extends their sense of powerlessness by relentlessly advancing the project of “globalization.” engendering trust that the gap will be narrowed.

Liberalism has failed—not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself. It has failed because it has succeeded. As liberalism has “become more fully itself,” as its inner logic has become more evident and its self-contradictions manifest, it has generated pathologies that are at once deformations of its claims yet realizations of liberal ideology.