

## Liberalism in America

When words lose their meaning, peoples lose their liberty.

—Confucius

In spite of local and temporal differences, the authentic meaning of liberalism is understood correctly throughout the world, with the possible exception of contemporary America.

Whereas “democracy” answers the question: “*Who* should rule?” and answers that it is directly or indirectly the majority of politically equal citizens, liberalism answers the question: “*How* should government be exercised?” Whatever the form of government, the exercise of power should not prevent citizens from enjoying the greatest amount of liberty compatible with the Common Good. (Not even the most celebrated liberal has the right to drive 100 miles per hour through a village.)

Democracy can be liberal or illiberal, but while an absolute monarchy cannot be democratic, it can be liberal. The monarchy of Louis XIV, who *allegedly* said “I am the State,” was in many ways far more liberal than a number of modern democracies. He could not require an annual income tax or conscript his subjects for military service, nor could he issue a law banning champagne from dinner tables. Conversely, many of the horrors of the French Revolution were democratic (but not liberal).

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a gradual and problematic syn-

thesis of democracy and liberalism took place. Since its beginning, this union suffered from the democratic principle of equality, the antithesis of liberty. We are either free *or* equal since equality is “unnatural” and can only be realized by artificial, if not repressive, measures. (Think of a garden hedge. How can an equal height be achieved? Only by constant clipping!) After all, William Dean Howells called “Liberty and Inequality” the two great American ideals, and Charles Beard insisted that the Founding Fathers loathed democracy more than Original Sin. Furthermore, the word democracy appears neither in the Declaration of Independence, nor in the Constitution.

Still, the democratic-liberal synthesis created endless confusion in the minds of many people and often caused them to confuse freedom with equality, or equality with freedom. The confiscation of a periodical, for instance, is often denounced as “undemocratic,” although it is quite possible that the majority of citizens were in favor of its termination. A measure like this, however, is certainly illiberal.

The term “liberal” in the political sense originates from Spanish. The supporters of

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the 1812 Constitution of Cadiz called themselves *liberales* and their opponents *serviles*. In 1816, Southey first used this term in English (with its Spanish spelling), while Sir Walter Scott used the French version and wrote about the *libéraux*. This should not be in the least surprising to those familiar with Spaniards who are basically liberal (and in their excess anarchical). George Ticknor, who visited Spain in 1816, wrote to his father Elisha that “this is the freest country in the world.” In Britain, after the English parliamentary reform in 1832, the Whigs assumed the “liberal” label while the Tories adopted the term “conservative.” Here the reader should be reminded that the American War of Independence was fought under the Whiggish banner and that Loyalists were frequently called “Tories.” Yet Edmund Burke was himself a Whig and a conservative at the same time. Similarly, the liberal Chateaubriand coined the term “conservative.”

There are four genuine Liberalisms that have freedom as their ideal. The first group I call “Pre-Liberals,” like Adam Smith and Burke. The second group, which includes Alexis de Tocqueville, Montalembert, and Lord Acton, I call “Early Liberals.” These noblemen had few economic interests. Then came the “Old Liberals,” who were indeed economically committed, yet somewhat “anticlerical,” and inclined to flirt with philosophical relativism. These include founders of the so-called Austrian School of Economics, such as Carl Meyer and Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, with Ludwig von Mises being the last modern representative. Finally, the more modern “Neo-Liberals” are those who formed the Mont Pélerin Society in 1961. The outstanding representatives of this school were Wilhelm Roepke and Alexander Rüstow. It should be mentioned here that several of the most prominent liberals were rather skeptical about democracy because they felt that majority rule

could elect real tyrants to power.

How did the genuine meaning of liberalism become so misunderstood in the United States? Many other terms have become misnomers in the U.S., such as “Middle East” for the Near East, and “extreme Right” for the National Socialists (who prided themselves for being *the* German Left). We see “humanism” equated with atheism (although it was a profoundly Catholic movement during the Renaissance against which the Reformers protested), or “Orientals” identified with people from the Far East. Just as a variety of reasons can be offered to explain these errors, so too can reasons be given why a certain leftist ideology in the United States had been named “liberalism” by supporters and enemies alike. There is a history to it and it is a fairly recent one.

It began during the Roosevelt presidency when America experienced a major onslaught of Leftism. The time was propitious: a huge economic crisis was underway, causing real misery to grip the masses. People expected relief from the government, but since Americans are basically “conservative” (in the etymological sense of the word), socialism could not be promoted as “unmasked.” It was, and still is, a “bad” word. (On the European continent the liberals are considered to be the arch-enemies of socialism and are usually seated in the parliaments on the Right.) The average American does not like to be an extremist, and a sentence like “Only extremes are bearable,” uttered by Anatole France, is alien to him. So, the “liberal” label had to replace the socialist one. It was “handy” and could well be adopted by artists and intellectuals and by persons of means who did not want to look ridiculous by using a Marxist trade mark.

All Americans love freedom, or at least pay lip-service to it, so the term “liberal” seemed attractive, while the country’s genu-

ine liberals neither had the will nor the organization to defend it. At the beginning of World War II, the *American Mercury*, then under the editorship of that wonderful man, Eugene Lyons, published a series of "Creeds." There was the creed of a conservative, a reactionary, a socialist, an "old fashioned" and a new liberal. In these essays, one could clearly trace the rupture. Of course, it also must be admitted that honest, though not very bright, liberals drifted leftward. Since freedom, openness of mind, generosity, and a certain impartiality characterizes the genuine liberal outlook, liberalism's "house" had all its doors and windows open so that the winds blowing from the outside could enter. At the time, practically all the prevailing "winds" had a leftist, a Marxist, a "libertine," and certainly anti-conservative character. In a sense, the metamorphosis was inevitable.

The real American liberals went in several directions. A great many became conservatives (thus adding to the complexities of the conservative camp); others, frightened by the conservative label, and having sacrificed their good old name on the altar of public consent, called themselves "libertarians." When I wear my Adam Smith necktie, I tell my European friends it is considered a "conservative" tie in America. They usually respond with utter bewilderment. "Adam Smith, a conservative?" they say, incredulous that this most classical of liberals is considered by many Americans to be a conservative.

What is the basic content of American liberalism? It is a synthesis of many different ideas, some having American and British roots. A review of these elements brings to mind Proudhon, who said that there is always a theological background to all political problems. American "liberalism" is very definitely not theistic and not even deistic in character. Yet this liberalism is certainly a manifestation of anthropolatry,

of a "worship of man." There is, of course, a certain connection between American "populism," the programmatic belief in "WE, the People," and the optimistic "belief in man."

I first encountered Americans in 1930 at the age of 21 when I spent the summer in the Soviet Union. So many of these tourists and *inospyetsy* ("foreign specialists") came fully prepared to adore the Soviet Union and could not really see what they saw. Faith had completely blinded them.

Yet there were some uniquely American angles to this enthusiasm. Empathy for the Soviet system was expressed despite the incredible squalor, dirt, stench, the general misery and disorganization of almost everything. The driving psychological force behind these American "fellow travelers" was their "futurism," which brings to mind the words of Lincoln Steffens, "I have seen the future and it works!"

One visited hospitals, schools, even a number of prisons (all make-believe). There were obviously no class differences, all were "equal," illiteracy was eliminated, and criminals were rehabilitated. Waiters were even prevented from taking "humiliating" tips (as notices exhorted). Several visitors asked the Soviets how free people really lived. To dispel any criticism, the enthusiast could reply that before 1917 everything was infinitely worse: for instance, there had been "serfdom" (actually abolished 2 years before American slavery), "racism" (totally absent), clericalism (unknown). Their historic ignorance notwithstanding, these mostly "liberal" Americans I met were extremely nice people, much nicer than my own Europeans.

Of course, not all American "liberals" were devotees of Red Russia. A great many were devotees of Red China and they were "building" on an old Sinophile American tradition. We found the apogee of this "com-

plex" in the Student Revolt of 1968 when fanatic youngsters praised Mao's *Little Red Book* which contained the tritest of trite phrases. Today we realize that the Cultural Revolution was infinitely worse than anything the Bolsheviks perpetrated, and competes successfully in nightmarish horrors with the French Revolution and the misdeeds of the Vietcong and the Khmer Rouge. In China's Quangxi Province the people were forced to eat the corpses of the butchered "class enemies," and those who did not comply were immediately suspect.

American liberalism is not a closed ideology like Marxism-Leninism or National Socialism, but a very mixed bag with a number of internal contradictions. It is like a compendium of nearly every nonsense that we in the West have produced since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. In spite of its lack of patriotism it has become part of the American scene, deriving advantage here and there from certain items of American folklore. It can do this because of its intellectual duplicity, which combines a masked elitism with a bogus populism. American liberalism exalts the proverbial three men sitting on cracker barrels in the general store talking politics, but at the same time hides the arrogant contempt the half educated have for the common sense of simple people. What are the components of this "mixed bag"? Nearly nothing from the Founding Fathers, but a great deal from European democracy, a bit of Marxism, a few items from anarcho-liberalism, and several loans from fashionable trends: philosophic relativism, hedonism, totalitarianism. To thinking persons these internal oppositions might cause concern, but most people tend to *feel* rather than think. And to many, the approach of American liberalism is agreeable: it is optimistic and carries many promises. Yet unlike a clever pagan existentialism, such as that of

Sartre, who told us that life is absurd and that the history of every person is a history of failure, contemporary liberalism is simply ignorant. It ignores the Biblical message that "the mind of every human being from childhood onward is directed towards evil" (Genesis, 8, 21).

And just like an ignorant person, this liberalism is stubborn and does not learn from past mistakes or from history. In spite of its relativism, it is highly aggressive and, in defiance of pleas for tolerance, it is itself extremely intolerant, alternating savage attacks with silent disregard.

The first big challenge posed to American liberalism came from the broadly popular National Socialist totalitarian dictatorship. Germany's military alliance with the Soviet Union and the Fall of Paris in June, 1940, inspired the compilation of a "liberal" manifesto entitled, significantly, *The City of Man*. In its pages, the worship of man reached a zenith. The mostly American authors proposed to judge and license the various religions according to their relationship to democracy. We can also read the following statement: "Democracy is nothing more and nothing less than humanism in theocracy and rational theocracy is universal humanism."

Yet the democratism of these liberals always causes them dilemmas. Should they not have supported the rule of the Shah to favor the popular rule of the mullahs in Iran? Should they not support the present military dictatorship in Algeria against a regime of Fundamentalists based on democratic majority rule? (Hardly any true-blooded American liberal would readily admit that the temporary military dictatorships of Franco and Pinochet were preferable to a red takeover.)

"Progress" is written large in America. Ever since its independence, the United States has seen a great deal of progress. The population has increased phenomenally,

people live longer, literacy has multiplied, obnoxious laws have been abolished, travel is more frequent, and huge advances in science and technology surpass that of other nations. Nevertheless, the European achievements of past centuries that have survived are a reminder that civilization might have progressed, but culture has taken a setback. (The art museums and architecture show this very visibly.)

The American liberal attitude towards religion is complex. There are atheistic liberals who hold dogmatically to the conviction that all religion is hokum and potentially dangerous to human freedom, democracy, equality, progress, and sanity. There are agnostic liberals who reserve judgment, while there are others who think religion is a human weakness that ought to be respected. In religious conversation this third group of liberals will assume a solemn expression, a tremor creeps into their voice and they make a real effort to appear immensely tolerant and “understanding.” There are many others who are determined to “liberalize” their religion; even to use it as a prop to advance the cause of welfare statism, pacifism, animal rights, feminism, and every other modern political nostrum.

To most American liberals, however, religious “fundamentalism” is the natural enemy. The American liberal does not like “dogmas,” “commandments” nor, naturally, solid foundations. Nothing for him is black or white, only different shades of gray. Religions should be respected if people sincerely believe in them, he says. But what about other convictions like the thugs of India who waylaid travelers and garroted them in front of a statue of Kali? (They became victims of British colonialism that exterminated these nice people.) Or consider, for instance, the “sincere” political convictions of Nazis who believe in the Brown Creed?

When necessary, as noted above, liberals will turn to folklore to advance their agenda. Take Jefferson’s “Wall of Separation” letter, which is used to read religion out of American public life. For instance, they ignore the fact that the First Amendment merely prohibits the “establishment” of a Church on the federal, and not on the state, level. There were in fact privileged state churches in America into the nineteenth century, and religious disqualifications into the 1870s. Yet one of the latest and finest victories of American liberalism was the prohibition of public Christmas carol singing in Vienna, Virginia.

To reach the masses, American liberals have not only made a concerted effort to disintegrate or manipulate churches, but also to bring education and the mass media under their influence. Here their efforts began some time ago, even well before the term “liberal” was debased. I remember asking a professor of a prestigious university whether he was active in its department of education. He answered with an emphatic “No!”: “This is the place where they throw false pearls to real swine.” In all too many high schools, colleges, and universities, real efforts are being made to wage war against the religiously inspired values of our civilization. The current assault against “Eurocentrism” is motivated by this hostility toward Western values.

To make matters worse, not only the content but also the quality of education has been sacrificed at the altar of egalitarianism. Although high school students receive highly inadequate instruction, they are permitted to attend college. Professors have no social prestige, so the most “famous” universities are, in fact, financially elitist, a situation unknown on the European continent. (In old Russia, three quarters of the university students paid no tuition.) Beginning at age 14, students can

choose their subjects up to graduate school. And the professors, poorly paid with little security, tend “sociologically” to embrace contemporary “liberalism”—a situation once well analyzed by Ludwig von Mises (who had difficulties at New York University). Most universities are dominated by American liberalism.

Unfortunately, even conservative individuals and foundations have made few efforts to remedy that situation. Regrettably, there exists in the United States, except among outspoken conservatives, a certain awe if not respect for these liberals. They are seen as “modern,” “enlightened,” and “progressive,” and they might have a lien on the future. Even many parents say: “Let us be broadminded and give the kids a chance to get exposed to new ideas in these prestigious places of learning.”

On the wall of one American college there appear the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: “We are of different opinions at different hours, but we always may be said to be at heart on the side of truth.” This sounds very nice, but would that be the right guideline in a dialogue with a Stalinist, or a supporter of Pol Pot? One thing is certain: polite doubt will not save this world.

The American liberal infiltration of the mass media was extremely easy, needing no “conspiracy.” These American liberals were able to win over with ease their colleagues in journalism because they held what de Tocqueville called *des fausses idées claires*, clear but false ideas. Error can easily appear as “commonsense.” Yet truth, as a rule, is not at all simple but very complex.

With the mass media it is difficult to raise the level of discourse to avoid expressing ideas that coincide with popular sentiments and folkloric imagery. Thus, during (and after) World War II, National Socialism was portrayed as an extreme rightwing movement of aristocrats, big landowners,

monarchists, industrialists, and bankers against the working class and the little people. To America’s man-in-the-street, Hitler was merely a paper tiger and a “stooge.” This erroneous view, originating from Marxist theory, was adopted by American occupation forces. Fearing a resurgence of Nazism, applicants for public office in American occupation zones were required to fill out a questionnaire that asked whether one of their four grandparents belonged to the nobility. Vice-President Henry C. Wallace declared a “Century of the Common Man” following the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany, but in fact this began with Woodrow Wilson in 1918. Had Hitler possessed a sense of humor, he would have erected a giant statue of Wilson right in front of Munich’s Brown House.

In domestic and foreign affairs, there is hardly an issue in which American liberals have not misled their country. They are touchy and thin-skinned people who want to lead mankind toward a heavenly future, absent of injustice and social misery. While Christians place their hopes in the beyond, believing this world will always be a vale of tears, liberals seek to establish paradise on earth through human effort.

To prepare the way, these liberals have introduced politically correct language to avoid disagreements and hurt feelings. For example, by marrying Anne I am discriminating against Mary; by buying a copy of the *Washington Times*, I am discriminating against the *Washington Post*. Discrimination is a law of life. We must simply choose between just and unjust discrimination.

Where do we find the most dynamic American liberal assault today? Surely not in the field of economics, when even the most socialistic European governments are trying to auction off state enterprises. No, the radical nature of American liberalism leads it to affect the very roots of life that are

found in human sexuality. It wants to hit us below the belt, to undermine and pervert the relationship between the genders, human sexuality, and the family which is the *nervus rerum*. If everything else is to be submitted to the omnipotent state, it is argued, there should at least be sexual "freedom." And yet, here is where discipline is most necessary.

One need not be a Freudian to understand its importance in human relations. He who "devalues" the family by promoting promiscuity and perversion devalues the very fabric of society. He who denies the biological differences of men and women, and the unique roles each must fill, rebels against nature. The Soviets boasted that the equality of the genders in their realm was perfect since women were permitted to work in coal mines. In the United States, too, women are now accepted as combatants in the armed forces as equally as men are.

Another danger lurks in the emancipation of sexual deviations. Our sexuality is of a rather "plastic" nature—even in its normal course. For instance, a male will more easily fall in love with an extremely slender girl, if thinness is the fashion, or with one of opposite bodily qualities, as in the fashion of Rubens' age, if that is the day's trend. Perversions or other forms of immorality often become fashions and can destroy nations. For instance, generations of fatherless children from single mothers will likely lead to social perdition.

Contemporary liberalism reveals its hedonistic character with the mass murder of the unborn. What we have in the West is Childermass of "unwanted life," similar to the practices of National and International Socialism in Europe and East Asia. What did Nicolas Gomez Davila, brightest thinker on the Right, tell us? "The cult of man must be celebrated with human sacrifices." As a result, pregnant women no

longer walk as cradles but as swinging coffins.

How did the Right fail in curtailing the growth of the Left? Many errors can be cited. In the United States, the conservative reaction to these developments had, at least initially, too much of an economic bent and lacked theological and philosophic depth. In addition a tendency towards national "navel gazing" developed without sufficiently countering liberal international interventionism. On top of it all, the American right failed to organize itself, allowing a certain lethargy to prevail for several decades. When young F.A. von Hayek first came to New York in the 1920s as a student, he was soon visited by a lady who wanted to assist him in this foreign land. She came from leftist quarters. There was nobody from the right who wanted to support him.

Will contemporary American liberalism end? It will because, as an unknown Viennese coffeehouse philosopher once said, "everything has an end, except the sausage which has two." It will end once a huge reaction is caused against it. This reaction will probably be most strongly directed against its anarchical character that shows indifference to all imaginable crimes. These deviations are not punished because society, not individual persons, is responsible for the disorder. The staggering crime rate touches on a highly neuralgic spot. Drugs already appear in elementary schools. Walker Percy's prediction in *Love in the Ruins* that by 2035 nobody would leave home without their submachine gun may indeed come to pass.

The reaction against all this should be rational and reasonable, but the provocation is such that the response might take on an irrational and violent character. It is the task of the American right to make this a *kalos agon*, a "beautiful fight" (2 Timothy 4, 7), ending in a positive history.