



The History and Future of Liberalism

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Abstract. liberalism, originating from seventeenth century enlightenment philosophers, emphasizes the ideas of natural rights, liberties, law and contract. Many political and economical institutions and applications, like constitution and free market economy were derived from it. Liberal theorists also provided many insights into social morality that formed current modern ethics. However, it is facing many serious challenges in the past decades, marked by its inability to maintain equality and liberty and keep pace with social progression. Criticism also revealed the theory's inner contradictions between subjectivist principle of self-interest and reason. Liberalism as one of the most prominent ideology, if no reforms were to be undertaken, would portray more inabilities, create widespread political disorder and leave room for populism and fascism. This essay attempts to look into the basic concepts and institutions of liberalism, the criticism and the future of it.

Keywords: liberalism, rights, liberties, critical theory, contemporary politics

1 Introduction

Liberalism is one of the most prominent ideologies that had a huge influence on politics, economics and philosophy. On a macro level, it serves as a guide for decisions regarding domestic politics, international relations, and economic policies. On a micro level, it could also be used to guide our beliefs, perceptions, and political attitude. Throughout its development, many liberal theorists had discourses, sometimes disputes, concerning various aspects of human society, making it a complete yet complex system of thoughts. To better understand this broad concept, and its position in contemporary society, we have to examine the history of liberalism, from the establishment of liberalism to present-day liberalism. During this process, this essay would look into the basic concepts, political practices, variations, challenges and decline of liberalism, discuss what liberalism means in contemporary politics and give prospects into its future.

2 The Basic Concepts of Liberal Philosophy

2.1 Natural Rights and Liberties

Rights and liberties are two of the most crucial concepts in the liberal context. Rights are entitlements (not) to perform certain actions, or (not) to be in certain states, or

entitlements that others (not) perform certain actions or (not) be in certain states. [1] The origin of rights came from the state of nature, which is generally an imagined primitive stage of humanity where people have no societal features at all.

The conception of the state of nature varies from ideologues to ideologues, Thomas Hobbes described it as a brutish and savage place in which people have no social interactions or guarantee of safety. [2] He concluded that natural rights are the rights "to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own Nature; that is to say, of his own Life". [3]

The English philosopher John Locke had a different view on the state of nature. There are no formal institutions of government in the Lockean state of nature either; instead, people are governed by their obligations to one another.[4] He asserted that everyone is born with unalienable natural rights that were given to them by God. He further identified the most fundamental natural rights are property rights. By the Lockean view of property rights, the body is the most basic property that one has, having control over their body indicates liberty, and it also extends to things one applied their labour on. [5]

Ideologues have conflicting ideas regarding the weights of different rights. Rousseau ruthlessly criticised private property rights as the main cause of inequality and captivity, while Locke stressed the mutual respect of property rights, and then inequality in properties is unavoidable for protecting property rights. Adam Smith is also a supporter of strong private ownership. [6] He concluded what he calls the "system of natural liberty", the natural extension of strong private property and economic liberties, comprising of including free competitive markets with careers open to talents, or free choice of occupation and the formal opportunity to compete for open positions.

Later theorists furthered the concept of liberty. John Stuart Mill, revisioned the traditional utilitarianism, and proposed a new definition of freedom, that is "The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way". [7] Isaiah Berlin, a twentieth-century British philosopher, proposed the two concepts of liberty. He distinguished the idea of liberty into positive and negative liberty. The negative freedom is "the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others", and the positive freedom is derived from "the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master". Or in short, negative freedom is "freedom from" and positive freedom is "freedom to". [8]

2.2 Law of Nature and Social Contract

The law of nature is a critical concept for erecting a social contract. Hobbes derived his conception of the law of nature from his state of nature. Hobbes' preassumptions on the state of nature are equality on ability, therefore no man is guaranteed safe on his own, and competition on scarce resources. Such premises together made up the horrifying Hobbesian state of nature which is a war of every man against every man. There are as many as dozens of Hobbesian laws of nature, the three most fundamental ones to the social contract are:

1. [that] Every man, ought to endeavour peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps, and advantages of war. [9]

2.[that] A man be willing, when others are so too, as far-forth, as for peace, and defence of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself. [10]

3. [that] Men perform their covenants made. [11]

This is the ground on which Hobbes built his theory of social contract: people want peace, and to achieve peace requires a submission of some rights and liberties to each other, which makes a contract. However, he further identifies that covenants made by pure words and maintained by mutual trust solely are actually void. This is because in the state of nature, a war of every man against every man, such a covenant is equivalent to transferring rights to an enemy, it is against the principle of self-preservation thus any suspicion would lead to its collapse. Thus, to enforce a social contract requires "a common power set over them both, with right and force sufficient to compel performance".[12] In order to erect such a common power, people must confer their power and strength on one man or an assembly of men, and submit their wills and judgements to his or their wills and judgements. [13]

John Locke had a very different conception from Hobbes. Lockean state of nature is based on a different set of assumptions about the state of nature: people have partiality, a desire to punish the transgressed, equal inalienable rights to life, liberty and property, and people have respect towards rights. As a result, if all men were to be judges on their own cases and take their own actions to punish people, there would be only confusion and disorder. [14] To judge impartially, resolve controversies in a better way, punish the transgressed justly, and to better protect property rights, it is more rational to construct a social contract.

"Every one of the Members hath quitted this natural Power, resign'd it up into the hands of the Community in all cases that exclude him not from appealing for Protection to the Law established by it. And thus all private judgement of every particular Member being excluded, the Community comes to be Umpire, by settled standing Rules, indifferent, and the same to all Parties; and by Men having Authority from the Community, for the execution of those Rules, decides all the differences that may happen between any Members of that Society, concerning any matter of right"

Its construction requires citizens to transfer their rights to judge and execute to a community which acts as an umpire that makes judgements and punishments objectively with their personal judgements excluded.

Rousseau took another approach to a desirable society. He sought to find a rule of administration that provide legitimacy. He developed the idea of the general will ('La volonte generale'), which is the will of people as a whole. The general will is an abstract concept aiming at pursuing public justice and the public good, instead of a combination of individual will. The general will consist of the properties of individual thoughts, like self-preservation and pursuits of liberty and happiness. From the general will theory, a society that is able to ensure its citizens' liberty and equality was made possible. In order to exercise the general will to the fullest extent, every citizen of the association

under the contract must transfer all the rights one possesses to the totality of other members, and be directed under the general will. As people can acquire the equivalent rights that he/she gave out from other members, people gain what they ceded and have greater strength to conserve what he possesses. Once the contract is formed, people share a mutual interest. All the citizens within the association enjoy equal rights, while they are also to perform certain obligations. As the sanctity of the pact is ought to be preserved, citizens that refuse to perform their obligations will be compelled to do so by the whole body.

John Stuart Mill further elaborated on what a liberal government should be. He suggested that a liberal government should consider individual acts to be automatically exempted from governmental prohibition unless they dealt harm to others' physical well-being or dignity. [15] He also proposed that liberal governments should protect freedom of speech, character and action. For all kinds of speech, no matter true or false, are reinforcing and contribute to the emergence of truth. And the freedom of character and action is adding to the diversity of the society undermining the threat that a dominant group would cause the tyranny of the majority.

2.3 Equality and Justice

The Lockean view of equality also relates to the idea of rights to property. As he defined, the action of extracting natural resources and other kinds of work mixes one's labour, which is carried out by one's body, into the property, therefore, making it a permanent property of the person. So, recognising property rights would inevitably cause differences in property between citizens. What most liberal philosophers would endorse is equality in rights and opportunity, which implies that people have an equal chance to compete with each other. This came to be criticised by later philosophers as differences in property rights would inevitably cause an imbalance in power.

John Rawls, a twentieth-century American liberal philosopher, redefined the concept of justice. He sought to find a new moral judgement system that could lead to an end to a dispute between utilitarianism, which seeks to maximize the utility, and intuitionism, which is based on intuitive moral judgements, and to resolve the controversies on the conflict between liberty and equality. He posed the idea of "Justice as Fairness", that is, to arrange social institutions fairly. He came up with two basic principles of justice as fairness:

First Principle: Each person has the same indefeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all;

Second Principle: Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions:

1. They are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity;

2. They are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle). [16]

He used the Veil of Ignorance (or Original Position), a famous thought experiment, to illustrate a standard of fairness. It requires people to choose a country to be born in from the position of a baby waiting to be born. Naturally, people would choose a

country with high welfare, safety nets, social minimum, and a high level of equality in opportunities and distribution. This provides us with a measure to assess the level of equality of countries.

Based on the idea that people have various conceptions of moral judgement, Rawls sought to find a principle by which the exercise of coercive power is justifiable and could be just in the given situation. He concluded that "our exercise of political power is proper and hence justifiable only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to them as reasonable and rational". [17] To justify the constitution all reasonable citizens should consent to, he gave the insight that although rational people differ in their values, they are not prone to impose their values on others. Additionally, political conception is a consequence of public political culture, therefore coercive political power is just. Different opinions on contingencies also made a wide controversy resulting in differing attitudes on wealth redistribution and taxation. Theorists advocating formal equality of opportunity demand an absence of legal prohibitions on accessing offices and positions. This formal equality of opportunity is widely accepted by most liberal theorists and most modern political entities.

2.4 Political and Economical Application

Tocqueville reassured the institutions of a liberal government. He revised liberalism with his observations during his research in America. He identified that universal franchise is an inevitable trend that countries would also need to follow in comparison to the limited suffrage common in the contemporary world. States would also need to adopt several political institutions including decentralization, separation of power, and the separation of church and state. He also denoted the importance of a public education system in a democratic society. [18] Such institutions became the baselines that a liberal government should ensure.

Adam Smith proposed the key doctrines of a liberal economy in his famous book *Wealth of Nations* in 1776. The economic ideas are the natural extension of strong private property and economic liberties, comprising of including free competitive markets with careers open to talents, or free choice of occupation and the formal opportunity to compete for open positions. Adam Smith also theorised the famous 'invisible hand', believing that markets had their own mechanism to reach the equilibria where the economy is at optimum. This concept directly resulted in the *Laissez-Faire* economy, which promotes a largely independent market without any government intervention. Most liberal philosophers, including Adam Smith, agreed on the government's duty on providing a public good, but they have diverse opinions on the scope of the public good.

To summarize, a typical liberal polity should consist of constitutionalism, separation of power, separation of church and state, decentralisation, public education, and universal franchise. On the other hand, a liberal economy would adopt equality of opportunity, private property, government provision of public goods, and varying degrees of a social minimum.

3 Prospects into Liberalism

3.1 Variations of Liberalism

From classical liberalism on, liberalism had been through centuries of evolution, which is illustrated through its diversification. Variations of liberalism were developed, addressing certain problems in different historical backgrounds. The three most prominent denominations were libertarianism and high liberalism. Libertarianism stressed the concept of all rights are properties and they have exclusive control over the properties. Notice that classical liberals like Locke and Mill regarded that some rights are so fundamental that are unalienable, whereas libertarians would permit the transfer of all rights. They also differed from other liberals in the conception of government. Libertarians are strong advocates of small governments, which are limited to only ensuring the rights of their citizens and contract rights. Regarding economics, libertarians pressed for a purely Laissez-faire economy that has no government intervention. Libertarian thoughts popularized by the Austrian School and Chicago School of economics earned favour and success in various parts of the world, including Chile, Portugal, and Britain. Libertarianism reflected the pursuit of exclusive economic rights, such tendency illustrated the growing influence of enterprises in politics.

On the other hand, high liberal tradition portrayed a more socially progressive tendency. A more progressive form of equality of opportunity, adopted by high liberals, is the fair equality of opportunity which requires the society to provide all the educational and other resources needed that offer all individuals an equal chance to compete with others at the same level. High liberalism's fundamental tenet is that everyone has a right to an adequate share of material resources to meet their basic needs, so they can be suitably independent, in charge of their own lives, and able to exercise their fundamental liberties and equal opportunities. [19] Liberal theorists' different evaluations and people's varying demands called for the emergence of new adaptations of liberalism. They reflected people's concerns and desires of the age.

3.2 Inabilities of Liberalism

Classical liberalism has portrayed many flaws and inabilities throughout the span of history. Some flaws are innate to liberalism itself, others are exposed through the advancement of human society.

The socialist theorists posed serious challenges to liberalism. Human nature, a founding principle of classical liberalism, is also an innate flaw of liberalism. The pre-assumptions of human nature to classical liberalism is like what rational choice theory to economics. They provide the normative ground for liberalism thoughts. The problems with the liberal conception of human nature are that it is static. Entering the nineteenth century, new social scientific thoughts emerged, including the idea of human nature is a societal construct and is malleable. Karl Marx denoted that capitalism, a system of natural liberty according to Adam Smith, has put estranged labour on people and alienated people from their nature (Marx, Karl, *Estranged Labour of Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (Prometheus Books: New York, USA)). This

provides the implication that what classical liberalism sought to solve, like avarice, selfishness, or partiality, could be caused by itself. Liberal constitutionalism received some critics as well. As previously discussed, protecting classical liberal property rights is in fact also implying the perpetual inequality based on family cumulation, physical luck and brute luck. Such critique appeared to be more emphasised under current global economic recessions. Additionally, the classical liberal economy has been widely criticised. Back in the 2008 economic crisis and the recent Covid-19 pandemic, we can see more calls for fairer economic reforms and resentment of the free market emerging. The increasing disparity between the rich and the poor is exaggerating the conflict within societies. When the rich are doubling their property there are also numerous people struggling for their next meal. Gaps among social classes lead to factual inequality in effective freedom, rights, and political power. The outcome of liberal economies is not in accordance with liberal thoughts.

Critical theorists, represented by Horkheimer and Adorno, have argued the facilitating effects of liberalism on fascism. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they identified that the enlightenment reason inside liberalism has become what is recognized as instrumental reason, which is manipulative rather than progressive, open and inspirational. Isaiah Berlin also identified similar development in his work *Ideologies in Twentieth Century*. People and leaders of political parties has become less liberal in ways that they portrayed a stronger tendency toward irrational means toward contingencies. They rather remove questions than to reason and resolve the question, and rather foster irrational worshiping and blind obedience than to inspire people's critical spirit. Additionally, Horkheimer distinguished the trend of liberalism collapsing into fascism. This is because liberalism is grounded on subjective premises. The "inner contradiction" of liberalism, which underlies in the subjectivist principle of self-interest and the instrumental reason. Such mechanisms are tending toward a totally administered society that is consistent with fascist idea.

4 Conclusion

In real-life politics, an evident declining tendency towards liberal political parties was also witnessed. The outcome of democratic elections is going to two extremes. Some people's concerns are tending toward a higher degree of equality and justice while others tending toward populism and fascism. US, UK and German elections illustrated such dual tendency. Trump, the former president of the USA who promotes anti-elitism, higher welfare and protectionist policies to promote domestic livelihood, his success reflected that more people are buying into populism and guarantees for basic needs. UK's labour party's voting intention has increased since 2019 and exceeded the conservative party in November 2021. Desire for fairer economic reforms is witnessed in British society. Similarly, the German party SPD which advocates social justice, welfare state, social free-market economy, and a fair redistribution of wealth won the election and formed a united government with Green Party and FDP. It is also noteworthy that the leftist party Die Linke also had an increase in its support rate. On the other hand, the Neo-Nazism party AfD -- Alternative for Germany, came to the fifth place in

the election. Such examples also can be found in French elections as the support rate for both National Rally, a rightest party with nationalist tendency, and La France Insoumise, a leftist populist party, increased.

It is evident that classical liberalism is getting unsuited in modern-day society although it is still the major ideology of many states. The word 'liberal' is even a little bit impaired with classical liberalism as it has become the favourite ideology among the conservatives. Its systematic flaws are hindering people from gaining their liberties. The inability of liberalism pushed people to illiberal stances, leaving rooms for populism, fascism or socialism. As one of the most prominent ideology, liberalism's influence is huge. The total collapse of liberalism would create huge worldwide political disorder. All in all, the declining tendency of liberalism result from the inabilities of it. If liberalism want to prevent its self from collapsing, bold reforms must be undertaken. The efforts of trying to retaining centrism and ameliorate the social conflicts, like welfare state and pluralism, would come to an end in front of the tribunal of reality as the transfer payment and government intervention into the market have overloaded the government spending, and diversified self-identities had been suppressed by the patriarchy resulted from certain groups' advantageous position in economic inequality. There is no room for remaining centralism, liberalism have to take side between left and right.

As previously mentioned, liberalism has developed variations to fit into more complicated circumstances. The prioritized preassumptions and doctrines ought to be re-examined. It is important to re-evaluate what should be emphasized. The pursuit of liberalism, which sought the emancipation of humans is what makes it valuable, it is also what every doctrine and principle should be centering around. The future of human society would be more challenging and competitive, it is necessary to introduce more creativity and bold reforms into our thoughts and to really look at what people need.

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