

## Lecture Notes on Liberalism

### 1. Defining Liberalism

Most Americans distinguish Liberals from Conservatives by policy differences. Liberals favor Choice; Conservatives oppose it. Liberals support “Motor Voter Registration”; Conservatives support Voter ID’s. Liberals want evolution to be taught in schools exclusively; Conservatives want evolution taught as theory comparable to the Theory of a divine first cause or Creationism. Liberals want gun control. Conservatives want so-called Second Amendment rights. Liberals want a separation of Church and State; Conservatives believe America is a Christian nation. Conservatives favor prayer in the school; Liberals do not. Conservatives favor the death penalty; Liberals oppose it. Liberals favor income distribution; Conservatives value making one’s own way in a competitive society. Liberals favor single payer universal health care coverage; Conservatives oppose it. Liberals support Medicare, Social Security and Obama Care; Conservatives regard this as the slippery slope to complete Socialism. Liberals favor a progressive income tax; Conservatives favor an equal tax rate and a Federal sales tax. Conservatives favor states rights; Liberals favor big government. Conservatives favor increasing defense funding; Liberals seek to cut defense spending.

What divides Liberalism from Conservatism is an axiomatic assumption about human nature. Conservatives believe that man is born in sin and shows very little potential for self-improvement. Without the guiding hand of government, culture, religion and the other norms, mores and institutions which confine human proclivities, human nature is ill disposed to do well. Conservatism is predicated upon the foundational belief that man’s innate lack of reason disqualifies man from becoming free. Liberals believe that freedom is a necessary condition to enable men to live by reason.

Liberalism takes the opposite view of human nature. Human behavior by its very nature lends itself to improvement. Each person is born with the inherent capacity to do right and become a better person. For Liberals, the behavior of

youngsters in *Lord of the Flies* was pathological and not a predictable, expectable outcome when social and legal restraints are absent. Most people are good because they want to be not because they are forced to be. With the proper guidance, such people can become even better human beings.

Liberalism in the United States took root in American soil. Despite its European sources, its identity was uniquely and genuinely American. Without the burden of thousands of years of European history, the Liberal Tradition started with a blank slate. By comparison with Europe, the New World was a pristine state of nature. "In the beginning all the World was America." John Locke, *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, Property, paragraph 39.

The liberal conception of the government as properly protecting economic freedom of citizens and private property comes into conflict in the Enlightenment with the valuing of democracy. James Madison confronts this tension in the context of arguing for the adoption of the U.S. Constitution (in his *Federalist #10*). Madison argues that popular government (pure democracy) is subject to the evil of factions; in a pure democracy, a majority bound together by a private interest, relative to the whole, has the capacity to impose its particular will on the whole. The example most on Madison's mind is that those without property (the many) may seek to bring about governmental re-distribution of the property of the propertied class (the few), perhaps in the name of that other Enlightenment ideal, equality. If, as in Locke's theory, the government's protection of an individual's freedom is encompassed within the general end of protecting a person's property, then, as Madison argues, the proper form of the government cannot be pure democracy, and the will of the people must be officially determined in some other way than by directly polling the people.

2. By turning a blind eye to the changing social and economic conditions, which brought on the French Revolution, Joseph de Maistre (1754-1821) blamed the newfangled notions of rational thought and individual rights for the disorder that ensued. In its place, writers like De Maistre substituted what has been termed "throne and altar Conservatism" or "Latin Conservatism". The authoritarian rule of a hereditary monarch over a hierarchically structured society is

represented by the throne. The altar stands for the Church, usually the Catholic Church. Without the imposition of authority, society becomes “red in tooth and claw”. The phrase refers to nature where predatory animals unsentimentally cover their teeth and claws with the blood of their prey as they kill and devour them.

“ Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation’s final law  
Tho’ Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shriek’d against his creed.

*Alfred Lord Tennyson’s In Memoriam A. H. H., 1850. Canto 56*

3. Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) was a social philosopher at Oxford renowned for his study of this period of the later 18th Century and early 19th Century which became known as the Counter-Enlightenment. Berlin ‘s unique insight was that the attack upon the Enlightenment launched by these writers laid the foundation for pluralism. Berlin thought that the rigidity of the Enlightenment thinkers forced a sort of homogeneity and uniformity where everything has to be the same. This has been termed “monism” by philosophers. Monism is the philosophical view that a variety of existing things can be explained in terms of a single reality or substance. The Counter-Enlightenment writers mercilessly attacked the Age of Reason for its reluctance and inability to recognize the numerous differences between people based upon both nature and nurture. Different people not only believed different things. They also saw things differently. This has been termed pluralism. Pluralism denotes a diversity of views and stands rather than a single approach or method of interpretation.

What Berlin observed was that the stiff-necked authoritarianism of Vcounter-Enlightenment Conservatism demonstrated pluralism thereby freeing intellectual inquiry and social policy from the rigidity and confinement of Enlightenment thinking. Berlin claimed the Enlightenment’s legacy in the 20th century has been monism which supports political authoritarianism The Counter-Enlightenment advocated pluralism which has apparently been embraced by Liberalism. Oops!

4. Setting up government to pursue the more perfect union to more closely bring the constitutive ideal in alignment with the normative principle can run into serious problems in a pluralistic society. That people disagree was anticipated in the design of the Constitution which designed government to operate as a conflict resolution mechanism.

5. The intellectual legacy of Liberalism at the turn of the 21st Century had deconstructed and denuded itself of any content, which provided relief to the maladies afflicting American society. Isaiah Berlin had so convincingly painted the picture that the world was a muddle in which conflicting value systems competed absent any objective yardstick to allow measurable comparison that only an existential crisis remained. "Principles are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed," he wrote. "Indeed, the very desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving for the certainties of childhood." By denying the existence of one true answer, which Berlin admits was always the implicit faith of Classic Liberalism, there is nothing left in its place.

What Berlin attempted to do was to remove the constitutive ideal from Liberalism after having deconstructed its monistic worldview in favor of a more contemporary, realistic view of pluralism. Without assuming the objective validity of the constitutive ideal, Liberalism is stuck. It cannot travel from where we are to where we are supposed to go. One cannot seek the improvement of the human condition absent any standard to measure improvement. Without such a grounding faith, Liberalism opens itself to an attack from the Left and the Right. The Right charges that Liberalism lacks a moral compass. The Left asserts moral relativism opening the gateway to nihilism precisely because the moral compass is the figment of a fevered imagination.

6. However the lesson to be drawn from our DNA is the indisputable demonstration of a common humanity. Man is also a social animal. Humanity finds its expression in human society. As is evident, there are many different human societies. The culture, norms and institutions are widely diversified. Each has its own vision of the well-ordered society. These visions may conflict. There

is no universal consensus upon which social order is the right one for a well ordered society in which people can live as they should.

7. Liberalism cannot separate from its core. Liberalism is an assumption held only by faith that the human condition can be improved. Liberalism relies upon reason which is the innate ability of human beings in society to work together to figure things out. Reason relies upon facts, science, and knowledge. Reason also relies upon inference, judgment and wisdom. The collective experience of mankind provides the basis for continued improvement. The history of mankind has been the history of human improvement. Human improvement throughout history has not been a linear progression. There have been many starts and stops. Progress is sometimes followed by regression. However at bottom is always the unprovable belief that things can be made better than they are, and they need to be made better for everyone.

8. Liberalism views humanity as the continuing constant in a sea of change and motion. Liberalism is the social philosophy that human society, culture and institutions government all exist to enable humanity to survive, flourish and adapt. The goal continues, as it was in 'The Enlightenment' to move further along the path from the normative state to the constitutive ideal.