



# LIBERALS LACK A “COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS”

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According to Émile Durkheim, one of the founding fathers of sociology, every society in the world has a collective consciousness, a set of shared beliefs, attitudes, and ideas, which every member of that society takes for granted and “finds already formed” when they are born: “collective ways of acting or thinking [that] have a reality outside the individuals who, at any moment of time, conform to it” [*Selected Writings*, p. 71]. This collective consciousness is what provides humans with a sense of belonging and identity, what’s right and wrong, acceptable and deviant. Durkheim, who came from a long lineage of devout French Jews, developed this concept to explain how societies are bound together, how individuals with conflicting personal and family interests reach consensual values and avoid the Hobbesian “war of all against all.”

## **Western Individualism**

Durkheim criticized Marx for believing that societies were held together through the coercive powers of the ruling class in control of the means of production. But he also criticized “utilitarian liberals” for believing that in the modern West the individual had been emancipated from the collective consciousness of society with the growth of individual liberties, freedom of speech, and the separation of church and state. According to Durkheim, the emergence of individualism, and the spread of capitalist economic ties based on personal interests, did not bring about a “weakening but a transformation of the social bonds.” The “progressive emancipation” of the individual did not mean that the individual had “separated himself from society.” It meant that individuals were now joined to society “in a new manner” [*Selected Writings*, p. 115].

Durkheim drew a distinction between the “mechanical solidarity” of traditional societies and the “organic solidarity” of modern European societies. He did not call it “mechanical” because the solidarity that exists in traditional cultures is “produced by mechanical and artificial means,” but because the individuals in such a society are linked similarly to the way homogeneous molecules of inorganic bodies are linked, in contrast to the unity of organic bodies where each part has “greater individualization” and autonomy of functions. In traditional cultures, the collective consciousness “completely envelops” the consciousness of its members. The individual “does not belong to himself” but is “literally a thing at the disposal of society.” The collective conscience consists of a rigid set of beliefs with very little opportunity for each member to develop particular personality characteristics [*Division of Labor*, pp. 84-5].

The beliefs and values inherent in the collective conscience of organic societies stress the dignity and worth of the human individual. Modern European societies encourage individuals to develop their own talents, happiness and inclinations. But this does not mean that the individual has been extricated from society. Rather, the individual becomes the supreme principle of the collective consciousness. This modern European collective consciousness affords the individual with "a sphere of action that is peculiarly his own, and consequently a personality." "The human person...is considered as sacred."

Whoever makes an attempt on a man's life, on a man's liberty...inspires us with a feeling of revulsion, in everyway comparable to that which the believer experiences when he sees his idol profaned...Nowhere are the rights of man affirmed more energetically, since the individuals is here placed on the level of sacrosanct objects [*Selected Writings*, p. 149].

The collective consciousness of modern Western peoples is thus very peculiar in that it "leaves uncovered a part of the individual consciousness" [*Division of Labor*, p. 85]. It does not demand the subordination of the individual to any religion, custom, or tradition, but encourages each person to affirm his right to freedom of association and expression and to "form ideas about the world that seem to him most fitting and to freely develop his own nature" [*Selected Writings*, p. 195]. Humans in this type of society become more aware of themselves as distinct personalities.

Durkheim observes that the "more primitive societies are, the more resemblances there are between the individuals from which they have been formed." He cites these words from an anthropologist: "He who has seen one native of America has seen them all" [*Division of Labor*, p. 87]. And these words from another observer:

this physical resemblance among natives arises essentially from the absence of any strong psychological individuality and from the inferior state of intellectual culture in general...The homogeneity of characters within a Negro tribe is indisputable...Differences between individuals of the same tribe are insignificant [*Division of Labor*, p. 89].

While it is true that the spread of modernization in Europe broke down distinctive dialects, reduced local characteristics and coalesced separate ethnic groupings within one nation, this "does not prevent Frenchmen today from being much more different from one another than they were once." "There are no longer as many differences as there are large regions, but there are almost as many differences as there are individuals" [*Division of Labor*, p. 91].

## **Anomie**

For all these observations, however, Durkheim believed that modern Europeans were facing a problem never seen before in history: Anomie. The discrediting of traditionally mandated values, the erosion of the authority of patriarchal relations, the loosening of individuals from communal economic ties, along with the liberation of markets and the pursuit of unlimited wealth—were creating individuals who were no longer morally constrained but were instead encouraged to give free reign to the satisfaction of their unlimited desires and appetites.

Humans need to be guided and restrained by society. "Men's passions are only stayed by a moral presence they respect" [*Division of Labor*, p. xxxii]. They cannot decide on their own what is the meaning of life without direction, without a sense of responsibility and connectedness to others. Durkheim observed that the reason suicide rates were higher among Protestants than Catholics was their lack of communal ties, smaller families, and their emphasis on individuals developing a personal relationship with God without relying on common religious authorities. Catholic individuals were more connected to society through their greater reliance on ritualistic practices, stronger family ties, and a collective credo interpreted through the authority of priests [*Selected Writings*, p. 242].

Durkheim thus came to the conclusion that in order to overcome the anomic tendencies of modern societies, individuals should be encouraged to create "secondary groupings" or "occupational corporations" for the purpose of representing their interests as members of distinct classes and for the purpose of nurturing a sense of belonging and meaning beyond the sphere of their private existences. In writing about these "occupational corporations," Durkheim was thinking about the capitalist societies of his day, the hostility and conflicts between labor and capital, the commercial crises and the associated bankruptcies. He believed that the state was too distant from the lives of individuals; only corporations that were intermediate between the mass of the population and the government could provide a direct collegial life, mutual obligations and responsibilities, to ameliorate anomic feelings. These corporations would be organized on the basis of values and norms decided upon by individuals, not on the basis of pre-established kinship ties, divine authority, noble birth, or Christian values.

## **Liberalism is Inherently Devoid of a Collective Consciousness**

We may thus be tempted to conclude that with the spread of socialism in the twentieth century, the creation of trade unions, public schools with a common curriculum, patriotic anthems and multiple

symbols reinforcing the civic identity of the peoples of liberal nations, the West managed to create a reasonably healthy collective consciousness, within the framework of the sacrosanct principles of individual rights, private property and enterprise. The way I see it, a society based on liberal principles is inherently incapable of generating a collective consciousness. This judgement may strike some as absurd. Haven't Western liberals assumed immense collective powers through the expansion of government bureaucracies, massive spending in public goods, regulation of businesses, and surveillance for hate speech? And how about the institutional and normative enforcement of feminism, equality of the races, the sacralization of the black civil rights movement, the holocaust, the rainbow flag, multiculturalism, human rights, and immigrant diversity? Don't these mandates speak of a rather intolerant collective conscience? These salient realities have indeed prompted dissidents to argue that Western nations are now controlled by "cultural Marxists" who "marched through all the institutions," replacing the liberals of old who believed in freedom of expression.

I used to argue along these lines—until recently. The way I see it now, individualism remains the defining, all encompassing ideology permeating every aspect of Western culture, a liberalism that is inherently about the right of individuals to choose their own way of life, but which, by the same token, demands the subordination of the individual to this ideology. Western governments are neutral in competitions between different lifestyles or different definitions of the "good life." In the West, one is socialized to be tolerant, inclusive, and respectful of a wide variety of lifestyles. Religious peoples are allowed, and so are people who believe in "traditional" values, with a small "t," as long as they don't "demonstrably limit the liberties of others." A liberal society cannot be tolerant to the point of tolerating individuals who promote collective consciences that threatens to destroy liberal tolerance. Classical liberalism became postmodern liberalism without any march through the institutions through its in-built progressive logic "to free the individual from the traditional restraints of society" or from any institution, norm, kinship group, gender bias or racial prejudice, that constricts the right of the individuals to choose their own way of life without restricting the right of others. Therefore, what liberalism does not tolerate is Traditionalism, with a capital "T," the preservation of heritages that constrict individual choice, the affirmation of national identities that preclude the human right of other nationalities to be included as equal citizens.

The essence of classical liberalism was expressed succinctly in the American Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." All individuals have these "unalienable rights" regardless of race, nationality, sex, or religious beliefs. The progressive liberalism, which came to fruition in the 20C, aimed at enlarging the

scope of "free action" of those who lacked the economic means to exercise their freedom of choice. Progressive liberals thus added, in the course of time, the right to a good education, right to work, paid parental leave, adequate standard of living, and medical care. Freedom was no longer defined as "negative liberty" from an intrusive and regulating government, but as the right to democratically push the government to provide these "positive" freedoms as well. Today, this positive liberalism has managed to persuade millions, particularly the new generation now in our universities, that the old negative freedom of speech should be limited if such freedom has a "harmful" impact on the "self-development" of individuals and their right to feel safe, and equal in "dignity." The civil rights movement that abolished legalized institutional racial segregation, job discrimination, and disenfranchisement throughout the United States, was consistent with liberalism. So was the abolition of white only immigration policies. A policy that treats immigrants differently based on their race violates the right and dignity of all humans to be treated as individuals.

Postmodernists are also consistent with liberal principles in their effort to afford individuals the right to decide which sexual identities they prefer to be identified with, rather than being boxed into a male-female "collectivist binary." The same logic applies to the way critical race theorists use racial categories. They don't believe in races. They believe that in our current society minorities are "racialized" by dominant whites, and that overcoming this racial hierarchy necessitates race identity politics. Their aim is to transcend altogether any form of racial identity for the sake of a society in which everyone is judged as an individual. Both multiculturalism and the replacement of whites are consistent with liberalism. The aim of multiculturalism is to afford immigrant minorities with resources to enhance their opportunities for individual integration while encouraging members of the "dominant" Western culture to respect their private ethnic identity and customs as long as the principle of individual rights is not trampled upon. The replacement of whites simply means that individuals with equal rights and dignity who have a different skin color will replace individuals of another skin color.

Of course, there have been heated debates among liberals about all these issues and progressions, particularly between those who emphasize "negative" rights and those who emphasize "positive" rights. Yet, today, libertarians or conservatives agree that no private business has a right to discriminate on the basis of color or sex. Classical liberals long ago accepted the positive liberalism of Keynesian government intervention. Not a single academic, politician, lawyer...including the leaders of populist parties, questions diversity, even if privately they hold prejudicial attitudes towards immigrants, because liberalism precludes any collective beliefs about the inherent significance of the West's "European" or "Christian" heritage. Liberalism makes no decisions about what are the "best" values, the best ways of life, the supra-individual significance of past heritages or traditions. The best way of life is

the right of the individual to decide what is the best way of life. The main role of the government is to ensure the security of "tolerance" and the institutions of liberty, in the name of which it has a right to curtail, demonize, and suppress, beliefs and acts of "intolerance" that would limit the liberty of others to pursue their own happiness.

In other words, liberalism, an ideology that is unique to the West, does not believe that the heritage of the West, Christianity, its uniquely creative architectural, literary, and artistic traditions, are of any higher worthiness to the cultural identity of Westerners than the individually preferred choices of any newly arrived immigrant citizen. Therefore, as long as Westerners remain liberals, there is nothing they can do to counter the eradication of Western civilization, its collective traditions, all the national anthems of Europe that sound too Eurocentric, as well as the biased notion that only a man and woman with children constitute a family. At the root of contemporary liberalism is not a collective conscience but the belief that a state cannot determine what is worthwhile, meaningful, and sacred in life other than to allow individuals to find their own subjective meaning and lifestyle in a world devoid of any collective meanings.

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Ricardo Duchesne has written [a number of articles](#) on Western uniqueness. He the author of [\*The Uniqueness of Western Civilization\*](#), [\*Faustian Man in a Multicultural Age\*](#), [\*Canada in Decay: Mass Immigration, Diversity, and the Ethnocide of Euro-Canadians\*](#).

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[Featured](#): *Decalcomania*, by René Magritte; painted in 1966.

