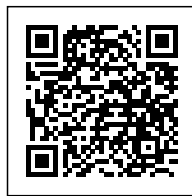


# WHAT'S WRONG WITH LIBERALISM?

*Posted on October 1, 2021 by Ryszard Legutko*



To many, liberalism seems the best; the only platform, in fact, that enables political leaders and social groups to cooperate and to introduce social change and political reform. At any rate, this is the situation in Eastern Europe; but I believe that to a considerable degree it is also the case in other countries of what we call the West. Liberalism is regarded not only as synonymous with a free society, but also as the destiny of the modern world; the basic binding force of civilization, and the only basis for a political language through which we can all communicate. When the East Europeans freed themselves from the Soviet hegemony, the first thing they were told, and many of them told themselves, was that they must follow the liberal pattern. What "the liberal pattern" meant was not clear. What was clear, however, was that any open rejection of this recommendation, even if only barely spoken, or a deliberate replacement of the word "liberal" by "non-liberal" or "illiberal" would provoke unpleasant consequences in international institutions and in international public opinion.

Liberalism is obviously a loose and rather obscure concept, covering several ideas, not always compatible with one another in different historical contexts. It extends from radical free market capitalism to certain forms of the welfare state; from Ludwig von Mises to John Rawls, from Reaganomics to the European Union. Shifting from a narrow understanding of liberalism to a large one and then back to a narrow one is, especially in polemics, a common practice among politicians, political commentators, and the public at large. This makes a coherent and exhaustive rendering of "liberalism" extremely difficult. This should not, however, be sufficient reason to abandon the search for a more or less unifying definition. Coherent and exhaustive renderings of socialism or conservatism are no less difficult; yet this has never prevented critics from formulating objections against socialism as such, or against conservatism as such.

Let me offer my own formula by way of definition. A liberal is someone who takes a rather thin view of man, society, morality, religion, history, and philosophy, believing this to be the safest approach to organizing human cooperation. He does not deny that thicker, non-procedural principles and norms are possible, but believes these to be particular preferences which possess validity only within particular groups and communities. For this reason, he refuses to attribute to such principles and norms any universal value and he protests whenever someone attempts to impose his profound beliefs, however true they may seem to him, on the entire social body. Liberals might have divergent opinions on economic freedoms and the role of government, but they are united in their conviction that thinness of anthropological, moral, and metaphysical assumptions is the prerequisite for freedom and peace. Whoever would thicken such assumptions generates ideological conflicts and is believed to undermine the basis of peaceful cooperation and opening the door to unjust discrimination.

Can one have non-liberal or even anti-liberal views today without becoming, at best, a laughing stock, or at worst, a dangerous supporter of authoritarianism? Is the thinness of basic assumptions indeed the only way to secure liberal ends? I, for one, think that the identification of liberalism and liberty, so characteristic of modern times, is largely unfounded. Liberalism is one of several systems whose aim is to establish a certain ordering of the world. Whether this ordering is good, or preferable to other orderings, or to what extent this ordering increases our freedom, are open questions, and no definite answer seems compelling.

In what will follow I will present five arguments against liberalism, of which some will be against the theory as such, while others will be against some of its claims.

## First Argument

The first and most immediate reason for my lukewarm attitude toward liberalism is its modest position in the entirety of human experience. To put it simply: liberalism as a theory is not interesting. Plato, Aristotle, Dante, Shakespeare, and Dostoyevsky were not liberals. One cannot think of any outstanding writer who could be qualified simply and solely as a liberal. What is most fascinating in the picture of man and the world, in the understanding of our relation to God, to nature, to one another, was all formulated outside the realm of liberal thought. The most intriguing thinkers whom we regard as belonging to the liberal tradition in the largest sense of the word — Kant, Ortega y Gasset, or Tocqueville are all interesting to the degree to which they transcend liberal orthodoxy.

A thought experiment will make this clear. Let us imagine a man educated exclusively in Aristotelianism, or Hegelianism, or phenomenology, or Thomism. Such a man could be accused of one-sidedness, but he certainly could, other conditions being fulfilled, achieve wisdom in the most basic meaning of the word. Then let us imagine someone who is educated only in the works of liberalism. Such a man could never attain wisdom because the works he studies leave out the most important problems that have preoccupied human beings from time immemorial. The liberal ignores those questions because he considers them either irrelevant, or — for reasons I will explain later — dangerous. My experience with liberals is that whenever I raise those questions in their company, I encounter two kinds of reaction: either reluctance to discuss those issues as secondary, or irritation which results from my interlocutor's conviction that he has located this problem within his system long ago and finds no reason to revisit it.

The lack of weight which one feels whenever one reads liberal works is an obvious consequence of the thinness of liberal assumptions, from which one cannot derive any profound insights. It is not that the tree of literary art is always greener than the tree of political theory, and that no poet or writer of significance was a propounder of a particular theory. The root of the problem lies in the program of consistent reductionism which closes the liberal mind to the issues that men have always thought constitutive of the human condition. The dilemma is inescapable: either one makes bolder assumptions — and then one is bound to depart from strict liberalism — or one sticks to the original thinness, and then one falls into sterility.

## Second Argument

What has been said so far can immediately be countered with the following reply. Liberalism does not address the fundamental metaphysical and anthropological — which is to say, human — problems because it has a far more modest objective. Liberalism's purpose is merely to create a framework within which people can function as acting, thinking, and creating beings. Liberals want to construct a model of public order spacious enough to secure maximum freedom for everyone, including the Aristotelians, the Hegelians, the Thomists, as well as their opponents — in short, for anyone, regardless of the priority or the profundity of his problems.

This reply is well known, but I do not think much of it. What we find in the reply reveals another level of liberal problems and explains why liberals are so difficult to communicate with. This leads me to my second argument. Liberals always place themselves in a higher position than their interlocutors, and from that position they have an irresistible urge to dominate. What they usually say is something like this: We are not interested in deciding any particular issue; all we want to do is to create a system within which you will make your own decisions. By saying this they do two things which I find rather dubious. First, they always usurp for themselves — without asking anyone for permission and without any permission being granted — the role of the architectonic organizer of society; thus, they always want to dominate by performing the roles of the guardians of the whole of the social system and the judges of the procedural rules within the system. Second, they declare "neutrality" towards concrete solutions and decisions within the system, but such "neutrality" is impossible to maintain; one cannot be an organizer of everything while at the same time refraining from imposing substantively in specific cases.

At least since John Locke, the liberals — declaring that all they are interested in is freedom of individuals and not the content of their choices — have made categorical judgments about what

government should look like, how it should govern, how social life should be arranged, how families should be constructed, how our minds should work, and how we should relate to God. They had definitive answers — believed to follow from the principles underlying their framework — about which institutions are inferior and which superior, how children should be educated and what objectives schools and universities should have, what is the best structure of churches and families, what are acceptable relations between spouses, between parents and children, between teachers and pupils. The answers, "I don't know" or "a decision is not possible within the accepted assumptions" are not something one often hears from liberals. In the system of liberty which they have constructed, everything is predictably known and accordingly regulated.

This openly declared focus on "procedural" issues rather than "substantive" issues is one of the greatest and most effective liberal mystifications, not to say sleights of hand. There are no non-substantive procedures. And once a radical change is made, whether in a school system, family life, the university, or the church, it does not make the slightest difference if the nature of the change was procedural or substantive. The liberals have legalized abortion, are in the process of legalizing homosexual marriages, are inclined to legalize euthanasia; they have changed or supported changes in family life, in religious discipline, in school curricula, in sexual conduct. None of these actions of support or inspiration were, strictly speaking, based on "substantive" claims; all were based on legalistic and formal arguments. But the practical effects in social and moral life were profound. Not only is liberalism not modest, its ambition to have a decisive voice is unquenchable: because it is the result of self-deception. The socialists, the conservatives, the monarchists are ambitious too, but they all know very well how far they want to penetrate the social fabric; and at least some of them are well aware that reality often resists, and that giving in to reality is sometimes a sound decision. The liberals, however, live in a world of self-delusion about their mildness and modesty, believing that even their most arrogant interference somehow does not touch moral or social "substance."

The liberal framework is sometimes said to be limited only to the general structure of society, while leaving room for non-liberal communities, on the condition that they comply with the liberal principles of the whole. But such a promise, even if sincere, is incongruent with the nature of liberalism. Once it is assumed — as all the liberals do assume — that individuals are the basic agents, then communities, particularly non-liberal communities, lose any privileges that may stem from experience, custom, tradition, or human nature. There is no compelling argument that would make a liberal uncompromising with respect to the principles of the whole while tolerant with respect to the principles of particular groups or communities. All communities are understood as aggregates of individuals; and it is individuals, not communities, that are said to need liberal protections.

Consequently, non-liberal social structures and traditions — those that still exist — are merely tolerated "for the time being;" and they are under constant and minute supervision. When the time for toleration is over, when "the time being" comes to an end, a non-liberal social structure immediately becomes the object of attack. The most recurrent example is the liberals' relation to the Roman Catholic Church, which is either formally tolerated in the name of the freedom that allows non-liberals to form non-liberal communities, or else formally attacked, also in the name of the freedom which the Church as a non-liberal institution is accused of lacking. But as everyone seriously interested in religion knows, the key to understanding the Church lies not in organizational questions but in substantive propositions about human nature, metaphysics, etc. Churches may be liberal or not; but the fact that they are liberal does not make them "by definition" better churches; it does not make them better adapted to the essential needs of human nature and more appropriate as responses to metaphysical problems. To acquiesce in the existence of the Catholic Church — regardless of its non-liberal organizational structure — as an irreducible expression of human experience, an experience from which one can learn or profit, is impossible for liberals. This would be for them a betrayal of liberal principles. Learning from others is something liberals never do.

### **Third Argument**

One can hardly deny the moral impulse behind liberal thinking: to free men from bondage because bondage is humiliating. The primary reason one becomes a liberal is to create a situation in which men, to use Kant's expression, are "freed from tutelage" and become sovereign agents themselves. But what would the world look like when men are in this blessed state? To this question, the liberals reply that it is precisely a world which corresponds to the liberal order. In other words, liberals — and this is my third argument — confuse two kinds of aspiration to freedom, or better, and to put it differently, two claims about freedom.

The first claim is that people are mature beings and their free actions should not be impeded by arbitrary will. The second claim is that what free people in fact want is a liberal order which best satisfies their need for freedom. These two claims are not necessarily identical, but liberals have no doubt about their equivalence. In the first case we have the belief that relying on people's maturity benefits society as a whole since every human agent makes the best use of his capacities. In the second case, we have the belief that there is a single system which secures the maximum of freedom for everyone and that for all those who value freedom such a system must be the object of their aspiration. By identifying these two beliefs, liberals assume that whoever wants freedom must

necessarily want liberalism, and whoever wants liberalism must necessarily want freedom. Armed with this assumption, liberals assess the progress of freedom by the yardstick of acceptance of their own system.

Liberals thus reconcile — in their minds as well as in their consciences — two tendencies which are essentially irreconcilable: acquiescence in the spontaneous development of social reality, and a desire to reshape society radically in accordance with a priori principles. Since those two things are not differentiated in their minds, the liberals believe that not only does the future of freedom depend on whether people accept the system they consider optimal, but also that the implementation of this system is in fact indistinguishable from the satisfaction of the deepest desires of sovereign individuals.

This, I think, explains an otherwise inexplicable paradox: that modern liberal discourse is not a language of freedom, but a language of necessity. Modernity, we are told, makes it imperative to embrace the liberal system and to reject whatever is not liberal. Whoever thinks otherwise should be placed in the dustbin of history. In no place is this imperative more palpable than in Eastern Europe. Almost immediately after the fall of the old communist regime — whose ideologues also believed in the inexorable laws of history — the peoples of Eastern Europe were told that in order to become free societies they would have to conform to one political model. In order to be free, they had to submit to liberal tutelage. There was to be no nonsense about experimenting, trial and error, drawing lessons from one's own historical experience or traditions. Schools, universities, the media, families — all had to become liberal. And this did not mean making creative use of one's freedom, one's intelligence, and one's experience, but following a blueprint that was said to be obligatory today and even more obligatory tomorrow.

#### **Fourth Argument**

Many liberals, particularly in recent decades, while never ceasing to preach the superiority of pluralism, have in fact been propagating a dualistic vision of the world: on the one hand, they see pluralism; on the other, what they consider pluralism's antithesis, which they sometimes call monism. This dichotomy is believed to describe not only the modern world but the entirety of human history, past and future. For liberals, the claim that in the human drama there have always been two antagonists — pluralists and monists — has acquired the status of a dogma, more self-evident than the Ten Commandments. The monists are ayatollahs, Adolf Hitlers, Christian fundamentalists, Catholic integrist, Islamists, conservatives, and many more. *Tertium non datur*. Whoever does not belong to the camp of the

pluralists, the camp of the liberals, will inevitably find himself sooner or later in the camp of their enemies.

Let us take a well-known but very bad essay by Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," where pluralism is exemplified by "negative liberty" and monism by "positive liberty." In that essay Berlin argues that those who defend the notion of positive liberty are in fact propounding a theory that justifies political authoritarianism, perhaps even totalitarianism. If, for instance, someone maintains that the human soul consists of two parts — i.e., higher and lower, rational and non-rational — and that the former should control the latter, then he intentionally or unintentionally opens the possibility that a certain institution or group of people will claim the right to take power and, in the name of the higher part of the human soul, impose one ideological and political system on another group representing the lower part of the soul. As it is easy to see, Berlin employs here a slippery slope argument, perhaps the most often used argument in this context, which says that monistic philosophies all lead, sooner or later, to disastrous political consequences by sanctioning discrimination, domination, and other equally reprehensible practices.

The only problem with this argument is that to the group of "monists" belong all the greatest and the most important philosophers, from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, to Hegel and Husserl. The dualistic perspective of the pluralists leads to discrediting what is most valuable in philosophy itself, and surprisingly, this act of discrediting is done in the name of "freedom" and "plurality." Once this dualistic perspective becomes accepted as legitimate, it must entail intellectual degradation similar to what we once had in Marxism, where the entirety of human thought was also divided between two currents: materialism (which was good) and idealism (which was bad). There is no point in studying the "bad" part — whether monism or idealism — unless one either subscribes to the well-known critique of it, or else defends the "bad" part by indicating that it has some elements of the "good" part (pluralism or materialism). Studying the "bad" part for reasons that have nothing to do with the dichotomy makes no sense.

This also explains the liberals' tendency to make sweeping judgments, positive or negative, about everything in the past, present, and future. This tendency derives from the simple criterion which they so often apply, and which is essentially political. The liberals do not analyze whether this or that theory is true or false, whether this or that moral position is good or bad, but whether those positions are politically safe — that is, whether they are not too monistic and therefore too authoritarian. And because in the light of the slippery slope argument nothing (other than liberalism) is safe, and because all non-



trivial propositions may be placed on the slippery slope, the liberals are moral busybodies, never ceasing to warn, reprimand, condemn, praise, or lament.

## **Fifth Argument**

Obsessed with the specter of discrimination and enslavement looming within every social practice, philosophy, or moral norm, liberals fall prey to the rhetoric of emancipation and are helpless when faced with modern ideological mystifications, which are often created in bad faith and from evidently erroneous assumptions. During the last century, there have appeared many ideologies that proclaim their noble aim of opposing unjust historically-entrenched discrimination by the dominant Western white Christian male majority. There is practically no minority today that, making recourse to these ideologies, cannot make a convincing case that it is a victim of a particularly sinister form of discrimination.

Who is today a liberal, and who is not, is often difficult to say since emancipatory rhetoric has become so omnipresent. The true-breed liberals — for whom the idea of freedom is so dear — are extremely generous in co-opting new groups into the ever-expanding circle of freedom fighters. But their generosity is not always reciprocated. Such radical groups as homosexual activists or feminists do not have any profound sympathy with liberalism, but they use its tools to promote their own goals. In fact, they are egalitarians, and the idea of equality, not liberty, is their principal value. The problem is that the liberals cannot reject the claims of such groups because they are paralyzed by the rhetoric of liberation and by their own conviction that saying "no" to these groups would amount to the renunciation of the liberal creed.

Sometimes the desire to co-opt everyone may express itself in a vision of society which is infinitely spacious — a utopia of utopias, as Robert Nozick once called it — which could be compared to a department store where all possible goods are available, and where people are not forced to buy only those that are currently fashionable or recommended by some authoritative agency. In a department store, there is no ethical hierarchy that would tell producers what to produce and customers what to purchase. A society which is modeled on the department store is said to stock goods for hedonists and spiritualists, for Jews and Muslims, for illiterate pleasure-seekers and for refined intellectuals; there is pornography and the Bible, Plato and Stalin, communism and laissez-faire. No one is deprived of the opportunity to find what he is looking for. Muslims are not coerced to accept the Christian faith, homosexuals are not forced to marry the other sex, monks are not distracted from their search for the

absolute, and users are not constantly reminded about the Sermon on the Mount. The diversity produced by these arrangements eliminates any need for the distasteful logic of political trade-offs.

The problems with this vision are two. The first is conceptual. Such a system is in fact egalitarian, not libertarian: a world of no discrimination is a world of perfect equality. It is an illusion to believe that the egalitarian logic of the whole will not influence what people think within each community. The entire system will either have to create a spontaneous acceptance of the assumption that all ethical creeds are essentially equal, or else a supreme authority will have to impose the rule of equality on all groups. In both cases we might talk of the emergence of a sort of multiculturalism, which — as some think — may be a good thing in itself, but this puts an end to a dream of real cultural diversity. Multiculturalism is always either a highly regulated system or a homogenizing ideology which conceals its homogeneity by selecting some fashionable minority "culture" — homosexuals, Africans, feminists — to which its adherents kowtow and make this kowtowing the criterion of "openness" to plurality.

The second problem is practical. The effect of the increasing number of individual and group claims and the supportive toleration of those claims by liberals creates social and political chaos. The liberals try to bring some order to the situation, but in practice they encourage new groups to make ever more claims and thus to increase the chaos. Liberals resemble a traffic specialist trying to find traffic rules that would enable an increasing number of cars to drive efficiently and without collision and who at the same time is an automobile manufacturer interested in selling as many cars as possible. This task is not feasible. The rules are more and more inclusive, but at the expense of being more and more remote from reality. The result is a loss of a sense of proportion.

Once, "violence" was associated with torturing people; today it is spanking a child. Freedom of speech once meant the fight for the publication of Solzhenitsyn; today, the measure of free speech is pornography. The liberals seem to believe that the rules that secure freedom should be so inclusive that they cover both prohibition of torture and prohibition of spanking, the publication of Solzhenitsyn and the publication of pornography. They do not doubt that the moral principle is in each case the same. Most *causes célèbres* today have a similar element of absurdity.

But although the inclusive rules are more and more remote from reality, their application is becoming more and more specific. Those specific goals are provided by the emancipatory groups that the liberals, naturally as it were, took to be their allies. Thus, not only are we against racism, but against a specific form of racism which is said to exist in mathematics and its categorical conclusions; not only for

toleration, but for that specific form of toleration that permits the students to violate the rules of grammar; not only for a fluid non-binary view of human sexuality but a particular regulation of toilets in public spaces. These are only samples of innumerable cases of the current politics of diversity in liberal societies. No wonder that the inclusiveness has turned into its opposite. The inclusive world the liberals and their allies organized has created far more limitations of freedom than the world they wanted to open for diversity.

Classical liberals, such as John Stuart Mill, believed that enlarging freedom by encouraging dissentience would result in an explosion of human creativity. Liberals today are less interested in creativity. They are on the one hand pedantic doctrinaires who never tire of constructing ever-more complex and ever-more dubious ideologies of inclusion; and on the other hand, they are ideological commissars who have acquired remarkable abilities to silence their critics and to enforce the way we speak and think. Never, since the demise of communism, have we had such an all-out assault on freedom.

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*The [featured images](#) shows, "La Liberté ou la Mort (Liberty or Death)," by Jean-Baptiste Regnault; painted in 1795.*

