

*The
Cambridge Companion
to*
Liberalism



EDITED BY
STEVEN WALL

The Cambridge Companion to
LIBERALISM

Edited by

Steven Wall

University of Arizona



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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
LIBERALISM

The political philosophy of liberalism was first formulated during the Enlightenment in response to the growth of the modern nation-state and its authority and power over the individuals living within its boundaries. Liberalism is now the dominant ideology in the Western world, but it covers a broad swathe of different (and sometimes rival) ideas and traditions and its essential features can be hard to define. *The Cambridge Companion to Liberalism* offers a rich and accessible exploration of liberalism as a body of political thought. It includes chapters on the historical development of liberalism, its normative foundations, and its core philosophical concepts, as well as a survey of liberal approaches and responses to a range of important topics including freedom, equality, toleration, religion, and nationalism. The volume will be valuable for students and scholars in political philosophy, political theory, and the history of political thought.

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Introduction

Liberalism resists easy description. Whether it refers to a political ideology or to a political philosophy, it covers a broad swathe of ideas. The swathe of ideas it covers is so broad, in fact, that efforts to identify its essential and distinctive features almost always come off as hopelessly narrow. For example, in the 1980s it was fashionable for political theorists to propose that liberals, unlike conservatives and radicals, are committed to the idea that the state should be neutral between contested conceptions of the good life.¹ However, this proposal in one fell swoop excludes Mill, Tocqueville, Hobhouse, Green, and many other influential members of the liberal camp. Rather than identifying a single unifying commitment, others have sought, more promisingly, to pick out family resemblance characteristics to zone in on the target.² But once again, the exercise looks ill-fated. True, the more characteristics that are picked out, the less restrictive the resulting characterization of liberalism becomes, but, at the same time, the broadened characterization makes it harder to view liberalism as a distinctive tradition of thought, one that differs in deep and informative ways from rival political traditions such as conservatism or republicanism. It might be advisable, then, to speak of multiple liberal political traditions rather than a single political tradition of liberalism. Or perhaps liberalism should be understood as a single political tradition, but one that is not very unified, encompassing a variety of rival strands of thought. What can be said with confidence is that liberalism is a label that attaches both to a history of a fairly diverse set of political movements, and to the ideas and arguments associated with those movements, and to an ongoing research program in contemporary political philosophy.

This volume introduces readers both to this history and to this research program. It certainly does not purport to be comprehensive.

Any volume of this size on a topic as expansive as liberalism must be selective. The historical periods and topics discussed here reflect the predilections and interests of the editor.³ In selecting topics and contributors, I hope to convey the diversity and vitality of liberalism, but also to bring into view some of its blind spots.

FREEDOM AND PROGRESS

Liberal political movements and the thinkers who have supported those movements have engaged in a wide variety of political causes. As one commentator has put it, "the history of liberalism is a history of opposition to assorted tyrannies."⁴ Liberals have fought against religious persecution in favor of toleration, against caste hierarchy and privilege in favor of meritocracy and social mobility, against arbitrary rule in favor of the rule of the law, and against totalitarian regimes in favor of limited government. These and other political causes have aimed to secure the freedom of individuals to lead their lives on their own terms and in free association with others as well as to expand the scope of those entitled to this freedom. Can we say, accordingly, that a strong commitment to individual freedom is at least a minimal unifying commitment of liberal political thought and liberal political philosophy?

Perhaps we can. Liberals do characteristically champion the cause of freedom. And it is certainly true that liberals very much tend to embrace individualism in the sense that they hold that the claims of individual persons, as opposed to social collectivities, are morally primary. But if this commitment to individual freedom is indeed a unifying feature of liberalism, then it is neither straightforward nor very informative. If we are told only that someone is strongly committed to individual freedom, we do not know too much about his politics. This is to be expected. Like other political and moral concepts, freedom is a contested ideal. It can be characterized in manifold ways, and liberal political thinkers have disagreed, often quite sharply, over how it is best understood. To take some important examples: Liberals have debated whether liberty is best construed in terms of rights and negative freedoms, or instead as a positive ideal of autonomy requiring access to a wide range of options. They have disagreed over the relationship, if any, between living in a free state and being a free individual. And while some liberals have held that

freedom is valuable as such, many have insisted that it is only a set of important or basic freedoms that really matter.

Furthermore, even if all liberals are strongly committed to individual freedom on some understanding of that protean value, very few liberal thinkers have thought that liberty is the only political value. Other values, such as equality or democracy or community, have also been associated with liberalism; and different liberal thinkers have disagreed over both the significance of these other values and their relationship to individual freedom. Not surprisingly, these differences continue to be reflected in contemporary philosophical work on liberalism. It is not uncommon, for example, for critics to charge that in venerating individual freedom liberals ignore or give insufficient weight to other concerns. Thus, socialist critics of liberalism hold that liberals too easily sacrifice equality to liberty, and communitarian critics have long objected that the common good is neglected in a liberal society. Liberal writers respond either by asserting the primacy of individual freedom over these rival values or by contending that the values do not really conflict, but are complementary.

Finally, liberal political thinkers disagree over which institutions best advance the values that they share. Almost all liberals embrace constitutional government. They contend that governments, including democratic governments, can become tyrannical and that limits on government are necessary to secure the freedom of individual people. In addition, almost all liberals affirm the institutions that make possible free speech and free inquiry, at least concerning subjects that are, in Locke's words, of "maximal concernment" to the individual. Beyond these commitments there is little agreement on institutions, however. Within the tradition, or traditions, of liberalism, we get different answers to these questions, for example: Does democratic government, and the associated idea of majority rule, safeguard or threaten individual liberty? Is the capitalist market an essential component of a free society, or does it allow the rich to dominate the poor, thereby undermining their freedom? And is a freedom-promoting political order one that centralizes power so that local tyrannies can be disrupted or one that decentralizes power so that the bureaucratic state does not absorb into itself all space for experimentation and free association?

Different answers to these questions will seem more or less plausible in different times and places. The liberal commitment to

individual freedom cannot on its own provide much guidance in answering them. Of much greater importance are the threats to individual freedom that the liberal perceives and responds to; and since these threats come from different quarters, it is no real wonder that liberal thinkers have supported different institutional arrangements to combat them.

The liberal commitment to individual freedom, however, is related to another commitment that many have taken to be central to liberalism, one that does help to distinguish it from some other political traditions of thought, particularly earlier traditions of political thought. This is the commitment to human progress. While there are anticipations of liberal ideas in ancient and medieval political thought, liberalism is widely, and correctly, viewed as a modern development. It is the offspring of the Enlightenment, and it bears the marks of its birth. Enlightenment thinkers very much believed in human progress, and it is characteristic of liberal Enlightenment thinkers to believe that freedom and progress go together.

How exactly might freedom of the individual and the progress of the species go together in the mind of the liberal? Various answers to this question can be given. In a perceptive essay on the nature of liberalism, Jeremy Waldron provides a particularly insightful one. "The Enlightenment," Waldron observes, "was characterized by a burgeoning confidence in the human ability to make sense of the world, to grasp its regularities and fundamental principles, to predict its future, and to manipulate its powers for the benefit of mankind."⁵ This optimism, in turn, had a political dimension.

Society should be a transparent order, in the sense that its workings and principles should be well known and available for public apprehension and scrutiny. People should know and understand the reasons for the basic distribution of wealth, power, authority, and freedom. Society should not be shrouded in mystery, and its workings should not have to depend on mythology, mystification, or a "noble lie."

In short, if human beings can grasp the rational order in the world as the Enlightenment promised, then this order can be explained to them. The limits on their freedom need be neither arbitrary nor inexplicable. Once this thought is granted and gains currency, then each individual, as a rational agent, is in a position to demand that the restrictions on his freedom be justified to him.

In retrospect, the Enlightenment confidence in human reason can look quaint. It was often excessive. But it took different forms, and some expressions of this confidence were more plausible than others. A major divide within liberalism is reflected in the differences between the Scottish and French wings of the Enlightenment. The French, and to a lesser extent the Germans, tended to be rationalistic, stressing the power of the human mind to design a rational political and social order, whereas the Scots tended to emphasize the limits of human reason and the need to learn from experience.⁶ Still, the Scots, like the French, remained optimistic about the prospect that human beings would use new scientific advances, including advances in economic and political science, to improve their political and social lives. Hayek, the steadfast critic of constructivist rationalism and twentieth-century heir to the Scottish Enlightenment tradition, was himself a firm believer in progress, albeit a cautious one. As he saw matters, human beings have used advances in knowledge to improve their societies, and they can be expected to continue to do so in the future. However, to make progress they must use the knowledge they can acquire "not to shape the results as the craftsman shapes his handiwork, but rather to cultivate a growth by providing the appropriate environment, in the manner in which a gardener does for his plants."⁷

Not infrequently, critics of liberalism on both the left and the right seize on this commitment to progress and the universalism that goes with it. Liberals, the critics charge, misrepresent the particular as universal. They present their ideals as rationally mandatory, ideals to which all of humankind must aspire.⁸ In reality, however, liberalism is merely the "official ideology of the western world."⁹ In pressing this objection, the critics are heirs to an important and powerful anti- or Counter-Enlightenment current (or currents) of thought.¹⁰ The anti-universalist criticism concerns the status of liberal values and ideals. In thinking about it, it is fair to ask, could not one accept wholesale the Counter-Enlightenment critique of liberal universalism and yet remain steadfastly committed to liberal politics? Many examples suggest an affirmative answer, of which Richard Rorty's "postmodernist bourgeois liberalism" is perhaps the best known. But possibility and plausibility are not the same. On inspection, it may turn out that liberal politics must presuppose some commitment to universalism – some commitment to truth in politics – in order to

make good sense of the demand that the distribution of power and freedom in a society should not be shrouded in mythology, mystification, or lies.¹¹

The relationship between liberalism and the Enlightenment commitment to progress is, of course, more complex than these brief remarks suggest. Like Tocqueville, some liberals are not particularly sanguine about the future. Others, as indicated, are skeptical of universal claims. The view ventured here concerns general tendencies of thought within liberalism. The suggestion is that these tendencies are significant enough to make it plausible to associate liberalism with them. More often than not, critics of human progress and of the possibility of universal values are critics of liberalism.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

Philosophers typically characterize liberalism in terms of certain ideals and values, such as freedom or equal concern or toleration, but liberalism does not refer only to these ideas. It has a history in practice, one that is enacted by liberal political movements and by liberal political societies. This volume does not attempt to trace this history. As mentioned, it is very selective, focusing on only a few historical developments.

The relationship between liberalism as a theory of politics and liberalism as it has been enacted in practice is complex and contested. There is very often a gap between liberal ideals and liberal practice. And this raises the interesting issue of whether liberalism should be identified with its ideals or with its practice. To take an example, it is sometimes said of liberalism in America that, with respect to race, it has repeatedly failed to live up to its own ideals. In tension with this claim, it is also often said that American liberalism itself is defective, that it contains internal contradictions, and that these contradictions are exposed by its treatment of race. Or to take another example, consider the status of women in liberal societies. Feminist critics sometimes reject liberalism because, as they see it, liberal societies have failed to bring about equality between the sexes. Others claim that this failure is merely a failure of these societies, not any failure of liberalism as such.

No resolution of this issue can be defended here. However, two observations are in order. First, as a general matter, it is a mistake to