

ESSAYS
IN PRAISE OF LIBERALISM
by
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THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF AMERICAN LIBERALISM

Liberalism has taken different forms at different times, but there is, I believe, an underlying spirit of liberalism that has persisted and evolved through various historical incarnations. This is not an original observation. I first came across it in a book by John Dewey called *Liberalism and Social Action*. Dewey observed that both he and John Stuart Mill were liberals but that he was a socialist while John Stuart Mill was a free market capitalist. Had the word "liberalism" simply been distorted as it traversed the century from Mill to Dewey or was there something that the two of them had in common which was more important than their difference about the best economic system? Dewey answered that there were three enduring values that he shared with Mill and that found their roots in John Locke and the makers of the American Revolution--liberty, individuality, and a commitment to progressive social action. He argued further that the specific forms these values took had had to change over time as the awareness of social injustice spread from a concern about the subjugation of economically successful non-aristocrats to the oppression of the working class.

More recently Douglas MacLean and Claudia Mills brought together a number of impressive contemporary thinkers in a book entitled *Liberalism Reconsidered*. Their working premise is that there are two fundamental strands of liberalism--equality and liberty. They are struck by the inherent tension between the two values and the high wire act that is required to balance the two in a coherent political theory.

I think that Dewey, MacLean, Mills, et al have got the right idea. There are enduring values of liberalism. But there aren't just two or three of them, and many of them cannot be adequately articulated as concepts or principles. They are as much sentiments and images as they are ideas, and they can be seen most clearly by tracing the history of Anglo-American liberalism as a political movement as well as an evolution of ideas.

John Locke and The American Revolution

Liberalism, I believe with Dewey, finds its origins in revolution. Not the American Revolution, although that is where it had its greatest revolutionary expression, but in the English revolution of 1688, known generally as the "Glorious Revolution." King James II was overthrown, and the Parliament selected William III to replace him. The rationale of the Whigs, the political party that engineered the revolt, was that the King had overstepped the limits of his authority by suspending a law without the approval of The Parliament. The King could not govern whimsically. The ruler does not have unlimited legitimate authority. The people of a nation do not have an unlimited duty to obey the ruler. Might is not right. And inheritance is not the sole criterion for being King. Parliament has the authority to choose a King if the King by lineage fails in his duties.

What a remarkable challenge to the divine right of Kings! But the Glorious Revolution broke the authority of the aristocracy in an even more fundamental way. People who were not aristocrats

were acknowledged to have equal rights before the law. They had the same right to private property and to the expectation that the state would protect them and their property. The armies and the police were no longer solely the protectors of the power of the King. They were to be protectors of the people of England.

There were clear adumbrations of what has been called "Constitutional Liberalism" prior to the Glorious Revolution. The Magna Carta, the organization of Parliament, and the notion that Kings were not above the law had begun four centuries earlier. But these limits on the power of the King were meant to benefit the aristocracy. The Glorious Revolution spread the realm of rights to include people who were not aristocrats, to include people whom, until then, the aristocracy had viewed essentially as servants.

John Locke, who was secretly the philosophical spokesman for the Whigs, gave voice to these values in *Two Treatises on Government*. He argued that there is a state of nature which exists before there are states, before there is government. The state of nature is governed by natural laws and natural rights, which belong equally to all men. All men are equal before the natural law. (Women did not count at the time, of course.) In principle a nation is a voluntary association of free men. This association, this "commonwealth", as Locke called it, is morally prior to the governance of the King. The natural laws which govern it define a host of obligations which a King must meet or face legitimate revolution. The people of England had rights that the King was obligated to respect.

It is ironic, to say the least, that the real driving force of The Glorious Revolution was the determination of the Protestant majority of England not to have a Catholic King and that the laws which he unilaterally suspended to the distress of the Parliament were penal laws against dissenters. In essence the growth of rights and power for non-aristocrats arose from intolerance and from rejection of an effort to enhance religious freedom. Personally, I find this terribly distressing. I like to think of Locke and his Whigs as heroes of democracy. Apparently, they were also religious bigots, whose concept of tolerance was limited to varieties of Protestantism.

It is, of course, a common fact of political life that there are marked differences between public pieties and political realities. Hypocrisy covers many matters of shame in all times and all places. This was certainly true of the late 17th century. Let's keep in mind that, while Locke and the Whigs and perhaps even William III were celebrating the triumph of an ideology according to which all men had equal rights before the law, the vast majority of the people of England lived in profound poverty. This was not a matter of political or philosophical concern. There was a subsistence culture, a general sense that life for most people was not meant to be more than scraping out a living from the land, reproducing, raising one's children, and dying--hopefully in God's good graces. Government's very limited responsibility to these people had been defined by The Poor Laws, which had been adopted in the 16th Century. They gave local governments some responsibility to insure subsistence for orphans, the disabled, and the able-bodied who could not find work. Help was provided primarily in almshouses and workhouses designed to be certain that no one would have an incentive to live off the generosity of the government.

From a contemporary perspective, then, Locke's notion of the natural rights of all men can easily be seen as vast hypocrisy. But it seems to me that there are two kinds of political and moral hypocrisies, two kinds of public pieties. Some simply hide something shameful but widely accepted. Others articulate ideals which create new political and moral realities, new imperatives which come to be driving forces in raising human political behavior to a new level.

I am reminded of a wonderful novel by John Gardner called *Grendel*, which gives the monster's view of *Beowulf*. Grendel frequently spies secretly on the human beings, whom he occasionally slaughters, and notes with disgust how foul and cowardly they are. One day a new poet appears, a blind man who composes heroic songs about the warriors, who generally run from Grendel. Grendel finds the songs ridiculous and infuriating, particularly because he notices that the men take courage from them and begin to stand up to him. Finally--with leadership from a particularly great and powerful hero--men who were previously cowards confront Grendel and slay him. Songs did that, stories which raised men's opinions of themselves, myths if you will, ideals expressed in images.

Locke's political theories turned out to be myths of exactly this kind, ideals which sang across a century and an ocean and provided the ideological framework for the American Revolution and our democratic, political structure.

"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. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." So begins the justification of The American Revolution contained in *The Declaration of Independence*. A few years later *The Constitution* begins this way. "We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure Domestic Tranquillity, provide for the common Defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish the CONSTITUTION for the United States of America." Shortly later *The Bill of Rights* was appended, which--among other things established freedom of religion, freedom of speech, a right to assembly, a right to privacy, and a right to property.

Locke's fundamental ideals had traveled to America. Equality! Rights! Liberty! Religious tolerance! There is a "People" which is morally prior to a nation defined by government. The fundamental purpose of government is to protect the rights of the people. The legitimate authority of government is derived from the people, from the individuals who are governed. And legitimate authority is limited by a requirement to serve common purposes, by a framework of law established in The Constitution, and by individual rights designed to protect minorities--including religious minorities--from the potential tyranny of the majority.

Brilliant! By comparison the leaders of The French Revolution missed some of the key ingredients of a workable democracy in their rush to overthrow the aristocracy and impose the General Will on all. Rousseau's concept of the General Will contributed to their failure to recognize the rights of individuals and to protect minorities from the majority. The pursuit of the perfection of mankind advocated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment turned into mob rule and a bloodbath, calling into question the whole Enlightenment enterprise. As Isaiah Berlin has argued, over-enthusiasm in the pursuit of the ideal lay a weak foundation for democracy and ultimately fell prey to the seductive sirens of totalitarianism.

The American Revolution was more modest in its goals and more given to political compromise. Confrontations between different interpretations of the rhetoric of democracy--especially between Jefferson and Hamilton--led to a system of checks and balances which integrated different views on the extent of government power.

The American Revolution made real some of the purely rhetorical promises of The Glorious Revolution. Individuals who were neither aristocrats nor favorites of the English King made

themselves into a People, took control of their own destiny, and insisted on their right to profit from their labor and their property. In the process they laid the political groundwork for the kind of social order that was essential for the Industrial Revolution to flourish.

Of course, the values of The American Revolution are easily subject to charges-- often made by radicals--that they are merely rhetoric on behalf of the rich. Slavery was a fact of life in America. Slaves had no rights and were only to count as 3/5 of a person in the census the Constitution required every ten years. The continuation of slavery after the Revolution was not a cultural-historical oversight, not a moral issue covered by shared cultural blinders. The issue was purposely avoided so as to make compromises among the states possible.

Similarly, women had no rights; and, in many states, men who did not own land did not have the right to vote. In addition, the lives of the poor were as squalid in America as they were in England in Locke's time, and the role of government to address the welfare of the poor was defined by essentially the same set of Poor Laws.

It is not unfair, then, to characterize The American Revolution not so much as a revolution "of the people, by the people, and for the people" as a revolution by the economically successful for the economically able. Still it was a progressive step in human history. Some of the people got out from under the thumbs of people who previously had held all the power. These people had won their own freedom, and they had created a system which would lay the groundwork for more and more people to win their freedom over the course of the next two centuries.

In my view, The American Revolution is the beginning of liberalism in The United States. It enunciates certain values which are fundamental to liberalism--liberty, equality, individual rights, religious tolerance, and protection of minorities from the majority. And the Revolution won the freedom of a disempowered population from an unjustly powerful population. This freedom released the previously disadvantaged population to flourish economically, politically, and culturally.

I expect conservatives to protest that liberals have no right to claim the heritage of the American Revolution as their own. Conservatives also value liberty, equality, individual rights, religious tolerance, democratic process, and the like. Actually, I am not sure that conservatives value equality and tolerance except with limiting definitions that are quite self-serving. Nevertheless, I think that they have a right to lay equal claim to the heritage of the Revolution, and I will argue that the values of the Revolution are the beginning, but just the beginning, of liberalism in America. Over the past two centuries additional values and political structures have emerged because they were needed to benefit people who were left behind by the Revolution. And in this new century we will need still more changes so that the United States can truly be a nation for all its people.

Laissez-Faire Economics and The Utilitarians

Post-Lockean liberalism begins with Adam Smith and laissez-faire economics and proceeds through Ricardo, Bentham, and James Mill to the quintessential statement of 19th century Anglo-American liberalism by John Stuart Mill.

Recently James Buchanan--a Nobel Prize winning economist--challenged this historical perspective in a provocative essay in *The Wall Street Journal* entitled "Saving the Soul of Classical Liberalism." He argued that the only "true" (his word) liberalism is a "classical

liberalism," which he identifies with the laissez-faire economics of Adam Smith. He states, "From [publication of *The Communist Manifesto* in the mid 19th century] onwards, classical liberals retreated into a defensive posture, struggling continuously against the reforms promulgated by utilitarian dreamers. Individual liberty was no longer the focus. ...life became the pursuit of happiness in the aggregate."

By "utilitarian dreamers" Buchanan clearly means Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. And he may be right that Bentham was a weak friend of liberty. But it is ridiculous to characterize Mill--whose greatest essay is called "On Liberty"--as anything but devoted to liberty and individualism. His belief in liberty and individuality, his love of creativity, his identification of eccentricity as the root of progress make Mill one of the greatest defenders of liberty of all time. What Mill did, of course, was to advance liberalism by adding the principle of social utility to the principle of liberty. It is just rigid ideology for Buchanan, and others, to argue that Mill betrayed the "true" liberalism in the process. (There is, of course, something wonderfully ironic about an economic conservative like Professor Buchanan trying to reclaim the mantle of "liberalism" while more or less liberal politicians universally run away from the dreaded 'L' word.)

But I've gotten ahead of myself. Let's go back to the late 18th century in England (actually Scotland) and to Adam Smith--the precursor of 19th century capitalism.

While the political history of the 19th century is far too complex to be summarized by any single theme, I think it is fair to maintain that the central economic fact of the 19th century was the spread of the Industrial Revolution. Capitalism emerged as the fundamental economic mechanism for the Western World, and capitalism found a fertile field in a politics of liberty.

Adam Smith gave first voice to the economic theory on which capitalism has relied ever since--laissez-faire economics. He maintained that the free reign of self-interest would result in a well-ordered economy and in a vast increase of overall wealth, that an "invisible hand" wove the random strands of individual self-interests into a dynamic and growing economic tapestry.

Needless to say, it was not at all apparent when Smith was writing at the end of the 18th century that an unregulated economy could be well-ordered and that government should stop trying to define the economic order and stop trying to be protective of its particular interests. In fact, mercantilism--the policy of protecting one's nation's industries from competitive thrusts by the industries of other nations--was the dominant political, economic policy of the time.

Smith's arguments were stunning in their divergence from received opinion, but he was remarkably persuasive. He argued that the laws of competition and of supply and demand would result in a relatively stable economic order and a vast increase in productivity, which in turn would result in a vast increase in wealth. He argued further that this increase in wealth would make life better for everyone, not just for the few people who would become very rich.

Obviously, a great many people today are--like Professor Buchanan-- followers of Adam Smith's laissez-faire economics. They believe that government should not intervene in the working of the economy, that virtually absolute liberty should be the byword of the economic system.

What is critical to note here is that there are two quite different lines of thought that get merged together in what is called laissez-faire economics. One line of thought reflects profound social concern. Its goal is a better life for all human beings, and it promotes individualism as the way

to achieve this social goal. It maintains that an unregulated economy will result in a vast increase in wealth, which will result in improved lives for the poor as well as for the rich.

The other line of thought is libertarian. It maintains that people have a right to their liberty, a right to property, a right to the wealth that they create through their own work and a right to the wealth they create through their skills at organizing other people to work for them. According to this line of thought, laissez-faire economics is right because it is the only economic system to reflect individual rights. Whether it produces more wealth for all is incidental.

Apparently, Adam Smith was given to the line of thought that laissez-faire economics is to be preferred because it produces more wealth for everyone. At times he sounds very much like a modern liberal when he says, for example, "No society can be flourishing and happy of which by far the greater part of the numbers are poor and miserable." He recognized that most people in Great Britain at the time he was writing were "poor and miserable." But he argued, first, that they were better off than they would have been in an agrarian, feudal society and, second, that over time the working class would live better and better so that ultimately they would thrive under capitalism. They would not rival the rich, but they would live in comforts greater than that of Princes in primitive cultures.

Let us note two things here. One is the fundamentally empirical claim that capitalism would produce more material well-being for everyone. The other is Smith's implicit philosophy of history--his confidence in progress. What is beginning to emerge in Adam Smith is a devotion to liberty and individualism that is linked to social concerns and to a philosophy of history which is confident that human life will improve.

Let me digress here to observe that Smith's concept of progress, and later Mill's, is quite different from the Enlightenment belief in the "perfectibility of man." The concept of "progress" is that things will get better over time. The concept of the "perfectibility of man" is that an ideal human state can be achieved. I agree with Isaiah Berlin that this sort of "pursuit of the ideal," as he calls it, is an invitation to despotism on the promise of perfection. "Progress" promises less and as a result is not only more attainable than perfection, it also is attainable without widespread social coercion.

The essence of Adam Smith, then, is that a free market economy will, over the course of history, produce greater wealth and comfort for all people. Economic liberty and political liberty are essential to an affluent society. So, while Smith is usually read as a libertarian, there is an important sense in which he is a utilitarian.

Utilitarianism, of course, gets its first full exposition from Jeremy Bentham, whose version is, from a political point of view, both powerful and wildly extreme.

According to Bentham good and right both depend on outcomes. An action is good and right if it has good consequences. By identifying right with good and good with consequences, Bentham broke with a strong Western tradition which holds that certain actions are inherently right or wrong regardless of consequences. Kant gave the traditional point of view its most profound (or at least is most difficult to understand) formulation when he distinguished between "hypothetical imperatives" and "categorical imperatives." Hypothetical imperatives are actions you ought to perform because they have good consequences and contribute to happiness. Categorical imperatives are actions you must perform regardless of their consequences. For example, Kant and many others would argue, it is wrong to lie even if lying would contribute to

happiness. More seriously, it is wrong to murder even if murder would contribute to happiness. We have duties. We have obligations which go beyond our happiness.

Bentham says no. We have no duties unrelated to happiness. What has been confused traditionally is our personal happiness and human happiness. Good and right, Bentham argues, have everything to do with achieving **human** happiness. We as individuals have a fundamental obligation to contribute to human happiness. Duties which go beyond our personal happiness arise from this social obligation. Bentham called this the "principle of social utility" and defined it as our obligation, and the state's obligation, to seek the "greatest good for the greatest number."

Stunning! Not only does the principle of social utility refocus moral and political philosophy on outcomes, it also takes seriously the notion that all people are equal. This is not a principle of the greatest good for the aristocrats or the landowners or the rich or men. This is a principle of the greatest good for the greatest number of **people**. In making public policy you need to ask, is this good for the poor as well as the rich? Is it good for workers as well as for industrialists? Is it good for renters as well as for landowners? Is it good for people of all religions, races, and ethnic backgrounds? Is it good for women as well as men? Is it good for children as well as adults?

John Stuart Mill was powerfully drawn to utilitarianism. Bentham, in fact, was a close friend of his father, James Mill, who in his own work had elaborated on both Adam Smith and Bentham. But John Stuart Mill was also powerfully drawn to the principles of liberty and individualism. The social vision that emerges from Bentham is of a society in which the vast majority of people are happy. The social vision that emerges from Mill is of a society in which all individuals are able to live freely and in which their freedom contributes to both the greatest good for the greatest number and to progress towards a better society.

"On Liberty" is a remarkable defense of liberty as essential to social utility. Mill was without doubt a brilliant and original thinker, but he appears to have been caught up in the Western philosophical notion that theories have to be logically coherent wholes with a first principle and subsidiary principles logically related to the first principle. For him social utility was the first principle; and liberty, therefore, had to be defended for its social benefits and not as a natural right.

This resulted in a brilliant defense of freedom of thought and freedom of expression as essential to social progress, which Mill saw as the constant process of overthrowing received opinion. He appears to have believed that if there are any eternal truths, we human beings don't know them yet and that we will only get closer to them by allowing all sorts of outlandish things to be thought and said. Some of these outlandish beliefs will turn out to be the next truths, and in any event, only by exercising the mind, only by challenging our beliefs will we be able to progress in our knowledge and in our social order.

What is most important about Mill from the standpoint of the history of liberalism is that he developed a political theory which links the values of liberty, individualism, tolerance, equality, social good, and progress and which applies these values not to just a few people but to all people.

I hear the radical chorus which lingers in the back of my mind begin to chant--hypocrisy, hypocrisy, hypocrisy. How in the face of the poverty of the 19th century can one think of Mill or any other wealthy intellectual as confronting the inequality and injustice of 19th century England

and America? Suffering was no secret. Dickens wrote his novels exposing the horrors of urban slums in the 1840's and 50's. Marx had produced the Communist Manifesto by the middle of the century. For that matter Robert Heilbruner in his wonderful book *The Worldly Philosophers* quotes a visitor to a factory in **1792** who comments with horror on both the use of children as laborers and on the impact of the factory on the environment. "...[the owner of the mill] may have produced much wealth into his family and into his country, but...destroyed the course and the beauty of nature. ...What a dog's hole is Manchester." During this period, the English Empire spread across the globe subjugating 10's of millions of people. And the United States spread across the continent, laying waste to Native American nations and ultimately concentrating them on reservations. Surely Mill and the others knew about the suffering of the urban poor and the destruction and subjugation of peoples whose presence was an inconvenience to a burgeoning economy.

"You're right", I have to answer to my mental chorus. There was vast injustice in the 19th century, and it was no secret. But can't we give some recognition to the progress that took place?

Conceptually two very important elements were added to the philosophy of democracy that originated with Locke. One is that democracy is not only about liberty, it is also about the well-being of the society as a whole, about the greatest good for the greatest number. The second is the idea of historical progress itself. Mill would have said that just as truth is gradually unfolding through the clash of ideas, so the body politic is gradually improving through the clash of values.

And there was progress. New classes of affluent non-aristocrats emerged. If the 18th century reflected the rise of landowners, the 19th century represented the rise of industrialists and merchants. Some became very rich. Others had good jobs working for them. Not the manual laborers, to be sure. But skilled craftsman and the rough equivalent of white-collar workers had lives that were unimaginably better than those of feudal agrarian people or even the tradesmen of earlier centuries.

In addition, there were new landowners. Yes, the march across America destroyed Native Americans, but it also opened land to huge numbers of people who had been among the urban poor and the disenfranchised. And these new landowners constructed new communities along democratic lines, which inspired the sprawling writings of de Tocqueville and remain a model for contemporary "communitarians."

And there were other very important elements of progress during the 19th century. The right to vote spread from landowners to all men. In some states women did not have to wait to the 20th century for the right to vote. Slavery ended in America. Public education began. The social welfare role of government grew. It began to recognize and accept a responsibility to care for people who couldn't care for themselves and to step in to do what some families could not do for their own. Government needed to function *in locus parentis*. It created protective institutions for children and old people as well as for people with both physical and mental disabilities.

The Progressive Era

As the 19th century wore on, however, it became clearer and clearer to many people that a laissez-faire economy would not produce a better life for all. Cycles of boom and bust; vast wealth concentrated in the hands of a very few; child labor; dangerous, slavish workplaces; *de facto* lack of liberty for workers; the use of the forces of government to crush legitimate expression of discontent, especially by unions; dreadful living conditions for the poor, which were known to contribute to low life expectancy; fears about the despoliation of the environment--all these combined to create new social movements at the turn of the 20th century.

No longer satisfied with philosophies of history which promised progress as an inevitable outcome of economic growth, a movement which called itself "Progressive" began. It insisted that working people deserve a decent place in society and that government had a responsibility to assure that they did not continue to be exploited and abused by industrialists whose self-interest blinded them to social justice and the public good. It insisted too that there was a responsibility to the land, which was increasingly blighted by industries indifferent to anything but their own profit. The invisible hand might create wealth, but it did not deal the cards fairly; and it was indifferent to the wasted environment it left behind after it had extracted what wealth it could.

Exposés by journalists whom Theodore Roosevelt called the "muckrakers," novels like Stephen Crane's *Maggie*, *A Girl of the Streets* and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and photographs like Jacob Riis's *How The Other Half Lives*--did much more than philosophical writing to define the progressive phase of liberalism. Their imagery overpowered conceptual commitments to Locke's and Adam Smith's notions of liberty--notions which placed the protection of property above the well-being of people.

Listen to this vignette from the opening scene in *The Jungle*. "This is the fifth year now that Jadyga has been engaged to Mikolas, and her heart is sick. They would have been married in the beginning, only Mikolas has a father who is a drunk all day, and he is the only other man in a large family. Even so they might have managed it (for Mikolas is a skilled man) but for cruel accidents, which have almost taken the heart out of them. He is a beef-boner, and that is a dangerous trade, especially when you are on piecework and trying to earn a bride. Your hands are slippery, and your knife is slippery, and you are toiling like mad, when somebody happens to speak to you, or you strike a bone. Then your hand slips up on the blade, and there is a fearful gash. And that would not be so bad, only for the deadly contagion. The cut may heal, but you never can tell. Twice now, within the last three years, Mikolas has been lying at home with blood poisoning--once for three months and once for nearly seven. The last time, too, he lost his job, and that meant six weeks more of standing at the doors of the packinghouses, at six o'clock on bitter winter mornings, with a foot of snow on the ground and more in the air. There are learned people who can tell you out of the statistics that beef-boners make [a good wage], but, perhaps, these people have never looked into a beef-boner's hands."

This brief passage tells us a great deal about the shift in moral perspective that took place at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Until then people like Mikolas were seen as responsible for their own poverty, as punished by God for their sins or simply victims of their own laziness and self-indulgence. Now a slew of writers tell stories of poverty in which poor people are victims of the world in which they live. Poor people are not immoral, lazy, or unskilled. Mikolas, for example, is a man who works hard, has skills, and takes care of his family. He is engaged. He is not throwing his money away on alcohol and whores. He saves every penny he can. The money has to be used to handle the periods of crisis when he is too sick

to work. He is a man--can't you see it coming--who will be destroyed ultimately by working under conditions in which earning a living is literally life threatening.

This is the essence of progressive imagery. Good people are destroyed by social conditions which gradually sap their strength if they manage to avoid accidents and illnesses which too frequently strike them down in a single, devastating stroke.

Here's how Walter Trattner, a social welfare historian, describes the social environment of the time. "American cities were disorderly, filthy, foul-smelling, disease-ridden places. Narrow, unpaved streets became transformed in quagmires when it rained. Rickety tenements, swarming with unwashed humanity, leaned upon one another for support. Inadequate drainage systems failed to carry away sewage. Pigs roamed streets that were cluttered with manure, years of accumulated garbage, and other litter. Outside privies bordered almost every thoroughfare. Slaughterhouses and fertilizing plants contaminated the air with an indescribable stench. Ancient plagues like smallpox, cholera, and typhus threw the population into a state of terror from time to time while less sensational but equally deadly killers like tuberculosis, diphtheria, and scarlet fever were ceaselessly at work."

These were hardly the images the promises of capitalism would lead one to expect. The rich were flourishing; the poor were at their mercy. Industry had become so powerful that it outstripped the power of government. It made very little sense to argue that property had to be protected from encroachments by government; it made a great deal of sense to argue that the people had to be protected from the power of property and that the government had to take on this challenge.

Several political philosophies built on images of poverty dominated the political landscape of the early 20th century. Revolutionary radicalism of the kind that produced the Russian revolution was one. Another was democratic socialism, which was driven by the perception that government had to take the means of production away from greedy industrialists who were in the process of concentrating so much wealth and power in a few hands that they would inevitably create oppression to rival the feudal age. A third political philosophy was the one which drove the Progressive Movement. It was built on the capitalist belief that competitive business created great wealth and that socialism could never rival its ability to do so. But it was also built on the belief that big business was out of control and that greed and self-interest created avoidable poverty and suffering and unnecessary disparities in wealth.

The primary philosophical spokesman for the Progressive Movement was Herbert Croly. He is largely forgotten today, less than 100 years after he wrote *The Promise of American Life* (1906) and later founded *The New Republic*. But his book was an important point of reference for Theodore Roosevelt and a generation of political reformers.

Croly had a great love of America. At the core of his love was a perception of what he called "the promise" of America. In part this is a promise of freedom, but in equal part it is a promise of economic opportunity--the promise, as Croly put it, to be "relieved of the curse of poverty."

Clearly this part of the promise had not been kept, and Croly went right at Adam Smith's theory of the "invisible hand" in his critique of America's failure to keep its promise. "The experience of the last generation," he says, "plainly shows that the American economic and social system cannot be allowed to take care of itself and that the automatic harmony of the individual and the

public interest [postulated by Adam Smith and other laissez-faire economists]...has proved to be an illusion."

What to do? At the time Croly was writing, socialism was a popular and socially legitimate response to the problems of poverty and exploitation. Upton Sinclair, for example, was an active socialist politician as well as a wildly popular novelist. But Croly did not believe that socialism was the answer. Yes, big business had become too powerful and had used its power to close off the promise of American life to a huge number of hardworking Americans. But big business was also the source of great wealth, of America's economic success. The answer, Croly argued, is not to turn industry over to the government to operate, but to increase the power of government to regulate industry--to create big, independent government as a countervailing power to big business.

This line of thinking resulted in a transformation of American government over the first 70-80 years of the 20th century. Government took steps to regulate itself with a civil service system to counter political patronage, and government stepped in to prevent too much concentration of wealth and power in a few monopolies and trusts. Government also stepped in to stop child labor, to humanize working conditions, to protect the rights of labor, to assure safe food and drugs, to conserve lands, to protect water, to set minimum standards of housing, to organize public health initiatives, to create public parks, etc., etc., etc.

Obviously, the United States was not alone in the Western World in extending the protective role of government. But instead of moving towards governmental operation of industry or to a sacrifice of democracy, the United States invented the regulatory agency. This approach created a tension between business and government which clearly persists even today, but it also created an ever shifting balance--a dynamic tension if you will--between the creation of wealth and the promise of America as a land of opportunity for all.

Croly's approach of preserving big business and making government responsible to keep the promise of America is, I think, the essence of the liberal position. And I hate to confuse things by talking about a liberal who was a socialist. But John Dewey, who was clearly the most important American philosopher of the 20th century, was both a liberal and a socialist.

Since socialism never came to dominate liberalism, I might have left Dewey out of my account of liberal political philosophy in the 20th century. But he makes a number of critical observations which are part of the core of liberalism as I understand it.

In *Liberalism and Social Action*, an excellent and very short book, Dewey argues that there are three "enduring values" of liberalism-- liberty, individuality, and intelligent social action.

By "liberty", Dewey means a mix of what Isaiah Berlin calls "negative" and "positive" liberty--a mix of freedom from external constraint and the ability to achieve your potential. Like John Stuart Mill, Dewey believes that liberty is the pre-condition of becoming an individual, of rising above social conformity, of achieving a creative and personally fulfilling life. Liberty is also a pre-condition of citizenship in a democracy. Freedom of thought and expression are fundamental to taking responsibility as a participant in a democracy.

By "individuality" Dewey means something like being your own person, not being a drone or a cog in a collective social machine. As an educator, Dewey was extremely sensitive about what it takes to become a free individual. "Freedom, " he argued, "is [not] something that individuals

have as a ready-made possession. ...the state has the responsibility for creating institutions under which individuals can effectively realize the potentialities that are theirs." This is another way of saying that the state, that government, must play a critical role in assuring that people have genuine opportunity to become free individuals. Education is essential and so are a host of other conditions, not the least of which is assuring that people do not live in the kind of poverty that grinds most people down, even if it allows a few Horatio Algiers to rise to the top.

By "intelligent social action" Dewey means the liberal commitment to change society so as to promote liberty and individuality and to promote changes on the basis of the best knowledge available at the time. For Dewey, social change is a process which can never end. There will be no perfect, final state for humanity. As historical conditions change so must social institutions, though always within a democratic framework.

So, though Dewey was a socialist, he enunciated a number of critical themes for those of us who are liberals but not socialists. He made it very clear that liberalism is not about the creation of a collective society, as it is frequently accused of being. Liberalism is about creating the social conditions that make it possible for people to become free individuals. It is about a form of liberty which goes beyond a legal fiction. It is about the creation of real equal opportunity, about quality education and about an end to the kind of poverty that robs most people of a real chance. And liberalism is not about violent revolution. Yes, liberalism is about social action; it is not content to wait for a better society to evolve on its own. But it is about progress made by people not by the inevitable forces of history. Progress of this kind can only take place in a democracy, and in a democracy violent revolution is not necessary.

As valuable as his core observations are, I find it disturbing that Dewey wrote *Liberalism and Social Action* in the same year that the Social Security Act passed as part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Not a word in Dewey! That is the beginning, I suppose, of the isolation of American political philosophy from the political life of the nation.

The New Deal

I would argue that the roots of 20th century liberalism are in the Progressive movement. The New Deal primarily expanded on the fundamental premise of progressivism--namely, that it is vital to preserve big business in America and that it is vital for government to offer a range of protections from the dangers of big business left unchecked.

But The New Deal added several important new dimensions to liberalism. One was social security both for people with the ability to work and for people who could not, or who were not expected to, work. Thus under The Social Security Act, unemployment insurance was created and became an entitlement, a government run pension system, now known as "Social Security", was also created, and so was a system of public assistance for dependent children and for people with disabilities.

The provision of pensions and public assistance reflected a major shift in moral perspective. The Progressive period was marked by images of good, hardworking people beaten down by economic and social conditions beyond their control, and these images, of course, marked the New Deal as well. The Depression and the Great Drought were clearly instances of good, working people denied the chance they needed. But now there were new images, of people who could not make their own way any longer--of older people, whose productive years were over--

and of women whose job it should be to raise children rather than to eke out a living in a sweat shop or a dried out field.

Under the Social Security Act, government took on a responsibility to provide enough to live on to the aged, the unemployed, and to mothers with children--not in institutions but in the open community. This was a major change in the responsibility of government and a major extension of liberty to dependent people.

A second major change initiated by The New Deal was public work. In part work programs were designed simply to give jobs to people for whom jobs were not available in the private sector. Work not charity. But in part these programs reflected a new understanding of the role that government could play in stimulating the economy. Prior to the Depression, the dominant economic theory was that a strong economy required strong investment to stimulate production. Given the lack of savings which could be used for investment in the aftermath of the stock market crash, this view of what it would take to stimulate the economy lent itself to a sense of hopelessness about the future of capitalism. John Maynard Keynes formulated a different view. Market demand would stimulate the economy, and governments could create market demand, first, by employing people, who would then have money to spend and, second, by purchasing goods itself. Bridges, weapons, automobiles--it didn't much matter what the government bought as long as it created a market. This, of course, meant that government would have to engage in deficit spending, but a flourishing economy would eventually pay it back.

Obviously, Keynes' notions, which became the economic basis of the New Deal, created a vastly new economic role for government. Economic liberalism had moved from laissez-faire--i.e. government should get out of the way--to Teddy Roosevelt's Square Deal--i.e. government should serve as a countervailing power to big business--to the New Deal--i.e. government should be a force in stimulating a strong economy and should provide a safety net for people hurt by the vicissitudes of the economy.

The experience of World War II confirmed the economic value of government as a market. And the post-war experience revived confidence in capitalism tempered by government to generate more and more wealth and to raise the standard of living of both workers and business leaders. The Labor movement was able to reach fundamental understandings with the corporate community, which increased income and social security benefits for workers in American industry. At the same time Social Security benefits could increase for those who were too old or too disabled to work and for those who relied on public assistance to be able to raise a family. Economic growth was perceived as the basis of social progress, and the role of government was simultaneously to support economic growth and to extend opportunities and benefits to those who did not benefit from a growing economy.

Liberalism in the 2nd Half of the 20th Century

Slowly in the 50's and then rapidly in the 60's, significant social changes changed the face of liberalism again.

First, the civil rights movement took hold. Racism in America was a national disgrace, which Roosevelt and Truman chose to ignore because tolerance of racism in the South was the basis of the alliance between northern liberals and southern conservatives that produced a parade of Presidential and Congressional victories for the Democratic Party. Civil rights advocates, therefore, took to the courts, and in the 1950's they won significant victories which began to

force integration of the schools, public transportation, and other public settings. As the cause of civil rights and overcoming racism grew in force, it became a core element of the liberal agenda. Ultimately it did cause a rupture in the Democratic Party, but before it did a Southern Democrat, Lyndon Johnson, spearheaded the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts.

The second major shift was the recognition that despite the gains of labor there were large numbers of poor people in the United States who did not even have enough to eat. Many of them were minorities, whose poverty related at least in part to the history of slavery and bigotry in America. But most of them were white. All were people bypassed by the thriving American economy. Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty. He created a program to assure that no American needed to go hungry. He strengthened the Social Security pension program to assure that no older American would live in dire poverty. He created Medicare to assure that no older American would go without health care. He created an economic opportunity program designed to address the disparities in real opportunities for the rich and the poor in America. And he created Medicaid to assure that poor Americans had equal access to quality health care. Intolerance of poverty and of lack of opportunity, which had been part of the liberal agenda from the late 19th century on, was raised to a new level of importance.

The third major shift was in the nature of the commitment of our society to people with disabilities. From late in the 18th century in Virginia through the 19th century and early 20th century throughout the nation, our society provided care for people with physical and mental disabilities primarily in institutional settings, which were supposed to be asylums from the hardships of life in the ordinary world. By the middle of the 20th century it was clear that these "asylums" were dreadful places in which abuse and exploitation were commonplace. In addition, evidence accumulated that living in an institution intensified disabilities and that people had a better chance of recovery in the community. This perspective coupled with over-optimism about the effectiveness of new treatments led to what has come to be called "deinstitutionalization", although I prefer to call it "communitization." People with mental illnesses or with mental retardation, frail elderly people, and orphaned or neglected children were all to be served in the community rather than in institutions. This decision to provide a community-based system of care led to serious problems for some people because not enough services were provided to sustain them in the community. But it also fueled a belief that government was responsible to fund or provide a broad range of social services to help people to overcome the social problems that surrounded them and to manage their lives in the community.

The fourth major shift was cultural. In the 60's there was a sexual revolution, which uncoupled sex and marriage. Obviously there had been lots of sex out of marriage before the 60's, but it was illicit. During the 60's it became an open way of life. And not only heterosexuality outside of marriage but also homosexuality became matters of personal preference. Conservatives reacted with horror at the loss of "morality", as if sexual restrictions constituted the whole of morality, but liberals by and large supported the new freedom. They, and eventually a majority of Americans, were happy to be unleashed from the bonds of sexual convention.

The fifth major shift was in the role of women. The Civil Rights movement and the sexual revolution combined to give new force to women's rights. Women had won the right to vote during the Progressive period, but little had changed in terms of their roles in society. Women were to be wives and mothers, the managers of domestic life, while men were to be workers and wage earners, professionals, political leaders, and artists. In the 60's women rebelled and demanded equal rights to men, which included freedom from the domestic consequences of

pregnancy. They demanded and won through the courts the right to choose whether or not to have an abortion. Their cause also became an element of liberalism.

The sixth major development was the War in Vietnam. Widespread opposition to the war, the failure to persuade the American people that it was a just war, and ultimately surrender to a Third World nation created a crisis in America's self-image. Were we a benevolent nation with the power and the duty to save the world for democracy? That was our post World War II image. Or were we a bully seeking to oppress an independent people due to a distorted sense of economic and military self-interest?

The War in Vietnam not only challenged our self-image as a nation; it also brought to the forefront the issue of transnational human rights. Under Eleanor Roosevelt's leadership, *The Declaration of Universal Human Rights* had been signed in 1948. It established principles of concern for the well-being of people outside one's own nation--thus vastly expanding the orbit of liberalism. The *Declaration* was unenforceable, but its ideas proved powerful and helped to put the nails in the coffin of colonialism and to raise doubts about the legitimacy of the Western hegemony.

From this melange of social changes, an alliance emerged of people who were for civil rights, against poverty, for equal opportunity, for government-supported health and human services, for sexual freedom, for women's rights, for human rights, and anti-war. This alliance was politically unhinging, fracturing the old Democratic Party and even driving a wedge between the labor movement and the new "liberalism." Working people, it turned out, had more conventional values than did more affluent people. They were mystified by sexual license, threatened by civil rights, furious about coddling people who didn't work for a living, and horrified by what they perceived as a failure of patriotism.

John Rawls and Liberalism at the End of the 20th Century

Amidst the turmoil of social values during the last quarter of the 20th century, only one liberal American political philosopher has captured public attention--John Rawls. It's actually amazing to me how often Rawls is cited with a reverence that approaches Biblical proportions, as if he had somehow gotten hold of the ultimate truth about social justice. Given how difficult his writing is, citing him, I suspect, usually reflects a vain hope of gaining intellectual credibility for political views which cannot actually have a firm philosophical base.

That said, Rawls does offer in the abstract a kind of summary of the liberalism of the late 20th century. His goal is to define a just society. He argues that a just society is one which allows for each person to have as much liberty as is consistent with others having equal liberty and that a just society also is one in which there is a fair distribution of social goods.

Rawls is clear that a fair distribution is not a literally equal distribution. He understands that human beings vary in their abilities, desires, and styles of money management. Even if they all started with an equal share, they would rapidly become unequal as some people outstripped others on the basis of ability and hard work and as some people bought impulsively, while others saved, and still others invested.

In addition, Rawls implicitly accepts the dominant economic view that capitalism is the most effective engine of wealth and that differences of wealth are both an inevitable consequence of capitalism and a necessary incentive for high levels of productivity.

So, Rawls accepts inequality as both inevitable and necessary, but argues that inequality must be limited in accordance with certain fundamental principles of fairness. These principles are that any benefit to anyone must create a benefit for all and that disparities in wealth must be the least possible consistent with the requirements of increasing productivity and wealth. In essence Rawls would agree with Ronald Reagan's defense of capitalism--a rising tide lifts all ships. More precisely he would find it acceptable to have a society in which a rising tide lifts all ships, while deploring one in which some ships rise and others fall. He would also reject as unfair a society in which the slope of the rising tide was more rapid for the upper economic classes of society than for the lower. In short, for Rawls disparity is inevitable, but the degree of disparity between rich and poor is a fundamental matter of social justice.

The other fundamental social issue for Rawls is the role of government. He believes that government has three basic responsibilities. One is to assure that people have as much liberty as is consistent with equal liberty for all. That is the rough equivalent of Locke's insistence that government protect people's rights to life, liberty and property. A second function of government is to assure that everyone has equal opportunity to gain "the positions and offices" which give some people special advantages. The third function of government is to assure that all people in society have their basic needs met--that no one is hungry or homeless or without adequate health care, etc.

A very important corollary of Rawls' view of the role of government in protecting liberty is that government should not constrain people's actions or expressions of belief unless it is necessary to protect other people. In *Political Liberalism* he refers to this principle as the "moral neutrality of the state"--a very unfortunate choice of words for a principle of political tolerance for diverse religious, metaphysical, political, and moral beliefs and of non-interference in the private lives of people.

Rawls also aptly captures the current state of thinking about the utopian idea of a world order. In *The Law of Peoples*, he accepts the unavoidable fact of national divisions and argues for the development of rational and respectful international relations rather than for the development of a unified world order. Peace, of course, is the ultimate goal; but he recognizes that some nations live outside the civilized standards of rationality and respect and that dealings with these nations sometimes depend on the presence of military might.

Conservatives, radicals, and "communitarian" liberals have all subjected Rawls to sharp criticism. I deal with their views in other essays. For now, I will just say that while Rawls does provide some sort of philosophical base for some dimensions of liberalism at the end of the 20th century, he does not--it seems to me--provide the basis for a liberal renaissance.

The question of the future of liberalism, I think, is largely a question of whether old alliances can be rebuilt. Can the poor, the working class, and the middle class join forces? Can diverse racial and ethnic groups unite? Is there a unifying agenda on which we can build a meaningful program of social action in the 21st century? Clearly this would require a re-worked liberal agenda. Rawls' principles are far too abstract and obscure for that purpose.

A liberal renaissance I think depends on identifying core values that emerge from the history of liberalism in forms that will ring true in the 21st century.

(This essay was written in 2001)