

## **IN PRAISE OF LIBERALISM**

By  
Michael B. Friedman

Conservative—and even centrist--opponents of liberalism reject it because they identify it with cumbersome government; reckless spending; high taxation; naiveté about economics, crime, and world power; and lack of moral values. What a mistake!

In fact, liberalism has been **the** source of political progress in the Western world since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The idea that rights set a limit on the legitimate power of government is a liberal idea. The idea that government must respect the liberty of individuals is a liberal idea. The idea that religious groups should be tolerant of each other is a liberal idea. Modern democracy is an outgrowth of these ideas. Capitalism is a liberal idea. Building a government strong enough to be a countervailing power to wealth to protect workers, consumers, and the environment from excesses driven by the profit motive is a liberal idea. The belief that **all** people in an economically successful nation should have the opportunity to lead a decent life is also a liberal idea. The belief that society should assure the security of children, old people, disabled people, and people out of work for reasons not of their own doing is a liberal idea. Civil rights is a liberal idea. Limiting the intervention of government into our private lives is a liberal idea. The universality of human rights is a liberal idea. Addressing global poverty is a liberal idea.

These important contributions to human history may seem not entirely consistent, and they are not. What makes them liberal ideas is not that they cohere in a logically consistent and comprehensive theory of liberalism but that they reflect an underlying spirit of liberalism—a determination to improve the lives of human beings who at a particular moment in history do not fare well. This spirit, this commitment to the well-being of all people, has given liberalism the vitality and adaptive capacity to lead social progress over the past three centuries.

The idea that liberalism has an underlying spirit, that it has underlying values that have endured through changes in the specific forms liberalism has taken at different times, is not original. I first came across it in John Dewey's book *Liberalism and Social Action*. Dewey observed that both he and John Stuart Mill were liberals but that he believed in the necessity of strong government, including strong governmental intervention in the economy, 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 intelligent social action. He argued further that the specific forms these values took had had to change over time as we came to understand more about the social conditions necessary to foster liberty and individuality.

Dewey, I think, had it basically right. There are enduring values of liberalism; but there aren't just 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 yes, these values often exist in tension with one another. But historically liberalism has found ways to forge disparate values into progressive policies that have worked to the benefit of more and more people over time. Let's look at the history.

### John Locke and The American Revolution

Liberalism 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.

It was 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 notion that Kings were not

above the law had emerged four centuries earlier in the Magna Carta and the organization of Parliament. 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. (Women did not count at the time, of course.) All men are equal before the natural law. 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 the King 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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 16<sup>th</sup> Century and codified in 1602. 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, Locke's notion of the natural rights of all men can easily be seen as vast hypocrisy. But 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 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, ideals expressed in images, myths if you will.

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:

"We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure Domestic Tranquility, 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, in their rush to overthrow the aristocracy and to impose on everyone what a few charismatic, revolutionary leaders and the people in their sway perceived as right, the leaders of The French Revolution missed some of the key ingredients of a workable democracy. Rousseau's concept of the General Will—which lent itself to the idea that it was legitimate to force people who did not recognize their true interests to be free-- contributed to the failure of these leaders 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 lays 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 the North and the South and 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.

The American Revolution was, then, the beginning of liberalism in The United States. It enunciated 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 a 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. 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.

### Laissez-Faire Economics and The Utilitarians

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

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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 mantel 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 18<sup>th</sup> century in England (actually Scotland) and to Adam Smith--the precursor of 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalism.

While the political history of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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. Government should not intervene in the working of the economy; virtually absolute liberty should be the byword of the economic system. Needless to say, it was not widely believed when Smith was writing at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> 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.

It is critical to note 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 that over time the working class would be far



better off under industrial capitalism than they would have been in an agrarian, feudal society. Ultimately they would thrive under capitalism. They would not rival the rich but they would, he said, live in comforts greater than that of "princes" in primitive cultures.

We need to note two essential dimensions of Smith's economic theory. 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.

Although similar to the Enlightenment's general confidence in human progress, 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. Isaiah Berlin has noted that "pursuit of the ideal" 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 this 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 significantly, 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 believed arose from a

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 always lingers in the back of my mind begin to chant--hypocrisy, hypocrisy, hypocrisy. How in the face of the poverty of the 19<sup>th</sup> century can one think of Mill or any other wealthy intellectual as confronting the inequality and injustice of 19<sup>th</sup> 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...[he also] destroyed the course and the beauty of nature. ... What a dog's hole is Manchester." During this period, millions died because of the famine in Ireland; the English did nothing to help (to put the best possible face on it. The English Empire spread across the globe subjugating 10s 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.

The radical critique is, of course, correct. There was vast injustice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was no secret. But there was also philosophical and social progress.

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.

There was also social progress. New classes of affluent non-aristocrats emerged. If the 18<sup>th</sup> century reflected the rise of landowners, the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 the American Indians, 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 19<sup>th</sup> century. The right to vote spread from landowners to all men. In some states women did not have to wait to the 20<sup>th</sup> 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, the disabled, the aged, and for people with serious mental disabilities.

### The Progressive Era

As the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 Jadvyga 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 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 prostitutes. 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 as well as unnecessary disparities in wealth.

The primary philosophical spokesman for the Progressive Movement was Herbert Croly. He is largely forgotten today, barely 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 strong, 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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. But later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the liberal position evolves still further. We can see this evolution fairly clearly in the political thought of John Dewey, who argues—as I noted earlier—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.

Thus Dewey enunciated a number of critical themes for those of us who are liberals but not socialists or radicals. First, 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. Second, liberalism is not about violent revolution. Yes, liberalism is about social action and is not content to wait for a better society to evolve on its own. And yes, liberalism arose from revolutions undertaken to overthrow the aristocracy. And yes, liberalism should sometimes support revolutions in despotic nations. But liberalism believes that revolution is neither necessary nor justified in a democracy. Third, liberalism is inherently pluralistic. It recognizes that social values shift over time and that different people and groups of people have different values and interests, which need to be woven together into a nation which functions well enough, though not perfectly. Perfect rationality does not exist, and a perfect political structure is not possible.

### The New Deal

Clearly the New Deal did much to define American liberalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I would argue that the roots of 20<sup>th</sup> century liberalism are in the Progressive movement and that 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 also 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—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, *private* 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.

### The Emergence of International Liberalism

The rise of fascism in Europe, the formation of an Axis of non-democratic powers intent on world conquest, Nazi genocide, and the ultimate victory of democratic nations in World War II (albeit in alliance with the Soviet Union) combined to contribute to a major step in the evolution of liberalism. In essence liberalism ceased to be simply a philosophy of legitimate government of a nation and became the defender of democracy against totalitarianism internationally. A new social responsibility emerged, to speak for and, when possible, to actively defend the rights of people around the world. The critical distinction, first articulated by Locke, between a people and the government of a people was extended to include a sense of responsibility on the part of victors to help vanquished people by providing economic support and fostering the establishment of democratic government. The concept of transnational human rights gathered force. A world court was acknowledged to have authority to judge and punish war criminals who had committed crimes against humanity; and a few years later, under the leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt, the United Nations adopted *The Declaration of Human Rights* in the United Nations. The *Declaration* was unenforceable, but its ideas proved powerful and helped to put the nails in the coffin of colonialism. Most importantly it established principles of concern for the well-being of people outside one's own nation--thus expanding the orbit of liberalism far beyond the responsibilities of a nation to its own people.

### Liberalism in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The Cold War tempered the international dimension of liberalism that had emerged during and immediately after World War II. Western democracies

had to confront the fact that the Soviet Union was a totalitarian regime, and this provoked a crisis for those liberals who sympathized with the hopes and dreams symbolized by the Russian Revolution if not with the heinous government which had formed in the wake of those dreams. As a result, for a time American liberalism focused more on domestic issues. Slowly in the 50's and then rapidly in the 60's, the face of liberalism changed 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 Act.

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 profound and 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 19<sup>th</sup> century on, was raised to a new level.

The third major shift was in the nature of the commitment of our society to people with disabilities. From late in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Virginia through the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> 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 beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was clear that these "asylums" were dreadful places, in which abuse and exploitation were commonplace. By the middle of the century, 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 community-based 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 outside of marriage before the 60's, but it was illicit. During the 60's it became an open way of life. 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 and raised doubts about the legitimacy of the Western hegemony.

From this *mélange* 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". A significant portion of the working class, it turned out, had more conventional values than did more affluent people. They were mystified by **open** 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.

Thus, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century liberalism was in turmoil. It had suffered such extensive political losses that the term "liberal" had become politically dangerous. Many of its ideas had been appropriated by New Democrats, who merged them with some important conservative observations to create a powerful form of centrism, which they characterized as a "third way", neither liberal nor conservative. Old leftist voices had become increasingly whiney and seemed trapped in an antiquated language of "oppression", "exploitation," etc., even while they devoted enormous energy to developing "politically correct" language. Many mainstream liberals remained committed to ideas which not only were not politically viable but which had lost much of their credibility because of effective conservative criticism and failed social experiments. And a new generation of young people associated with liberalism by the press and by their opponents if not by themselves had emerged to fight against economic globalization led by multi-national corporations and to fight for American workers, international human rights, and protection of the global environment.

### The Underlying Spirit of Liberalism

The chaotic state of liberalism at the moment makes it critical to try to distill from the history of liberalism its underlying spirit—a spirit which can create a sense of unity of purpose and sweep liberalism into a new period of vitality.

The history of liberalism reveals an abundance of important and powerful values. They include democracy; liberty; equality; rights; individuality; tolerance; capitalism; economic growth; social utility; social progress; overcoming poverty; protection of the environment; government as a protective, countervailing power; labor rights; humane workplaces; social

security; meeting basic needs for housing, food, and healthcare; education; entitlements; fairness; civil rights; privacy; human rights; and more.

Clearly not all of these values are solely owned by liberalism. It is the cluster of values, not each of its components, which distinguishes liberalism from other political perspectives. The values in the cluster are to some extent complementary and to some extent in dynamic tension, and balancing them through a democratic process is part of the essence of liberalism. But it is the commitment to social action designed to realize these values that sets liberalism apart and unites it in all its incarnations.

The history of liberalism, I believe, makes it clear that liberalism's underlying spirit is commitment to improving the lives of people through social action. In each of its major phases, liberalism has recognized a group of people who were have-nots in comparison to the haves of their society and who were to a large extent cut off from political influence. Liberalism has pressed for changes in government which would help these people to have basic economic security, to rise from poverty, to have equal rights in practice as well as rhetoric, and to participate meaningfully in the deliberations and choices of our democracy.

To vastly oversimplify, liberalism began by asserting the fundamental values of democracy--liberty, rights, equality, individualism, and tolerance--thus breaking the hegemony of the aristocracy and enabling landowners to rise to power. Laissez-faire liberalism merged capitalism and democracy and generated wealth and power for industrialists and businessmen. The Progressive movement grew out of the perception that unregulated capitalism perpetuated unjust poverty and jeopardized the natural environment. It called on government to serve as a countervailing power to big business; to humanize the workplace; to assure safe food, water, and drugs; and to conserve nature while at the same time preserving the capacity of capitalism to promote economic growth. In the process the working class began to rise out of poverty. The New Deal provided social security--a safety net--for people who want to work but cannot find jobs; for people who are too old to work; for mothers with children, who are not expected to work; and later for people with disabilities who are unable to work. The New Deal also recognized a significant new role for government--to stimulate economic growth. World War II fostered a commitment to spreading democracy and to promoting transnational human rights. The civil rights movement ended legal segregation and began to open the doors of opportunity to blacks and other minorities. The concept of civil rights was later extended to women, people with disabilities, and to people who are homosexual. The War on Poverty attempted to create a minimum standard

of living in the United States and to confront the reality of unequal opportunity with a mix of affirmative action and human services designed to help people become able to take advantage of opportunities. Medicare and Medicaid—created during the Johnson administration—provided health coverage to people who are poor, old, and/or disabled. The determination to overcome poverty combined with the decision to communitize care for people with mental and physical disabilities, the frail elderly, and orphaned and neglected children fueled a great growth of government supported health and human services. The liberal cultural revolution gave impetus to a more expansive right to privacy and freed us from smothering restrictions on lifestyle—sexual and otherwise. The War in Vietnam called into question the legitimacy of the Western economic and military hegemony and gave fresh impetus to the concept of transnational human rights. Lately, people with liberal inclinations have turned their attention to poor and powerless people in the developing world.

Improving the lives of people! Liberalism has always been an active effort to extend liberty, opportunity, material well-being, and power to people who are disadvantaged by their position in society. Liberalism has never sought human perfection and thus has avoided the dangers of utopian ideologies. Instead, liberalism has engaged in social actions to bring about simple forms of progress; and in each phase of liberalism, people who were cut off from the basic goods of society have at last improved their lot in life, becoming freer and more affluent (or at least less poor.)

This sense of the spirit of liberalism suggests a clear vision for its future.

In the United States, poverty, economic insecurity, and limited opportunity persist. Liberalism should work to address these problems more effectively.

Americas' health system is bedeviled by the combination of the world's highest costs and relatively poor health status. Healthcare reform addresses the terrible fact that 50 million Americans have not had health insurance, but it is questionable whether it realistically addresses the issues of health status and health costs. It is time for liberalism needs to take this issue on realistically rather than ideologically.

The civil rights agenda has not been completely achieved. That a black man is now President of the United States demonstrates great progress. But the color of those who suffered most from the floods in New Orleans caused by Hurricane Katrina as well as masses of data that show continuing economic and health disparities between minorities and whites make it clear that the



civil rights agenda has not yet been completed. Liberalism should work towards its completion.

Traditional moralists continue to try to make sexual behavior the defining moral issue of our time and to limit individual freedoms accordingly. Liberals must respond (1) that the fundamental family value is caring for one's family members and accepting responsibility for their well-being, (2) with an active defense of privacy and pluralism as fundamental moral values, and (3) with an insistence that the overcoming profound poverty, eliminating discrimination, protecting the environment, and opposing unjust wars are the real defining moral values of our time.

Democratic process is troubled by poor participation in elections and the excessive influence of wealth. In addition, the effectiveness of government is limited by over-regulation in some areas and under-regulation and enforcement in others. Liberalism should commit to the improved functioning of democratic government.

Fundamental rights such as the right to privacy, the right to know—and for the public to know—why one is arrested or denied a passport, and the right to a speedy and public trial—have been limited because of a pervasive fear of terrorism. Liberalism needs to reject fear mongering and the panicked imposition of unnecessary limitations on civil liberties.

The global environment is at risk. Numerous international conferences and treaties have identified a mix of national and international activities to protect the environment. Liberalism should work to build the global political will needed to follow through on plans to reduce risks to the environment.

Poverty and lack of human rights in most “developing” nations are shameful, and efforts to improve the quality of life of people in impoverished nations are clearly fundamental to a liberal agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

And finally, it is critical to redefine the role of America in the world and to develop a stance regarding the use of its military power which is realistic both about the dangers from which our military can protect us and about the extent to which it should be, or can effectively be, used to protect the rights of people in other nations.

The challenge to contemporary liberalism is to address these major domains of social injustice and risk, not to defend the list of common liberal positions which has become fodder for liberalism's critics. Indeed liberalism needs to subject this list of positions to the kind of open-minded scrutiny that has

always been at the heart of liberalism's commitment to use the best available knowledge as the basis of social action. Every contemporary liberal position needs to be questioned. Does it contribute or impede progress for people in the United States? Does it contribute to or impede improving the lives of the vast majority of people in the world whose lives leave a great deal to be desired?

What will it take to confront the major social issues of our time and to make as much progress in the new century as was made in the past? Ultimately it is in determination to extend liberty and economic well-being to the people who need them most that liberalism can find the vision and inspiration it needs to revive itself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*(Michael B. Friedman is a social worker and social advocate who teaches at the Columbia University Schools of Social Work and of Public Health. He is the founder and past Director of the Center for Policy, Advocacy, and Education of the Mental Health Association of NYC where he also founded The Geriatric Mental Health Alliance of New York and The Veterans' Mental Health Coalition of New York City. Over the past 40+ years he has been a social advocate, a public official, an administrator in mental health and child welfare organizations, and a teacher of philosophy as well as social policy.)*