

## AFTER LIBERALISM: NOTES TOWARD RECONSTRUCTION

Serious discussions of politics today, especially in the academy, routinely presume that liberalism is inevitable, the only tolerable form of political society available in the modern world. For that reason, fundamental objections to liberalism are considered pointless. Critics are told they must choose between irritable complaints that go nowhere and trying to restrain or moderate liberalism while nevertheless accepting its basic premises.

The reason, as John Rawls and others have emphasized, is pluralism. Prosperity, urban living, easy communication, mass mobility, and widespread advanced education mean that people go their own way for their own reasons. The result is that consensus regarding goods that society might pursue in common is not possible, now or in any foreseeable future. To base government on a specific view of the good would mean suppressing thought and discussion, and forcing people to live in ways they reject for reasons they consider fundamental. Such an effort would be at odds with how modern society works, and people would not stand for such “injustice.”

The lessons of history are said to buttress this view, supporting what Judith Shklar called “the liberalism of fear.” The premodern West was violent and oppressive because

public life was tied to religious issues that could not be resolved; we have gotten beyond the violence by avoiding the issues. We have been able to do so, it is said, because agreement on the right and just is possible without reference to ultimate goods: it is right to treat everyone equally, and just to pay equal regard to their various goals.

It is also thought, in line with the modern technological outlook, that social order is a human construction that can be perpetually remodeled to bring it ever more into conformity with what is right, just, and rational. The conclusion, which is basic to today’s public life, is that government should intervene continuously in social life to put everyone more and more in a position to get what he wants, as much and as equally as possible. Such an approach gives each of us all that is possible without slighting others. The result is that no one has legitimate grounds for complaint, and a social decision as to the good is unnecessary.

To educated and responsible people today this line of argument seems unanswerable. Nonetheless, there are basic problems with it that make the indefinite continuance of liberal government doubtful and that open

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up possibilities for a different approach to politics.

### LIBERALISM AND THE GOOD

The problems go to the most basic claims and concepts. “The good” is simply whatever it is that makes a goal rational to choose. It follows that liberal governments are based on a definite theory of the good, that it is at bottom a matter of satisfying preferences. That theory is as contestable as any other. Some believe it makes sense; others, who find goals such as virtue or human flourishing more reasonable, do not.

Most of the great thinkers of the past, and most people who are neither economists nor rigorous liberals today, reject preference satisfaction as a supreme goal. Those who affirm some other conception of the good naturally want to bring their view of the matter into public discussions. It is hardly conciliatory to tell them that their thoughts on such an important issue are mere private opinions with no legitimate role in public decisions.

To make matters worse for liberal claims of neutrality, the exclusion of substantive views of the good from the public sphere appears to result, at least as a practical matter, from a view of ultimate issues that has itself come to be treated as authoritative. Crudely expressed, that view identifies reality with atoms, the void, and human subjectivity; knowledge with modern natural science; and rational action with technology, the rational use of available resources to satisfy human preferences. Because all preferences are equally preferences, and there are no higher goods that allow us to judge one better than another, all have an equal claim to fulfillment. Maximum equal preference satisfaction thus becomes the uniquely rational guide for ordering society.

As the supreme guide to a just social

order, that principle of maximum equal satisfaction is considered worthy of a loyalty that trumps all others. For that reason it naturally receives a quasi-religious interpretation, one that sanctifies individual feelings and purposes as the source and goal of all value. Such an outlook has become the criterion for what amounts to a public religious orthodoxy: liberal religion, which affirms the equal dignity of values, is good and beneficial; antiliberal religion, which proposes a substantive higher standard, is dangerous and oppressive.

Despite claims to the contrary, it thus turns out that contemporary Western government *can* be identified with a particular view of ultimate and even religious issues. There is nothing surprising in that result. As Kenneth Craycraft and others have noted, religious neutrality is a myth. Basic social institutions inevitably claim the right to make decisions on matters of life and death, and to demand sacrifice—even extreme sacrifice—of personal interests. To do so, they must be seen as grounded in ultimate realities regarding the meaning and value of life, and thus correspond to an authoritative religious outlook.

In any event, it is less a government’s conception of the good that makes it tolerant than its willingness to put up with other conceptions. In that regard there is nothing intrinsically tolerant about liberalism. To the contrary, liberalism is an evolving outlook based on abstractions whose demands expand without limit. In practice it tries to root out one illiberal arrangement after another, and becomes more and more intolerant of competing views and practices. A nonliberal government that views, say, Christian virtue as the ultimate goal of social order will try to facilitate it in various ways, but it is also likely to accept that virtue cannot be coerced, and so adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude in many respects. A liberal government that aims at equal pref-

erence satisfaction and that takes a technological approach to the social order is likely to notice that people inconvenience each other in ways that are unjust by its standards and conclude that a comprehensive system of politically correct supervision, indoctrination, and control is needed to keep them from doing so. Which government will be more tolerant in practice?

Present-day Western governments conduct all the normal activities of traditional, preliberal governments, and then some. They confer honors, establish holidays, educate the young, determine family law, support people in their troubles, define crimes and determine how serious they are, spend a very large part of the national income, and try to reshape institutions, attitudes, and personal relationships in the interest of what they believe to be just. How could such a comprehensive scheme of activity possibly be rational without an overall view of what to promote and what to curtail? If the sole purpose of these efforts, which pervade all aspects of life, is maximization of equal freedom, without regard to the effect on other goods, the efforts are fanatical. Why is fanaticism in the name of freedom and equality better than fanaticism in the name of virtue or God's will?

In fact, the advance of liberalism increasingly undermines older liberal principles such as freedom of opinion and even freedom of conscience. Western governments need popular support, but they insist on liberal goals as determined by experts. To satisfy both needs, they inevitably try to mold popular attitudes in favor of goals already determined to be correct. They have a variety of means to do so. Those means emphasize education and supervision of organizational life in the interests of equality but increasingly include direct use of coercion. In much of the West, the coercion amounts to enforcement of a new law of blasphemy

and heresy, while in America the Obama administration recently ruled that religious institutions will have no exemption from a requirement to provide health-care coverage for contraception, sterilization, and abortifacients. Those that fail to comply will be subject to a \$2,000 fine for every employee. So the University of Notre Dame, with about five thousand employees, now faces a choice between violating its Catholic conscience and paying a \$10 million fine *each year*.

The liberal logic of the Obama administration is impeccable: equal satisfaction of preferences requires, for women, that they have immediate access to technological control of their fertility. But such a policy belies the claim of unique freedom of belief stemming from liberal neutrality on ultimate issues. The modern liberal state does not burn at the stake for heresy, any more than it hangs, draws, and quarters for treason. It finds it more effective to smother dissent through a system of comprehensive but comparatively gentle social controls that weakens and supplants competing centers of allegiance and authority, such as family, religion, and cultural community.

In any case, equal satisfaction of preferences cannot really be the goal of government. Goals conflict, so they cannot be equally favored. The attempt to make freedom equal and absolute means that goals that affect others in ways that matter must often be suppressed, leaving as permissible only those that can be satisfied without interfering with a technically rational system of production, distribution, and control. Examples of the latter include career, consumption, and personal indulgences that do not have too many side effects. Goals that cannot be readily accommodated within this liberal grid are rejected and suppressed as intolerant or otherwise antisocial.

The result is the suppression of many of the goods people care most about. Marriage

as traditionally conceived, which provides a definite and dignified setting for the most basic connections and concerns of ordinary life, is an example. The traditional conception requires habits, understandings, and limitations that put some people at a disadvantage. For that reason it must be debunked and disestablished in the interests of equal freedom, its practical functions supplanted by private contracts and government services. Even proposing traditional marriage as a standard poses a threat to those it would disadvantage. Hence the tone, manner, and outcome of the disputes over Proposition 8 in California.

To make matters worse, “neutral” criteria such as mutual tolerance do not give unequivocal answers. People are to have equal freedom, but freedom to do what and equality in what respect? Careers compete with careers, rock music with peace and quiet, consumption of off-road vehicles with consumption of unspoiled nature. Private indulgences such as marijuana, alcohol, and fornication have public effects that burden other people. In such cases, which goals are to be free and equal and which are to be suppressed? If distinctions as to substantive value are out of bounds, it is impossible to say. Decisions must nonetheless be made, and so they are made arbitrarily. Marijuana is illegal, alcohol OK, fornication a human right. The result is that liberalism becomes self-defining and dictatorial. Instead of individual freedom, we get the system of freedom—liberalism itself—as the ultimate standard. Freedom becomes freedom to live a liberal lifestyle in a liberal environment. In order to secure and perfect that freedom, which is the highest social and political goal, conduct, attitudes, and relationships must be supervised, controlled, and transformed.

Liberalism thus falls into contradiction and fails in the most fundamental way pos-

sible. Enforcing freedom denies freedom, enforcing equality makes the enforcers unequal, enforcing tolerance requires a comprehensive system of supervision and control, and giving people what they want is not what people really want. Liberalism is badly founded and not as secure as people think.

#### PRACTICAL STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

It is nonetheless said that the advanced liberal standard—maximum equal ability to satisfy desires within a technocratic scheme of social life—is inevitable because it is the only one people can agree on. This argument is weak. Many people do not agree with liberalism, and fewer would if they understood its full implications. Its dominance does not show that everyone, or even most people, “believe” it consciously, or at all. What liberalism’s current dominance shows is merely that it is the standard that wins public arguments because it serves as a common reference point in discussions of public affairs by influential people.

A great strength of liberalism is that it justifies the power of the people who run things today, and their embrace of liberalism is sufficient to make the liberal outlook dominant socially. The power of such people, as James Burnham and other analysts of managerial society have pointed out, is based on claims of special expertise and dominance of formal institutions. Maximum satisfaction of desires is a technical and organizational issue; equality a question for jurists, bureaucrats, and administrators. Liberalism tells us that those are the basic issues of public life, and experts and managers can claim quite persuasively that they are the best ones to handle them. The proper role of the people then reduces to giving consent, and their refusal to do so is treated as a failure on their

part that shows they need (re-)education and deserve to have less influence in public life. Hence the uncomprehending and abusive response to the Tea Parties on the part of educated and well-placed people in America; hence, too, the horrified alarm in Europe at the remotest sign of a newly vigorous “populism.”

Liberalism further entrenches the power of experts and managers by debunking and

ill suited. Markets and bureaucracies may be good for providing things that are useful when raising children, but they are not good for child rearing itself. That is a serious problem when the function is so basic.

The flaws of liberalism are not self-correcting, since the logic of a system that takes equal freedom as a final self-defining goal is to become ever more purely liberal and ever more blind to its own limitations. The



*Worldviews in tension: Obama at Notre Dame*

disrupting institutions like family, religion, and cultural community that depend on authorities and forms of knowledge that are neither expert nor managed. That is a strength, because it eliminates competitors; but it is also a weakness, because alternative authorities are additional principles of social functioning. As they weaken, the responsibilities of markets and rational bureaucracies, the only institutions that measure up to managerial liberal standards of neutrality, rationality, technical efficiency, and susceptibility to regulation, come to include more and more functions for which they are

result is that liberalism becomes increasingly imprudent and dysfunctional. The denial of common sense and a fixed human nature leads to ever greater lack of realism on issues such as education. The sacrifice of social ties and community standards to self-interest and self-expression erodes rectitude and public spirit. The insistence on indiscriminate social inclusion disrupts informal habits and understandings needed for formal institutions to work. And the need to provide the services once performed by newly marginalized institutions such as family, religion, and neighborhood makes

fiscal sanity impossible in a political order that holds universal consumer well-being as the highest human good. The bankruptcy of the welfare state, with which all Western governments now struggle, is a predictable outcome of the liberal project.

Skeptical and moderate liberals try to stabilize the system by retaining some traditional limitations. They want a more “modest” liberalism that respects the family and religion, not the contemporary advanced and intolerant variety. Their attempt to salvage liberalism is a losing one, however, in the absence of a solid theory explaining why the older limitations are just and not merely expedient. Liberalism cannot produce such a theory. The consciousness of liberals keeps getting raised, and as time passes liberal demands become ever less negotiable.

## FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE

Nothing lasts forever, especially systems that are badly founded and blind to their own limitations. Today it is unimaginable how to avoid liberalism; in the future, it may be unimaginable why anyone ever accepted such a defective understanding of public life. The change may come suddenly, as a result of some crisis, or gradually, in response to chronic problems that confer an advantage on those who follow a different approach. Either way, those who govern will change their outlook or lose their ability to govern, and with it their position.

But how are new principles to establish themselves? It is neither possible nor necessary to explain the details in advance. Like the development of a language or the recognition of a leader, acceptance of common understandings comes about one way or another. Some of the influences favoring agreement are obvious. Man is social and takes his cues from others. Most people pre-

fer stability and substantive goods to theoretical purity, and they go along with standards that seem to work even when others might appear more attractive.

Elites take the lead in determining matters of principle, and they tend to emphasize concerns such as stability, effectiveness, and maintenance of their own authority. Civil discord is costly, so people who run things normally cooperate to maintain common understandings and to find a *modus vivendi* when agreement is impossible. Nonetheless, they need the cooperation of the people at large to stay in power and have something functional to run. For that reason, popular concerns count heavily in the long run.

Those concerns relate largely to daily life and human relations, and liberalism faces increasing problems with regard to such matters. It is hard to live happily or well as a thoroughgoing liberal, because there is so much that the liberal outlook cannot deal with. Crude measures like surveys of reported happiness and charitable giving among liberals and others show as much. The outlook attracts the wholehearted adherence of comfortable, self-centered people who want to justify and universalize their point of view, but has little to say about the blessings, difficulties, and duties of ordinary life. In particular, liberalism does not deal well with marriage and the family. Liberals do not have many children, and the future belongs to those who do.

To the extent that the formal institutions and principles on which liberalism depends lose popular allegiance and the ability to function, people will fall back on more basic human connections and build on them. Liberal modernity has been hard on principles like family, friendship, religion, and particular culture, but life must go on, and necessity is likely to bring them back. The tendency is already with us: public spaces are disappearing, discussions fragmenting,



common loyalties declining, gated communities growing, social services deteriorating, and political dynasties taking hold. The majority way of life continues to slide into incoherence, but religious traditionalists and other disciplined minorities are resurgent. Among the educated and focused upper-middle class, the family and even religious observance now show signs of turning the corner after a long decline.

Such trends seem likely to continue and extend themselves, since people live as they can and the future belongs to the functional. Those who run things will have to adapt their views and manner of operating to whatever may come. The Communist countries transformed themselves when governing elites came to accept that established views did not work; Rome Christianized because the Christians were the most functional community in the empire. At some point, something similar will happen among us. When enough influential people find nonliberal understandings the most helpful way to make sense of their world and how it works, we will emerge into a nonliberal public order.

### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Basic changes are unpredictable, and to say they will come is not to say what they will be. One possible outcome of present tendencies would be a collapse into radical particularism resulting in a Levantine-type society, one composed of inward-turning ethno-religious communities governed by weak, corrupt, and oppressive governments with no organic connection to the societies they rule. Under such circumstances, ineffective intellectual leadership and the need for an overall ordering principle would likely lead to common understandings that are crude but easily comprehensible. The obvious solu-

tion would be a simple and forceful religion, or an ideology functioning as a religion, that reflects the tendency toward strong particular loyalties and away from open-ended rational thought. The consequences of such an outcome can be seen in the Middle East.

We can do better than that. Ways of life are not predetermined by history or material conditions. Choices are possible, and the key to the revival of the social order is revival of the intellectual order by intellectuals and of ways of living by all of us.

It is hard for a political order based on abstractions such as freedom and equality to stay moderate and avoid anarchy or tyranny. To avoid both extremes, public life must be rational and open ended, but also ordered and coherent. To that end, principles that go beyond the limits of liberalism are necessary. What is needed are publicly valid explanations of man and the world—what things are, how they work, what they are for, and what is worth pursuing—that are more concrete and substantive than liberalism can offer but general enough to allow fruitful and open discussion.

The obvious and least disruptive way a better public order could emerge is for the West to revert to type. Liberalism depends on a heritage from the past to function at all—it depends on social capital it does not, itself, generate—and as mounting problems make that dependency more obvious, the advantages of the Western heritage are likely to become obvious as well. Other civilizations have followed cyclical patterns. Why shouldn't the West do the same? At a philosophical level, the result might be a renewed acceptance among educated and responsible people of something like traditional natural law, a rational outlook that accepts essence and teleology and so enables us to discuss what things are and what they are for. Such a move would provide a substantive and historically grounded alternative to liberalism.

Many details would of course still need to be filled in. The actual constitution of any society is a balance among the implications of fundamental principles publicly held, other views and demands, and practical circumstances. A variety of initiatives will likely be needed before a generally adequate response is found to the present situation. Nonetheless, an ideal goal is necessary to focus efforts and provide something concrete to hope for. For many Catholic conservatives today, and increasingly for other conservative-minded Christians, the social doctrine of the church provides such an ideal. It is an architectonic alternative to the welfare state or other versions of liberal technocratic society.

However that may be, the immediate practical outcome to work toward would be a society much like the present one in most ways, with similar institutions and debates over their role and management, but with the human good and not equal freedom as the ultimate reference point. Rather than taking preferences, equality, and efficiency as the basic standards, serious discussion of public affairs would bring in a more full-bodied and open-ended understanding of the human good, with room for notions of natural functioning, authoritative moral tradition, and even revelation. Such a change would eventually transform the institutions inherited from liberalism, just as liberalism transformed the institutions it inherited from the European past, but it would leave room for prudence, moderation, and consent as concrete changes come to seem advisable.

To the extent such changes reflect a more adequate understanding of reason, they could stem the technocratic slide toward small-scale social chaos combined with the public tyranny of experts, economists, and bureaucrats, and so allow a broader practical scope for public and private freedom. A richer array of nontechnological consider-

ations would allow a much larger role for the local, autonomous, and participatory aspects of social functioning that facilitate the freedoms that matter most in normal human life—like the freedom to carry on family life in a favorable environment and to live by one's religious beliefs in the workplace. And it would place ultimate goals at a transcendent level that cannot, even in principle, be achieved by coercion.

Any such development would require a reorientation of popular attitudes and loyalties as well as the outlook of governing elites. That is always possible. Liberalism depends on residues from earlier periods of social life, so features that facilitate a reversion to type are always present. The 1960s, as well as episodes like the collapse of speculative bubbles, show that large-scale change can be fast, unexpected, and radical if dominant principles have played themselves out and lost their credibility. A reversion to older and less artificial ways of doing things seems especially likely when the newer system depends on the correct functioning of very large and complex structures subject to periodic crisis, as in the managed societies of today.

People would not agree on everything in a postliberal world, any more than they do now or have in the past. Dealing with reality means accepting the reality of conflict. There would continue to be a variety of understandings of the West, natural law, Christianity, and human needs and nature in general. Nonetheless, conflict need not degenerate into the war of all against all. There is no pat formula for peace and good government, but social understandings normally converge sufficiently for something functional to become authoritative. In that somewhat chaotic process, the views that are best able to explain experience, appeal to fundamental interests, and bring life into a satisfying order will have an edge. To the



extent differences remain, people will—as always—have to find some practical way to live together.

History has not come to an end and cannot be predicted. Nor can the world be controlled or brought into perfect order. Instability and uncertainty are part of human life, and order will no doubt continue imper-

fectly to arise out of a mix of custom, negotiation, power relations, economic interests, religious and cultural aspirations, and the practical search for a *modus vivendi*. In the meantime there is always the obligation to make the best of things by whatever lights we have, and otherwise—if those lights allow—to trust in Providence.

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