

Liberal's Antipathies and Their Significance

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Abstract— *The main feature of liberalism can be considered as its commitment to liberty. As per J.S Mill, liberty is a negative notion – to be free is to be not in jail, not bound to a particular occupation, not excluded from the franchise, and so on. The history of liberalism is a history of opposition to assorted tyrannies. Anti-Absolutism is a protest against any absolute and arbitrary power that violates the personality or rights of those governed. As per John Locke, a specific exception exists in the case of soldiers on the battlefields. Liberals deny any form of authority based on the theories of divine right or charismatic authority, Marxist theory, and Nazi theory. Authority exists only to achieve goals like security of life, property, and the pursuit of happiness. The second liberal's antipathy is Anti-Theocracy – the separation of the Church (the sacred) and the State (the secular) based on Locke's concept of toleration, which upholds matters of conscience. This view can also be termed secularism in the Western worldview. The third of liberalism's antipathies is known as Anti-Capitalism, in which one strand of liberalism, namely – the late twentieth-century conservatives or neo-liberals, has regarded capitalism as an enemy of liberty, marking a significant reversal in the history of liberalism. Neo-liberalism is based on a laissez-faire or free-market economy.*

Index Terms: *Anti-Absolutism, Anti-Theocracy, Anti-Capitalism, liberalism.*

I. INTRODUCTION

We are tempted to acknowledge that we are faced with liberalisms rather than liberalism and inclined to say that they are all versions of one liberalism; it is tempting also to suggest that liberalism is best understood in terms of what it rejects. Nor would it be surprising to come to such a conclusion. Conservatism is no easier to define than liberalism, and it is not infrequently observed that what conservatives believe is a matter of what they want to conserve and who threatens it. As noted above, Louis Hartz in *The Liberal Tradition in America* argued that conservatives in the United States, as opposed to their counterparts in Britain and Europe, were in the wrong way because the society and political system they want to conserve has always been a liberal one; temperamental conservatives are thus forced to be ideological liberals (see Hartz, 1955, pp. 145–154). In *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Vol 1), Chapter 14, Ryan (2007) argued, “It is certainly true that many thinkers described as ‘neoconservatives’ might as aptly be described as ‘neoliberals’ – as they often are. However that may be, it is not implausible to argue that liberalism is well defined in negative terms” (p.367). Its central commitment, liberty, is generally a negative notion – to be free is to be *not* in jail, *not* bound to a particular occupation, *not* excluded from the franchise, and so on – and the history of liberalism is a history of opposition to assorted tyrannies. We will discuss liberal antipathies under three headings as given below.

II. ANTI-ABSOLUTISM

According to Ryan (2007), “One way of understanding the continuity of liberal history in this light is to see liberalism as a perennial protest’ against all forms of absolute authority”

(p. 367). It is tough to trace the origin of liberal political theory or find any consensus on one of them. In British politics, for instance, Ryan (2007) noted that only in the 1860s did the more radical members of the Whigs call themselves the Liberal Party. Yet it would be odd not to count Locke among early liberals, just as it would be absurd to call Hobbes a liberal even while one might want to acknowledge that he supplied many of the ingredients for a liberal theory of politics during his defending absolute and arbitrary authority as the only alternative to the anarchy of the state of nature and the war of all against all.

Whatever liberalism has been concerned with, it has been concerned with avoiding absolute and arbitrary power. It is not alone in this. English constitutional theory had, for several centuries, an aversion to anything that smacked of confiding absolute power to anyone. Neither parliament, the judiciary, nor the king was entitled to a monopoly of political authority. The imagery of the body politic was called upon to suggest that the elements in the political system had to cooperate for the body to function coherently. What makes liberal hostility to absolute rule rather than merely constitutionalist is the liberal claim that absolute rule violates the personality or the rights of those over whom it is exercised (Locke, 1967, pp. 342–348).

This argument connects Locke's *Second Treatise* with its claim that absolute and arbitrary authority were so inconsistent with civil society that they could not be considered a form of government at all, with the twentieth-century liberal's contempt for the totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. Liberals have disagreed about just which sorts of absolute authority are intolerable. Locke agreed that a general needed absolute authority over his soldiers in battle and might shoot deserters out of hand. However, this was not arbitrary authority –

generals might shoot deserters, but they were not entitled to take sixpence from their pockets (Locke, 1967, pp. 379–380).

Ryan (2007) added, “Locke argued that soldiers on the battlefield temporarily lost their right to be governed constitutionally; other liberals argued that whole peoples were still at a stage of political development where such a right did not exist for them” (p. 367). J. S. Mill thought the principles of *On Liberty* did not apply to people who could not benefit from rational discussion (Mill, 1974, pp. 69–70). Elizabeth I and Peter the Great had rightly exercised unaccountable power over sixteenth-century Britain and eighteenth-century Russia, respectively, and the despotic power of the East India Company over its Indian subjects was legitimate. On the other hand, the nineteenth-century British working class was entitled to full civil and political rights, and women of all classes were entitled to as much rights as men. Other liberals have been somewhat less ready to describe entire populations as ‘childish’ and have thought absolute authority over the inhabitants of their colonial possessions as indefensible as any other absolute power (Ryan, 2007, pp. 367–368).

The thought behind liberal opposition to absolute power is not complex, although it has several strands. As Ryan (2007) has written, “One is the idea that political authority exists for purely secular ends, towards which we should adopt a rational, scientific attitude, adjusting our political institutions and our policies in an instrumentally efficient way” (p. 368). Negatively, this means that liberals do not see authority as conferred either by the voice of God, as in theories of divine right or charismatic authority, or by the dictates of history, as in Marxist theory, or by racial destiny, as in Nazi theory. Authority exists only to enable society to achieve those limited goals a political order helps us to achieve – the security of life, property, and the pursuit of happiness (Locke, 1956, pp. 128–129).

According to Ryan (2007), “It follows that nobody can claim absolute power, since their title to exercise power rests on their ability to pursue these limited goals in an efficient fashion” (p. 368). Moreover, Ryan further explained:

A second idea that reinforces the first is that the content of these limited goals can only be set by attending to the opinions of all the people under that authority, or at least all those who have not shown themselves to be anti-social or a menace to the political order. (Ryan, 2007, p. 368)

To exclude anyone’s views is to devalue them and deny what liberalism relies on for its effect as a moral argument, the claim that we are born free and equal (Dworkin, 1985, pp. 191ff.). As free, we must be persuaded to give our allegiance; as equals, we must be obliged on the same terms as everyone else. This means that government must listen to the people and cannot take absolute power over itself (Rawls, 1971, pp. 221–223).

A third element provides much of the anti-totalitarian energy of modern liberalism. Ryan put in the following

words:

Free and equal individuals must be so recognised in the legal system as well as in the political system narrowly conceived. They must be free to form associations for their own purposes, and to engage in varied social, commercial, and intellectual activities. Absolute authority is inimical to and unwilling to share control over the lives of the citizenry with the leaders of other, secondary groups. (Ryan, 2007, p. 368)

The history of twentieth-century totalitarian states shows they have permanently destroyed the independent authority of all associations they could lay hands on. Liberals believe that the energy and liveliness of society come from these secondary allegiances and, therefore, that absolute power is both an affront to the moral personality of individuals and destructive of the life of society at large (Dworkin, 1985, pp. 193–200).

III. ANTI-THEOCRACY

According to Ryan (2007), “The opposition to absolutism, which links Locke to Mill and both to Rawls, Dworkin, and contemporary liberal thinkers, had its origins in another issue” (p. 368). As Ryan (2007) noted, “This was the liberal hostility to the confusion of secular and religious authority, and the liberal obsession with the rights of conscience” (p. 368). Liberalism can be understood as a form of socio-political ideology that cherishes the separation of the Church and the State based on tolerance. This view can also be termed “secularism” in the Western worldview. Thus, secularism is the by-product of the conflicts between religion and politics.

Hobbes was a sceptic, but he was also profoundly hostile to supposed *rights* to toleration. It is this that marks him as a non-liberal. For Hobbes, religious doctrines were too essential to be left to private men to pick and choose, and the task of the sovereign was to regulate what might and might not be said in public on all such matters (Hobbes, 1991, pp. 124–125).

Ryan (2007) shared that “Locke put forward the modern doctrine of toleration some thirty years after Hobbes” (p. 369). In Locke’s eyes, there were two distinct realms, the sacred and the secular, the former much more important than the latter. The political realm dealt with what Locke termed *bona civilia*, the goods of earthly peace and security, that he otherwise characterised as life, liberty, property, and physical well-being (Locke, 1956, p. 128). Alan Ryan summarises the Lockean form of liberalism below:

A sovereign who tried to dictate how we practised our religion was overstepping the proper bounds of his authority. Conversely, a church that tried to dictate the secular law was overstepping the bounds of its authority. The state was essentially a non-voluntary organization, and one to which we owed obedience willy-nilly; churches were essentially voluntary, and probably plural. (Ryan, 2007, p. 369)

Ryan (2007) shared that, unlike Hobbes, Locke was a devout Christian who thought much about religion as a religion rather than from a sociological perspective. It was this that made Locke a passionate defender of toleration. Toleration was based on protestant persuasion of matters of conscience. To force someone to assert a belief he did not hold was to outrage his most profound nature.

Where Hobbes suggested that men quarrelled over matters of conscience because there was next to nothing to be known about religion by the light of reason alone, and therefore, ought to be made to assert something in common, simply for the sake of peace; Locke was committed to the view that God required a willing assent, and a genuine faith so that whatever kind of forced assent the state might induce us to make was an insult to God as well as an outrage upon the individual (Hobbes, 1991, pp. 260ff.; Locke, 1956, pp. 132–133). Ryan made an argument in favour of Locke's view:

Conversely, true religion can make no demands upon the state. This is a view that modern readers find harder to accept. Locke thought it impossible that there might be a valid religious reason for a group to do anything that might come into conflict with the ordinary criminal law. (Ryan, 2007, p. 370)

Thus, Locke would have differed with most liberals of today over the 1990 case in which the American Supreme Court found that the First Amendment guarantees of religious liberty did not entitle Native Americans to use the hallucinogenic drug peyote in their religious rituals once the state of Oregon had banned the consumption of peyote.

Locke would have sided with the Court, but many contemporary liberals thought the demands of any religion should weigh more heavily than that. Modern readers found that neither Roman Catholics nor atheists qualified Lock's prescriptions – toleration confined to opinions that did not threaten political order. In both cases, the argument was that they were *politically* dangerous: atheists lacked motives to keep their promises and behave decently, while Catholics professed earthly loyalty to the Pope and so could not be relied on by the rulers of whatever state they happened to belong to (Locke, 1956, pp. 157–158).

According to Ryan (2007), "This reflected Locke's sharp distinction between those matters over which secular authority might be exercised and those over which it must not" (p. 370). Locke argued that earthly governments existed for secular tasks and did not include saving men's souls. Mill's *On Liberty* took a different route to make the same conclusion – a consistent utilitarian who believed in the importance of individuality and moral progress must agree organised coercion exerted by governments for the protection of our liberty and security above all else (Mill, 1974, pp. 119ff.; Gray, 1983, 2000). Mill's argument is no more conclusive than Locke's. Ryan has illustrated as below:

Someone who advocates the intertwining of secular and spiritual authority, where the state supports a national church

and the religious hierarchy sustains the authority of political leaders, may ascribe no value to individuality for its own sake, and believe that an enlarged freedom would lead to depravity rather than moral progress. Anyone who demands the union of spiritual and secular authority on this basis must be answered on the empirical level rather than by appeal to ideals that *ex hypothesi* are not agreed. (Ryan, 2007, p. 370)

In the second half of the twentieth century, liberals generally took a less rhetorical, more practical line than Locke and Mill. They have argued that totalitarian regimes, the lineal descendants of confessional states, have two significant drawbacks. The first is that totalitarian regimes like the Communist or Nazi party employ a distasteful amount of force (exemplary brutal punishment for dissent) in securing their goals as they failed to secure genuine loyalty from the subjects (Arendt, 1968).

The second drawback is that such regimes are inefficient; they may be effective when

fighting a real, all-out war. However, they are economically less efficient than liberal societies in which the division of labour between the sacred and the profane is respected in approximately the form Locke laid down. These considerations are well founded, but whether this practical argument captures the liberal's deepest beliefs is doubtful (Rawls, 1971, pp. 205–211).

IV. ANTI-CAPITALISM

According to Ryan (2007), "The history of hatred for despotism, theocracy, and the modern union of the two that is reflected in totalitarianism is a long history" (p. 371). The third of liberalism's antipathies has a shorter history. From the middle of the nineteenth century until today, one strand of liberalism has regarded capitalism as an enemy of liberty (Mill, 1848/1965, pp. 766–769; Dewey, 1931/1984). Alan Ryan explained the third of liberalism's antipathies as below:

This marked a great reversal in the history of liberalism. It is not a large over implication to say that until the early nineteenth century there was no question of opposing liberalism to capitalism. The movement of ideas and institutions that emancipated individuals from tradition, that insisted on their natural rights, and demanded that 'careers should be open to talent' rather than birth, was a seamless whole. (Ryan, 2007, p. 371)

Just as a man must think for himself, so he must work for himself; society would progress only if each person took responsibility for their own ideas and moral convictions, so it would flourish economically only if everyone stood on their own two feet. How far this was an articulate defence of capitalism as such is debatable; the term 'capitalism' itself did not come into general use until the late nineteenth century, and it is difficult to decide how appropriate it is to characterise as capitalist societies which possessed nothing one could call a proletariat, where the great majority still lived in the countryside and worked on the land, and which

thought of themselves as ‘commercial societies’ rather than ‘capitalist economies’ (Smith, 1976, pp. 399–403).

Moreover, Ryan (2007) has further explained that many of the rights to dispose of property just as one wished, to work for anyone willing to employ one, and to contract with anyone for any purpose not damaging to the security and good morals of the commonwealth, had been established by successive decisions made by judges appealing to the English common law rather than by legislation of a self-consciously liberal kind. Still, there is an apparent affinity between liberalism, the rule of private property, and freedom of contract. The liberal view that the individual is by natural right, or by something equivalent to it, sovereign over himself, his talents, and his property is the basis of limited government, the rule of law, individual liberty, and a capitalist economy.

But it was apparent from the beginning that property might be employed oppressively

as well as harmlessly or beneficially. Apart from the conflict between the rights of property owners and the traditional claims of rural workers – such as customary claims to gather wood or glean in the fields or to take small game – there was a more general conflict between the liberty of the large property owner to do what he chose with his property and the impossibility of his workers or competitors striking anything like a fair bargain with him. Throughout the nineteenth century, the sentiment grew that if it had once been necessary to liberate the entrepreneur from a misguided or oppressive government, it was now required to liberate the worker and consumer from the tyranny of the capitalist (Hobhouse, 1911/1964, pp. 22–24, 82–84; Green, 1888, pp. 366–370).

According to Ryan (2007), “Mill observed that the modern wage labourer had as little real choice of occupation as a slave have had in antiquity” (p. 372). In that spirit, Mill defended the right of working people to organise into trade unions to even the balance of power a little. T. H. Green and L. T. Hobhouse went further, suggesting that capitalism exerted a kind of moral tyranny over the ordinary person, as exemplified by the spread of drinking establishments that destroyed both the health and the self-respect of their victims (Green, 1888, pp. 380–385). Ryan (2007) further explained that ‘New Liberalism,’ exemplified in Britain by the social policy of the Asquith government of 1908–1916 and in the USA by the demands of the Progressives and the practice of the Democratic Party after the 1932 election of Franklin D. Roosevelt, had many positive ambitions but one negative assumption was that the working man needed to be freed from the power of the capitalist. This explains the seeming paradox that late twentieth-century conservatives are often characterised as *neoliberals*. The contemporary defence of property rights is not, as it was two centuries ago, the defence of landed property against commercial and industrial capital, but the defence of nineteenth-century *laissez-faire* and the

property rights of commercial and industrial capital against modern reformers (see Ryan, 2007, p. 372).

V. CONCLUSION

From the three liberal antipathies, Anti-Absolutism, Anti-Theocracy, and Anti-Capitalism, we can conclude that liberalism is primarily committed to human values or rights, particularly liberty or freedom. Liberalism is against any form of *absolute* and *arbitrary* power since it violates the personality and rights of those for whom the power is being exercised. Liberalism is indebted to the separation of *religion* and *politics* (the Church and the State), thereby promoting secularism based on tolerance, which resulted in the development of liberal democracies, especially in Western countries and the increasing dominance of democracy in our contemporary world. One strand of liberalism, known as *Conservatism* or often characterised as *Neo-liberalism*, is against *Capitalism*, and this marked a significant reversal in the history of liberalism. *Neo-liberalism* is based on a *laissez-faire* or free-market economy to protect the working class or proletariat against the capitalists. *Neo-liberalism* is the defender of *liberalism*, particularly the liberal democracy in Western countries and democracy in other parts of the world because it encourages market reforms, privatisation, globalisation, etc. Among these liberal antipathies, Anti-Capitalism, which produces neo-liberalism, was responsible for the downfall of the totalitarian or authoritarian regimes/institutions like Marxism, Communism, Nazism, and Fascism. However, the contemporary defence of property rights has resulted in the defence of nineteenth-century *laissez-faire* and the property rights of commercial and industrial capital against modern reformers. This is one of the most significant challenges faced by liberal democracies in the contemporary world, and urgent redressal is needed to protect landed property against capitalists.

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