

Inquiring Minds topic – 2 August 2019

Albert Myers, Moderator

Liberalism

Considering the article below,

- What is liberalism – does this article define it?
- What is your own definition of liberalism and of a liberal order?
- Is liberalism really in trouble? - if so, what should its advocates do?
- What are the obstacles to renewal of liberalism?

We're in an anti-liberal moment. Liberals need better answers.

[washingtonpost.com/outlook/were-in-an-anti-liberal-moment-liberals-need-better-answers/2019/06/21/5f276b26-91f7-11e9-b72d-d56510fa753e_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/were-in-an-anti-liberal-moment-liberals-need-better-answers/2019/06/21/5f276b26-91f7-11e9-b72d-d56510fa753e_story.html)

Liberalism promises the freedom to cultivate the self. Inequality undermines that possibility.

By Samuel Moyn - Samuel Moyn is a professor of law & history at Yale University.

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The gravediggers of liberalism believe that their moment has arrived. Hungary's prime minister — who condemns [“shipwrecked” liberalism](#) — has weakened his country's courts, changed the electoral system to favor his party and cracked down on universities. Poland's Law and Justice party has followed suit. On the home front, President Trump openly praises strongmen, disparages judges and the free press, and disdains institutions like NATO that many people view as pillars of the postwar [“liberal order”](#) uniting Western democracies.

Conservative intellectuals in this country don't praise all these moves but have suggested they result from genuine frustration with the current political order. Possessing an “animal instinct” that detected dissatisfaction with liberalism, Trump has begun to nudge the political culture “from autonomy-above-all toward

order, continuity, and social cohesion,” Sohrab Ahmari, the op-ed editor of the New York Post, [recently noted approvingly](#) in a much-discussed essay in the conservative journal First Things. Ahmari added that the state should be “re-ordered to the common good and ultimately the Highest Good” — that is, the Christian God. And New York Times columnist Ross Douthat has [written](#) that “it has become easier to imagine ways the liberal order might deserve to fall, because of evils generated from within itself.”

Liberals, including the [New Yorker’s Adam Gopnik](#) and the Brookings Institution’s [Robert Kagan](#), will defend their creed, of course, driven by a sense of emergency. But as the debate goes on, it will become clearer and clearer that the political system based on individual liberty and representative government doesn’t need to be celebrated *or* repudiated. It needs to be saved from itself. Liberalism’s adherents should be open to reimagining their tradition for a new era.

[“Creative resistance has been a quintessential part of the American experience,” author Jeff Biggers.](#)

In these discussions, “liberalism” refers not to the philosophy of one American political party, but rather to the turn after the Protestant Reformation to a secular politics that allowed individuals and groups to coexist while they pursued their own goals in their own way. Over centuries, state enforcement of Christianity waned in Europe in exchange for greater pluralism and tolerance, and more citizens got more freedom to pursue their own visions of the best life. But such a system, critics have long said, breeds not autonomy but atomism, not fairness but inequality, not fulfillment but emptiness, not culture but anarchy. It also, many conservatives say today, promotes hedonism, nontraditional sexuality, abortion on demand and an unhealthy focus on self-expression.

The current debate in the United States over liberalism’s worth might be traced to Notre Dame political theorist Patrick Deneen’s [“Why Liberalism Failed,”](#) an unlikely bestseller last year. The Roman Catholic right, to which Deneen belongs, has long been skeptical of liberalism. But while Deneen counseled that the faithful should drop out of national political life and focus on local communities, Harvard law professor Adrian Vermeule, a Catholic convert, advocates for a more aggressive approach. He [has expressed the hope](#) that “nonliberal actors” could “strategically locate themselves within liberal institutions and work to undo the liberalism of the state from within.”

[\[Right-wing nationalists are on the rise in Europe — and there’s no progressive coalition to stop them\]](#)

Liberalism is also coming in for a drubbing from the left. “In practice,” the young progressive writer Luke Savage [wrote](#) in Jacobin magazine recently, liberalism “has largely become . . . a set of reflexes common to those with a Panglossian faith in capitalist markets and the institutions that attempt to sustain them amid our flailing global order.” Marxists recognize that liberals are not simply hedonists

and relativists, as Roman Catholic writers charge. They accept that liberals believe in freedom, but they believe that liberals fail to see that the market cannot create the conditions for such freedom.

Liberals have time-honored defenses against such criticisms. First, liberalism was a response to earlier alternatives that were worse — notably Christian or secular tyranny. Liberalism's critics, including Deneen, often gesture nostalgically, and unspecifically, to the supposedly more rooted social order of the Middle Ages. Yet liberalism arose from that social order because illiberalism itself failed badly. Liberals perceived that a state's pursuit of one "Highest Good," as conceived by one religious group, was a path not to human fulfillment but to repression and war without end.

What's more, liberalism outlived alternative political systems in the 20th century, including religious or irreligious totalitarianism, that make it look utopian by comparison. Anti-liberals today pass lightly over the fact that right-wing critics of liberalism chose fascism in European history — and supported right-wing regimes like Francisco Franco's in Spain, long after the debate on liberalism known as World War II seemed to settle the matter.

The critics also fail to see that liberalism is too diverse an ideology to charge it with one master error. Early liberals could make the line between church and state blurry or even insist, as the Swiss Protestant Benjamin Constant did, that liberalism was Christianity's most evolved form. (Perhaps the most remarkable fact about liberals is not that they displaced Christian regimes but rather that, as minorities living among them bitterly observed, for centuries they advanced the hegemony of Christianity.) Liberalism is not a dogma: It is a set of dilemmas about how to balance freedom and the common good, economic liberty and social fairness, the search for meaning and the desire to be left alone.

It may be tempting to exhume these old, and mostly true, arguments to ward off the new gravediggers. But our current political tumult suggests that these arguments ring hollow for too many today. Rearguard defenses served up by liberal Brahmins — such as Gopnik in his new book, "[A Thousand Small Sanities](#)" — come off as complacent, for good reason. Instead, liberals should welcome the chance to reconsider their position as our present crisis unfolds. Our argument has to be that the best imaginable versions of liberalism have not failed because they have never been tried.

It is true, for one thing, that all the forms of liberalism so far have gravitated sooner or later to economic libertarianism. Indeed, in modern history, they have created larger gaps between the rich and the rest than the Christians and kings liberals once denounced for imposing dehumanizing feudalism did.

It is also true that liberals in recent decades have spent most of their time focusing on the coexistence of different outlooks — promoting interdenominational peace, a public square in which religious and secular voices can both speak, and above all an emphasis on groups asserting their special

identities — and forgetting to foster a sense of life well lived. Liberals have promoted group tolerance at the expense of self-cultivation. In the face of increasing criticism, however, liberals need to answer that they already champion a highest good: creative freedom.

At its best, that emphasis on difference and tolerance has freed individuals to forge their own meaning, on their own or in common. Conservatives indict nonconformity — including how people explore their sexuality — and moral emptiness alike, but what is an experiment in living but an attempt to fill the void where traditional answers have failed?

Iconic liberals such as John Stuart Mill — by the end of his life a socialist who indicted economic inequality — insisted that a society that permitted free self-creation must avoid descending into conformity and materialism. Liberals must relearn that lesson. Mill today would be appalled, not by the supposed depredations that liberal society visits on the religious (which are minor) but by the ways rampant consumerism for those who make money, and penury for those who don't, obstruct the possibility of the creative lives liberals once promised.

Liberalism's main problem is that its vision of a life well lived has been corrupted — not by too much license and self-expression, but by an overemphasis on economic freedom that has undercut its own promise.

The right strategy for liberals is therefore to own their failure to make their ideals of self-creation a reality. They must assert not merely that their tradition coexisted with and even promoted religious values — as it undeniably did — but also revive their proposals for meaningful life in the absence of divine superintendence. Liberalism can thrive because it is the only worldview so far that does not try to resolve the eternal debate over whether to orient oneself to the divine, but allows either bet to be made, and creative and meaningful lives to be led either way.

Barack Obama [noted](#), in June 2018, that he'd read and enjoyed Deneen's book, but he did not reckon publicly with why his own strain of liberalism failed. Savage [is right](#) that Obama summoned "forth a tidal wave of popular goodwill, then proceeded to invite the same old cadre of apparatchiks and financiers back into the White House to carry on business as usual." But this doesn't mean that liberalism, as a whole, has failed. It simply means that Americans have to push their politicians to embrace old traditions of honoring the common people and invent new traditions that save the ideal of a free life from thralldom to market values and meritocratic conformity.

Liberals need a better defense against their critics. If American liberals — especially those in the Democratic Party — do not pivot from their complacency soon, they may find themselves ushered to an untimely funeral.