DOES LIBERALISM HAVE A FUTURE?

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The County Election *(hand-colored engraving with glazes) from* The Election Series*, by George Caleb Bingham, 1854. Reynolda House Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, NC. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Based upon Bingham's 1852 painting, this image depicts liberal democracy's flaws and ideals.*

The Fall 2017 issue of the triannual *The Hedgehog Review,* an interdisciplinary journal of ideas published by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture (IASC), features a scholarly roundtable investigation of the theme "The End of the End of History?"

Even while Francis Fukuyama's name and optimistic, if qualified, post-Cold War declaration about "the end of history" were occasionally cited, the roundtable was not actually about him or his seminal 1989 essay or 1992 book. The idea of an "End of History" ultimately

mutated into something beyond ubiquitous cliché: it became a meme, capturing something of the moment that got jaded and eventually became the butt of jokes. Beyond appropriating the meme as a launching point, the *Hedgehog* discussion essentially skips past Fukuyama and simply asks about the health of liberalism.

Fukuyama's work deserves better, but the roundtable still addresses an important question: does liberalism have a future? Recent history—the past two years of American politics—gives a sense of urgency regarding the health of liberalism—an urgency amplified by concerns over whether American society still enjoys the unity of shared commitments or only the rifts of partisan ones. The core of the problem, as James Davison Hunter sensibly asks, is how a self-governed society can survive when the citizenry no longer agrees on foundational truths. The stable of respondents offers differing views.

In Patrick Deneen's response, "The Tragedy of Liberalism," the spoiler is in the title. According to him, liberalism essentially *can't* survive. Rather, liberalism is doomed by its own internal contradictions—namely, that it is ultimately indistinguishable from progressivism. John Owen's contribution widens the view, weighing an external threat (China) in addition to an internal one (like Deneen, Owen worries about the evolution of liberalism into illiberal progressivism). Wilfred McClay and Jackson Lears offer a pair of essays that assesses the damage to liberalism from its own economic logic: that is, from the technocracy, globalization, and oligarchy that untrammeled capitalism has wrought. William Galston joins many of these concerns and issues a plea for the left to soften its cultural agenda in order to salvage its economic one.

Certain of liberalism's defenders might argue Hunter's question misses the point. Rawlsian liberal democracy claims to prescind from questions of ultimate good and presents itself as the only viable arrangement for peaceable coexistence in a pluralistic society. We may disagree about the good, but we still have to pave the roads and keep the peace. Liberalism can at least keep the lights on while we bicker. Democracy doesn't merely survive in the absence of agreement about primary truths: it was *designed* for that exact situation.

But liberalism was never as neutral as its Rawlsian partisans claimed. Liberalism treats all ideologies and beliefs equally, but only as long as they do not interfere with liberalism. Depending on which version of liberalism is at question, this could be a real stumbling block. Put another way, liberalism abstracts from questions of the good and leaves us free to pursue it as we each see fit, which is fine as long as your belief system treats the pursuit of the good as an individual, rather than public, activity. These are precisely the questions that are now emerging in liberalism's third century. If we can no longer agree on such foundational principles, Hunter's question—is liberalism viable?—is apt.

Liberalism certainly faces an array of challenges, as most of the contributors to the symposium highlight. But by itself this is hardly reason to fret. Liberalism has never been without opponents. It first appeared in a world dominated by monarchy, aristocracy, and chauvinistic nationalism. It fought mostly losing battles against the Holy Alliance and the conservative powers of Europe for most of the nineteenth century. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the liberal powers managed to snatch political

defeat from the jaws of military victory. Having won the fight in World War I, they then bungled the peace. Such things as the "War Guilt" clause in the Treaty of Versailles, the resulting ruinous reparations, and the United States' abstention from the League of Nations colluded to doom the peace and compel liberalism's retreat. Into the vacuum stepped new fascist and communist powers. Its post-war rise thus aborted, the liberal order would not take hold until 1945. Even then, liberalism has never been an uncontested ideology. The post-1989 situation, in which powerful liberal states stand at the center of a prosperous international liberal order, is an aberration. We are, in fact, living at what is thus far the high tide of liberalism in all of recorded human history. For all we know it may well continue to rise further. But present times chasten our optimism.

The difference today is that current threats are from within. Liberalism is now threatened more by "atrophy rather than violent death," as John Owen rightly warns. Two other roundtable contributors also caution against various dangers emanating from the logic of liberalism. McClay has uneasiness about globalism, or the withering away of the nation-state in the face of transnational capitalism. Meanwhile, Lears takes aim at oligarchy and technocracy and the "neoliberalism" of the Reagan era. For both, the economic forces unleashed by global liberalism threaten to undermine its legitimacy. But I'm unconvinced they've identified the most dangerous culprits.

It's not that McClay's and Lears' lines of criticism lack merit, but they fail to state the issue in its strongest form. It is hard to take Lears' concerns seriously when he finger-points at the "defunding of public schools" (which already spend $12,500 per pupil, well above the rich-world average of $10,500), or to the "systematic dismantling of the welfare state" (which cost the US taxpayer $2.5 trillion in 2017). Lears criticizes rule by technocrats while simultaneously complaining about the starvation of the public sector.

The Polling *(engraving) from* The Humours of an Election, *by William Hogarth and Francois Morellon de la Cave, 1758. Wellcome Collection, London. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Hogarth's series portrays the 1754 election of a member of Parliament in Oxfordshire, and while this image resembles* The County Election, *it has a much more negative view of liberalism. Notice how Britannia sits in a broken coach while the coachman and footman play cards.*

Whom does he think the public sector employs, if not the technocrats he rails against? Where does he think technocracy rules from, if not the public payroll? You can't be against technocracy and simultaneously for a larger and richer administrative state. They are the same thing.

The most powerful statement of this line of criticism—that the biggest danger to liberalism is itself—comes from a philosophical, not economic, approach. Deneen, in this roundtable and elsewhere, gives a decidedly pessimistic prognosis for the future of liberalism based on his view that eighteenth-century liberalism leads unavoidably to today's progressive liberalism, and thus to collapse. He advances the provocative—and to my mind mistaken—view that classical liberalism and progressivism are of a type. The latter is a natural and inevitable outgrowth of the former; the former is unstable and inexorably deteriorates into the latter.

Of course, "liberalism" meant different things in different eras. Deneen distinguishes between two basic types: classical and progressive. Owen argues for three: the first sought to free the individual from the despotic state; the second sought to use the liberal state to tame overweening economic power; and the third (roughly corresponding to Deneen's progressive type) uses the power of both the state and the market to free individuals from traditional mores and culture. (Complicating the picture is the fact that liberalism's enemies have sometimes claimed the mantle and name of liberalism to borrow its authority while undermining its content.)

Owen and Deneen both approach the same idea. Regardless of how you break down the history and the typology of liberalisms, it is plain

that the liberalism we encounter today is profoundly different from the liberalism of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the heart of Deneen's critique is that despite the discontinuity, the evolutions that overtook classical liberalism were implicit in its premises. "The logic of liberalism," Deneen avers, "will inexorably continue to unfold, impelling the ship toward the inevitable iceberg." If he is right, liberal democracy will prove impossible to sustain and is doomed to fail. The various difficulties evident today are features, not bugs, inherent in the idea of liberalism itself.

Chairing the Members *(engraving) from* The Humours of an Election*, by William Hogarth and Antoine Coypel, 1758. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Unlike the celebratory scene from* The Verdict of the People*, here the Tory candidate's victory leads to mayhem.*

But the validity of Deneen's critique depends on there being a moral equivalence between the effects of classical liberalism and progressivism. Deneen puts blame for the breakdown of things such as the family, the arts, and education at the feet of liberalism, period. He acknowledges no differentiation between those who attacked and those who defended such things. He allows no recognition that early liberalism had a markedly different effect than late (progressive) liberalism.

Recognizing these differences is epistemologically crucial—because no such equivalence as Deneen proposes between early and late liberalism is persuasive. Most of the ills Deneen describes—the assault on culture, liberal arts, local governance, the family—came about primarily because of the progressive left, not the classically liberal right. Deneen conflates the various movements on the right into a single movement of market fundamentalism. He ignores that there are flavors of classical liberalism that value localism, tradition, and family. Indeed, there are viable and healthy political movements that still look a lot like classical liberalism and that have resisted the supposedly irresistible internal logic of liberal evolution. If Deneen's proposal were correct, we would not expect to see these things.

Deneen's position is deterministic and too beholden to the improbable existence of deracinated ideas. But ideas don't have agency; they can't unfold by themselves. They evolve in the minds of the thinkers who think them, change them, and deploy them. Deneen's determinism is falsified by the presence of thinkers like Owen, Quentin Skinner, and others who are still able to think and advocate for older versions of liberal institutions. Many thinkers and policymakers continue to believe that some version of the older liberalism, by whatever label, is still viable. As Owen rightly points out, "first stage liberalism still exists, and has its champions in free-market, small-government political parties on the right," and, perhaps in a different way, in some of the communitarian and green movements on the left.

The solution to the ills of liberalism is not post-liberalism or illiberalism. It is to recognize that some of the ways in which liberalism has evolved have made it decidedly less liberal. The progressive liberalism that Deneen identifies, or Owen's "third-stage" liberalism, has made democratic societies *less* tolerant, less free, and less diverse. At their worst, these versions of liberalism seek to impose cultural and ideological uniformity in the name of progress, autonomy, inclusiveness, identity, justice, expression, or some other value. It amounts to restricting freedom in the name of one particular value that one sect or minority wants to make general. The problem isn't the values in question, but the means used to propagate them: the "values' champions" want to use the coercive instruments of the state to compel respect for their preferred values, which is what makes their ideology, by whatever name, deeply *il*liberal.

As Owen claims, and Deneen wrongly denies, older versions of liberalism are still around and still viable. Indeed, in his 2012 *First Things* essay,

The Verdict of the People *from The Election Series, by George Caleb Bingham, 1854–55. Saint Louis Art Museum. Source: Wikimedia Commons. While the painting is uplifting, Bingham still quietly shows problems with America, including slavery and intemperance.*

"Unsustainable Liberalism," Deneen himself writes approvingly about the collection of *institutions* that comprise liberal governance, which predate liberal *ideology*. This is akin to what Cambridge scholar Quentin Skinner describes in *Liberty Before Liberalism*, based on his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge. John Locke and Thomas Jefferson, Skinner notes, did not invent the institutions of a free society; they explained them. The institutions came first; the philosophical justifications came later. The institutions are separable from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European philosophy, and can survive whatever weaknesses and failures inhere in that philosophy. Deneen may be right about the philosophical weaknesses of liberal ideology, but he is probably wrong about the implications of that weakness for the survival of liberal societies.

This explains also why liberalism can be—and in some cases ought to be—adapted outside the West. Non-Western liberalism exists: democracy is demonstrably possible in a place that did not experience Western history or produce Enlightenment philosophers. Japan, India, and South Korea are the most obvious examples of just such thriving, prosperous, and stable democracies, and have been for decades. Botswana, the Philippines, and Turkey are further examples of non-Western liberal—or liberalizing—democracies at varying levels of stability and prosperity. They are a small sample of the 64 non-Western states that Freedom House ranked "free" (24 states) or "partly free" (40) in 2017. The success of liberalism outside its birthplace should give us confidence that liberalism might also have a future in its old home in the Western world, a West which, moreover, is increasingly distancing itself from its Enlightenment heritage.

The solution, then, is a return to the sort of pre-Enlightenment liberalism that Deneen, Owen, Skinner, and others have described. For the sake of unambiguous discourse, the return might require a new name. I suggest "Augustinian liberalism." Augustinian liberalism neither grounds the institutions of a free society on Enlightenment assumptions about the perfectibility of mankind and human society nor harbors ambitions about "beginning the world anew." Rather, liberalism of this kind roots a free society in an Augustinian distrust of human nature and unchecked power, in the need to diffuse power among many rulers, and to hem in those rulers with checks and balances. This is the sort of thing Reinhold

Niebuhr argues for throughout his life, most prominently in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*. The subtitle of that work is telling: *A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*. Niebuhr thinks democracy is worth fighting to sustain, and he also thinks that Enlightenment foundations are too shallow to do the job.

Contrary to Deneen's belief that Enlightenment liberalism has hopelessly tarnished the American experiment, Augustinian liberalism is at the heart of the Founders' vision for American government. Recall James Madison in *The Federalist Papers* No. 51:

> If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.

Such a move—or return—to Augustinian liberalism might press against other elements of the roundtable beyond Deneen. For example, Owen calls for third-stage liberalism to shed its "militant edge" and find a way to "coexist with liberalism's earlier stages." William Galston similarly asks the left to consider "shifting" on "social and cultural issues" so that voters actually hear the appeal on economic issues, instead of being driven away by progressives' alien cultural agenda. These are fine ideas, but they amount to arguing that the solution to our disagreement is for you to agree with me.

Augustinian liberalism assumes the persistence of disagreement. Therefore, the major structural implication is the devolution of power. If we start from a posture of distrust of human nature and human institutions, we are unlikely to favor centralization. There are some things done best at the center, but all else being equal, it is better to diffuse as much power as possible among the 50 states and their thousands of subordinate counties and cities. As Galston argues, "There is an obvious cure for excessive concentration of power: a selective devolution of decision making to subordinate jurisdictions."

Whatever one thinks of this particular proposal, at least one question remains: if liberalism does not have a future, what might replace it? A reasonable answer to this is missing from most critiques of liberalism. Post-liberal theologians like Stanley Hauerwas, William Cavanaugh, or John Milbank, and political theorists like Deneen, kvetch about liberalism in book after book. But their solutions typically sound quite a lot like early liberalism. Everyone loves to hate liberalism, but we also all love to live in it.

That's not to ignore the very real illiberal challenges abroad and in the land. As the title of the *Hedgehog*'s roundtable might suggest, the most insightful analysis of the challenges to liberalism comes from Fukuyama himself. In his original essay, Fukuyama anticipates three major challenges to liberalism: nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and nihilistic nostalgia for the heroic days of history. Back in 1989, Fukuyama did not believe they would pose a challenge sufficient to derail liberalism and restart history.

But today we see all of these forces both at home and abroad. There are powerful and devoted illiberal states in the world—Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea—that embody varying mixes of the very challenges Fukuyama identifies. These states have the money, weapons, and motivation to make the world unsafe for democracy. There are, similarly, illiberal forces *within* liberal societies, including groups like antifa, the alt-right, and homegrown jihadists, who also illustrate the dangers Fukuyama saw in nationalism, religious extremism, and nihilistic nostalgia.

Meeting these challenges while reforming liberal institutions to help them live up to their promise is a tall order. What is needed are statesmen who understand liberalism; who can make the case for limited, representative, and accountable government; who understand the challenges to it at home and abroad; who are unafraid to make the moral case for human liberty; and who can marshal a coalition to confront those challenges. The death of liberalism is highly exaggerated. What is needed are statesmen and voters who love liberty and are willing to fight for it. P

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