

Moderate Political Ideologies: Liberalism and Conservatism

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Moderate Ideologies along with moderate political viewpoints may be correctly seen as occupying positions between the more extreme wings of the spectrum. In terms of the extent of power of the State moderate ideologies strike a balance between individual rights, freedoms and obligations and the coercive power of the State to mandate or prohibit certain behaviors by people. This "balanced" view brings forth various implications regarding governmental structure, electoral procedures, the rule of Law, economic concerns, and other important issues present in all organized societies. Likewise considerations regarding time help define the boundaries of moderate ideologies.

Change is inevitable in society, in governmental arrangements and relationships, in leadership, in public policies and throughout the political world. Ideologies of the moderate varieties seek change at a pace that enables progress to occur but neither so fast that the destruction of stability and order in society becomes more likely, nor so slow as to foster stagnation and status quo permanence. Clearly then, there is considerable room for disagreement and dispute over what is the proper balance in all of these concerns. These disputable arenas contribute profoundly to struggles among those who support different moderate ideologies.

Liberalism

Liberalism has occupied an important position in the moderate varieties of political ideologies for well over two centuries. Although its dimensions differ from society to society (where it is permitted to endure), there do exist core elements which can be identified, examined and understood. At the outset let it be noted that common parlance often misapprehends and violates the reality of liberalism. Calling someone a "bleeding heart liberal" is worse than an insult, it is largely meaningless insofar as conveying accurate information. Describing one public policy or another as "liberal" sheds precious little light on the nature of governmental activities.

The first glimmerings of liberalism may be discovered in the expansive political role being sought by increasingly large numbers of individuals and, more significantly, discreet groups of people with identifiable common interests. In the latter part of the 18th Century great forces were at work undermining existing political arrangements in Europe. Whereas the British had been experiencing a gradual expansion of the rights of ordinary citizens as well as the landed nobility as against the Monarch, such forces were largely held in check in France until the Revolution of 1789. Unlike in France the British had no central instrument of oppression such as a centrally controlled standing army ready to do the bidding of the monarch. British liberalism sought not to overthrow the Monarchy but to reign in its powers by expanding the role of the representatives of the people.

Certainly it was John Locke (1632-1704) who best expressed the principles of Liberalism in the British (and American) tradition. His Two Treatises of Government (first published in 1690) constitutes a most important statement on the liberal political philosophy that has so much influenced politics in succeeding centuries. At the center of his writings are basic values that today remain as under girding for the entire liberal view. Government exists to serve the people and community it governs. Its power is limited by concepts of natural rights of individuals and moral or natural law. Among these natural rights was the concept of the right to acquire and dispose of property. "Life, liberty and estate" belonged to individuals quite apart from any grant from society or its instrument Government.

The basic duty of government is to protect the common good and private rights which were seen to be inextricably related if not the same thing. Individuals agree to limits on their behavior by granting to government certain limited powers but only if the government rules on behalf of the common good and in the protection of private rights. For reasons of convenience and mutual benefit people enter into a compact whereby they willingly relinquish some of their freedom of action and in return gain security and stability in their daily lives. As Locke wrote: "Men being, as has been said, by Nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this Estate, and subjected to the Political Power of another, without his own Consent."

The only way whereby any one divests himself of his Natural Liberty, and puts on the bonds of Civil Society is by

agreeing with other Men to join and unite into a Community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living amongst another, in a secure Enjoyment of their Properties, and a greater Security against any that are not of it. (Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, NY: New American Library, 1963, pp.374-75.)

Should government become tyrannical and deviate from this Compact with the people, then the people had the right of revolution to overthrow the government which had broken the Compact. This right of revolution is based solidly on the notion that people may, when confronted with injustice, take actions to bring about basic changes in government. Society and government were separate entities and the dissolution of the latter did not imply the destruction of the former. Governments were bound by laws just as were individuals. Moreover, these laws, could not legitimately violate principles of natural justice; indeed if a contravening of principles of natural justice were done then the actions of the government were not laws in the true sense of the term.

For Locke principles of natural justice were grounded in a right to own and dispose of property. Debate over what constitutes these principles has continued to the present time. In France the development of liberalism took decidedly different turns. A corrupt and parasitic nobility sought to maintain its grip on power at all costs and with no recognition of the rights of the populace at large. The demand for equality as part of the concept of liberalism was an invitation to complete rejection of the *ancien regime* and to do so in an uncompromising and violent manner.

A revolution devoted in 1789 to principles of individual rights degenerated by 1793 into the dictatorship of the Jacobins and the accompanying terror of mob rule. At this point in time the ideology supporting the French Revolution became extremist rather than moderate and laid the foundation for the eventual success of Napoleon Bonaparte who offered stability and order in place of the chaos of post-revolutionary France.

Because of common ethnic, cultural, legal, political and even geographic factors, liberal development in the United States initially took more from the British than the French. While the early stages of the American Revolution did borrow heavily from British political thought subsequent development had more in common with the French. Thomas Jefferson certainly was influenced by developments in both countries. The Declaration of Independence written by Jefferson in 1776 contains concepts developed by Locke and others in the British liberal tradition. However, following his tenure as Ambassador to France during the 1780's Jefferson was evidently deeply influenced by French political thought and attempted to channel American liberal political development in directions parallel to those in France. These views contained a greater emphasis on popular control of government, deeply ingrained suspicions of institutionalized power, a decidedly anti-clerical orientation and in general an almost fanatical faith in the common people and their wisdom.

These initial successes of liberal movements had, as the name itself implies, a fundamental purpose: to liberate people from oppression. While the methods of liberation, as well as the sources of the oppression may be quite different depending on the time and the place in question, liberation is inevitably the fundamental purpose of liberal political thinking and liberal political movements.

To seek such a goal certain assumptions, not necessarily provable, had to be made. Natural rights as expanded upon by Locke is the first of these. As Jefferson wrote, there are "inalienable" rights that each individual has that may not be legitimately denied by government or any other instrument of society. Initially these rights were to be protected primarily from governments whose tendency it was to diminish, ignore or abuse these rights. Restraints on government in the form of Constitutions or other devices were necessary to the goal of individual freedom. Among the early restraints on government were those protecting largely unfettered rights to acquire and dispose of property, both real and personal. These so-called "economic freedoms" were supplemented with a host of political freedoms including rights to express controversial political views and to organize political opposition to the prevailing group in power.

Natural rights and limited government are corollary concepts. The acceptance of one concept necessarily implies acceptance of the other. Whenever there is a parent there is a child; whenever there is a husband there is a wife. Similarly, whenever there is a right belonging to an individual there is a duty on the part of some other entity -- government or person -- to respect and/or protect that right. If people have the right to freely express their ideas then it necessarily follows that government cannot legitimately suppress such expression or punish those who utter unpopular remarks or otherwise offend government officials. Not only is government power to restrain and to punish limited, but government also has the duty to protect those who, because of their unconventional views, may be in danger from non-governmental threats.

In Europe by the late 19th Century and in the United States by the early 20th Century liberalism began to shift its emphasis from protecting individuals from oppressive governments to using government as a device to enable individuals to achieve a more meaningful and rewarding life. Government was seen as a positive force in shaping human affairs and society, but only if it was used properly and controlled by the people. Liberalism had come to recognize that powerful institutions in society had to be controlled and regulated by the instrument of the people if true liberation was to occur.

In particular the growth of vast economic empires in the hey-day of capitalism generated a widely held view that only government could reign in these powerful enterprises and provide the citizenry with the means to deal with them effectively. Rights to form labor unions for the purpose of collective bargaining were among the major liberal goals. Regulations were promulgated regarding safety rules, wages, maximum hours, minimum wages and working conditions generally. The liberal credo thus shifted dramatically from a call for less government to cries for more government but in the name of empowering people to deal effectively with the vast powers of modern society.

Faith in the potential reasonableness and goodness of people runs as another constant thread throughout the liberal ideology. This is not to say that the liberal view rested on the assumption that all people were reasonable and good, but that it is the responsibility of society in general and government in specific, to adopt structures and policies that maximize this potential. Taken to its ultimate conclusion this position reaches the absurdity of a totally rationalistic society where all is planned carefully and with perfect premeditation.

Rationality constitutes a similar if not identical cornerstone of liberal philosophy. This emphasis on mankind's rational potential supports quite well the modern liberal position calling for the use of government to solve social, political and economic problems. Government is viewed as the only representative agent of people capable of bringing to bear both rational problem solving techniques and the authority to carry such policies out at the societal level. Social development ought not to be left to chance but planning and governmental power must be brought to bear on problems that are too large, too intractable, or too complex for the private or non-public sector to deal with effectively and/or equitably.

Capitalism or the free market economy runs counter to this Twentieth Century version of liberalism. A free market, by definition, is uncontrolled by government and is, therefore, in opposition to the modern liberal emphasis on rational social planning. The original liberal orientation toward freedom from social, economic, religious and governmental institutions fit much more comfortably with capitalism than does the modernist version of liberalism.

It must be remembered that liberalism and capitalism were products of roughly the same period of history: the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Each had as its core the concept of liberation. What were called the "excesses" of capitalism -- massive concentrations of wealth in the hands of a relative few individuals and corporations, urban blight, worker alienation and exploitation, environmental degradation, etc. -- became targets for liberal rationalists.

These social maladies demanded, in the liberal view, governmental remedies. Uncontrolled economic activity was thus viewed as a new form of oppression and thereby in need of regulation, restraint and control by government. The nature and scope of the limits on government have inevitably been and will continue to be a source of never ending debate and disagreement. Students of politics have a never ending dispute over what constitutes the proper balance between necessary governmental power and restraints needed to protect individual rights.

In general, the Twentieth Century liberal view has been to stress the need for governmental restraints in the "political" realm such as freedoms of expression, but to seek expansive governmental powers in "economic" and "social" arenas in the name of protecting the disadvantaged and powerless groups who otherwise find themselves at the mercies of entrenched institutions criticized for running roughshod over hapless and helpless adversaries. Corporations must be controlled. The economy must be regulated. Moneyed interests must be tightly restricted. Private discrimination against individual members of minority groups that have been traditionally borne the brunt of societal bigotry must be outlawed and vigorously pursued by governmental agents. Thus, governments must be selectively limited in this modern liberal view.

The initial liberal concept that the government which governs least, governs best has been discarded by liberals and, ironically, claimed, at least in part, by conservatives. Government itself, in the liberal view, must be popularly controlled and directed. While modern liberal purists might opt for direct democracy in which each adult member of the citizenry takes a personal hand in making policies, the existence of governmental units with populations in the millions makes this impracticable if not undesirable. Even Locke did not support "direct democracy." Indeed, he would have denied the right to vote to the poor unpropertied segments of society.

The modern liberal position is that representatives, chosen in freely contested elections permitting universal adult participation, should act in the name of and on behalf of the people. Majority rule through popularly elected representatives is imperative for a legitimate government to exist. People would be morally obliged to follow the limited dictates of the majority dominated government but only if its policies observed the rights of the people.

One of the most important political rights is that of the minority to criticize government policies and to try and become the majority. Minority rights are part of the concept of majority rule in the liberal view. The nature of these rights is subject to change over time as has been seen. Change in society is warmly embraced by liberal supporters. A brighter day can be obtained by combining the various precepts discussed above. Society is constantly evolving. Thoughtful and responsible people should nurture and guide this process in the name of human liberation and progress. That which exists is not sacred nor perfect. Nothing is protected by divine intervention. Through careful analysis, using mankind's rational capabilities institutions, beliefs, and values can be consciously shaped and molded to produce a better world.

In summary, liberalism has embraced several fundamental but imprecise elements. Moreover, at different points in history the liberal ideology has emphasized different aspects of its basic principles. Those elements which have appeared as fundamental to liberalism may be seen as:

1. the idea of a compact between the people and their government
2. the right of revolution if the compact is violated
3. natural rights as belonging to all people
4. faith in and support of human rational potential
5. limited powers of government
6. majority rule tempered by minority rights
7. support of change in society

Conservatism

Frederich Hegel's (1770-1831) view was that the process of dialectics constitutes the mechanism by which ideas change. Out of each thesis (or idea) necessarily arises an anti-thesis (or challenging idea) which inevitably becomes a synthesis of the two. Whether this is indeed the driving force in human intellectual development may never be known, but the development of conservatism bears a close resemblance to this process.

Whereas liberalism sought to liberate mankind from oppressive institutions (be they governments, religious institutions, oppressive social customs and traditions, or vast economic enterprises), conservatism developed as a reaction to what was perceived as dangerous tendencies within the liberal movements toward radicalism and a wholesale rejection of the past as valuable. There was and is an element within conservatism that holds the past in reverence and views with skepticism most change, particularly if it was planned change. If, however, conservatism means nothing more than a rationale' justifying the maintenance of the status quo then it cannot be correctly adjudged an ideology for it would be content neutral. Conservatism could, in that instance, be used to support political systems ranging from democratic to communist to fascist to anarchistic.

A closer examination of conservatism does reveals a more meaningful doctrine than merely conserving that which exists. Whereas liberalism embraces societal and governmental change as both necessary and desirable, conservatism does indeed adopt a much more doubtful view of the desirability of altering proven institutions and societal values. Respect for authority, custom, and tradition permeate a conservative value system. In particular, changes in the moral ordering of society are seen as very suspicious and probably harmful. Aside from this ingrained suspicion of change there are at rock bottom values within the conservative tradition that remain constant.

Once again it is an Englishman who first expounded the moderate political doctrine in question. Edmund Burke (1729-97) did not create conservatism but as Locke did for liberalism, became its most eloquent spokesman and advocate. In numerous pamphlets this scholar-politician put on paper what was to become the anti-thesis to liberalism run riot (in Burke's view). Throughout his long and lustrous career within the British political system Burke expressed a profound admiration for the success of the British "Glorious Revolution" of 1688-89 in which the Parliament asserted its power as against royal prerogatives.

The Bill of Rights was adopted which limited the power of the Monarch and protected itself from arbitrary royal enactments. His was a passion for justice, sound governmental administration, devotion to religion and unrelenting opposition to tyranny. For over twenty-five years he was the leading intellectual force in Whig party politics in Great Britain. As a Member of Parliament he supported the American independence movement largely on practical grounds. He continuously advocated policies that produced peace and prosperity.

What galvanized Burke most intensely was the French Revolution. In his work *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) ideas were set forth that shaped political thinking down to the present time. His intense opposition to and condemnation of the French Revolution as destructive to French society did irreparable damage to his political career and caused estrangements with old friends. Ultimately the Whig party itself was split asunder over this issue.

Burke had long be reluctant to engage in a discussion of the general principles of his ideas. He initially felt that broad abstractions were to be avoided. The French Revolution, however, forced his basic views out in the open. In his refutation of the justifications of the French Revolution Burke attempted to destroy the logic behind the revolutionist reliance on reason and logic as tools guiding social change. Human beings did have rights, Burke did readily admit, but they were conventional not natural. These rights were organically related to society and could not be divorced from it.

People need to have a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves; something that will endure beyond their own short lives. Base feelings of love and loyalty bind members of society together giving them a sense of purpose that permits and encourages self-sacrifice for the larger purposes of the community. Deep emotional attachment will nurture a sense of duty and responsibility that ultimately produce a better society for all. Society is not held together by abstract principles such as a "social contract" but by people bound together through a sense of history, shared experiences and common beliefs. The role of irrationality in society can be ignored only at the risk of misunderstanding a most important inherent characteristic in all mankind. Human institutions have evolved over time and are not the product of rationally constructed plans of action.

Society is indeed a contract. Subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest may be dissolved at pleasure -- but the state ought to be considered as something far better and more significant "than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern." The State us not to be taken as something of a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with other reverence. . . "It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. . . . Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds ass physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place." (*Reflections 1790, Works, Vol. II p. 368*) In this statement Burke makes little distinction between state and society.

The overall message is crystal clear: that which binds humans together is far more than any commercial contract which is subject to abrogation at will. No well-reasoned rationale' can justify overturning what time immemorial

has produced. Moreover, reason running rampant becomes raging radicalism inevitably destined to destroy much of what generations of human experience has produced.

The religious foundations of society almost inexorably come to support conservative political doctrine. Burke himself exhibited a devotion to religion and to the religious foundations of the just state. Government, the State and society in general were all part of a divine order though which God's will exhibits itself. This religious orientation in Burke's conservatism may be found in most, if not all, conservative movements. Regimes that call themselves "Marxist" have been seen to resort to religious-like defenses when confronted with serious challenges. Stalin urged Soviet citizens in the second world war to come to the defense of "Mother Russia." More commonly those espousing a conservative position refer to some "divine" purpose inherent in their society and state. At best this places moral obligations on the state to follow policies that are just and fair (however these terms may be defined). At worst this "divine" purpose becomes a justification for domination of peoples outside the "chosen" ones. Without this religious anchor the development of some "special" social cause or purpose becomes very difficult to maintain.

Just as mankind's need to have some transcendental system of belief in an ordered universe was seen as necessary, so too was a government which emphasized order, custom, and tradition. Order is needed to reign in mankind's ingrained selfish tendencies and proclivity toward savagery. The state, which is the enforcement arm of society, must rule in a strong and resolute manner providing swift, sure and harsh punishment for those who violate the law. Proper respect for the roles and responsibilities of private institutions must be observed by government and support should be provided. Custom and tradition should receive their due for they are the outgrowth of generations of experience. Reverence for that which has stood the test of time is ignored at the risk of instability, disorder and social disintegration. A sense of community that is both broad and deep is needed if long-term adherence to social values is to be obtained. This sense of community is no conscious, voluntary and rational decision that one chooses to accept. Society is no debating group says the conservative.

Moreover, people must feel they are a part of something larger and more important than themselves. Pride in and love for the institutions and traditions of one's society go beyond mere knowledge and willful acceptance of these things. From the earliest childhood and continuing throughout life individuals need to be made a part of the great traditions of his/her people. Accomplishments in the arts and sciences, cherished customs, linguistic uniqueness, religious traditions, economic practices, and especially established human relationships including marriage and family values must be embraced and supported with fervor. Symbols need to be revered and treated with the utmost respect for they represent the very basic elements of society.

The nature of humanity, according to conservative doctrine, is far less admirable than seen in the liberal view. All humans are essentially self-oriented and in pursuit of their own best interests as they see those interests. These irrational drives and self-serving tendencies must be tempered by social control mechanisms that are the outgrowth of centuries of experience. In addition to this selfish characteristic of humans, conservatives believe that the concept of equality is both inaccurate and undesirable. People are not equal in their abilities or value to society. Those who are more able and who contribute more to the well-being of their community are deserving of greater rewards. These rewards include not only enhanced material wealth, elevated social status but also a greater role in the governance structure. While traditional conservative doctrine supported the notion of a hereditary aristocracy, modern conservatives support what might be called an aristocracy of talent and morality. Societies' leaders should be chosen from those individuals who have by their own talents demonstrated superior abilities through recognized achievements.

But even they cannot properly be given unlimited powers because like all humans they are flawed and cannot be trusted to do what is right. They too must be restrained in their powers by the same institutions and customs operating to maintain stability in society. Just as great societal changes (industrialization, organization, technological innovations, and modernization generally) forced liberalism to alter its stance regarding the proper role of government in economic matters, so too has conservatism changed its position in the face of such great forces. Regarding the important question of the proper relationship between government and the economy conservative doctrine has taken the somewhat ambivalent position of supporting government actions that simultaneously encourage and yet does not control or even closely regulate business activities. This often amounts to a "hands off" policy insofar as government regulation is concerned, but a "helping hand" policy regarding such matters as favorable taxation rates, beneficial tariffs (legislation protecting home business from foreign competition), price supports and countless other schemes.

As liberalism began to espouse the need for increased governmental regulation of business enterprises conservatives, particularly during the depression years in the United States, adopted increasingly anti-regulatory positions. Cries of "creeping socialism" were raised against liberal efforts to increase governmental control over the economy. Aside from questions of economics conservatism has retained, and in recent years emphasized, its original emphasis on maintaining traditional values and institutions. Social maladies that seem to accompany Twentieth Century intensive urbanization (family disintegration, drug and alcohol abuse, soaring street crime rates, and a general loss of a sense of safety) are seen by conservatives as clear evidence of a need to return to basics: faith in God, hope for a better future, love of country and family, instillation of self-discipline in the young, willingness to sacrifice immediate gratification for future goals, industriousness, and a sense of belonging.

Exactly how these values are to be implanted remains controversial even among conservatives but the goal of returning them to their proper place in society drives conservatives to offer a wide range of governmental policies: swift and harsh punishment for criminals, "no frills" education with strict discipline in schools, governmental protection of institutions devoted to maintaining traditional values (including churches), elimination of welfare programs believed to encourage immorality and indolence, expansive (and expensive) military policies ostensibly

protecting the home country from foreign threats and a host of other proposals.

In summary, conservatism does contain basic beliefs and values beyond a mere mistrust of change. Certain core concepts remain throughout the long spectrum of the conservative ideology. They may be seen as:

1. high value on existing institutions as produced by custom and tradition
2. a belief in mankind's essential base and irrational nature
3. faith in some supernatural force guiding human affairs
4. acceptance of human inequality and the attending consequence of social hierarchy
5. recognition of the need for a sense of community among individuals that will bind them emotionally to their society.

Concluding Remarks

It has been said that no one who has a heart can resist being a liberal and that no one who has a brain can avoid being a conservative. Like most aphorisms this one contains a trace of truth wrapped in a maze of misperceptions. These two political ideologies offer to government leaders, policy makers, and thoughtful citizens a set of guides permitting some semblance of coherent conclusions regarding compelling social, economic and political issues.

Their common features include rejection of radicalism and its attending violent uprooting of established institutions and practices, acceptance of the need for restraints on the powers of government, advocacy of balance in society regarding individual rights and societal powers, and ultimately some root concerns for individual dignity. Most certainly disagreement abounds between the two ideologies when the outlines of such values are given clarity, but support of such basic principles enables supporters of each doctrine to work within the same governmental framework. This agreement to disagree in a civil manner surely constitutes one of mankind's most noble political achievements.
