



University of Richmond
UR Scholarship Repository

Political Science Faculty Publications

Political Science

Winter 1990

The "L-Word": A Short History of Liberalism

Terence Ball

Richard Dagger

University of Richmond, rdagger@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/polisci-faculty-publications>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Political Theory Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ball, Terence, and Richard Dagger. "The 'L-Word': A Short History of Liberalism." *The Political Science Teacher* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 1-6.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

The Political Science Teacher

A
Publication
of the
American
Political
Science
Association

Vol. 3, No. 1/Winter '90

Incorporating "NEWS for Teachers of Political Science"

The "L-Word": A Short History of Liberalism

by Terence Ball, University of Minnesota
and Richard Dagger, Arizona State University

Are these good or bad times for liberalism? On the domestic front, after eight years of the Reagan administration and a presidential campaign in which liberalism became "the L-word," they seem to be bad times indeed. The same can be said of Margaret Thatcher's Britain. But elsewhere, especially in the Communist world, events and regimes seem to be moving in a liberal direction. China after Tiananmen Square presents a notable exception, of course, but the Communist regimes of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are generally moving towards market economies and a greater concern for individual rights and liberties—two of the hallmarks of liberal societies.

Hence the question: Are these good or bad times for liberalism? To answer, we shall need a broader perspective than a survey of contemporary developments can provide. We shall need to look back, that is, to see what liberalism was in order to understand what it has become. Only then can we assess its current condition and prospects—and appreciate how politics in the United States is largely an intramural debate between different wings of liberalism.

continued on page 2

In This Issue

Essays on Liberalism	1
A History: Liberalism Under Attack	1
Welfare Rights and Liberalism	10
For the Classroom	12
C-SPAN in the Classroom	21
Advanced Placement	23
Resources for Teachers and Students	25

continued on page 6

History of Liberalism

continued from page 1

In the Beginning

Liberalism did not begin as a self-conscious social and political movement. This is evident in the fact that "liberal" did not enter the vocabulary of politics until the early 1800s, at least a century after what we now call liberalism became an important force in political thought and action. Like "liberty," "liberal" derives from the Latin *liber*, free, and before the 19th century it was commonly used to mean generous or tolerant—an attitude befitting a gentleman, much as a "liberal education" was meant to prepare a young gentleman for life. Through an extension of this common use, "liberal" became a label applied to those who sought a more tolerant and open society—a society whose members would be free to pursue their own ideas and interests with as little interference as possible. This first happened in Spain when a faction of the Spanish *Cortes* of 1810-1811 adopted the name *Liberales*.¹ From there the term spread quickly to France and Great Britain, where the party known as the Whigs evolved by the 1840s into the Liberal Party.

These self-proclaimed liberals were understandably eager to claim descent from prominent political and intellectual figures—Locke, Montesquieu, and Voltaire, for example—and movements such as the Protestant Reformation and the Glorious Revolution of 1688. They did this partly in order to gain credibility and support, a tactic common to political actors of all persuasions, and partly to understand the bases of their own beliefs. This meant that anyone who had spoken for individual liberty and against the various constraints on that liberty had some claim to being a liberal, even if he or she could not have used the word in self-description. This meant, in particular, that the original liberals were the people who reacted against two of the characteristic features of medieval society in Europe: religious conformity and ascribed status.

Religious conformity was the norm in medieval Europe, where church and state were supposed to be partners in the defense of Christendom. Indeed, there was no clear distinction between church and state at that time, and almost no sense that such a distinction was worth drawing. For its part, the Christian Church saw its mission as saving souls for the kingdom of God—something that could best be done by teaching and upholding orthodoxy, or "correct belief." Those who took an unorthodox view of Christianity or rejected it altogether thus threatened the Church's attempts to do what it saw as the work and will of God.

To enforce conformity to its doctrines, the Church used not only its own powers, but called on the secular authorities of Christendom to use theirs. Whether out of religious conviction or a desire to maintain order in their domains, the secular rules were usually willing to suppress those the Church deemed heretics or infidels.

The other feature of medieval society against which early liberals reacted was ascribed status—the condition in which a person's social standing is based not on one's achievement, but the status of one's parents. One was born a noble, a free commoner, or a serf; and that, with few exceptions, was all there was to it. Although ostensibly equal in the eyes of God, men and women of different ranks were not equals on God's earth or in man's state. The intricate arrangements of feudalism, with its lords, vassals, villeins, and serfs, reflected these differences, as did the parliaments or estates-general that began to appear in the late Middle Ages.

Against this society rooted in ascribed status and religious conformity, liberalism emerged as the first distinctive political ideology. But the liberal reaction did not take form until a series of social, economic, and cultural changes shook the medieval order. Many of these were directly related to the outburst of creativity in the 14th and 15th centuries known as the Renaissance. But there was also the Black Death, which took the lives of about one-third of Europe's population between 1347 and 1351, thereby loosening the medieval social structure and opening new opportunities for the survivors. The expansion of commerce in the late Middle Ages also played a part, as did the wave of exploration set in motion by this commerce. But of all the developments that contributed to the decline of the medieval order and the rise of liberalism, the most important was probably the Protestant Reformation.

When Martin Luther struck the spark that became the Reformation, he meant neither to encourage people to believe and worship in whatever way they chose nor to separate church from state. Apparently he expected that everyone who read the Bible—something he and his colleagues made easier by translating it for the first time into German—could only understand it as he did. But contrary to Luther's expectations, his proclamation of the "priesthood of all believers," with its stress on individual conscience, opened the floodgates to a variety of interpretations of the Bible and a profusion of Protestant sects. Separation of church from state followed, as the reformers' challenge to the universal authority of the Roman Church gave secular authorities an opportunity to expand their power at the Church's expense. Thus Henry VIII of England, with the approval of Parliament, created a national church with himself at its head.

The Reformation also provoked a series of bloody wars in which contention over religious doctrine led to questions about the nature of political authority and obedience. Should a conscientious Christian obey a ruler who tried to enforce conformity to doctrines, whether Protestant or Catholic, that the conscientious person took to be wrong? Both Luther and Calvin said, with some qualifications, that one must disobey but not resist such a ruler, for all rulers derive their power from God. Later, however, some of Calvin's followers concluded not only that resistance is sometimes justified, but that the people have a right to overthrow rulers who deny them freedom of religion. By this they meant everyone's freedom to practice Calvinism, to be sure. Yet their arguments for freedom of conscience, resting in part on the claim that government receives its authority *indirectly* from God *through* the consent of the people, planted the seeds of the argument in favor of religious toleration.²

Without intending to do so, then, the Protestant reformers prepared the way for liberalism. By teaching that salvation comes through faith alone, Luther and the other reformers encouraged people to value the individual conscience more than the preservation of unity and orthodoxy. From individual conscience to indi-

The Political Science Teacher is published quarterly by the American Political Science Association. TPST is distributed to all individual members of APSA and the chairpersons of departments belonging to the Departmental Services Program.

The next issue of *The Political Science Teacher* will appear in Spring 1990. Correspondence should be addressed to:

The Political Science Teacher
1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

Executive Editor/Sheilah Mann
Managing Editor/Kristine Vawter
Editorial Board:

Kathleen Knight, University of Houston
Betty Phillips, Northern Virginia Community College
Donald Racheter, Central University of Iowa
F. LaMond Tullis, Brigham Young University

Copyright 1990, The American Political Science Association
ISSN No. 0896-0828

History of Liberalism

continued from page 2

vidual liberty was still a radical step for the time, but it was a step that liberals took in the 17th and 18th centuries. For in those centuries liberalism emerged as an attempt to free individuals from the constraints of religious conformity and ascribed status in society—an attempt, that is, to work a fundamental transformation of society.

Liberalism and Revolution

It is no accident that the 17th and 18th centuries are associated with revolutions as well as with the emergence of liberalism. In fact, "revolution" entered the vocabulary of politics in 17th century England, when it was borrowed from astronomy to refer to a return, or revolving back, to an earlier position or condition.³ By the time of the French Revolution, however, "revolution" suggested something new and bold—a thorough transformation of an entire social order. Liberal ideas helped to inspire this revolution, just as they did the more modest revolutions in England and its North American colonies.

The revolution in England occurred in two acts, as it were, beginning with the civil war of the 1640s. Pen and ink played as great a part in this war as bullets and sword. From every point of view came a vast outpouring of pamphlets, treatises, sermons, and even major works of political theory. Among the latter was the first book of philosophical significance to bear the distinctive stamp of liberalism, Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651).

Hobbes's conclusions, of course, were anything but liberal. For the sake of security, he argued, the people of a commonwealth grant the sovereign absolute power, retaining only the right to defend themselves when the sovereign threatens them with "death, wounds, or imprisonment." What gives Hobbes's theory the stamp of liberalism is not his conclusion, however, but his premises. Individuals are equals, on Hobbes's account, and everyone has a natural right to be free; but in order to protect their interests, individuals consent to create and obey government. In these respects, Hobbes's position is very much that of a liberal. But it remained for John Locke to use these premises to reach a conclusion that we may definitely regard as liberal.

The reaction against both religious conformity and ascribed status is clear in Locke's work of the 1680s, the period of the second act of the English revolution. In his *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) Locke maintained that it is wrong for governments to force their subjects to conform to a particular religion. Drawing a distinction between private and public matters, Locke said that religion is normally a private concern and not, therefore, a proper subject for government interference. Governments cannot save souls, for this can come only through individual belief. Unless the practice of a religion directly threatens the public order, then, government must allow the adherents of any religion to worship as they see fit. For Locke, this meant that Catholicism and atheism should *not* be tolerated. Catholics owe their first loyalty to a foreign monarch, the pope, so they cannot be trustworthy members of a commonwealth; nor can atheists, for anyone who denies the existence of God, salvation, and damnation cannot be trusted at all. But Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and the Puritan sects—the groups who figured so prominently in the religious and political upheaval of 17th century England—must learn not only to stop trying to enforce conformity to their views on their fellow citizens, but also to tolerate any religion that confined its practice to the private sphere.

Complementing his work on toleration was Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1690). Published in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution but written, for the most part, during the early or mid-1680s, the *Two Treatises* inquired into the foundations of political authority. In the *Second Treatise*, Locke proceeded from premises very similar to Hobbes's, yet reached a very different

conclusion. Both denied that social status is somehow fixed or ascribed by nature, and both believed that government is founded on the consent of the people; but Locke believed that people can only consent to create and obey a limited or constitutional government. To give anyone absolute power over our lives would be both irrational and contrary to the will of God. Both Hobbes and Locke also believed that people have natural rights; but for Locke this included not merely a right to self-defense, but rights to life, liberty, and property. These, in turn, provided the basis for a right of revolution—a right that would be invoked four score and six years after the publication of the *Two Treatises* in the Declaration of Independence of the United States.

Long considered a prime example of Lockean liberalism, the character and provenance of the Declaration of Independence is now a matter of scholarly dispute.⁴ But there is no doubt that the argument of the Declaration, as well as some of its striking phrases, closely resembles Locke's. This, perhaps more than the "truths" Jefferson declaims, is self-evident:

that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, . . .

Not only the Declaration, but Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776) provide compressed versions of Locke's argument—an argument that Jefferson later said merely represented "the common sense of the matter. . . ."⁵ Two features of this "common sense" view deserve particular attention. The first is the claim that "all men are created equal, . . ." This caused some embarrassment when the Declaration was issued, for a number of colonists, "patriots" as well as "tories," pointed out the hypocrisy of proclaiming the equality of all mankind while continuing the practice of slavery.⁶ The source of this embarrassment was in fact a general problem in the position of the early liberals. For they spoke a democratic language when they said that all men are naturally free and equal and that government rests on the consent of the people; yet they never explained whom they counted as "men" or "the people." By making these claims, however, the early liberals at least provided an opening for those who could say—as Mary Wollstonecraft and others soon did—if all men are created equal, why isn't this or that group of men or women being treated as equals?

The second feature of Jefferson's "common sense" view that deserves special attention is his defense of the rights and liberties of individuals against governments. This again is typical of the early liberals, who saw government as a continuing threat to individual liberty. But it also betrays the influence of the classical republican theorists, such as Machiavelli and James Harrington, who warned against the danger of corruption. Republicanism and liberalism are difficult to sort out at this point (and others), but there were differences of emphasis. The republicans worried about the corruption of the people as much as the corruption of the government, while the early liberals were concerned almost exclusively with the abuse of power by the government. Moreover, the republicans looked upon freedom as mostly a matter of governing oneself through political participation, and therefore closely connected with civic virtue; but on the liberal view freedom was more a matter of being free from interference by the government, and virtue something to be learned and practiced in private life.

This heady mixture of republican and liberal thought not only served to justify the independence of the United States, but to provide the philosophical basis for its constitution as well. At the same time the constitution was taking effect, furthermore, this mixture was inspiring a truly revolutionary upheaval in France. To understand the part that liberalism played in this revolution, it is

continued on page 4

History of Liberalism

continued from page 3

necessary to remember three important characteristics of the *ancien regime* that the revolution attacked: religious conformity, aristocratic privilege, and absolute rule. Locke had argued against all three in his writings, and the French *philosophes* followed him in attacking at least the first two. When the Revolution came, however, all three were condemned as contrary to reason and rights. In the National Assembly's *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789), the first article dismisses aristocratic privilege and ascribed status with the assertion, "Men are born, and always continue, free and equal in respect of their rights. Civil distinctions, therefore, can be founded only on public utility." The second article proclaims "the natural and imprescriptible rights of man" to "liberty, property, security, and resistance of oppression," and the third says that the "nation" is the "source of all sovereignty," which entails that no one can "be entitled to any authority that is not expressly derived from it." So much for absolute rule. Nor did the *Declaration* spare religious conformity, declaring in the tenth article that "No man ought to be molested on account of his opinions, not even on account of his *religious* opinions, provided his avowal of them does not disturb the public order established by the law" (emphasis in original).

In all these respects, the French Revolution began as an attempt to transform France into a liberal society. To many historians, and not only Marxists, this has meant that the Revolution was principally an uprising of the bourgeoisie, for it was the bourgeoisie in particular that resented the opportunities denied them by aristocratic privilege. They wanted a society open to talent and achievement, where a man might prove his worth through competition, including economic competition.

Economic opportunity was especially important to the merchants, bankers, lawyers, and professional people who composed the bourgeoisie or middle class, in France and elsewhere, for acquiring wealth was practically the only way they could improve their social position. But in the Middle Ages and the early modern period in Europe there were numerous restrictions on manufacturing and commerce, such as the traditional Christian ban on usury and a host of national and local regulations concerning working conditions and the production, distribution, and sale of goods. In the 17th and 18th centuries, there were new restrictions associated with the prevailing economic theory, mercantilism.

In their efforts to remove obstacles to individual liberty, many liberals began to argue that economic exchanges are essentially a private matter between persons who are pursuing profits. This emphasis on private profit ran against the grain of much of the Christian and republican traditions, neither of which assigned much value to either privacy or profits. But the 1700s produced some forceful statements of the argument that people ought to be free to pursue their private interests—Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714), for instance, and the French physiocrats, who summarized their views in the phrase, *Laissez faire, laissez passer*. Capitalism found its most thorough and influential defense, however, in Adam Smith's *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). Smith argued for an economic policy that would allow individuals to compete freely in the marketplace. He saw this as the fairest policy, since it gives everyone an equal opportunity, as well as the most efficient and most conducive to the public interest. For there is nothing like self-interest to lead people to provide the goods and services that others want. As Smith put it, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantage" (Book I, Chapter II).

Throughout the 18th century, then, liberalism proved a revolutionary doctrine, one that was reshaping the religious, political,

social and economic relations of people in Europe and North America. It continued to play this part in the 19th century, inspiring revolutions in South America as well as Europe, and consolidating its strength in England and the United States. And in England in particular, the theoretical development of liberalism took new directions.

Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century

Perhaps the best way to characterize these new directions is to say that the liberal attitude toward democracy and government changed during the 19th century. Where earlier liberals had spoken the language of equality, that is, liberal thinkers of 19th century England took the further step of calling for expansions of the franchise; and where earlier liberals regarded government as, in Paine's words, a "necessary evil," some in the 19th century came to see it as a necessary ally in the struggle to promote individual liberty. In both cases, Utilitarianism in general and John Stuart Mill in particular played vital parts.

Jeremy Bentham, the original leader of the Philosophic Radicals, or Utilitarians, died in 1832, the year of the Reform Bill that extended the vote to England's middle-class males. Bentham had worked for the passage of this bill, but he preferred a more democratic franchise—a vote for all men, and perhaps (he was not firm on this point) for all women, too. He came to this view slowly, led by his commitment to the principle of utility. As Bentham saw it, "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to determine what we ought to do, as well as what we shall do."⁷ Anything, then, that helps us to avoid pain or achieve pleasure has utility and helps to make us happy. But the things that give utility are scarce, and some people's pleasures come at the expense of pain to others, which means that we must have a principle to tell us how to act when a conflict of interest arises. That principle, Bentham said, is the principle of utility—do whatever will promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number—and it is the "business of government to promote the happiness of society, by punishing and rewarding."⁸

Bentham drew two general conclusions from this. The first was that in most cases government could best promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number by leaving people alone. The individual is usually the best judge of his or her own interests, he said, so government should usually let people pursue their interests as they see fit. The second conclusion was that government is not likely to effect the happiness of society if it is open to only a portion of the people. In the pursuit of utility, Bentham declared, everyone is to count equally. The government must take everyone's utility into account, and it can do this only if everyone, or almost everyone, is allowed to vote.

Bentham and his associate, James Mill, occasionally qualified their enthusiasm for a democratic franchise—Mill once suggested that denying the vote to women, men under 40, and the poorest one-third of the population would still allow for full representation of social interests—but they were nevertheless in the vanguard in their day. Mill's son, John Stuart Mill, pressed the point in the mid-1800s. A staunch supporter of women's rights, including the right to vote, Mill called for adult suffrage. Yet in his case, too, there were qualifications, the most significant being the scheme of plural voting he advanced in *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861). There Mill recommended representative democracy as the best possible form of government by appealing to the elevating qualities of political participation. Political participation exercises the mental and moral faculties, he claimed, and thus promotes intelligence, discipline, and devotion to the public interest. If society is to derive the most benefit from this exercise, it must extend the right to political participation to almost all adult citizens. Yet it would be foolish to entrust everyone, the ignorant

History of Liberalism

continued from page 4

and unenlightened as well as the informed and public-spirited, with an equal voice in public deliberations. Almost every man and woman should have a vote, therefore, but those with higher levels of education and intellectually more demanding occupations should have two, three, or more.

Mill's ambivalence toward democracy probably derives from his fear of the "tyranny of the majority," a fear he expressed to lasting effect in *On Liberty* (1859). In that much-debated essay Mill expressed his alarm at what he took to be a new threat to liberty. Now that government is responsible to the people, he said, or at least to those who vote, the majority of voters can use legal coercion to deny liberty to those who do not share their views. More directly, the "moral coercion of public opinion" can and does stifle freedom of thought and action by making social outcasts of individuals who do not conform to social customs and beliefs.

Against this new tyranny, Mill proposed "one very simple principle": "the only purpose for which power can be exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others." He defended this principle—the so-called "harm principle"—by appealing not to natural rights, but to utility. Freedom is a good thing, he argued, because both individuals and society as a whole will benefit if people are encouraged to think and act freely. For the individual, freedom is as vital to personal development as food is to physical survival. It is always possible, of course, that people who speak and act freely will make others uncomfortable or unhappy. But in the long run this works to the benefit of society, too. For progress is possible only where there is an open competition among different opinions and beliefs—a marketplace of ideas.

Mill's defense of liberty took a form familiar to earlier liberals. It rests on a distinction between private (or self-regarding) and public (or other-regarding) matters, for instance, and suggests that individual liberty must be protected from interference by government and society. There was another dimension to Mill's view of liberty, however, and it marked a shift in the attitude of many liberals toward government. Although Mill defined freedom in *On Liberty* as the absence of restraint, his emphasis on the growth and development of the individual person has more in common with Aristotle than with Bentham. For freedom, as Mill conceived it, is largely a matter of being free to realize one's potential. In some of Mill's later work, and especially in the writings of T. H. Green and the English Idealists, this conception of freedom suggested that government could and should be something more than a nightwatchman protecting the life, liberty, and property of the citizen.

Green couched this argument in terms of a distinction between *negative* and *positive liberty*. There is a sense, he said, in which freedom is merely the absence of restraint. But it has a positive dimension, too, a sense in which freedom is the positive power or ability to do something. Thus we may say that a child born into poverty, with no real opportunity to escape, is not truly free to grow and develop to the full extent of his or her abilities. But if we admit this, anyone who values individual liberty will want to take steps to overcome those circumstances—poverty, ignorance, illness, and prejudice among them—that pose such formidable obstacles to positive freedom. And this means that society, acting through government, should take steps to promote the welfare of its people—and do so in the name of individual liberty.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries a number of scholars and political figures adopted and extended these views, leading to a sharp split between these "welfare" or "reform" liberals, on the one hand, and their "neoclassical liberal" rivals, on the other. In the late 1800s neoclassical liberalism found its most prominent expression in the Social Darwinism of such writers as Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner. As the franchise expanded

to include the working class, however, and the welfare state began to emerge, neoclassical liberalism began to fade. In the industrial world, moreover, the days of the entrepreneur seemed to have given way to the days of the corporation, the trust, the syndicate and conglomerate. Business was now "big business," and many people began to call for government intervention in the marketplace not to restrict competition, but to keep the large corporations from choking it off. Under the impetus of these developments, welfare liberalism came gradually to be known simply as liberalism.

Liberalism Today

This is not to say that neoclassical liberalism ever entirely disappeared, for some economists (e.g., Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman) and at least one novelist (Ayn Rand) continued to press the case against active government and the welfare state in their writings. In the 1970s and '80s, furthermore, neoclassical liberalism has enjoyed a revival. The emergence of the Libertarian Party is one sign of this revival, as is the admiration for "free market" policies so evident in the Thatcher and Reagan governments. Yet another is the philosophical respectability won for neoclassical views by Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974).

Still, welfare liberalism remains the stronger branch as we enter the last decade of the 20th century. The Libertarian Party has had little success at the polls, and neither Thatcher nor Reagan has dismantled the welfare state. As for philosophical respectability, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) has given welfare liberalism a powerful theoretical statement at least as influential as Nozick's.

It is possible, of course, that welfare liberalism is the stronger branch of a weak or dying tree. George Bush's presidential campaign, with his repeated references to Michael Dukakis as a "big-spending liberal" and an "ultra-liberal," suggests that this is the case. For all his attempts to turn "liberal" into "the L-word," however, Bush, like most Republicans, is a liberal, albeit one who seems unable to decide whether he prefers the welfare or neoclassical camp. If he appears to be a conservative, it is largely because the established way of life that our conservatives want to preserve is itself rooted in liberalism. And if he appears to be a pragmatic politician who is above or beyond ideology, it is because liberalism is so deeply rooted in American thought as to seem, as Jefferson said, "the common sense of the subject. . . ."

So it is that political debate in the United States is largely an intramural contest between different wings of liberalism, with the welfare liberals dominant. Yet there seems little chance that they will overwhelm or absorb their neoclassical rivals. On the contrary, there is some reason to believe that the differences between the two factions may grow sharper. To this point the two have agreed on ends—a society in which individuals have an equal opportunity to choose and pursue their goals freely—but disagreed on the best means to achieve them—an active government or a nightwatchman state. But if welfare liberalism continues to move in a more egalitarian direction, as Rawls and others suggest it should, this disagreement over means may look more and more like a disagreement over ends. Add to this the changes underway in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and we may have the beginning of a shift in ideological alignments, with welfare liberalism and various forms of socialism merging into something that might be called social democracy, on the one hand, and opposing an alliance of neoclassical liberals and conservatives, on the other.

Whether this does or does not happen, two general conclusions can be drawn about the current state of liberalism. The first is that liberalism is not the revolutionary force it once was. Or not in the West, at any rate. For the liberal attack on ascribed status, religious conformity, or political absolutism still strikes at the foundations of society in some parts of the world. This is most evident in Iran and other countries of the Middle East, where liberalism

continued on page 6

History of Liberalism

continued from page 5

may have provoked a reactionary response from Islamic fundamentalists. In Eastern Europe and Asia, moreover, various protests against Communist forms of ascribed status and political absolutism claim "liberalization" as their goal. In the Western world, however, the aims of the early liberals are now deeply entrenched in public policy and public opinion. In these places liberalism is no longer a revolutionary ideology, but an ideology defending a revolution already won.

A second conclusion is that liberals are now wrestling with two extremely difficult problems—problems that are difficult partly because they stem from liberals' basic commitments to individual liberty and equality of opportunity. The first is, how far should individuals be able to go in exercising their freedom? Most liberals, welfare and neoclassical alike, accept something like Mill's harm principle. When it comes time to apply the principle, however, the difficulty of deciding what harms someone becomes clear. Many liberals say that such "victimless crimes" as prostitution, gambling, and the sale of pornography should not be crimes at all. Others respond that these crimes are not as "victimless" as they appear. So the argument continues without resolution. Despite their desire to separate the area of private freedom from the area of public control, then, liberals have found the boundary between private and public impossible to draw with any precision.

The second problem grows out of the liberal commitment to equal opportunity. For the neoclassical liberal, this means simply that everyone ought to be free to make his or her way in the world without unfair discrimination. The liberal should then see to it that discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender—of anything other than talent and ability—is illegal. Most welfare liberals want to take the matter further, however. They claim that government ought to take steps to help disadvantaged people enjoy an equal opportunity in life. But how far should this go? Should we try to bring about a more nearly equal distribution of wealth and resources, as Rawls suggests, in order to promote true equality of opportunity? Is this fair to those who have earned their wealth, as Nozick maintains, without violating the rights of others? Should we endorse affirmative action programs in order to compensate women and members of racial minority groups for the discrimination they have suffered in the past? But aren't these ways of discriminating *against* some people by discriminating *in favor of* others? Can this be justified in the name of equality of opportunity?

These questions are especially troublesome for liberals because they are the kinds of questions liberalism leads people to raise. So whether one thinks these good or bad times for liberalism is likely to depend on how he or she reacts to the current inability of liberals to provide satisfactory answers to these questions. Some may see this as a serious or even fatal weakness—a sign that liberalism is lost or exhausted, at the end of its rope. A more sympathetic response might be to say that liberalism is still doing what it has always done—searching for ways to advance the cause of individual liberty and opportunity. Certainly anyone who shares Mill's belief that flexing our mental and moral muscles is vital to individual growth will find plenty of room for exercise—and conclude that these may be good times indeed for liberalism.

Note

*Thanks to Jack Crittenden for comments on an earlier draft. Portions of this article are drawn from Terence Ball and Richard Dagger, *Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal* (New York: Harper & Row, forthcoming).