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Why Modern Liberalism Is in Retreat

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Summary

If one looks at the oftentimes dysfunctional lives of the liberal elite, it should give the normal folk the heebie-jeebies that the libs think we are incapable of living our lives without their help and control.

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The central issue is really about human nature—are we at heart self-governing, living entities, or are we being moved about by impersonal forces and in constant need of help from government?

Liberalism was once a radical social philosophy because it championed liberty, in particular, the right to individual freedom in civil and economic affairs. In time, however, the term “liberal” was hijacked by those who were actually advocating a return to extensive government interference, championing this now as necessary so as “to make people free.” In fact, however, what they proposed was the paternalistic state whereby adult human beings would once again be treated as if they were children, dependents, in constant need of being regimented by superior leaders so they could live successfully.

The radical liberalism that meant freeing adult individuals from government became classical liberalism and, later, libertarianism, at least in the United States of America. (Throughout the rest of the world “liberal” still calls to mind the original radical meaning.) Yet the debate isn’t only about words.

Modern liberals—or those individuals who elsewhere are referred to as social democrats or socialists—do have a different idea of what human beings are. They think they are helpless in the face of the challenges and adversities of nature and society. Classical liberals generally view people as capable of taking the initiative, if only other people and governments don’t put chains on them, don’t stop them from helping themselves. Certainly people would have different starting points in the effort to advance themselves—some would have more fortunate beginnings than others, would start off healthier, more appealing or talented, born to wealthier parents, than others. However, all in all, they could put their shoulders to the task of improving their lives, whatever their original situation. And a free society, one championed by classical liberals or libertarians, would then afford the best chance for them all to succeed at their diverse endeavors.

Modern liberals, however, embrace a different view of human nature. They hold that we are basically moved by impersonal forces and have no capacity to initiate any improvements in our lives. Any such improvement has to come from the outside, and government, with its concentrated and massive coercive power, is the most promising candidate to bring about such improvement. This is, in fact, the intellectual source of the switch from the American Founders’ original idea of individual rights to the idea of positive rights or entitlements that was the substance of Franklin Roosevelt’s “Second Bill of Rights.”

Of course, many other factors influenced the change, including various special interests parading as the public interest, but all rested, fundamentally, on the switch from understanding people as self-starters to seeing them as passive participants within a society. The central issue is really about human nature—are we at heart self-governing, living entities, or are we being moved about by impersonal forces and in constant need of help from government?

Yet, as should be evident, the modern liberal’s approach to advancing the lot of human beings is paradoxical. While denying that individuals can help themselves if left to their own resources and to voluntary cooperation, they affirm that governments—which are, after all, composed of individuals—can take the initiative and effectuate adequate solutions to human problems. How is this possible? Either we are helpless, in which case so is the government, or we can help ourselves, in which case it is best, in most cases, to leave us free to find our own solution to problems. Moreover, if we can take the initiative, then those who know the problems they face, who have access to what has come to be called local knowledge—which is where solutions most often lie—are in a far better position to address challenges facing them than far off agencies of governments.

So what has stymied the full development of the classical liberal, affirmative view of human individual capabilities of free men and women? It is, first, that the idea was simply very radical and unfamiliar to most; and, second, that those who had taken advantage of the opposite idea (that rulers need to run everyone’s life) didn’t wish to yield power.

The modern liberal, in point of fact, is a reactionary, one who still clings to the old idea that people in the main are inept and require some supreme ruler to run their lives, to take care of them. That is the foundational idea behind feudalism and monarchy, with tsars, Caesars, kings, queens, pharaohs, and other chiefs ruling the realm with the rest of us relegated to the position of subjects required to follow the leaders’ will.

In time, one may reasonably hope, the classical liberal’s radical but very sensible insight about human nature—that it is fundamentally creative and productive and needs liberty to flourish—will reemerge, having overcome the bad habit of dependency on government. However, this cannot be expected to happen automatically. Eternal vigilance is its price, indeed.

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