Social Work and Society:

Dr Ian Cummins i.d.cummins@salford.ac.uk

Liberalism

Introduction

As with other political philosophies, liberalism should be seen as an umbrella term that covers a range of views, approaches and positions. Neo-liberalism, for example, is clearly a form or branch of liberalism. Liberalism has evolved over a period of time. Modern liberalism, for example, would be more suspicious of claims of the supremacy of the market than its forebears. A further complication in examining liberalism is that the term can be applied in both the economic and social spheres. The two spheres are not necessarily compatible. David Cameron was both an economic and social liberal. The austerity policies that his government followed were partly based on a classic liberal belief in a smaller state. At the same time, he was a social liberal - the introduction of gay marriage being an example of liberal social legislation. Gay marriage does not square with traditional Tory values and policies. This chapter will explore the roots and subsequent development of liberalism which has been one of the key political ideologies of the last three hundred years.

The roots of liberalism can be traced back to the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. It became a clear philosophical school during the Age of Enlightenment. The emergence of liberalism as an intellectual tradition is associated with the writings of key figures such as Locke , Rousseau and Kant. Early liberals were opposed to the dominant political forces of feudal capitalism of the period the established Church, absolutist monarchs and the landed gentry. They were committed to an alternative group of ideas, which included freedom of religion, constitutional rule, individual property and free trade.

The influence of liberalism was extended following the American and the French Revolutions. Thereafter the liberal tradition was instrumental in the Huntington (1991) refers to '*three waves of democratization*' . The first wave saw liberal governments elected and the introduction of social welfare provision in Europe and

the Americas in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Huntingdon's second wave took place after World War II. This period saw the establishment of democratic regimes to replace authoritarian regimes in, for example Germany and Italy. The postwar period also saw a period of de-colonisation where, for example, former colonies of the British Empire became independent nations. Huntingdon's third wave is the period after 1974, which saw the overthrew the military dictatorships in Spain and Portugal as well as those in Latin America. It should be noted that this is not a linear process - the coup in Chile in 1973 which saw the overthrow of the socialist Allende government and the establishment of a military dictatorship ran counter to this. The third wave also includes the post 1989 collapse of the Communist regimes of the eastern bloc. There is a danger that these huge changes are presented as inevitable.

Liberty

Cranston (1967) saw liberty as the prime political value of liberalism " *By definition a liberal is a man who believes in liberty".* This is in contrast to other political values or aims such as equality. This is a modern statement of the values that can be found in the work of Locke and Mill. Locke outlined a state of perfect freedom, in which, human beings would act in ways, that they saw fit. They would not need the permission or authority of others to do so. Mill argued that if society wanted to restrict the freedom of individuals then the burden of proof lay with the authorities, however they might be constituted, to demonstrate why the restriction was justified. Social contract theories of the development of political institutions developed from these basic premises. These are concern with attempts to provide a justification for the existence of the modern state. There are fundamental issues to be addressed here such as - *on what basis does the authority of the state exist? when might be right to overthrow a state?* Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau argued that the social contract is the means by which modern civic society, including government develops. Before the existence of the social contract there was a condition of stateless anarchy, sometimes referred to as a "state of nature." The state of nature is not an ideal one. It allows for chaos and there is no rule of law. As society and social relations become more complex , each person agrees to surrender some (or all) of his or her original rights and freedoms to a central authority - a form of government. They do so on the condition that all

other members of the society do the same and that any breaches of laws will be punished by the central authority. The motivation for surrendering some individual rights in this way is that each member will enjoy certain benefits - particularly domestic peace- a central authority can provide.

Berlin (1958) identified two categories or forms of liberty - *negative* and *positive*. Liberty is conceived as the absence of coercion. One is then able to make choices. Negative liberty can be viewed as an opportunity concept. Negative liberty is thus freedom from constraint - legal or social sanctions to act on one's free will. Mill argued that the only justification for the restriction of liberty would be in the action resulted in harm to another individual. Adults are free to make poor choices - they have to live with the consequences. In its most extreme libertarian form, this argument would support the removal of legal sanctions against drug use or other behaviour which does not harm others. It is also at the roots of those groups who criticise the so called " *nanny state*" which they regard as patronising and hectoring in the advice that it offers across a range of lifestyle and health issues. Taylor (1979) argued that negative liberty saw freedom as a matter of what options are available to us, whether we choose to exercise them or not. Positive liberty is viewed as the capacity to act one's free will. A person is only free if they are self-directed and autonomous. The classical notion of liberty has its roots in Roman society - *liber* was a free person, the opposite was *servus* a slave. From this, the republican notion of liberty develops sees the role of the government to ensure that no body or agency, including its own has arbitrary power over any citizen. These various conceptions of the fundamental notion of liberty are an area where the liberal political theory splinters.

The trends of economic and social liberalism are two key elements of this political tradition. Other key concerns of liberalism are the question of private property and the issues of human rights. Classic economic liberals of the 19th century saw private property and liberty as inextricably linked. Private property represents the foundation of an economic system that will provide individual liberty. Alternative economic systems that challenge these fundamentals of private property will inevitably lead to restrictions on liberty. In its purest form, a market system based on private property and where individuals are free to make contracts

and sell their labour, is regarded the purest form of liberty. In addition, the dispersion of power that private property represents is seen as providing protection to the liberty of subjects.

Liberalism seeks to guarantee a series of fundamental rights. This would include freedom of assembly and worship, freedom from arbitrary arrest and a range of civic and political rights. These fundamentals are incorporated in the Human Rights Act (1998). The various articles of the HRA seek to establish a balance between the individual and the state. Liberalism is concerned with the overdue exercise of state power. The HRA places limits on state power but also provides the individual with potential legal remedies. The other features of a liberal democracy would be a strong civil society - a free press, rights for workers and limits on monopolies and other powerful forces.

One of the key concerns of liberalism is the role of the state. Liberalism is naturally wary of the potential power that state agencies can have. Liberals would be opposed to state surveillance and monitoring of citizens unless this was justified on security grounds. A liberal approach would seek to ensure that the scope for state intervention in the lives of citizens is restricted. It recognises that the state should be able to intervene but there must be a clear processes and individuals must have legal representation to be able to challenge. In the same way, liberals are concerned with the way that commercial monopolies are able to exploit this position to the detriment of consumers.

Despite being temperamentally wary of the state or any expansion of its power, Liberals have had a key role in the creation of the modern welfare state. The liberal concern with inequality and individuals underpins the concern with the excesses of the free market. Beveridge a liberal was one of the key architects of the modern welfare state that was established in the UK following World War II. The role of government planning in the war, the recognition of the huge suffering that the nation had endured and a realisation that there was a need to avoid the slump of the 1930s all contributed to a shift in attitudes. In all Beveridge's proposals, there was an attempt to strike a balance between the individual and the state. There was also a concern that benefits should not be seen as too generous.

The commitment to full employment and Keynesian management of the economy meant that Beveridge viewed unemployment benefits as a temporary support whilst workers were looking for new jobs. Liberalism is thus concerned with providing that the state provides a safety net for the most vulnerable individuals in society. However, they are also concerned at the same time of maintaining a balance between, individuals, families and state agencies. This is combined with a commitment to localism and voluntary organisations. State agencies can be seen as the intervention of last resort.

Social mobility and creating an environment where individuals are provided with the support to make most of their skills is a recurring theme in modern liberal democratic societies. As noted above, the original thinkers whose ideas underpin liberalism were opposed to the established forces of absolutist monarch, Church and related institutions. There are echoes of this in modern politics. Mrs May has stated that to the Conservative Party as one that would seek to '*fight against the burning injustices' of poverty, race, class and health, and give people back 'control' of their lives* (Swinford, 2016). She also stated that her administration would not *'entrench the advantages of the privileged few*.' Littler (2013) highlights the fact that the rhetoric of meritocracy is universal. As she notes,

the overwhelming majority of those who use the term assume that it has a positive, progressive and anti-elitist meaning. All politicians seem to be committed to the creation of a meritocratic society. Young (2004) coined the term as a warning. It was a satirical comment on a society where elites were publicly committed to a more egalitarian society. but actually followed policies that entrenched their position. Littler (2016) argues that the idea of meritocracy is thus being used to actively extend their own interests and power.

The development of the modern - i.e post World War II international political framework is based on fundamental liberal principles. This period saw the establishment of a series of international and national institutions, which are grounded in fundamental liberal principles. These would include liberty and the equal rights of all, m political freedom, economic opportunity, social emancipation and equality before the law (Gray, 2004). The end of the Cold War and the

tearing down of the Berlin Wall were represented as a great triumph of liberal political values. Fukuyama (1989) famously declared that this political triumph marked the "*end of history*". By this, he meant that debates about the relative merits of political systems had been settled and liberal democracy had won. Even if one accepted the basic premises in his arguments, recent political events - the re- emergence of neo fascist anti-immigrant and anti-welfare parties across Europe, Brexit, the election of Trump and Putin's ongoing control of the Russian political system - have raised serious doubts about the security of the triumph of liberalism. Fukuyama (2018) himself has somewhat backtracked on the claims of his 1989 piece. The influence of the 1989 was, in part, that it provided an intellectual support to the argument of neo-liberals that free markets were inevitably linked to political freedoms.

After the military defeat of Nazism, there were international efforts to ensure that such a cataclysm was never repeated. Nazism fundamentally denies that all people should be afforded the same rights. The legal framework that was established sought to ensure that citizens would be afforded a basic minimum set of rights that would balance the potential arbitrary exercise of state power (Habermas,2010). The UN Declaration of Human Rights *states in Article 1 that 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights' (United 131Nations General Assembly, 1948).* A common set of moral values that
recognise the equal dignity of all humans underpins this discourse. This discourse is not
restricted to the legal sphere; it is also a key component in broader ethical discussions that overlap with the law – bio-ethics and end-of-life care being two clear examples. This modern notion is a recasting of Kant's (1996) categorical imperative that every person should be viewed as an 'end in themselves'. In *A theory of justice* (Rawls, 1971), Rawls argued that a concept of justice must be based on the rights of individuals, as *'each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override*' (1971, p 3). Communitarians argue that this conception of liberal individualism overlooks the fact that individuals live in communities.

The post-Second World War discourse of human rights has moved these notions into much wider areas than the liberal rights of freedom of association and religion, protections against arbitrary arrest, and so on (Habermas, 2010). These so-called democratic rights of
participation or classical civil rights were a buffer to prevent the intrusion of the state into the private sphere. Despite their egalitarian and universal rhetoric, were not enjoyed by all – women and minorities being two obvious examples of groups not included. Rawls (1971) argued that the classical civil rights of political liberalism only acquire equal value for citizens when they are accompanied by social and cultural rights. Fraser (1995,
2010) sees dignity as the fundamental basis for the equal respect of citizens. Fraser argues that the claim for equal treatment on the basis of identity must have within it a simultaneous claim for redistribution for it to have value. Dworkin (1995) notes that dignity is both a powerful but also a vague concept. This is part of its attraction, but also, perhaps, part of its weakness. Dworkin also added that any notion of human rights had
to accept that dignity would be at its core. There are two broad objections to the notion of human dignity and the discourse of human rights as outlined above. The first echoes Dworkin (1995) in claiming that dignity is a vague concept Pinker (2008). The second challenge to the notion of the human rights discourse sees it as a liberal fraud, in that these rights are only available to those accept Western concepts of human rights and social values (Badiou, 2015)

Popper on Intolerance

In the age of social media and twenty-four hours rolling news, one of the recurring debates resolves around the nature what should be seen as acceptable in public political debate. One of the most oft repeated claims by commentators on the Right is that political correctness means that there are certain issues, particularly in the fields of race and gender politics, are not debated. The argument here is that individuals will be characterised as racist, sexist or homophobic for even raising concerns. There is a certain irony in that this point is made, most forcefully, by white heterosexual men such as Rod Liddle, Jeremy Clarkson and Richard Littlejohn who are handsomely rewarded by national newspapers for

writing weekly columns, in national newspapers, that claim they are denied freedom of expression. These debates have been given increased significance post the Brexit referendum .

As noted above, liberalism has freedom of expression as a key component of civil society, which acts as a balance against powerful government or commercial interests. This then leads to the difficult question as to what limits, if any, can be placed on freedom of expression. The First Amendment to the US Constitution states "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances"* This is perhaps the purest statement of the right to freedom of expression. Colin Kaepernick NFL quarter back and now one of the faces of the latest Nike adverts has been one of the most prominent campaigners against police brutality. Supporters of his taking the knee protest argue that he is exercising his First Amendment rights to free speech. In contrast, since 1945 symbols of Nazism such as the Hitler salute and the swastika have been banned. Libertarians would argue that the banning of any symbols or the expression of views however objectionable they might be, is an unacceptable restriction on the liberty of individuals.

Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies,* written in the shadow of Stalinism and Nazism, published in 1945, is often viewed as a classic liberal argument against totalitarianism. Popper was committed to the maintenance of liberal political values. He saw these as a bulwark against the emergence of authoritarian forms of government. He also confronted the paradox that liberal democracy creates. How should liberal political systems respond to political parties and movements that are fundamentally opposed to its key tenets and would deny citizenship to religious, racial and sexual minorities? He termed this the "*paradox of tolerance*".

Less well known is the paradox of tolerance: Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught

of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. In this formulation, I do not imply, for instance, that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies; as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, suppression would certainly be unwise. But we should claim the right to suppress them if necessary even by force; for it may easily turn out that they are not prepared to meet us on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all argument; they may forbid their followers to listen to rational argument, because it is deceptive, and teach them to answer arguments by the use of their fists or pistols. We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant. We should claim that any movement preaching intolerance places itself outside the law, and we should consider incitement to intolerance and persecution as criminal, in the same way as we should consider incitement to murder, or to kidnapping, or to the revival of the slave trade, as criminal.

Popper's argument has been criticised for being in favour of unjustified restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly. The notion of tolerance can be viewed as problematic in itself. Civic and political freedoms should be based on tolerance - which implies a form of polite or passive acceptance - but inherent rights that should be afforded to all citizens.

There are two main critical approaches to liberal ideas -with its focus on equality and individual rights. From the Right, liberalism focus on equality is naive and hopelessly optimistic as it falls to acknowledge that society is unequal. This is because skills and knowledge are not spread equally across society. Any attempt to alter this will lead to a restriction on the freedom of some individuals. From the Left, liberalism's commitment to civil rights ignores economic conditions. The argument here is that more economically powerful individuals have greater access to resources - for example legal advice - which enable them to these rights. There is a disconnect between the theoretical commitment to civil rights and the reality in capitalist societies.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet bloc was meant to usher in a new triumph phase of liberalism and liberal democracy. This has proved to

be wildly optimistic. If we regard a liberal democracy as one in which all adult citizens, men and women, have the vote and can exercise it freely then it is a relatively new and limited phenomenon. For example, the USA a self proclaimed have of democracy effectively denied African American citizens the vote until the civil rights movement led to the signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. This act was designed to ensure that African American voters in the South could register and vote. The post 9/11 world has seen the key institutions and beliefs of liberalism come under increasing pressure. Terrorism attacks have seen calls for the suspension of the rights of suspect, the use of torture and the increased surveillance of individuals and communities (see the chapter on Radicalisation for further discussion). The argument against these increased powers for the state is that their use undermines the very liberal freedoms upon which democracies are based.

The critics of liberalism - from both the Left and Right - often elide liberalism with elitism. Liberal elite has become a pejorative term used to described affluent, middle class, metropolitan, well-educated, left of centre voters who claim to represent the interests of the working class. It is often shortened to Guardian reader. The term liberal elite is used by populist politicians as an attempt to distance themselves from what they say as a self serving and corrupt group. Populism is based on the notion that there are two groups "*the people*" and *"the corrupt elite*". The populist leader claims that he or she represents the "*will of the people*". It places the leader in an opposition to an enemy. The enemy is a grouping of those who represent the current system which is seen to operate against the interests of "*the people"*. Trump and his claims that he will "*drain the swamp"* are an excellent example of this. This leads to situations, in which, politicians who are clearly members of the elite seek to deny that they are part of it. Prime Ministers Major, Blair, Brown and Cameron, in an attempt to establish their 'regular guy' credentials, all tried fairly unconvincingly to claim that they had a lifelong interest in football. The Brexit referendum is another example. The leaders of the Brexit campaign presented themselves as leading a campaign to '*Get our country back'*. The most prominent Brexit campaigners – Nigel Farage (leader of UKIP) and the Conservative Cabinet members Boris Johnson and Michael Gove – had all been privately educated. Farage was a stockbroker and Johnson and Gove journalists for leading Tory-supporting newspapers. Populist parties exist across

the political spectrum. Part of the populist claim is that they speak over the heads of academics, experts and other members of the liberal elite directly to the wider public. Alongside this, populists claim that the media stories are distorted and so on - Trump's so-called *fake news.* This adds to the claims that the liberal elite is also a conspiracy against the people.

Synder (2017) argues that the rise of Trump and other populist parties poses an existential threat to the basic premises of liberalism.
"*The mistake is to assume that rulers who came to power through institutions cannot change or destroy those very institutions—even when that is exactly what they have announced that they will do.*"
His book is a restatement of liberal values and a call for a re-engagement in public and civic processes. His twenty lessons include

- *Do not obey in advance.*
- *Defend institutions*
- *Believe in truth*
- *Investigate*
- *Listen for dangerous words*

Synder suggests that the disconnection between electorates and politicians has created an an opportunity that populist exploit.

Comparative Perspectives
Esping -Andersen (1990) included *liberal* as one of his three models of welfare. A liberal welfare regime was outlined as one that had limited state intervention. This means that there are limited welfare benefits. Large areas of provision such as education and health that in other systems are based on private provision. Benefits are funded through private insurance schemes. There is a limited public welfare system but the services are limited and their Esping Andersen included the United States and Australia as examples. This liberal model is contrasted with the social democratic models of the Scandinavian systems where higher personal and corporate taxes are used to fund public services. In the social democratic model the investment in and the quality of public services mean that there are not regarded as inferior. The other important area for social work is liberalism concern with the dangers of state interference in private and family life. There is a

concern that social workers have too much power, particularly in children and families work. A liberal perspective would see state intervention as unjustified unless there is a clear risk of physical danger or abuse and neglect. This dilemma about when and how it is appropriate for the state to intervene is at the heart of many contemporary social work practice concerns.

Key features of liberalism

- *A focus on the importance of individual freedom and choice*
- *Liberalism is wary of the concentration of power, for example in the hands of corporations or state agencies*
- *Society needs to be tolerant of and accept the expression of a range of views*
- *Focus on individual civic rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of association, freedom to follow religious faith*
- *Individual citizens' rights have to be protected.*

Conclusion

Liberalism is one of the most influential political ideologies of the modern period. It has splintered into a number of different variants. There are some tensions between economic and social liberals. However, in all its forms there are some consistent features. These are the focus on political and civil rights, the market and a commitment to a legal framework that balances the rights of the community and individuals. The institutions of the civil society - a free press, trade unions, voluntary and community associations, churches and so on - act as break on a possible over mighty state. Modern liberal political thought is concerned with the increase in inequality that has resulted from the reduction in social protection and welfare systems.

Critical Questions to consider

- *What are the rights that all individuals should have in liberal democratic societies ?*
- *How do we balance the rights of individuals against the rights of the wider community ?*

- *How should liberal democratic societies respond to individuals and groups who express extremist views?*
- *What should the limits be on the powers of social workers and other professionals to intervene in family life ?*

Further Reading

Freeden, M (2015) *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction* Oxford OUP

An excellent introduction to this area.

Habermas, J. (2010) 'The concept of human dignity and the realistic utopia of human rights', *Metaphilosophy*, vol 41, no 4, pp 468-80.

This paper examines the notion of human rights a cornerstone of modern liberal thinking

Snyder, T., (2017) *On tyranny: Twenty lessons from the twentieth century*. Tim Duggan Books.

This short book is a defence of some of the key institutions in liberal societies - for example the free press. It shows the way that they are challenged by authoritarian politics

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