

## **Liberalism, Properly So Called**

unpublished manuscript

1933 or 1934

*Albert J. Nock*

I understand that what you want is not a publishable article but merely a conspectus or brief, which will aid the comprehension of two remarkable historical phenomena.

First, why is it that Liberalism is now motivated by principles exactly opposite to those which originally motivated it, and how did this change come about? Second, why has the spirit and temper of Liberals undergone a corresponding change, and how did this change come about?

The facts are clearly apparent. We now see on all sides the extraordinary spectacle of Liberals doing their best to destroy the cardinal freedoms and immunities which Liberals formerly defended, while all the forces which are historically and traditionally known as Tory or Conservative are arrayed in defense of those freedoms. Furthermore we see Liberals vehemently vilifying those who hold to the original basic principles of Liberalism, denouncing them as enemies of society, and doing all they can to discredit and disable them. These two are probably the strangest anomalies that recent history presents.

To understand them it is necessary to consider Liberalism's origin and rise in Britain, since it is only in this perspective that American Liberalism can be clearly seen and correctly assessed. British political Liberalism was a continuation of Whiggism, which as far back as the time of Charles II proposed to subordinate the royal power to the power of Parliament. Toryism, on the contrary held to the "divine right" theory of monarchy, with all its implications. Put in terms of general principle, the Tory held that obedience to established authority is unconditional; the Whig held that it is conditional. It is of the utmost importance to keep these two primary principles constantly in mind.

Toryism therefore contemplated a type of society organized around a system of compulsory cooperation. This system is best illustrated by the example of a conscript army. The individual soldier has no option about joining or leaving the service; nor has he any say about his duties, his maintenance or his pay. In all ranks throughout the service obedience is unconditional, and is enforced under coercion. The final intention is thus to bring and keep the many under rule of the few; and the service's rules and regulations are devised with a view to strengthening a highly centralised coercive military power over the many, and making them more easily manageable. This is the point to be kept in mind when considering the structure of civil society as Toryism would have it, and for some time did have it. As the Army, not the individual soldier, is the unit of ultimate value, so the civil structure with its system of fixed ascending subordinations, and not the individual member, was Toryism's ultimate criterion; and hence the regulatory laws, edicts, mandates, which Toryism set up were devised with a view to strengthening a highly centralised coercive civil power over the many, and making them more easily manageable.

Liberalism, on the contrary, contemplated a type of society organized around a system of voluntary cooperation; a system of original contract, free contract. This system is best illustrated by the example of an industrial concern like the Standard Oil Company. The individual need not work for Standard Oil unless he wishes to do so; he is not conscripted. His acceptance of the Company's rules is a matter of free contract; he is not coerced; he may leave if he does not like them. His wages, hours and conditions of labor are fixed by consent; if they do not suit him as proposed, he is free to refuse them. Under this system the individual is regarded as the unit of ultimate value. The logic of this position was that society as a whole would gain more from the aggregate initiative and enterprise of groups pursuing various ends in free association and by such means as of free choice should seem best to them, than it would from the efforts of groups pursuing prescribed ends under coercion.

Consequently the political design of Tory measures was uniformly to increase the coercive power of the government over the individual and enlarge its range of action. The design of Whig measures, and subsequently Liberal measures, was uniformly to decrease the government's coercive power and to reduce its range of action. This must be kept clearly in mind, for it is the fundamental distinction between Toryism in practice and Liberalism in practice. It furnishes the one and only test

by which to determine whether a specific political measure should be classified as Tory or Liberal. No matter what political label the measure bears; no matter whether its direct object may be desirable or undesirable; its mark of identification is found only by addressing these questions to it: Does this measure tend to diminish or to increase the government's coercive power over the individual? Does it tend to narrow the range of the government's coercive power, or to widen it? Does it tend to diminish compulsory cooperation or to increase it? Does it tend to enlarge the area of conduct in which the individual is free to do as he pleases, or does it enlarge the area in which he must do as governmental agents please? If these questions can be answered by the one affirmative, then the measure is a Liberal measure, properly so called; and if by the other, it is a Tory measure; and it must be repeated that neither the desirability per se of the immediate end which the measure is designed to serve, nor its lack of desirability, has any bearing whatever on this decision.

Liberalism held that society's work should be carried on, its responsibilities met, and its difficulties dealt with, by the application of social power, not governmental power; social power meaning the power generated and exercised by individuals and groups of individuals working in an economy which is free of governmental interference — an economy of free contract. This follows logically from the conception of government inherited from Whiggism in opposition to Toryism's conception of it. Toryism held that the ruler derived his authority from God and distributed that authority to his agents in various degrees according to their function; therefore the agents exercised power by divine right ad hoc, responsible only to the ruler, who in turn was responsible only to God. Whiggism, on the contrary, regarded rulership as purely a civil institution established by the nation for the benefit of all its members, with no inherent power of its own, and responsible only to the nation.

The early Liberals inherited from the Whigs this conception of government as an agency set up by the nation and responsible to it, with no power of its own, but with certain coercive powers granted to it for exercise in sharply defined directions and in none other. They contemplated a government whose interventions on the individual should be purely negative in character. It should attend to national defense, safeguard the individual in his civil rights, maintain outward order and decency, enforce the obligations of contract, punish crimes belonging in the order of malum in se, and make justice cheap and easily accessible. Beyond these negative interventions it should not go; it should have no coercive power to enforce any positive interventions whatever upon the individual.

When the Whigs came into power they kept all the foregoing tenets in mind, and so did the early Liberals who succeeded them. They worked steadily towards curbing the government's coercive power over the individual; and with such effect, as historians testify, that by the middle of the eighteenth century Englishmen had simply forgotten that there was ever a time when the full "liberty of the subject" was not theirs to enjoy. In this connexion the thing to be remarked is that the Whigs proceeded by the negative method of repealing existing laws, not by the positive method of making new ones. They combed the Statute-book, and when they found a statute which bore against "the liberty of the subject" they simply repealed it and left the page blank. This purgation ran up into the thousands. In 1873 the secretary of the Law Society estimated that out of the 18,110 Acts which had been passed since the reign of Henry III, four-fifths had been wholly or partially repealed. The thing to be observed here is that this negative method of simple repeal left free scope for the sanative processes of natural law in dealing with all manner of social dislocations and disabilities. These processes are slow and usually painful, and impatience with them leads to popular demand that the government should step in and anticipate them by positive statutory intervention when anything goes wrong. The Liberals were aware that no one, least of all the "practical" politician, can foresee the ultimate effects, or even all the collateral effects, of such interventions, or can calculate the force of their political momentum. Thus it regularly happens that they bring about ultimate evils which are not only far more serious than the specific evils which they were meant to remedy, but are also wholly unexpected. American legislative history in the last two decades shows any number of conspicuous instances where the political shortcut of positive intervention has been taken towards remedying a present evil at the most reckless expense of future good. The Prohibition Amendment is perhaps the most conspicuous of these instances.

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century British Liberals turned their backs upon their historical principles and gave support to a series of coercive measures, continuously increasing both in number and particularity, from the poor-laws, the Factory Acts, and the subvention of school house building in the 'thirties, down to the proposals set forth in the Beveridge Report of last year. It is hardly possible to conceive of a more complete volte-face on fundamental doctrine. Three circumstances bearing on this change may be noticed.

First, the period from the third quarter of the eighteenth century to the second of the nineteenth was one of wars; and as always in a war period, it was one of savage governmental coercions of all kinds. As always, again, the general structure of society reverted from the more advanced type contemplated by Liberalism, the type marked by voluntary cooperation, to the more primitive type contemplated by Toryism, the type marked by enforced cooperation. The normal development of a society is always from the primitive closely-organised militant type towards the loosely-organised industrial type; that is to say, from organisation in mass to organisation in group. Hence this mutation of type was a retrogression; and in consequence, as invariably happens, the mind and spirit of the people underwent a considerable readjustment. From their adjustment to the terms of pre-war "liberty of the subject," they became largely readjusted to the terms of a slave-status.

Second, as is usually the case, the period almost immediately succeeding the period of war was one of great general distress and serious civil disturbances. "The Hungry 'Forties" was on its way to become a by-word. This state of things brought heavy pressure on the government; and the pressure for positive interventions of one kind and another was much increased by the readjustment just now mentioned. To understand the attitude of Liberals in these premises, one must keep clearly in mind the fact that nothing is more natural than to regard a remedied evil as an accomplished good, and to forget entirely the all-important differentiation of the means by which the good was accomplished; and therefore to conclude that the thing to be aimed at is the direct accomplishment of a present good, or what it presumed to be a good, rather than the consistent employment of a means contemplating far larger measures of ultimate good.

Thus it was natural for Liberals to say, "The government intervened to accomplish that great good, and that and that; why should it not intervene to accomplish this and this?" The cardinal fact that in the one case the intervention was negative while in the other it must be positive, was lost sight of or disregarded. The questions of principle which early Liberalism would address to any proposal of intervention were no longer put; the only questions now put were those of expediency and practicability. In this way the later Liberalism progressively abetted the lapse of British society into a mode of State-servitude quite as rigid and unconditional as the mode contemplated by Toryism, and marked by far greater particularity.

Third, the later Liberalism was confirmed in its digression by the spread of a new doctrine of society fathered by Bentham in England and on the Continent by Comte. This doctrine made a slight side-approach to Toryism in holding that society is the unit of ultimate value; rather than the individual, as early Liberalism had held; hence "the greatest good to the greatest number" is the thing to be aimed at, for the individual will find his greatest advantage and happiness in a society controlled by this principle. The consequent justification of expediency is obvious; and the extent to which the later Liberalism has been affected by Benthamite doctrine is well known.

Passing now to consideration of Liberalism and Liberals in the United States, there is hardly anything to be said which is not clearly implicit in the foregoing. We once had a short-lived political party led by Henry Clay and known as Whigs, but it had nothing in common with British Whiggism. It was formed in opposition to Jackson's stand on the National Bank and on nullification, and took the name of Whig only as an anti-Roosevelt party today might do. It came into power in 1840 for four years, and went to pieces some ten years later.

Liberalism in this country never had a political organisation, nor has it ever had anything in common with earlier British Liberalism. It was never formulated in definite terms, even according to the broad original British formula which defined a Liberal as "one who advocates greater freedom from restraint, especially in political institutions." Thus it has had no tradition, unless one might say that it has perhaps come more or less into the degenerate British Liberal tradition of Benthamite and Comtist expediency; but this is no doubt a matter of coincidence rather than design.

Hence we see that those who call themselves Liberals proceed on no fixed principles whatever, and their action in any given premises is notoriously unpredictable. Their title is usually self-chosen, in virtue of an interest in some one special enfranchising or humanitarian cause like freeing slaves, universal suffrage, "social security," improving the conditions of labour, raising the status of Negroes. This interest is often exclusive; the absence of fixed principle is apparent in the Liberal's active opposition to other causes which stand on a logical footing with the cause he favours; as when, for example, many Liberals were rabidly against withholding the suffrage from Negroes and equally against giving it to women.

But the determining factor in the honest Liberal's attitude is his indifference towards the essential nature of the means employed to further the cause in which he is interested. There is here no implication against the honest Liberal's moral

character. Nor is there an implied charge that he is acting in black ignorance of history; the charge is only one of stark incompetence with history. Having all history to guide him, he nevertheless fails to look beyond the immediate effect producible by a measure bearing on his cause, and thus fails to see that the ultimate sum-total of effect may be to produce a much worse state of things than the one which it was meant to remedy, and perhaps did remedy.

I have purposely refrained from illustration, since any one with ordinary knowledge of history can readily supply a dozen for every point I have raised. I shall make one here, however, partly to clear the point of the last paragraph, and partly as in a general way typical.

Twelve years ago, when a government made up of professing Liberals proposed a largescale positive bureaucratic intervention to relieve distress, and by use of the taxing-power brought all citizens into enforced cooperation with it, Liberals were in favour of it. They regarded only the immediate end — the relief of distress—and not at all the nature of the means; and the means did actually serve that end, though in a most disorderly and wasteful fashion.

The true Liberal, the Liberal of the eighteenth century, would at once have looked beyond that end and asked the great primary question which finally judges, or should judge, all political action: “What type of social structure does this measure tend to produce? Does it tend to improve and reinforce the existing type, or to bring about a reversion to the primary militant type? Does it tend towards advance or retrogression, towards progress in civilisation or towards re-barbarisation?” Let us take the measure apart, and see.

The subordinate questions would then follow: “Will this measure increase the government’s coercive power over the individual and widen its scope?” Clearly so. “Will it, through taxation, confiscate social power and convert it into State power?” Yes, to an incalculable extent. “Will it diminish voluntary cooperation and increase compulsory cooperation?” Yes, greatly. “Are the directions and the driving force of this measure’s political momentum at all determinable?” No, not even a conjecture is worth making.

If the true Liberal had subjected the proposed relief-measure to these tests twelve years ago, he would have said at once, “This is in no sense a Liberal measure. There is not a suggestion of Liberalism anywhere in it. On the contrary, it exactly meets every specification laid down by the most hide-bound Toryism, and for that reason I oppose it.”

This illustration brings us in sight of reasons why the self-styled Liberal of the present day vehemently defames the representatives of historic Liberalism. But we should make a distinction here by leaving out of account those who are Liberals for revenue only; those of the rice-Christian kind, who take this title with a view to personal gain, as a convenience for getting political jobs, prestige as journalists, essayists, commentators, prestige in one-or-another order of society, or for acquiring some other modicum of advancement or distinction. Such as these meet opposition by the political method technically known as smearing; that is, by applying terms which are irrelevant to the matter in hand, and which are therefore neither descriptive nor meant to be so, but are merely terms of opprobrium. Terms such as Fascist, Naziist, economic royalist, antiSemite, are now conspicuously the property of persons who call themselves Liberals for the sake of personal profit, as rigger-trader and rigger-lover were a century ago, and as bolshevik was in the days following the Russian revolution. Such persons obviously stand outside any serious discussion of Liberalism.

Another order of persons, quite in the majority, style themselves Liberals in all good faith, but being ignorant of Liberalism’s principles and history, they understand neither what they say nor whereof they affirm. They conceive of themselves as on the side of progress, enlightenment, a larger measure of welfare and happiness all round, and they regard the content of Liberalism as made up of whatever matters seem compatible with this view. Whether or not they are actually compatible with Liberalism can be determined only by analysis, which they do not attempt to make. To them, whatever social or political end attracts their allegiance is a Liberal desideratum; and whatever means will attain it is, by consequence, a Liberal means.

These usually, and in quite good faith, meet opposition by attributing to the opponent opinions which he does not hold; opinions perhaps which he has often openly disavowed. In my own case, for example, an old friend, a member of the Administration and a self-styled Liberal (but of this second order) describes me as an anarchist because I hold to the theory of government maintained by the eighteenth-century British Liberals, by Mr. Jefferson and Thomas Paine. Nothing could be in

more violent contrast with the spirit and temper of the early Liberals. They and the Tories each at least knew what the other's opinions and principles were, and could state them in specific terms. My friend, I regret to say, is wholly ignorant of both.

Again, this ignorance sometimes leads to conclusions prejudicial to an opponent's character; and in a time of popular excitement it quite regularly does so; and I repeat, in all good faith. Here also I may take my own case by way of example. When I questioned the policy of governmental poor relief twelve years ago, on sound Liberal principles, I was met with the question, "But would you let Americans starve?"; and as it happened, the question was pressed hardest on me by persons who called themselves Liberals. As professing Liberals, it meant nothing to them that the exigency clearly called for the application of social power, not governmental power; that there was plenty of social power available, and plenty of social agencies available for its distribution; and that a Liberal government's duty was to stimulate and encourage this application, but not in any way to supplant or supplement it.

I think that now, in the main, the anomalies which are the subject of this inquiry have been accounted for. Enough has been said to show how and why it is that persons calling themselves Liberals are now, many in good faith, some in despicably bad faith, advocating a coercive totalitarian type of government, a recession from the advanced type to the primitive, from the more nearly civilised to the more nearly barbarous; and are also denouncing as reactionary and anti-social those who adhere to the historical principles of Liberalism.