



## Embrace and Promote the Liberal Spirit

**Abstract** In this chapter a third kind of counterstrategy against populism is presented and discussed, namely, to embrace and promote the liberal spirit. Building on the tradition from von Humboldt and Mill, I argue that it is possible to develop a liberal politics of recognition and identity that gives credit to the different lifestyles and conceptions of a good life that characterize a liberal society. Such politics could offer emancipation, meaning, and community, a sense of purpose and belonging, and human flourishing in a broad sense. In addition, the need for a liberal collective legitimizing identity and for liberal narratives are discussed.

**Keywords** Counterstrategy against populism · The liberal spirit · Liberal identity politics · Human flourishing · Communitarian critique · Liberal institutions · Liberal narratives

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A third major type of counterstrategy to fight back against the populists is to develop and embrace the less often emphasized dimension or facet of classical liberalism, namely the spirit of liberalism. Rational arguments and facts for how to improve institutional arrangements and the functioning of the liberal economy and society are not likely to be able to do the full job. As already Aristotle argued, to persuade you need to convince the audience in three different areas: *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*. *Logos* concerns rational argumentation; *pathos* appeals to emotions; and *ethos* emphasizes the importance of character. Liberals should become better to appeal to *pathos* and *ethos*. As Jonatan Mercer observes, often “feeling is believing because people use emotions as evidence” (Mercer, 2010: 1).

In Chapter 5 I argued humans have a quest for meaning and community that populism has exploited through a collectivistic identity politics. Most people are seeking meaning and want to engage in purposes that give fulfillment. They also have a quest for community and belonging. And many devote their lives to forming their character and developing virtues that contribute to human flourishing. It should be possible to advance a liberal politics of recognition that gives credit to the different lifestyles and conceptions of a good life that characterizes a liberal society. Such politics could offer emancipation, meaning, and community, a sense of purpose and belonging, and human flourishing in a broad sense, that should be attractive to large parts of society.

The populist collectivistic identity politics is based on antagonism and constructed existential enemies that appeal to the tribal mind of many people. As argued in Chapter 4, such an intuitive part of the human psyche is a latent trait of human psychology. In the terminology of Kahneman, these more intuitive systems can take over the rational, slower, effortful, and more controlled system, making us use different simplifying heuristics, such as the ones populism offers. Latent tribal instincts may be activated, and subversive conspiracies may even develop into “parasites of mind”. This deliberate polarization of society is at the core of populist identity politics. It is also a politics that in the long run may undermine social norms and virtues.

This means that liberals need to take on the challenging work to explain why and how a liberal system is superior, not only in terms of economic outcomes, but to a good society in more general terms, emotionally and character-wise, including the recognition of different lifestyles, cultures, and identities, i.e., with an appeal to *pathos* and *ethos*.

## MEANING, COMMUNITY, AND VIRTUE IN A LIBERAL SOCIETY

Liberalism may seem to lack an identity politics. But as shall be argued, this is not necessarily so. It would be a politics of pluralism and tolerance, that recognizes the value of different personal, social, and normative identities, and equal dignity and respect. This is where the spirit of liberalism comes in. A core idea in liberalism is that every individual should have the right to decide over his or her own life, her identity, what is meaningful, which communities to belong to, and to develop her character and virtues. There is an important liberal tradition, at least from Wilhelm von Humboldt and John Stuart Mill and onwards, that argues that the perhaps most important argument in favor of a liberal society is that it is a prerequisite to individual self-development and human flourishing.

Many liberals thus believe that self-development, not to be confused with selfishness, is one of the most important values or goals of such a liberal society. In *The Limits of State Action* Wilhelm von Humboldt (1969 [1852]: 16), written already in 1791–1792, argued that:

The true end of Man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal and immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. Freedom is the first and indispensable condition that the possibility of such a development presupposes.

Similarly, developing one's abilities to the fullest, according to John Stuart Mill, should be the goal of human endeavor. In *On Liberty* (1859 [1975]: 56) he emphasized that:

Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself.

Mill also famously argued that some projects are more worthy than others and that liberty is needed precisely to find out what is valuable in life – we learn about the good. This is how the right to liberty promotes the good.

Both also emphasized that self-development was not only dependent on liberty but also on a pluralistic society—the consequence of liberty—where different experiences and examples of how to live exist. And both Humboldt and Mill, again, argued that education was a prerequisite to human flourishing. Moreover, self-development involved the development of character and sociability, something that also would benefit

society at large (Mautner, 2020; Valls, 1999). In the terminology used in a Chapter 5, this means that they argued that meaning, community, and virtue would flourish in a liberal society.

In the last decades, there has been a renewed interest in Aristotelian virtue ethics and human flourishing, in general, but also in the relationship between liberalism and human flourishing. One of the best examples from a classical liberal perspective is Douglas B. Rasmussen's and Douglas J. Den Uyl's *Norms of liberty: a perfectionist basis for non-perfectionist politics* (2005) where they argue why individual rights of liberty are prerequisites for moral pluralism and human flourishing understood to be an inclusive, individualized, agent-relative, social, and self-directed activity. On their account, human flourishing is objective, plural and profoundly social. In their view, "individualistic perfectionism," supports liberal, non-perfectionist, or neutral, politics, or a classical liberal state, as described in the last chapter.

Others, such as Joseph Raz, in the *Morality of Freedom* (1986), defend an autonomy-based perfectionism. A good life is that of autonomous persons creating their own lives through progressive choices from a multitude of valuable options. In his view, this makes it legitimate for the state to seek to promote the conditions for individual autonomy, or if you want, self-development or even human flourishing. Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, on their hand, discuss the importance of what they call "basic capabilities" for human flourishing (Nussbaum, 2011). These are the capabilities that they argue should be secured by the state and fairly distributed to support human flourishing. None of these latter authors thus do defend a totally neutral state, and at least Sen and Nussbaum cannot be considered to be classical liberals. But again, classical liberals themselves disagree about the exact limits of state action when it comes to measures to support a decent and cohesive society. Concerning human flourishing, however, most would agree that education, skills development, and perhaps also basic health care have key roles.

### A POLITICS OF TOLERANCE, RECOGNITION, AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

From these perspectives on human flourishing, a more elaborate classical liberal identity politics could be developed to be part of the answer for how to fight back against the populists. Such a liberal politics of recognition could provide a liberal ethos or spirit that gives credit and respect to the different identities, lifestyles, and conceptions of a good life that characterizes a liberal society.

Such identity politics is a politics of pluralism of personal and social identities. Importantly, it is a politics that respects and recognizes the diverse ways people choose to live their lives. The classical liberal institutions provide the necessary framework for individual self-development, meaning, community, and virtue, where people themselves can find out what is valuable. Without freedom and pluralism, it is not possible to learn from experience and the example of others. Neither is it possible to find opportunities of doing and engage in meaningful projects that have a purpose, some mission, or cause. In such a society family, friends, and clubs in civil society, moreover, provide communities that form the basis for social cohesion and social norms, which also may be supported by policies that support social mobility. And without individual liberty, it is hard to see how individuals could develop their character and virtue. The liberal rights protect the conditions under which individuals can pursue their flourishing, but they do not, of course, guarantee success.

It is fundamental, thus, to distinguish between the classical liberal institutional requirements and the results of these procedures. In markets and civil society, individuals can pursue their own goals without being subservient to centralized political authority. People can even pursue mutually contradictory purposes and values, without being restricted by some majority view. As put by Kymlicka (1989), liberals argue for the right of moral independence not because our goals are arbitrary, but precisely because our goals can be wrong, and because we can revise and improve them.

The communitarians philosophers mentioned in the last chapter argued that liberalism is excessively individualistic and atomistic, and not only lacks an understanding of the importance of the social foundation that communities and collective belonging provide for virtues and a good life but also that liberalism undermines the kind of identity that defines a good society. They argue that the self, the identity of a person, always is embedded or situated and that liberals have a too limited view of what an individual is. This may well be true of some economists within the neo-classical tradition, liberal or not, at least in their economic models, where an individual is nothing else than a preference function that should be maximized. The same goes for the narrow Randian conception of human motivation. There may also have been a one-sidedness by liberals on the necessary procedural or institutional requirements of a liberal society, such as the rule of law, pluralism, constitutional democracy, and limited government. But it is a mistake to think that liberals do not understand

that identities are socially embedded. As emphasized above, liberalism is more than its procedures.

The communitarians have addressed this kind of critique against the procedural theory of justice of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971) where he uses an abstract and stylized "original position", in a similar way as Locke and Kant, to derive his principles of justice. However, what they tend to forget is that this position where the individual is stripped of many of his or her real-world characteristics, is just a construct, a model, used to ensure impartiality (Karlson, 1993 [2002, 2017]) and to identify morally relevant aspects (Fairfield, 2000) for political principles, not for society at large. Rawls himself had a broad understanding of the importance of the social embeddedness of the individual:

No doubt even the concepts that we use to describe our plans and situation, and even to give voice to our personal wants and purposes, often presuppose a social wetting as well as a system of belief and thought that are the outcome of the collective efforts of a long tradition. (Rawls 1971: 522)

As I will argue below, in a similar way as Fairfield (2000), classical liberals have no problems with accepting that individuals are socially embedded or that they form identities based on meaning, community and virtue. In fact, it is the institutional structure of liberal society that makes such identities possible. In this sense, in a liberal society, identities emerge as a kind of spontaneous order.

Let us start with meaning. In a liberal, pluralistic society there are ample opportunities for doing and engaging in things that have a purpose, some mission, or cause. As illustrated by Humboldt and Mill above, self-authorship of one's life project, as Tomasi (2012) puts it, is at the heart of liberalism. Such a life project need not be self-interested but can just as often have the ambition to promote causes that are larger than oneself, for example, the development of virtuous behavior, helping others, promoting justice, and contributing to human flourishing, to use the Aristotelian expression.

Another example is entrepreneurship, in which to succeed largely depends on the ability to promote the interests of others – how else can you succeed in markets based on voluntary contracts? As an entrepreneur, you always care about employees, customers, and suppliers; otherwise, you will soon be out of business (Karlson et al., 2015; Storr, 2008).

Perhaps the most meaningful projects in a liberal society are tied to being a parent, having a job, engaging in voluntary organizations of civil society, or having a hobby. Or for that matter, to engage in public discourse and politics to try to improve the institutions of society.

The same is true about community. It is a myth that the individualism of liberalism should be atomistic or anti-community. Family, friends, and clubs provide communities that form the basis for social cohesion and social norms in a pluralistic civil society. To most individuals, this is where their real sense of belonging and identity, purpose in life, pride, and self-esteem is created and upheld. A liberal economist and social philosopher with this perspective was Wilhelm Röpke (1960) who favored a “humane economy” with decentralized decision-making, small communities, and free markets, where moral behavior, virtues, accountability, and personal responsibility would flourish. Notably, he was also critical of the welfare state that he feared would destroy the communities of civil society. Similar arguments are made by Botteke (2021) and McCloskey (2019).

Robert Nisbet (1953), as well as Robert Putnam (1993) and many others, have argued that a dynamic civil society with strong communities, separate from the state, fulfill numerous roles: it makes gives a sense of belonging and community, it creates social capital, it makes cooperation and the production of local public good or club goods possible (Buchanan, 1965), it stimulates responsible behavior and social trust (Uslaner, 2002). Admittedly there may also be communities where family, friends, and clubs promote hierarchical subordination and the like. But what ultimately makes civil society liberal is pluralism and the possibility of exit as an option (if not without costs) (Kukathas, 2003).

The strongest case for a classical liberal identity politics concerns the role of virtues (Berkowitz, 1999). Without individual liberty, it is hard to see how individuals could develop their character and virtues. Without learning from voluntary practical actions and reflection about one’s experiences, and the pluralistic experiences of others, human flourishing is simply not possible, just as many liberal thinkers have argued. Both Humboldt and Mill meant that the value of liberty primarily was that it enabled individuals to develop their character through experience and practical wisdom. The same is true for Rasmussen and Den Uyl referred to above.

## A COLLECTIVE LEGITIMIZING IDENTITY?

What liberalism may seem to have a harder time offering is the sense of collectivist belonging that the populists may provide to their followers. Or what perhaps a Medieval city or society could offer through religion, myths, superstitions, and other non-rational collectivist beliefs, as the communitarians seem to want. Or what paternalistic socialist, conservative, or nationalist welfare states try to offer. Liberals' belief in pluralism, tolerance, and equal rights means that there will be all kinds of different and competing opinions about the good and what a good life is. That is the point of liberty and what a liberal politics of identity is about.

But liberalism may also need a collective legitimizing identity, to use Castells' term (Castells, 2004), to protect itself. All liberals can offer, it may seem, is a kind of collectivist identity based on the liberal institutional framework and procedures themselves, such as the safeguard of liberty, individual rights, the rule of law, and constitutional democracy. This idea has been called constitutional patriotism by Habermas (1996). Müller (2008) has argued that such an attachment is necessary in multicultural societies to enable and uphold a liberal democratic form of rule that free and equal citizens can justify to each other.

Others argue that a kind of liberal nationalism is needed, that individuals need a national identity to lead meaningful, autonomous lives, and that democratic polities need national identity to function properly (Kymlicka, 1995; Miller, 1995; Tamir, 1993). It is thus not an argument only saying that nation-states historically have played a role in establishing liberal institutions, but rather that liberal multicultural democracies polities need a national identity to be sustained. As argued by Tamir (1993), membership in a liberal nation not only involves rights but also special obligations and responsibilities towards each other, obligations that may not apply to non-members.

A consequence of liberal nationalism is that the state may not really be said to be fully neutral anymore to different views of the good life that its citizens may hold. An actual example of this is the French concept of *laïcité*, which originally emerged as a way, similar to the US constitution, to guarantee a strict separation between the state and religion, but that over time has evolved into a concept whose underlying purpose is to secure critical characteristics of French culture, such as banning the wearing of Muslim burkas (Leane, 2011).



A third kind of argument, developed already by Mill, is that liberalism may need a new kind of liberal religion, which he calls “the religion of humanity”, to sustain the virtues, values, and beliefs that a liberal society needs to be sustained (Mill, 1969). Even someone like Buchanan, a professed atheist, has approved of a similar idea. In the paper titled “The Soul of Classical liberalism”, already mentioned above, he refers to the need for a “classical-liberal predisposition” and defines it as “an attitude in which others are viewed as moral equals and thereby deserving of equal respect, consideration and ultimately equal treatment” (Buchanan, 2005: 101).

In my view, it is the liberal spirit, and its emphasis on human flourishing, the third dimension of liberalism presented above, rather than religion or nationalism, formulated as a classical liberal identity politics that could offer such a collective legitimizing identity. What liberals can offer is a sense of belonging to an open, prosperous, and pluralistic society, a culture where people tolerate, respect, enjoy and recognize the different values, lifestyles, and conceptions of the good of others and themselves. It is a society that celebrates science, free speech, and rational discourse. It is not a utopia, but to defend liberalism in this broad sense against the populist threat is undoubtedly a meaningful cause that is larger than the individual herself. It is a cause that should have the potential to mobilize a critical mass of support against infringements of freedom. It is also a cause that is more inclusive, more encompassing, and more sustainable in the long run than the collectivistic identity that the populists pretend to offer.

To achieve the support of this is of course easier said than done. For classical liberalism to create reasonable collective legitimizing identity would at least require liberal narratives.

### CREATE LIBERAL NARRATIVES

An important counterstrategy against the populists is thus also to create more and better narratives of why and how liberalism and liberal institutions contribute to a good society. This would need to be narratives that combine ethos, pathos, and logos.

There is a need to revive and create liberal narratives that not only support markets and wealth creation, but that also cherish civil society and the liberal spirit in all its dimensions. These narratives need to be inclusive, rather than divisive and show how individuals and other actors

in markets and civil society can flourish in liberal societies. They need to embrace tolerance and equal respect for others, despite differing views about the good.

Deirdre McCloskey (2016, 2019) and others have made an excellent job of explaining how classical liberal ideas, virtues, institutions, and policies have contributed to, what she has termed, *The Great Enrichment*. But it is just as important to explain how classical liberalism has contributed to what may be called *The Great Emancipation*. Liberalism is essentially just that, a story of liberation for the many. Or even better *The Great Flourishing*, of how the classical liberal ideas, institutions, and spirit have contributed to human flourishing.

A narrative is basically a story, a series of related events or experiences. It is a way of presenting connected events to tell a good story. Narratives normally have a certain structure comprised of actors, events, plot, time, setting, and space. It connects apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

The populist strategy, rhetorical style, and discursive frame with the ‘us-versus-them’ logic is of course a narrative, constructed to create polarization and support for autocratization. In the words of postmodernists and critical theorists, it is a metanarrative or grand narrative, that claims to explain economic, social, and political developments and to create meaning by connecting disperse events and phenomena. It is not about facts, but about emotions, resentment, and fear. It serves to delegitimize liberalism, modernity, and the ideas of the Enlightenment.

History, however, is full of real-world stories and actual liberal narratives of the emancipation of ordinary people. Examples are the abolition of serfdom and slavery, as well the fight for Jewish emancipation and the women’s liberation movement. During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries liberalism became the preeminent reform movement in Europe, combining liberal rights and the opening of free markets. For example, Adam Smith not only supported free trade and free markets but also attacked serfdom and slavery.

From the last quarter of the eighteenth century into the second half of the nineteenth century, emancipation brought an end to serfdom in all European states, but Hungary and Russia as late as the 1860s. Brazil became the last nation in the Americas to abolish slavery in 1888, and it may still exist in parts of Africa and the Middle East (Eltis et al., 2017). Similar, long-term processes, combing active support for equal rights and market-driven change, largely fits the history of Jewish emancipation

(Sorkin, 2019) and the women's emancipation movement (Evans, 1977; Paletschek and Pietrow-Ennker, 2003). Liberals should devote more time and energy to developing these and similar processes into narratives.

Today history is seldom written from a classical liberal perspective. As argued Douma and Magness (2018), classical liberals represent a small minority among academic history departments, which tend to be dominated by Marxist, postmodernist, critical theorist, or conservative schools. Consequently, the importance of liberal ideas and institutions, and perhaps in particular free markets (Hayek, 1954), tend largely to be unappreciated when history is taught and written.

In more popular culture—in movies and novels—the situation is similar, even though there are exceptions that come to mind. For example, we have classics that make us understand totalitarians systems way better than most academic attempts, like *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler, *The Trial* by Franz Kafka, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, *Animal Farm* and *1984* by George Orwell, and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, just to mention a few.

While several of these books have been made into movies, just as Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series that also deals with tyranny, there are other movie narratives that capture the spirit of classical liberalism's strive for liberty and emancipation, like George Lucas' *Star Wars* and J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Ring* series, the later of course first published as novels.

But none of them fully explain the benefits and the human flourishing of a liberal order. The same is largely true for the novels of Ayn Rand, but for a slightly different reason. While doing a good job at exposing the negative effects of collectivist ideas, her conception of human motivation and development is, in my view, way too narrow and self-oriented to fit the understanding of human flourishing presented above.

Hence, there is work to be done for the defenders of liberty, and not only politicians but just as important actors in markets and civil society, in media, gaming, universities, and cultural institutions. Liberalism needs heroes, stories of emancipation and flourishing, and epic narratives of hope that capture the imagination, and that also show that populism is a tragedy.

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