THE LIBERAL HERESY

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Origins and Historical Development

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CONTENTS

Foreword	xi
An heretical experience	xi
The theme	xii
Apologies	xiv
Introduction	1
Aim of the book	1
Random references to political liberalism today	4
A declining but still influential 'ism'	5
Expanding radical authoritarianism	8
Three points concerning approach	9
(a) Method	9
(b) Inner convictions versus outer conditions	10
(c) Causation	11
Liberalism and liberty's essential role	12
The birthplace of liberalism	13
1. Liberalism: a Definition	16
An 'ism' is ideas and institutions	16
A wide range of meanings	17
The search for the common denominator	19
The evidence provided by acting together in a movement	20
A social order founded on individual autonomy	22
Liberty	22
The problem of diversity	24
Liberalism as <i>equal liberty</i>	25
Four other key elements	26
(a) Reasonableness	27
(b) The dignity of the individual	27
(c) Moral equality	28
(d) Tolerance	29
Liberty for non-liberals	29
The <i>optimum</i> is not the <i>maximum</i>	30

Liberalism and anarchism	32
Centrifugal pull: moderatism and progressivism	33
Frontiers of liberalism	34
2. Liberal Institutions	36
Priority of the political	36
Self-government	37
Suffrage	38
Liberal constitutionalism	39
Fear of the mob and 'bourgeois' democracy	40
The priority of inalienable rights over the will of the majority	42
Liberal democracy	43
The rule of law	45
The rule of law benefits all	46
Liberalism is not permissiveness	46
Liberalism shifts the source of power from above to below	47
Unchanging method to achieve ever-changing goals	48
National sovereignty	49
Institutional pillars	50
Liberal concern with education	51
Repressiveness of most educational systems	52
Liberal 'new education'	53
Property	54
Free enterprise	55
Beyond the economic <i>optimum</i>	56
Liberals' reformed free enterprise	58
The welfare economy	59
3. A Long and Difficult Journey	60
Liberty as burden	60
Authoritarian orthodoxy and liberal heresy	61
The awareness of reason	62
The beginning of philosophy, history and science	63
Law and Romans	64
Law divorced from religion	65
A unique religion	67
The nominalistic heresy	68
The dignity of man	69
A radical revolution	70
Facing God	71
The emancipation of minds	72
Progressivism and obscurantism	73
The advance of science	74

CONTENTS

vii

Freedom of expression	75
Fortuitous success of liberalism's political forebears	76
The greatest heresy, tolerance	77
Seven major steps	79
4. The Liberal Era: (i) Where English is Spoken	80
A common source for English-speaking nations	80
The Whig century in Great Britain	81
Whiggism: an attitude and a programme	82
Dynamism and achievements belonging to citizens, not to the state	84
Growing differentiation	85
The Liberal century in Great Britain	86
The Liberal state advantages all, not Liberals only	87
The ethical core of the Liberal century	89
Towards equality within liberty	90
From an empire to a commonwealth	92
Liberalism with a small 'l' survives Liberalism with a capital 'L'	93
West and East: beyond Whiggism	94
Towards 1776: meeting houses and stockades instead of palaces, cathedrals and fortresses	95
1776 and 1787: liberal constitutionalism	95
The parting of the ways: moderatism and progressivism	97
American liberalism	98
Liberal democracy strongly entrenched	99
Variety makes for richness of life	101
Concrete problems	102
Regulation of free enterprise	103
In the black	104
The main failure	106
Some successes	107
Liberalism in other English-speaking nations and communities	109
English-speaking nations and communities in which liberalism has failed	112
5. The Liberal Era: (ii) Continental Europe	115
The Continent	115
Continental liberalism	116
The eighteenth century: prelude to the liberal era	118
The authoritarian road to progress	119
The anti-authoritarian road	120
1789	121

The intelligentsia comes into its own	122
The radicals' revolt against liberalism	124
Jacobins	125
An old ideology in modern clothing	127
Jacobinism as the source of twentieth-century totalitarianism	128
In the wake of 1789	130
Post-Napoleonic course of continental liberalism	131
Continental liberals as an influential minority	133
The political realignment of the 1870s	133
Towards liberal democracy	134
The sin of pride	135
Sins of greed and fury	137
The sin of arrogance	139
Liberal decline after the First World War	141
Short-lived freedom in 'successor' states	142
West of 'successor' states	144
On the road to liberal socialism	148
Lay and confessional conservatism veer towards liberal moderatism	151
Elements of weakness	152
6. Liberalism in Latin America, Eastern Civilisations and the Arabian/African Region	154
Latin America: independence with little liberty	154
<i>Oligarchia</i>	155
Slow beginning of emancipation	157
Onward	158
Backward	159
'Oriental despotism' in eastern civilisations	162
Russia's closed society	163
The Russian 'thaw' of the 1860s	164
1917: the tragic failure of liberalism	165
Turkish progressivism	167
The 'closed' continent closes again	169
Japan: a question mark for liberals	172
Indians try liberal democracy	174
The other Indies in the East	177
From the Euphrates to the Orange River: independence and dictatorship	178
7. Success brings Failure	183
The impact of liberalism	183
The liberals' democracy	184

CONTENTS

ix

Liberals suppress slavery	185
Escape from despotism	186
The breaching of the intellectual dyke	187
The breaching of economic dykes	189
Towards equality	191
Emancipation of half the population	194
Humanitarianism	195
The independence of nations	197
Internationalism	199
Pluses	200
Adverse effects of the release of energies	201
Flooding the earth	203
Responsibility: a burden for many	204
The mote and the beam	205
Liberalism's Achilles' heel	206
8. Conclusion	210
Purgatory	210
Guidance versus spontaneity	211
Liberals' and socialists' mutual ambivalence	212
Liberty erodes conservatism	216
'Making overmuch of liberty'	217
49 B.C., A.D. 1434, . . . ?	218
<i>Bibliographical note</i>	220
<i>Selective index—glossary</i>	230

To Joyce

to whom I owe more than I can say
this book is dedicated

FOREWORD

AN HERETICAL EXPERIENCE

A civilisation was born in modern times in the midst of turmoil and suffering. Its beginnings were modest. Although resented by most people much of the time nearly everywhere, for a few generations it affected all mankind, and transformed most of it. Now, in the midst of greater turmoil and of tensions unendurable for many, limited to a small minority of independent states belonging primarily to the First World, passionately attacked at all levels from all sides, it is losing ground; this is why the book has been written.

The autonomy and responsibility of individuals, and the choices they made, were central to the civilisation: not the rights of society and the state, not guidance by rulers who know what is good for everybody. With power deriving from the freely expressed and ever-changing will of the citizens, the relationship between people and state was reversed institutionally. Contrary to what happened everywhere in the past, and happens today in Second and Third World civilisations and in illiberal states of the First, goals and policies mattered less than the way goals were pursued and decisions about policies taken.

A radical departure from the age-old orthodoxy of authoritarian and conformist societies (nearly as dominant in the world today as it once was), this civilisation has been heretical both at the level of ideas and of institutions — of spiritual and practical activities. It reduced repression, and in consequence there came expansion and advancement in all fields of endeavour. This was the credit side. Minds and expression being freer than ever before, awareness of remaining repression increased, bringing unhappiness; action being freer, tensions increased. This was the debit side.

The driving force of the new civilisation was a striving for liberty — for the right and duty to be not just a unit in the herd but oneself. It took a long time to clarify the ideas implicit in the striving, and to decide through what institutions the ideas could become a way of life. A long period elapsed before clear ideas were held by enough

people to become a political force. Once they did, they gave direction to a movement which, successful in the revolutions of 1688, 1776 and 1789, established the institutional structure later described as 'liberal'.

THE THEME

This book deals with the movement leading to the three revolutions, and to many kindred ones in all continents — some successful for long or short periods, others not — which occurred from the 1790s to the 1970s. Early revolutionaries summed up their position in the British Bill of Rights, the French Declaration of Rights, the American Ten Amendments, in statutes substituting for constitutions and in written constitutions, and in slogans such as the 'free and equal' of the second revolution, 'liberty, equality, fraternity' of the third. Liberalism is the movement of those who drafted Bill, Declaration and Amendments, who approved statutes and constitutions, who used the slogans, who replaced servile institutions with free institutions. What they had in common mattered more in humanity's historical scheme than what divided them. Today, conflicts between advocates and opponents of free institutions are what matter, not dissensions between progressive and moderate advocates of the same institutions, or antagonisms between different factions of opponents.

The goal of the forerunners of liberalism, and of liberals since the term came into use in its ideological—political meaning, was emancipation: immediate emancipation of minds from dogmas and superstitions, and of citizens from despotism. In time, liberals hoped, there would result emancipation from disease, ignorance, poverty, discrimination and war. Emancipation meant an institutional structure within which people would decide what direction to move in, if they wanted to move. It meant means to achieve ends, not specific ends. The institutional structure has been known as 'liberal constitutional', if suffrage was limited, 'liberal democratic' if suffrage was universal. (Inappropriately because of the varied meanings of democracy, many, particularly in North America, call the institutional structure democratic *tout court*. Unswervingly centred on liberty, Scandinavian-type social democracy, enriched with institutions promoting justice, belongs to the liberal family.)

The original liberties were freedom of expression (worshipping openly according to one's conscience, saying and printing what one wanted) and political freedom (the free election of those who make laws and supervise their application), both being meaningful when

several requirements are fulfilled. These two and none other are liberalism's essential liberties; these and none other provide the criterion distinguishing a free society from an authoritarian one. Important, but not essential on the basis of long-standing evidence, is economic liberty, correctly understood as institutions facilitating changes in economic structures, including the passage from one economic system to another (and not to be identified, as is mistakenly done by many, with capitalism, a by-product in continual transformation of the drive for emancipation, now largely replaced by mixed welfare economies). The two essential liberties interest all and have no sectional, or class, connotation.

Within the relative security of liberal constitutional and, more recently, liberal democratic states, emancipation expressed itself in new ideas, aspirations and movements. Some strengthened the institutional structure and improved it, others aimed at destroying it. Different from the traditional authoritarian forces against which liberals had struggled, new enemies of liberty ranged from dictatorial sectors of radical revolutionarism at the end of the eighteenth century, to dictatorial sectors of today's liberation movements — which would play a liberal role if to the pursuit of specific goals of emancipation they did not add the obliteration of freedom of expression and of political liberty, and of everything making them meaningful.

One set of enemies nearly won in the early 1940s. They were held together by frenzied nationalistic conviction of their own superiority. Another set of enemies is gaining ground in all continents today. Its unifying element is hatred of capitalism — for most of its opponents a vague term covering everything they are against. Their hatred is reinforced by the conviction that they are agents of laws immanent in society, the laws in turn justifying any action one engages in. This hatred is more and more an obsession in ever-widening circles of the intelligentsia, the dynamic minority now guiding mankind. What was essential in emancipation — freedom of the mind to explore and blaze new trails, to create and to invent, freedom to share one's convictions with others, institutions centred on self-government to guarantee these freedoms, respect for others, legitimacy of opposition and dissent — is all dismissed as futile, harmful, or a dream. To eliminate malignant economic growths, the whole liberal-democratic structure and the ideas and values on which it rests, are to be eliminated. Once liberty of the mind and political liberty are lost, they may remain lost — forever. Mankind may revert in its entirety to the authoritarianism and conformity of the pre-liberal past. Whatever the wave of the future may be, it behoves one to be aware of what the liberal heresy is, and how it came about.

APOLOGIES

In other times, the title of this book might have been: ‘An Introduction to the Study of Liberalism, its Nature, and its Historical Development in Modern Times as an Ideological—Political Force’. This is what the book is. As an introduction, it is necessarily incomplete; by synthesising it contains the margin of error unavoidable in all generalisations and simplifications; as a history it can be no more than a survey. On the three counts it falls short of scientific precision. In justification, it can be said that a subject alien to the consciousness of many requires an introduction and that, didactically, synthesis and survey precede analysis and detailed study of specific developments.

The index—glossary (page 230) provides brief definitions of terms to which various meanings are attached (e.g. ‘imperialism’) or which are not in common use (e.g. ‘centrist socialism’). The use of capitals has been restricted; in some cases it is self-explanatory (‘Continent’, for instance, is the European continental area of Western civilisation, and ‘Liberal party’ is a specific party of that name). There are many names of individuals, largely in order to compensate for the often misleading simplification of general terms: the impersonal Free Democrats, for instance, does not give the idea of inner tensions, outer pressures, complexity of positions and problems personified in Heuss or Scheel. Footnotes have been dispensed with, as academically pretentious in an introductory survey.

There are a few more points. In this book, liberalism is seen in the context of global developments, not just Western ones; this changes the perspective. What among five or six hundred million Westerners is obvious and ‘natural’ is neither obvious nor natural among the world’s four thousand millions. In the second place, while books on ideological—political positions called ‘isms’ mainly deal with goals, programmes and policies, a book on liberalism deals primarily with what makes goals, programmes and policies possible — that is to say with the basic institutional structure. Thirdly, little reference is made here to the economic side of liberalism or other ‘isms’. This is not because of lack of awareness of economic problems and of the obsessive interest in them (this writer’s doctoral thesis and much of his subsequent writing has been in the field of political economy) but because the role of economics matters less than the role of ideas (for instance, not an economic problem *per se* moves people to action, but the idea they have of the problem) and of politics, or management of society’s institutional structure. Finally, as the mind is an imperfect (albeit marvellous) instrument and all faculties are limited,

any phenomenon — in this book, liberalism — is perceived somewhat incorrectly; what one can, and should do, is to be as correct as possible — and to stress, unequivocally and everywhere, the freedom of thought and of expression which only can reduce inaccuracies.

San Tommaso, Capodarco, Italy
March 1977