

Liberalism, Modernity, and Its Discontents

Introduction

The question of how people of faith should think about what is often called "liberalism" is a subject for debate today. Many Christians regard liberalism and modernity more generally as essentially incompatible with Judeo-Christian thought and tradition.

Objectives: (1) outline the central premises of this claim, (2) challenge these premises, and (3) provide an alternative perspective about how to think about liberal order.

Caveats

1. None of the questions raised by conservative critics of liberal order are out of bounds.
2. I'm not going to address every single critique of liberalism.
3. I'm not going to engage in a line-by-line critique of specific authors.
4. The sheer ambiguity associated with the word "liberalism." We need to look at the adjective is being attached to the word "liberal." We need to consider whether the critique is really one of modernity, and that in turn means the various Enlightenments.

Part One - Liberalism in the dock

1. Liberalism is understood primarily as an ideology that emphasizes free choice and individuality at the expense of community and the value of solidarity.
2. Adherents of this liberal ideology, they say, use state power to further their vision of humanity.
3. Conservative critics of liberalism have strong reservations about the market economy.
4. The critique of liberalism embodies a highly negative view of the various Enlightenments.
5. The critique of liberalism is associated with a critique of America.
6. The conservative anti-liberal critique is characterized by a range of possible solutions to what its proponents see as its liberalism's negative effects upon society.

Part Two - Weaknesses of the Anti-Liberal Critique

Not everything said by the conservative anti-liberals is wrong. But . . .

1. There are some significant problems with what might be called their genealogy of ideas. It's unclear that all these ideas are distinctly liberal or even particularly modern. Are our present discontent's deeper causes to be found in errors that have reared their head in *every* age, not just in conditions of liberal order?
2. The anti-liberal critique is highly economicist.
3. There's no reason why economics and free markets need to be premised on an ideology of radical autonomy.
4. An inadequate conception of the Enlightenment. It was far from a monolithic phenomenon or as anti-religious as many suppose. Catholics and Enlightenment. Protestants and Enlightenment. Different legacies left by the different Enlightenments.
5. Edmund Burke: "The only liberty that is valuable is a liberty connected with order; that not only exists along with order and virtue, but which cannot exist at all without them."

Part Three - A Way Forward

Maybe the real question should be: *Must liberal order, or liberal institutions, be premised on liberal ideology?*

By "liberal order:" structures and commitments such as constitutionalism, rule of law, market economies, due-process rights, legally-recognized and often constitutionally-guaranteed rights more generally, and a strong distinction between the temporal and spiritual realms—all of which are characteristic of the Anglo-American tradition of ordered liberty.

By "liberal ideology:" an ideology which is premised on voluntarist, nominalist, plastic conceptions of human nature; an ideology which I've described elsewhere as authoritarian liberalism.

A liberal order grounded on insights drawn from orthodox Judaism, orthodox Christianity, particular strands of Scottish and American Enlightenment thought, and the tradition of natural law which permeates these ideas.

Compare thus to a liberal order which takes its bearings from accounts of life which deny Revelation, which regard human nature as infinitely malleable, in which reason is seen as purely instrumental, etc.

These worlds are very different worlds, and likely to produce quite different results.

The history of the development of the Anglo-American tradition of ordered liberty, and realize that it doesn't start in 1776 or even 1688.

The economic arrangements which we call capitalism first manifested themselves in a relatively systematic form in medieval Europe.

The roots of modern constitutional orders which seek to organize political life in ways that promote ordered liberty go back to the early-modern and late-medieval worlds and particular Roman and Greek thinkers.

The idea of natural rights existed several centuries before Hobbes, Locke or Jefferson.

The foundations of liberal protocols and institutions from the late-seventeenth century onwards are highly influenced by various accounts of natural law.

Edmund Burke is associated with conservatism's attention to the tacit knowledge contained in customs, conventions. Yet Burke's conception of liberty and order was deeply shaped, as Peter J. Stanlis demonstrated in *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (1958), by natural law reasoning.

So what does this mean for us today?

First, we can certainly talk about how particular concepts such as "natural rights" or institutions such as "markets" which are part of the modern conservative tradition may be in tension with other parts of that same tradition, and vice-versa.

Second, we should be far less ahistorical when we discuss these things. Legally-recognized rights and functioning market economies, for instance, predate what we are calling "liberalism."

Third, some ideas, habits, customs, institutions, even systems are clearly incompatible with modern conservatism.

Fourth, what really matters in the context of our current discussion are the underlying cultural, philosophical, and religious convictions that inform and shape the workings of the concepts and institutions associated today liberal order.