

What Ryan Cooper Gets Wrong About Classical Liberalism

You might think Enlightenment liberalism, or classical liberalism, did some good for the world. It gave us political consciousness of individual rights, eroded slavery, ended religious wars, brought free trade, and encouraged humanity to embrace trade and creativity over war, violence, and authoritarianism. The story of liberalism is about universal human ennoblement.

That's my view, but hardly my own: even Karl Max lavished praise on liberal capitalism for breaking up the old feudal order of tribe, hierarchy, and dynastic power. In fact, the most sweeping attacks on liberalism have generally come from the Hegelian right (think of [The Concept of the Political](#) by the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt).

So it is startling to read Ryan Cooper, writing in [The Week](#), who offers the world an amazing screed against a political outlook that hasn't come under fire in a long time. He writes that classical liberalism "profoundly wretched the historical record" and has "caused stupendous social carnage." He establishes this in an 800-word column filled with personal invective, selective history, and caricature while leaving out anything resembling a fair description of the idea at the core.

It's the New Thing

Why the attack? Cooper begins by observing that "conservatism" as a term doesn't have the best reputation these days. "President Trump is not exactly a good #brand for people wanting to distinguish themselves as deep thinkers," that is true enough. The meaning of the term itself – a postwar invention that has always lacked real substance – has ebbed

and flowed and tumbled into absurdity, as one can easily observe by attending the annual event of the “Conservative Political Action Conference,” where Trump was cheered to the rafters.

So, yes, the moniker classical liberal is being bandied about as a solid alternative. It’s unfamiliar. It has a beautiful history. The idea of liberalism itself stretches back half a millennium, and is embodied in the ideals of many great thinkers over many countries – from Thomas Aquinas to Murray Rothbard and thousands of others in between. And this, Cooper theorizes, is why star intellectuals like Jordan Peterson self-identify as classical liberals (though plenty of his critics on the left call him a fascist, in complete defiance of his writings against both left and right).

Definition, Not Contradiction

And so Cooper goes on the attack. He begins with the general claim that liberalism is about “self-regulating markets,” which he smacks down as absurd because “property, contracts, corporations, stock exchanges, currency, and so on – all the bedrock institutions of capitalism are underpinned and maintained by government laws, or are direct creations of government.”

This is strange. The claim of liberalism is precisely that government ought to stick to maintaining such bedrock institutions and nothing else, as we learn, for example, from the Declaration of Independence. That is not a contradiction; it is a definition of what liberalism has long believed is the sole function of government: punishing force and fraud only. Moreover, he is not even correct that government creates property, contracts, currency and so on; the historical record shows precisely the opposite. But you don’t even need a big book to reveal this: ask yourself in general whether, in your experience, government is more adept at securing or violating

your personal property rights.

Liberalism's Crimes?

Next we come to his list of liberalism's supposed crimes: the enclosure movement, vagrancy laws, punitive workhouses, imperial crusades, violence against foreign peoples. But this is an odd list: liberalism spoke out against political violence of all sorts and including all the things he lists. It couldn't make the world a perfect place but it could improve it by beating back government (and putting up barriers to public authority) when possible. It's almost like he doesn't have Wikipedia.

But Cooper claims that when liberalism faced a choice between freedom and human life, "classical liberals tended to prioritize the former," which is a calumny since the whole point of liberalism is to favor freedom as the best foundation of life. It reveals so much about his own world view that he wants to drive a wedge between the two.

So that the reader doesn't have a chance to think about these strange claims that liberalism bears responsibility for the opposite, he immediately turns to a personal smear of liberal hero John Locke (1632-1704), observing that he invested in companies that had commercial interests in the slave trade. And it's true that more than 300 years later, we might all wish he had been more scrupulous, just as we might wish moral and spiritual perfection on the whole of human history.

But the slave trade had a grim and poisoning effect on commerce for centuries, which is precisely why liberalism opposed it so passionately. One might think that Locke would get some credit for ferociously opposing slavery a century and a half before it was finally opposed in Britain. "The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man," he wrote, "a liberty to follow my own will in all things,

where the rule prescribes not; and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man.”

Sins and Contradictions

But this does raise the question: what can we say about liberal thinkers of the past who engage in inconsistent writings or actions? Let’s consider Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) for example. He has [this](#) beautiful liberal statement (especially considering the time) about the role of government. It is not designed to suppress all vices but only the “grievous” ones like “murder, theft and such like.” That’s a tremendous view, but it also happens to be in tension with his statements elsewhere that it is morally permissible for the Church to burn heretics.

This was the 13th century. Four hundred years later, the notion of burning heretics had fallen out of favor in most nations and eventually was seen as barbaric. The same happened with religious wars, indentured servitude, the king’s divine right, slavery, women’s subjection, forced segregation, mercantilism, travel restrictions, forced marriage, censorship, cruel punishments and torture, and so on. These are the triumphs of liberalism over many centuries and many countries.

(I’m going to bypass Cooper’s passing claim that markets caused the Great Depression simply because 85 years of literature refuting that canard should be enough.)

What It Really Means

Let’s finally gain some clarity about what we mean when we say liberalism. Cooper sums it up as “self regulating markets” but that’s both misleading and too narrow. Liberalism believes that society manages itself better than any top-down authority

can. That includes the commercial life of a nation. But it also pertains to civil liberties, international relations, migrations, family and cultural life, and religion.

And what does classical liberalism oppose? Managed economies, imperialism, ethnic cleansing, war, arbitrary rule, dictatorship, authoritarianism, and every action of government that goes beyond what is absolutely necessary, if any government is necessary at all. That the meaning of the term changed in the US in the first half of the 20th century is one of the most tragic language distortions on record.

Liberalism simply observed that things go better with freedom – not perfectly, not always, not toward creating utopia, but generally much better than any kind of imposition from above ever can. And it's not just about generating prosperity; it's about a political order of human rights and dignity for all. This is not wretched. It is beautiful.

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