

The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism.

By Anthony Arblaster. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 1984.

Anthony Arblaster has composed, mainly in the form of a historical account, a polemic against liberalism in all the conventional senses of the term, but especially against classical liberalism. In his preface the author declares that "liberalism has therefore had, in my view, a rather better press than it deserves," and it is clear on practically every page that he intends to redress the balance.

Arblaster deserves credit for taking on a subject of the scope and complexity of western liberalism; other recent writers in this highly important area have either dealt with the topic all too briefly, or concentrated on particular periods or national traditions. In the end, however, the product of his efforts is highly disappointing, with occasional insights overwhelmed by massive prejudice, ignorance, and outright fatuousness.¹

The author correctly asserts: "There is a sense in which any book about liberalism in general is bound to be a book about exploring the definition, or the concept of liberalism....For liberalism is not reducible to a set of general or abstract propositions. It is a historical movement of ideas and a political and social practice." Still, as he concedes, the recognition of "certain continuities and common threads" is required in order to demarcate what, out of all the thinking and events that have taken place in the past several centuries, is to count as pertaining to liberalism. The question, of course, is whether the author has hit upon the right "continuities and common threads."

The book is divided into three parts, the first providing an analysis of the philosophical foundations of liberalism and the other two dealing with its history ("rise and decline"). In what follows I shall confine myself to discussing Arblaster's treatment of classical

liberalism, in my view (for which I cannot argue here) the authentic form of the doctrine.

A major defect of part one is shared by other works in the field: too much weight is given to technical philosophical thought. There is a good deal of truth in Arblaster's statement that "at the base of every major political doctrine" lies "a distinctive conception of man, or human nature, and a general theory of human society logically related to that conception." Much more dubious, however, is the proposition that the coherence of an ideology's values "is derived from the metaphysics or ontology lying behind them." Have liberals then always, or almost always, shared the same metaphysics and ontology? Arblaster seems to say so. He believes that while "this relation between political and moral values and ontological or metaphysical theory is not always made plain," Hobbes and Bentham have the merit of having displayed "*the* structure of the argument" (emphasis added).

Arblaster thus appears to assume that the foundation of liberalism is the nominalist-atomistic world-view, with an empiricist epistemology and a utilitarian ethics. He then has the job of trying to fit historical liberalism into this Procrustean bed. One method is through omission. While Kant, for instance, is referred to on eleven pages, the only reference to his deviation from the supposed philosophical foundation of liberalism occurs on page 334: "Rawls's Kantian approach implies more respect for the rights of the individual than classical utilitarianism allows for." There is no mention of Kant's divergent metaphysics and epistemology. Some other liberals who would not fit into Arblaster's stereotype are simply never mentioned at all: Wilhelm von Humboldt, the French Doctrinaires, and the French Liberal Catholics, for instance. In this way, the author makes the task of conforming liberal political values to a particular philosophical outlook a good deal easier for himself.

Restricting liberalism in the analytical section to the tradition of British empiricism, and then mucking about with the various components of that tradition, Arblaster succeeds in creating a parody of "the" liberal world-view. In the liberal view, "desires are taken as given...the whole process of socialization...is generally ignored by liberal theory... [There is] a liberal suspicion of any intellectual developments which...suggest that the social conditioning of individuals extends as far as the shaping of their wants and aspirations." Just what does the author suppose the whole liberal distinction—from Benjamin Constant to Herbert Spencer—between military and industrial societies was about? Moreover, that he could believe that his description reflects the ideas of, say,

Adam Smith or Tocqueville is incredible.² This absurdity is appropriately followed by a discussion of the Marquis de Sade lengthier than the book's treatment of Constant.

We then learn that in "the" liberal world-view "at its most fundamental ontological level a man can be certain only of his own existence—which means that solipsism is an ever-present threat in this philosophy." Yes, of course. Liberalism has a "tendency to stress the inherently anti-social, or at least, non-social character of human beings." Here Hobbes (who was not, *pace* Leo Strauss, the first liberal, or any liberal at all) is the chief—really, the sole—exhibit presented, and Arblaster displays a good deal of confusion in arguing his point. He states, of "many liberals, from Locke to Mill," that, *in contrast* to Hobbes, "they simply denied that self-interest necessarily ruled out either individual benevolence or the possibility of social harmony"; they entertained "hypotheses of a natural harmony between the interests of individuals" and an "optimistic account of the relation of the individual to society." Well and good. Arblaster nonetheless concludes: "the difference between, let us say, Hobbes and Adam Smith is not over the essential characterization of human nature. They are agreed in thinking of man as naturally non-social and egoistic." But what is the force of this, given the liberals' belief in "natural harmony" and the "optimism" just mentioned? And what, for instance, of Smith's ascription to "human nature" of "the propensity of truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another"?³ In Arblaster's way of doing intellectual history, not even such an obvious counter-example as this need be accounted for.

Arblaster's donnish English parochialism is illustrated by his treatment of the plight of ethical values. Part of the rising tide of liberalism in the early modern period was the growth of the "orthodox outlook of modern science," which conceives of nature as totally ethically neutral. This creates a problem, he feels: "Where do values go when they are excluded from the empirical world of science? The answer of modern liberal moral theory is that they become a matter of individual choice and commitment." Arblaster follows these words with a quotation from—Iris Murdoch. Previously he had illustrated the liberal concept of the "individual" by a quotation from E.M. Forster. It is an annoying habit of his to bolster his interpretation of liberal thought at key points by citing, not important and acknowledged representatives of classical liberalism of the past and present, but various twentieth century English writers, usually novelists. (Forster is mentioned on eighteen pages.)⁴

What Arblaster is trying to demonstrate is that in a liberal society man must suffer from deracination and anomie. His dialectical talents are insufficient for his purposes, however. Consider the following passage:

...the liberal conception of the moral life is essentially individualistic. Values are not woven into the fabric of the universe, as they had been by Aristotelianism and medieval Christianity. Nor can they be laid down by any form of traditional or institutional authority, whether secular or religious. From the beginning liberalism disputes the right of priests or kings to force conscience. The individual must choose his values for himself, and construct his own morality.

This clearly resembles the attitude of modern British academics much more than it does that of most of the great figures in the history of liberalism, or even many present-day classical liberal philosophers who consider themselves in the Aristotelian tradition. Note how the author takes the genuinely liberal principle that priests and kings (and everyone else) are prohibited from forcing conscience to be more or less equivalent to the notion that no traditional or institutional authority may "lay down" values. Liberals who are Roman Catholics, Orthodox Jews, or Mormons will accept the first proposition while without contradiction denying the second. Moreover, the claims in this passage simply have no relevance to the history of liberalism even as Arblaster proposes to recount it. Leaving aside the believers in natural rights (is it possible to recognize John Lilburne or John Locke in the above description?), Arblaster himself has just quoted Bentham: "Nature has placed Mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne." To claim, as Arblaster implicitly does, that this amounts to holding that "the individual must choose his values for himself, and construct his own morality," is nonsense.

In these musing, whose hidden agenda is what is currently called "communitarianism," the author leans a good deal on another critic of liberalism, Alasdair MacIntyre; he states, for instance: "liberal morality differs from both Marxism and traditional Christianity, which share the belief that questions about the nature of the world and of human beings have to be asked and answered before it is possible to answer the question, 'But how ought I to live.'"

Does this mean that liberalism must first pass judgment on the existence of an after-life (as both Marxism and traditional Christianity, for instance, do) before it can deal with questions of social ethics? MacIntyre and Arblaster seem to find it impossible to comprehend an ideology that quite deliberately takes no position on the great issues of ultimate meaning.⁵ Liberalism functions on a radically different level from all-encompassing religious, quasi-religious, or philosophical outlooks, in that it refuses to propose an answer to the question of how people ought to live. It may, in fact, be viewed in its cultural dimension as a solution to the problem of how society is to be organized once we realize that an abundance of diverse responses to the great questions of ethics and religion is here to stay.

As a communitarian, Arblaster wants to deny the inevitability of pluralism in modern societies, but he never clearly and forthrightly joins issue with liberalism on this point. Instead, he stresses the alleged drawbacks even of toleration of conflicting religions: indifference and skepticism. "In practice the most tolerant society is likely to be also the one which is the most *aimless*" (emphasis added). But what would a modern society with a well-defined, comprehensive set of "aims" look like? How would it be possible in the absence of a politically-empowered, ideologically-coherent elite, of the sort that was available to traditional Christianity and that Marxist regimes find indispensable?

While the tendency to misanthropy, solipsism, alienation, anomie, and sadism are among the major charges he levels against liberalism, the author is willing to take up virtually any criticism he might find lying around: e.g., "liberalism has never developed a satisfying theory of art and imagination." Presumably, he believes that conservatism and socialism do have such satisfying theories. Such is the not merely critical, but relentlessly captious and carping tone to which anyone undertaking to read this book must resign himself.

Unfortunately, only a very few of the points made in the historical section can be addressed here.

Arblaster begins by rejecting the "old Whig version of English, and even Western history," which traces the roots of liberalism to the medieval period. Instead, betraying again his preference for high philosophy over institutional history and *Weltanschauung* over politics and law, he claims that it was in the Renaissance that the assembling of the liberal doctrine begins. Great stress is laid on the humanist thought of Marsilio Ficino and his disciple Pico della Mirandola. In Pico's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, God hails man as "the maker and moulder of thyself," who is free to fashion himself

“in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.” This is doubtless a noble celebration of the high human estate; yet not every such apotheosis can be considered liberal—Marx’s Promethean view of man, for instance. When, as Arblaster notes, Tasso remarked that “there are two creators, God and the poet,” he was certainly glorifying boundless human creativity in a certain sphere; but so far nothing at all has been said on behalf of a liberal social order.

Already fatal to Arblaster’s project is that he has gotten his starting point wrong. What the disparaged “Whig” historians, above all Acton, understood was that liberalism was born in the West, out of the womb of the Europe that was, or had once been, in communion with the Bishop of Rome, nowhere else. It happens that the history of this particular culture includes episodes like the conflict of emperor and pope and the rise of the chartered towns of the Middle Ages, the emergence of representative bodies restricting the royal prerogative, of declarations of rights like the Magna Carta, and of a political discourse justifying those rights. In general, it comprises the growth of a system of divided and competing jurisdictions, within which property rights and freedom of action could find a haven, prove themselves in practice, and furnish precedents and models. This grand history, so far from being irrelevant to liberalism’s story, is the beginning and foundation of it.

More illuminating for the development of liberalism than the heroic humanism of Renaissance Italy is its evolution as “a political and social practice”—in other words, how the institutions and attitudes bequeathed by the Middle Ages were transformed in a liberal direction under the impact of modern conditions. Arblaster rightly emphasizes the importance of the growth of religious toleration and of the polity that first established it in western Europe, the commercial republic of the Netherlands.⁶ In a nice passage, he states:

in the difficult, piecemeal, haphazard process of the establishment of liberal principles in Europe, this middle-class republic represents their first secure foothold in modern history. And its national struggle against Spain rightly became a potent symbol for liberals in later times. The plays and music of Goethe and Schiller, Beethoven and Verdi, are the noble salutes of liberal posterity to the heroic struggle against Spanish absolutism.

After the successful war of liberation against Spain, no new monarchy arose in the Netherland: “Holland provided a working example of a headless commonwealth,” which, by combining religious toleration, intellectual freedom, the rule of law, and com-

mercial prosperity, served as a highly attractive model. Arblaster quotes a passage from Spinoza, (reminiscent of Voltaire's remarks on the London Stock Exchange):

The city of Amsterdam reaps the fruit of this freedom in its own great prosperity and in the admiration of other people. For in this most flourishing state, and most splendid city, men of every nation and religion live together in the greatest harmony, and ask no questions before trusting their goods to a fellow-citizen, save whether he be rich or poor, and whether he generally acts honestly, or the reverse.

Among the many liberal developments influenced by the evolution of Holland was the Leveller movement.⁷ Arblaster is to be commended for emphasizing the significance of the Levellers. Contrary to the propaganda of their opponents, who wished to tar them with the brush of economic equalizers, they were firm believers in property rights. In fact, it is with the Levellers, advocates of private property, religious liberty, and freedom of the press as natural rights, and enemies of state monopoly grants and any church establishment, that liberalism makes its debut on the stage of history.⁸ By the middle of the seventeenth century, it was possible for the Levellers to assert that the unprecedented degree of emancipation they proposed was perfectly consistent with the continued integrity and harmonious functioning of society. Arblaster would have been well-advised to follow up this line of development, since it represents the core of what has been characteristically liberal as a "political and social practice." That line continues with the Real Whigs and the late-18th century English radicals, including Price, Priestly, and Thomas Paine. Arblaster does quote Paine's famous dictum from *The Rights of Man*:

Great part of that order which reigns among mankind is not the effect of government. It has its origin in the principles of society and the natural constitution of man. It existed prior to government, and would exist if the formality of government was abolished.⁹

He does not, however, dwell on the statement, nor does he appear to realize that it does not simply reflect Paine's version of liberalism, but instead contains the central insight of authentic liberalism: society must be understood as separate from and in opposition to government, as a network of individuals interacting within the very wide bounds of their natural rights, and, so understood, it is by and large self-regulating.¹⁰ On this basis, a kind of

ideal-type of classical liberalism could be elaborated. The figures and episodes who would then fit into the story would include Jefferson and the American Jeffersonian tradition, Benjamin Constant and the *Censeur* group in France, the Anti-Corn Law League and its counterparts in France, Germany, and elsewhere, Bastiat and the *Journal des Économistes*, and Herbert Spencer and the radical individualists of the late nineteenth century. Other movements and thinkers could then be considered, as they were situated nearer or further from this liberal central line. Following such a procedure would have clearly delineated the features of a liberalism that evolved but did not finally disintegrate into a meaningless, featureless set of mental attitudes and personal preferences. It would have avoided the recourse Arblaster is compelled to adopt of "then there was this, and then there was that," over three hundred years.

On the nineteenth century, Arblaster is as tendentious as ever. The Irish famine is laid down as a trump card against liberalism. The author is obviously irked that while fascism and revolutionary Marxism have been debited with millions of victims, liberalism has gotten off rather easy. Insofar as the British stood by "the principles of free trade and laissez-faire economics" and allowed the Irish to starve, liberalism "also has its massacres and cruelties to answer for." More to the point, however, would have been to confront the question, Why did Britain and the rest of western and central Europe *not* fall victim to a similar catastrophe? Here a rational and balanced discussion of the Industrial Revolution would have been in order. Instead, Arblaster resorts to the latest dodge of the anti-industrialists: the truth of what happened to the living standards of British working people during industrialization, it now turns out, after generations of debate on that very question, is not important. "Whether or not the living standards of the mass of people rose or fell in real terms, the sheer visibility and extent of urban poverty and squalor" and the disparity in wealth between capitalists and factory workers led many to question the new system. Arblaster shows no appreciation of the meaning of the Industrial Revolution, that it was the West's solution to an unprecedented population explosion. As a recent historian has written in assessing industrialization in Britain:

...what would have happened to Britain's teeming population had industrial growth not rescued it from a Malthusian population trap? It is difficult to see how a "check" on an even more catastrophic scale than the Irish famine of 1845-47 could have been avoided, and to this not inconsiderable

extent the Industrial Revolution brought the benefit of permitting a much larger population to survive and, in the long run, thrive.¹¹

Critics of capitalist industrialization like Arblaster might consider the likely results of having tried to keep the new tens of millions in Europe alive through, say, the central planning of the Saint-Simonians or the state-funded worker cooperatives of Louis Blanc and Ferdinand Lassalle.

This is the fundamental economic condition that should be borne in mind in considering the liberal fear of democracy—or the “mob”—that emerged under certain circumstances, and that Arblaster so enjoys gloating over. “In 1848 [in Paris]...the demand was for social revolution, for the ‘red republic.’” Tocqueville’s horrified condemnation of the June uprising is, accurately enough, taken as representative of the attitude of liberals of the time. According to Arblaster, Tocqueville

feared the masses, and saw their rebellion in June as a threat to the whole order of civilized society...when democracy threatened to open the way to socialism, Tocqueville drew back and joined the side of “order,” which, in 1848, was a euphemism for direct, brutal repression of the urban poor.

But, in the first place, the June uprising was not a manifestation of “democracy.” Arblaster ignores the fact that the Parisian workers and the socialist intellectuals who lead them were in conscious opposition to the great majority of Frenchmen, who had made their conservative sentiments clear in the elections of May, conducted according to universal manhood suffrage.¹² That, when it came to an actual vote, the majority of the French could not be had for a “social republic” annoys a writer like Arblaster, who consequently directs attention to the anti-democratism of the liberals.

Second, Arblaster is justified in disparaging the liberals’ fear of the socialist-led “mob” only if he can show that liberals like Tocqueville were wrong in believing that the transformations proposed by the socialists would have led to disaster for the great majority of people.¹³

On John Stuart Mill Arblaster is not only better informed, but much more interesting. This is largely because the author’s policy of undercutting liberalism is more refreshing when applied to the “saint of rationalism,” who enjoys a vastly inflated position in the conception of liberalism entertained by English-speaking people.

Arblaster points out that for Mill, "society" posed even greater dangers for individual liberty than the state itself. This is a view that leads to pitting liberalism against perfectly innocent, non-coercive communitarian values and arrangements, and is another respect in which Mill was actually a "modern," rather than a classical liberal. It also tends in the direction of forgoing an alliance between liberalism and the state-power, since it is exceedingly difficult to see how, as a practical matter, non-coercive social norms are to be foiled except with the aid of the state. (Historically, the chief method for counteracting "oppressive" traditional arrangements has been for the state to displace the church, particularly in education.)

Similarly, as Arblaster states, "Mill is concerned to attack not merely governmental action, but also any kind of action in which individuals band together and act as a collective body." He adds: "Liberal individualism has generated a widespread, and often rather silly, suspicion of all forms of collective action, *as if individuals, and individualism, were somehow diminished by the very act of working together*" (emphasis added). This is very much on the mark, and what it shows is that it is not individualist and liberal doctrine that is at fault, but rather Mill's obsession with the individual shedding the constraints of non-governmental social institutions. In contrast to Mill, the indispensability of voluntarily-sustained traditions and freely associated "collective" action was stressed, among others, by the post-Revolutionary French liberals, such as Constant, the Doctrinaires, Tocqueville, and Laboulaye. Much more exemplary of the spirit of liberalism than John Stuart Mill is Wilhelm von Humboldt, who stated, in the work that was an inspiration for *On Liberty*:

...indeed, the whole tenor of the ideas and arguments unfolded in this essay might fairly be reduced to this, that while [men] would break all fetters in human society, they would attempt to find as many new social bonds as possible. The isolated man is no more able to develop than the man who is fettered... unions and associations, so far from having harmful consequences of themselves, are one of the surest and most appropriate ways of promoting and accelerating human development.¹⁴

As for Arblaster's journalistic diatribe against Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Nozick in the book's last chapter, "Liberalism Today," it is not worth answering.

1. As for fatuousness, one example may stand for scores: when Arblaster comes to discuss the rise of capitalism in the sixteenth century, the ethical-theological voluntarism expressed by William Tyndale in his statement, "to steal, rob, and murder are holy, when God commandeth them," elicits this from him: "Such teachings were extremely congenial to the development of the capitalist economic order." Can Arblaster really believe that what early capitalism desperately needed was masses of people who felt that stealing, robbing, and murdering were holy acts when commanded by God?
2. Arblaster allows a glimpse of the cloven hoof when he complains: "For liberals, people's apparent desires are also their real desires and should be respected as such." Presumably he does not hold that people's "apparent desires" deserve to be respected.
3. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed., R.H. Campbell, A.S. Skinner, and W.B. Todd (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1981), I, p.24.
4. While George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, and Alexander Herzen are discussed and Virginia Woolf and W.H. Auden mentioned several times, there is no mention at all of the School of Salamanca, Grotius, Pufendorf, the Physiocrats, Destutt de Tracy, Say, Charles Comte, Dunoyer, Thierry, Bastiat, Gustav de Molinari, or Auberon Herbert, among many others.
5. Cf. Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism: A Socio-Economic Exposition*, trans., Ralph Raico, 2nd ed., (Kansas City, Kans.: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1978), p.192.
6. The crucial role of Holland as a nursery of liberal ideas and an exemplar of the liberal polity is sketched by Christopher Dawson, in "The Historic Origins of Liberalism," *The Review of Politics*, vol. 16, no. 3 (July, 1954).
7. Cf. for example, Richard Ireton's citation of the Dutch example in arguing against military impressment in *A Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens*: "the Hollanders our provident Neighbors have no such cruelties, esteeming nothing more unjust, or unreasonable..." Don M. Wolfe, ed., *Leveller Manifestoes of the Puritan Revolution* (1944; reprint, New York: Humanities Press, 1967), p.125.
8. Perez Zagorin's terminology is more confusing than helpful when he calls the Levellers "the first leftwing movement in English and, indeed, European politics." *Rebels and Rulers, 1500-1660*, II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp.163-164.
9. Arblaster usefully underscores (although for his own purposes) the acceptance by radical liberals like Paine and Jefferson of the economic inequality inevitably generated by a liberal order. Paine is quoted, from his *Dissertation on First Principles of Government*: "That property will ever be unequal is certain. Industry, superiority of talents, dexterity of manage-

ment, extreme frugality, fortunate opportunities, or the opposite, or the means of those things, will ever produce that effect, without having recourse to the harsh, ill-sounding names of avarice and oppression....All that is required with respect to property is to obtain it honestly, and not to employ it criminally." This point is relevant to the debate among German historians revolving around Lothar Gall's assertion of a rupture in the development of liberalism brought about by the new "class society" resulting from the Industrial Revolution.

10. Cf., in regard to economic liberalism, Albert Schatz, *L'Individualisme économique et social. Ses origines, son évolution, ses-formes contemporaines* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1907), p.32, states: "...little by little the idea will emerge and spread that the economic order is no more the artificial work of the legislator than the order that naturally reigns in the functioning of an organism is the work of the hygienist...that there is, in a word, a natural economic order and that this order is capable of being substituted for the artificial order of regulation...The day that this idea is scientifically established one may say that the individualist doctrine was born."

11. Eric J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State. Early Industrial Britain, 1783-1870* (London/New York: Longman, 1983), p.153. That Evans is in general critical of the Industrial Revolution makes his conclusion all the more impressive.

12. Eighty-four per cent of those eligible voted in the elections for the Constituent Assembly. The socialists won only one hundred out of 900 hundred seats. See Jean Tulard, *Les révolutions de 1789 à 1851* (Paris: Fayard, 1985), pp.422-423.

13. In discussing Tocqueville's social thought, the author characterizes his celebrated phrase, "the tyranny of the majority," as "melodramatic," adding that "Tocqueville does not provide the evidence to justify it." This is incorrect, and one might have expected Arblaster to be more sensitive to some of the evidence Tocqueville does cite, including the prevention of the publication of freethought works and interference with the right of free blacks to vote. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in American*, trans., Henry Reeve and Francis Bowen, ed., Phillips Bradley (New York: Vintage, 1945), I, pp.275 and 373.

14. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, ed., with introduction by J.W. Burrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp.98 and 101.

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