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What Does “Liberal” Mean, Anyway?

BY DAVID BOAZ

The United States is a liberal country in a liberal world. What does that mean? Let’s consider a little history.

For thousands of years, most of recorded history, the world was characterized by power, privilege, and oppression. Life for most people was, in the phrase of Thomas Hobbes, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

And then something changed. In the 17th century, the Scientific Revolution emerged out of a new, more empirical way of doing science. And that led into the Enlightenment beginning late that century. In his book *Enlightenment Now*, Steven Pinker identifies four themes of the Enlightenment: reason, science, humanism, and progress.

Liberalism arose in that environment. People began to question the role of the state and the established church. They argued for liberty for all based on the equal natural rights and dignity of every person. John Locke, often regarded as the father of liberalism, argued in his *Second Treatise of Government* that every person has a property in his own person and in “the work of his hands”; that

government is formed to protect life, liberty, and property and is based on the consent of the governed; and that if government exceeds its proper role, the people are entitled to replace it.

As the economist and intellectual historian Daniel Klein has shown, in the 1770s writers

began using such terms as “liberal policy,” “liberal plan,” “liberal system,” “liberal views,” “liberal ideas,” and “liberal principles.” Adam Smith was another founding figure of liberalism. In his 1776 book *The Wealth of Nations*, he wrote about “allowing every man to pursue

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DAVID BOAZ is a distinguished senior fellow of the Cato Institute and the author of *The Libertarian Mind*. This article is based on a speech delivered at the Berkeley Forum at the University of California, Berkeley.

In March, JOHAN NORBERG spoke about innovation and openness for a live audience of 2,500 at the Festival de las Ideas in Puebla, Mexico.

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his own interest his own way, upon the liberal plan of equality, liberty, and justice.” The term “liberalism” came along about a generation later.

The year 1776, of course, also saw the publication of the most eloquent piece of liberal or libertarian writing ever, the American Declaration of Independence, which concisely laid out Locke’s analysis of the purpose and limits of government.

Liberalism was emerging in continental Europe, too, in the writings of Montesquieu and Constant in France, Wilhelm von Humboldt in Germany, and others. In the 1820s the representatives of the middle class in the Spanish Cortes, or parliament, came to be called the *Liberales*. They contended with the *Serviles* (the servile ones), who represented the nobles and the absolute monarchy. The term *Serviles*, for those who advocate state power over individuals, unfortunately didn’t stick. But the word “liberal,” for the defenders of liberty and the rule of law, spread rapidly. The Whig Party in England came to be called the Liberal Party. Today we know the philosophy of John Locke, Adam Smith, the American Founders, and John Stuart Mill as liberalism.

THE LIBERAL 19TH CENTURY

In both the United States and Europe the century after the American Revolution was marked by the spread of liberalism. The ancient practices of slavery and serfdom were ended. Written constitutions and bills of rights protected liberty and guaranteed the rule of law. Guilds and monopolies were largely eliminated, with all trades thrown open to competition based on merit. Freedom of the press and of religion was greatly expanded, property rights were made more secure, and international trade was freed. After the defeat of Napoleon, Europe enjoyed a century of relative peace.

That liberation of human creativity un-

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leashed astounding scientific and material progress. *The Nation* magazine, which was then a truly liberal journal, looking back in 1900, wrote, “Freed from the vexatious meddling of governments, men devoted themselves to their natural task, the bettering of their condition, with the wonderful results which surround us.” The technological advances of the liberal 19th century are innumerable: the steam engine, the railroad, the telegraph, the telephone, electricity, the internal combustion engine. Thanks to such innovations and an explosion of entrepreneurship, in Europe and America the great masses of people began to be liberated from the back-breaking toil that had been the natural condition of humankind since time immemorial. Infant mortality fell and life expectancy began to rise to unprecedented levels. A person looking back from 1800 would see a world that for most people had changed little in thousands of years; by 1900 the world was unrecognizable.

THE TURN AWAY FROM LIBERALISM

Toward the end of the 19th century, classical liberalism began to give way to new forms of collectivism and state power. That *Nation* editorial went on to lament that “material comfort has blinded the eyes of the present generation to the cause which made it possible” and that “before [statism] is again repudiated there must be international struggles on a terrific scale.”

From the disastrous World War I on, gov-

ernments grew in size, scope, and power. Exorbitant taxation, militarism, conscription, censorship, nationalization, and central planning signaled that the era of liberalism, which had so recently supplanted the old order, was now itself supplanted by the era of the megastate.

Through the Progressive Era, World War I, the New Deal, and World War II, there was tremendous enthusiasm for bigger government among American intellectuals. Herbert Croly, the first editor of the *New Republic*, wrote in *The Promise of American Life* that that promise would be fulfilled “not by . . . economic freedom, but by a certain measure of discipline; not by the abundant satisfaction of individual desires, but by a large measure of individual subordination and self-denial.”

Around 1900 even the term “liberal” underwent a change. People who supported big government and wanted to limit and control the free market started calling themselves liberals. The economist Joseph Schumpeter noted, “As a supreme, if unintended, compliment, the enemies of private enterprise have thought it wise to appropriate its label.” Scholars began to refer to the philosophy of individual rights, free markets, and limited government—the philosophy of Locke, Smith, and Mill—as classical liberalism. Some liberals, including F. A. Hayek and Milton Friedman, continued to call themselves liberals. But others came up with a new word, libertarian.

In much of the world even today the advocates of liberty are still called liberals. In South Africa the liberals, such as Helen Suzman, rejected the system of racism and economic privilege known as apartheid in favor of human rights, nonracial policies, and free markets. In China, Russia, and Iran, liberals are those who want to replace totalitarianism in all its aspects with the liberal system of free markets, free speech, and constitutional government. Even in Western Europe, the

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term liberal still indicates at least a fuzzy version of classical liberalism. German liberals, for instance, usually to be found in the Free Democratic Party, oppose the socialism of the Social Democrats, the corporatism of the Christian Democrats, and the paternalism of both.

For all the growth of government in the past century, liberalism remains the basic operating system of the United States, Europe, and an increasing part of the world. Those countries broadly respect such basic liberal principles as private property, markets, free trade, the rule of law, government by consent of the governed, constitutionalism, free speech, free press, religious freedom, women's rights, gay rights, peace, and a generally free and open society—but not without plenty of arguments, of course, over the scope of government and the rights of individuals, from taxes and the welfare state to drug prohibition and war. But as Brian Doherty wrote in *Radicals for Capitalism*, his history of the libertarian movement, we live in a liberal world that “runs on approximately libertarian principles, with a general belief in property rights and the benefits of liberty.”

AMERICA'S LIBERAL HERITAGE

And that is certainly true in the United States. The great American historian Bernard Bailyn wrote:

The major themes of eighteenth-century [English] radical libertarianism [were] brought to realization here. The first is the belief that power is evil, a necessity perhaps but an evil necessity; that it is infinitely corrupting; and that it must be controlled, limited, restricted in every way compatible with a minimum of civil order. Written constitutions; the separation of powers; bills of rights; limitations on executives, on legislatures, and courts; restrictions on the right to coerce and wage war—all express the profound distrust of power that lies at the ideological

heart of the American Revolution and that has remained with us as a permanent legacy ever after.

Through all our many political fights, especially after the abolition of slavery, American debate has taken place within a broad liberal consensus.

Modern American politics can be traced to the era of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, when “liberalism” came to mean activist government, theoretically to help the poor and the middle class—taxes, transfer programs, and regulation—plus a growing concern for civil rights and civil liberties. Race relations, which had taken a turn for the worse in the Progressive Era, with Woodrow Wilson's resegregation of the federal workforce, D. W. Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, and the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan, began to improve after World War II with the desegregation of the armed forces and federal employment and subsequent moves to undo legal segregation. A new opposition arose, a conservative movement led by William F. Buckley Jr., Sen. Barry Goldwater, and President Ronald Reagan. That conservative movement preached a gospel of free markets, a strong national defense, and “traditional values,” which often meant opposition to civil rights, women's rights, and LGBTQ rights.

And those were the opposing factions in American politics from the 1960s to 2015. But Donald Trump changed that picture. He didn't really campaign on free markets, traditional values, and a strong national defense. He emphasized his opposition to free trade and immigration, was largely indifferent to abortion and gay rights, and engaged in open racial and religious scapegoating. That was a big shift from the Republican party shaped by Ronald Reagan, but Trump remade the GOP in his image.

Now we have Democrats moving left in all the wrong ways—far more spending than even the Obama administration, openly socialist officials, and aggressive efforts to restrict free speech in the name of fighting “hate speech.” Meanwhile, Republicans are moving to the wrong kind of right—a culture war pitting Americans against Americans and a new willingness to use state power to hurt their opponents, including private businesses.

THE LIBERAL OR LIBERTARIAN CENTER

Where does that leave libertarians? Well, right where we've always been: advocating the philosophy of freedom—economic freedom, personal freedom, human rights, political freedom. Or as the Cato Institute maxim puts it, individual rights, free markets, limited government, and peace.

But if liberals and Democrats become more hostile to capitalism and abandon free speech, and Republicans double down on aggressive cultural conservatism and protectionism, maybe there's room for a new political grouping, which we might call the liberal or libertarian center.

Pundits talk a lot about “fiscally conservative and socially liberal” swing voters, and a Zogby poll commissioned by Cato once found that 59 percent of Americans agreed that they would describe themselves that way. Most Americans are content with both the cultural

liberations of the 1960s and the economic liberations begun in the 1980s.

That broadly libertarian center is politically homeless today. If we approach politics and policy reasonably, libertarians can provide a nucleus for that broad center of peaceful and productive people in a society of liberty under law.

THE LIBERTARIAN CHALLENGE

As bleak as things sometimes seem in the United States, there are definitely worse problems in the world. In too much of the world, ideas we thought were dead are back: socialism and protectionism and ethnic nationalism, even “national socialism,” authoritarianism on both the left and the right. We see this in Russia and China, of course, but not only there; also in Turkey, Egypt, Hungary, Venezuela, Mexico, the Philippines, maybe India. A far-right candidate—anti-immigration, anti-globalization, anti-free trade, anti-privatization, anti-pension reform—came too close for comfort to the presidency of France.

As Tom G. Palmer wrote in the November/December 2016 issue of *Cato Policy Report*, we can identify three competing threats to

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liberty: identity politics and the intolerant left; populism and the yearning for strongman rule that invariably accompanies it; and radical political Islamism, which has less political appeal in the West.

People who oppose these ideas need to develop a defense of liberty, equality, and democracy. Libertarians are well suited to do that.

In 1997, Fareed Zakaria wrote:

Consider what classical liberalism stood for in the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was against the power of the church and for the power of the market; against the privileges of kings and aris-

toocracies and for dignity of the middle class; against a society dominated by status and land and in favor of one based on markets and merit; opposed to religion and custom and in favor of science and secularism; for national self-determination and against empires; for freedom of speech and against censorship; for free trade and against mercantilism. Above all, it was for the rights of the individual and against the power of the church and the state.

And, he said, it won a sweeping victory against “an order that had dominated human society for two millennia—that of authority, religion, custom, land, and kings.”

Libertarians are tempted to be too depressed. We read the morning papers, or watch the cable shows, and we think the world is indeed on “the road to serfdom.” But we should reject a counsel of despair. We’ve been fighting ignorance, superstition, privilege, and power for many centuries. We and our classical liberal forebears have won great victories. The fight is not over, but liberalism remains the only workable operating system for a world of peace, growth, and progress. ■

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