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Liberalism

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A large part of history is … replete with the struggle for … human rights, an eternal struggle in which a final victory can never be won. But to tire in the struggle would mean the ruin of society (Einstein 1954, 35).

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness (Matthew 23:27).

Introduction: What is Liberalism?

Liberalism is at the heart of the project that we usually call 'the West'. It is a 'Grand Theory' like practically no other, in that it expresses a 'systematic theory of "the nature of man and society"' (Mills 1959, 23). And yet it has been formulated by so many thinkers and policy-makers in so many ways as to defy neat categorization. Perhaps this is why so many liberals have decried the very idea of 'Grand Theory', a condemnation that Quentin Skinner (1985, 3–4) has noted as being a common feeling of some very prominent liberal thinkers, with Sir Lewis Namier, the great 'Whig' historian, and Karl Popper, that Hammer of the Left (and of all 'utopian' thought), as archetypal debunkers of any school of thought that aims at explaining and understanding everything. Yet that is precisely what liberalism does. It is its great strength and its ultimate weakness, as open to attack as any all-encompassing theory.

The difference with this theory, as distinct from Marxism, for example, is that it espouses an ideology of openness and non-discrimination with such fervour that it inevitably opens itself up to attack from multiple angles and lays itself bare for charges of hypocrisy and duplicity in a way that no other grand theoretical framework does. So when an American or British politician claims that he is ordering troops into an oil-producing Middle Eastern country for the purpose of freeing the local population from a 'tyrant', eyebrows are raised in a way they never would have been when a Soviet politician ordered his troops to defend 'socialist order and the international proletariat' in Hungary or Afghanistan, or a German nationalist his troops to uphold German 'dignity' in Poland. All ideologies

and totalitarian states have claimed liberal language for their own. The Chinese National Anthem has the line '[l]et us stand up and fight for liberty and true democracy' while having scant regard for either.[1] Many writers like Karl Popper and J.L. Talmon have identified totalitarianism as liberalism's most obvious enemy and an optimistic liberal opinion would rightly be that totalitarianism has been defeated more often than it has won against liberalism (Talmon, 1961; Popper 1971).[2] Outrage there may well be in these cases, and hypocrisy is the least of the charges against them. But liberalism claims to mean what it says on liberty and democracy, and this is both its strength and its weakness.

This chapter will examine why that is the case, and do so by examining the evolution of the liberal idea and how it often seems to founder on 'hard cases'. The areas I have chosen to consider (obviously there are many others) are those of how the liberal should view the links between the individual and the community; how liberals have looked at questions of international intervention in the affairs of other states; and how they think wealth should be created and distributed in an equitable manner – what is known in political theory as 'distributive justice'. These categories of thought and action, in the domestic, international and economic spheres are clearly linked as our increasingly global system has been the product of liberalism's slow but steady advance over the last two centuries. But they also show up liberalism's internal contradictions. For instance, capitalism – the major lasting economic legacy of liberalism – claims to liberate the individual to become rich, and has spread its practices across the globe, mainly because of capitalism being forcibly exported by imperial powers and by the less forcible but nonetheless inexorable spread of market forces. Capitalism has undoubtedly made the globe vastly more prosperous, but wealth has been unevenly distributed, with billions languishing in poverty while their neighbours live in conditions of unbelievable riches.

Equally, I will suggest that liberalism's main political child, democracy, is, in Winston Churchill's definition 'the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time'.[3] Thus the approach here will be to take a number of categories within which liberalism's great strengths and evident weaknesses (historical and case-based) can be demonstrated, and then show how these strengths and weaknesses can be best be illuminated.

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1   Engel (2008). The other endearing quality of liberal democracies like the UK is that they can never match the efficient political machinery of states like the Peoples' Republic of China, but they do not execute so many of those 'people' quite so efficiently either. Engel comments: 'And all the while we thought the Chinese leadership had no sense of humour. No, liberty is not their strong point.'

2   It must be said that Popper's identification of Plato as one of the key enemies of the open society is open to some incredulity, but his other candidates, Hegel and Marx in particular, may be justifiable targets.

3   Churchill, Speech to the House of Commons, 11 November 1947.

Liberalism Defined

As C.B. Macpherson (1962) suggested, every political theory requires a conception of the person, and liberalism is that theory par excellence. Whereas Marxism and conservatism can be said to be theories that privilege community above all, liberalism is the theory of the emancipation of the person. Conventional definitions of liberalism always contain four basic elements, as summed up by John Gray:

> *Liberalism is individualist, in that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against the claims of any other social collectivity; egalitarian inasmuch as it confers on all humans the same moral status and denies the relevance to legal or political order of differences in moral worth among human beings; universalist, affirming the moral unity of the human species and according secondary importance to specific historical associations and cultural forms; and meliorist in its affirmation of the corrigibility and improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements (1986, 10).*

This definition can only be accepted in general terms however for, as Richard Bellamy has pointed out, all of these categories have been developed within particular societal contexts at different historical epochs and under particular geographical, cultural and social conditions. Bellamy (2000) does nonetheless accept that liberalism embodies a generalized philosophical acceptance of the principles of 'equality, liberty, individuality and rationality'; a social commitment to notions of 'liberal individualism'; a 'general concern with protecting each individual's ability to pursue his or her own conception of the good'; and politically, 'a strict distinction of state and civil society, as well as a commitment to the rule of law and parliamentarism'. Liberals also like to think that they are creatures driven by ethical imperatives, and especially the idea of what Kant called the 'categorical imperative', which bids us to treat others as having value in themselves, and to act in accordance with principles that are valid for all other actors. An actor's moral motives are therefore a key part of a liberal's analysis of the actor and of others. Reason is the key for Kant in determining what these motives are (Donaldson 1992, 136–7).

Of course this 'do as you would be done by' maxim has a bit of an 'Alice through the Looking Glass' feel to it. 'Reciprocal justice' has a very grand ring to it but how many humans act out of such disinterested motivation? All manner of realists will attack such pious claims, and not without reason as many of the names associated with such statements are of religious origin. But it is in the use of the idea that we see the problem writ large. Bellamy uses the critique of Carl Schmitt to point to a few evident problems with the operationalization of the reciprocal idea of 'democracy' over time. Parliamentarianism and democracy are not necessarily equivalent, for example, and the rule of law can be oppressive as well as liberating. Industrial societies create hierarchies of power so that the rich tend to get more of their agenda respected. In short, Schmitt believed that 'mass democracy deforms rather than reinforces liberalism' (Bellamy 2000, 68–76). This is a view partly shared

by more ardent defenders of liberalism like Alexis de Tocqueville and J.D. Talmon, as we will see below.

Notwithstanding these clear caveats, liberalism can be said to encompass a number of concepts that have come to define what is now seen as a basic political 'good' in the core countries of the West and far beyond. Hence, Gray's definition of modern liberalism may be a good summary but it does not cover all of the signposts along the route to now (Williams 2006, Chapters 1 and 2).

One area that is not addressed by these definitions and their critics is that of how liberals have realized that to bring about the kind of 'progress' (or 'meliorism') they desire, they have to observe and try to influence not only the domestic but also the international sphere. James Bryce, a great nineteenth-century British liberal, said in 1922 that for him liberalism did not just mean

> *… that blind faith in the certainty of human progress … but rather that aspiration for a world more enlightened and more happy than that which we see today, a world in which the cooperation of men and nations rather then their rivalry and the aggrandizement of one at the expense of the other, shall be the guiding aims.*

This way of seeing liberalism also includes the idea of 'fairness' both in domestic and international life that has continued to be a key debate within liberalism and against it. Kant was the first notable modern advocate of a cosmopolitan liberal view that a different kind of international 'order' is necessary before economic and political 'justice' and the legislation of human rights can become the necessary bases of any national or international order (Donaldson 1992).

The idea of 'fairness' has been a feature of much liberal thinking ever since the emergence of the 'new liberalism' in the nineteenth century, with L.T. Hobhouse (1964), T.H. Green (1883) and others stressing the responsibilities of rich societies to care for their weaker members. In the period after 1900, and particularly after 1945, this came to mean variants on Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 'New Deal' or the British welfare state. But there has always been a tension between this welfare approach and that of the above-mentioned individualism, which predates the 'new liberalism' and has its roots in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century classical liberalism of John Locke (1690) and Adam Smith (1776), the political and economic fathers of liberalism. This critique was at the heart of Macpherson's 'possessive individualism', and has seen political form in a periodic reaction against welfarism. This was especially so in the 1980s in Britain where Margaret Thatcher's dictum 'there is no such thing as society' came to be emblematic of an uncaring free-market individualistic liberalism that was prepared to throw vast numbers of miners and others onto the dole queue in the name of 'progress'.

A last area that is both distinctly 'liberal' and also distinctly ambiguous lies in the natural continuation of individualism into the political, social and cultural realm – that of 'human rights'. As David Forsythe (2000, 3) has put it: 'In the classical liberal view, the good society is based on respect for the equality and autonomy of individuals, which is secured through the recognition and application of the

fundamental legal rights of that person … liberalism is a synonym for attention to personal rights'. Again, we can point to problems that arise when we try and impose 'our' views of what rights are, as compared to 'their' ideas of what these should comprise. But like motherhood and apple pie, who can disagree that rights are a 'good' thing? To say otherwise lays us open immediately to charges of 'cultural relativism', an argument that says, essentially if brutally, that 'we' would obviously not tolerate certain practices (female circumcision, child-beating, capital punishment) but that it is alright elsewhere as 'they' have different cultural norms. However, should those who live in glasshouses throw stones – surely we also have practices that 'others' find abhorrent?

Alexis de Tocqueville is a seminal thinker for an understanding of how communities can be liberated and how they can also oppress using the basic tenet of the liberal credo. It might seem strange to emphasize him rather than the better-known 'fathers' of liberalism like John Locke and Jeremy Bentham, but his approach is useful in that it encompasses critiques of both Locke's and Bentham's theories while not denying their fundamental virtues. De Tocqueville is also a useful starting point in that he had observed at close hand the negative side of democracy in the French Revolution and also the emergence of a new American liberal democracy in the early nineteenth century. He was thus much more of a man of the modern age than Locke, whose theorizing about liberalism took place in the context of a very embryonic parliamentary democracy in pre-industrial seventeenth-century Britain. Locke nonetheless had a great rhetorical influence on the constitutional arrangements of the young American Republic (see Doyle 1997).

The main prediction by de Tocqueville, that the 'Anglo-Américains' and the Russians would come to be the dominant world powers was a brave one when he wrote it in 1833–35. It reflected his belief that liberal democracy would prove to be one of the most dominant future political and ideological forces on the planet at a time when there was arguably only one real democracy in existence – the United States. He 'knew that [he] was walking on difficult ground [*terrain brûlant*]' for in Europe the peoples' voice was rarely heard while in the US 'the people dominate in all things [*sans obstacles*]' (Tocqueville 1981; Guellec 2005). Universal suffrage, support for the rule of law, and freedom of speech could give rise to the sublime rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the Constitution of 1784, but they could also lead to the down-treading of the native population and ultimately to a 'perfect equality and an illusory freedom … a world without belief or conviction, inhabited by mild, will-less ruminants … a benevolent totalitarianism' (Kaledin 2005).

Many might say they see this world reflected in the consumerist nightmare of the present-day US, but Kaledin stresses that de Tocqueville also saw a more happy potential outcome for American democracy, namely, 'the possibility of a democratic future of unparalleled political and cultural activity, new form of community, a broader idea of humanity, and warmer, more natural human relationships' (*ibid.*, 48–9). Edmund Burke, who has been claimed by both liberals and conservatives as one of their great prophets, prefigured de Tocqueville in seeing the potential dangers of democracy becoming totalitarian. Burke's opposition to the French Revolution in the 1790s reflected what Jennifer Welsh calls his conservative 'empiricism and its

denunciation of metaphysical discussions of what constitutes the "good"' (Welsh 1995, 11), but he was also a major supporter of the American desire for 'liberty', a metaphysical idea if ever there was one. His support for the American Revolution as one 'within a tradition' as opposed to the French 'revolution in sentiments, manners and moral opinions' (*ibid.*, 93) was mainly due to the way the French revolutionaries *behaved*, not their initial ideological impulse. He was also outraged by the French having, as he saw it, broken up the society of states that existed before the French Revolution (also often known as 'Christendom') which worked according to generally accepted rules that the French so flagrantly breached in the 1790s (*ibid.*; Brown 2002). Chris Brown points out that they may have done so in some areas (chopping off the King's head and invading a lot of Europe to 'liberate' it being two obvious examples) but there was a regular Anglo-French boat link between Calais and Dover (the 'packet') and British participants at Parisian scientific congresses throughout the Napoleonic Wars (2002, 34).

Of course, both de Tocqueville's and Burke's visions have continued to epitomize our dualistic view of what the US, or indeed France, represents in terms of the potential for liberal regimes to deny or encourage freedom and therein lies their enduring fascination. As with Britain in the nineteenth century, so with the US in the twentieth, the great liberal power carries all the contradictions of liberal greatness of their respective epochs as their special burden. This is best shown by liberalism's actions in the international sphere, whether it be under British or American direction.

Liberalism, War, Interventionism and Imperialism[4]

As we have by now seen, liberalism, an ideology with a clear idea of the 'good', has inevitable cross-border ramifications. When the record of liberalism is applied to the international sphere and the perceived need to intervene to 'keep the peace', prop up a 'failed state' or deal with a 'humanitarian disaster', this statement comes to life even more strongly. Liberalism has been the most active player on the international stage of all other ideologies. Not even Soviet Marxism, and certainly not National Socialism, can be said to have had such a lasting and global impact. Liberalism has claimed the need for global solutions based on the language of rights and the search for the 'good'. Kant, whose thinking on the international has already been mentioned above, is the liberal philosopher most associated with a society of states that would be based on republics, even a proto-world government based on liberal and 'cosmopolitan' principles. The way that this Enlightenment philosopher, and his brethren, saw such an international system would be one that would sweep aside the old obscurantism of religion and intolerance and bring us into a new era of emancipation and 'Perpetual Peace' as he put it in a celebrated tract of 1794 (Brown 2002, 40–46). This is a cry that we have heard many times since, in Marxism, other forms of socialism and endlessly

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4   The next few paragraphs draw on Williams (2007, 300–304).

for all sorts of supporters and deniers of liberalism. The United Nations is a clear beneficiary of such thinking, for example.

But as a result of the mixing of liberal ideas, power and influence, even the most sacrosanct of liberal icons can now be assailed. Mark Hoffmann has rightly written that 'international affairs have been the nemesis of liberalism' (cited in Smith 1992, 201). Liberal states, and especially the hegemonic 'Anglo-Americans' have seen themselves pilloried for excessive zeal in their desire to spread their self-defined 'morality' or 'ethics' and democracy by force over the last two hundred years, as with the declaration of an 'ethical foreign policy' by British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook in 1997 (Smith and Light 2001). The latest version of this liberal 'proselytizing' can be found in the wrongly named 'neoconservatism' or, perhaps more rightly, 'militant liberal Wilsonianism' and actions against 'Islamo-fascism' in Afghanistan and Iraq (see Williams 2007, Conclusion). Maybe one reason for this zeal is that liberals put so much Kantian emphasis on 'reason' and a duty to find the 'moral' course to take that they forget that others do not reason or moralize in the same way as they do?

This has arguably long been the case when the epithet 'imperialism' is juxtaposed with the term 'liberalism'. Locke has been accused of creating a distinction in liberal states' treatment of those populations who exist in a 'state of war' and those in a 'state of nature'. The former are those who seemingly obey and respect no clear laws and thus put themselves beyond the pale (Doyle 1997, 216–26; Williams 2006, 21–4). Even John Stuart Mill has not escaped opprobrium on these grounds. Joseph Hamburger asked 'How Liberal was John Stuart Mill?' (1995, 109–22), while Beate Jahn attacked Mill for his 'imperialism' (Jahn 2005, 599–618), though it must be said that the basis for this was his seeking the invasion and suppression of the Barbary pirate kingdoms of North Africa. Mill's 1859 tract *A Few Words on Non-Intervention* has clearly influenced liberal policy-makers and thinkers who believe that non-intervention should be the norm, but dealing with 'primitive peoples' can constitute an exception to this norm (Brown et al. 2002, 486). What could be more obviously 'primitive' than the Taleban or the Shia militias of Moqtadr el-Sadr, we might ask?

But must 'intervention' therefore always be 'imperialist'? Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's foreign policy advisor Robert Cooper is a recent convert to justifying selective intervention, as he does in his book *The Breaking of Nations* (2004). His use of the epithet 'liberal imperialism' to describe Blair's foreign policy in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 was not used with irony or distaste. Others have compared 'humanitarian intervention' (Wheeler 2000), now enshrined in a UN General Assembly Resolution as the 'Responsibility to Protect' with such thinking (Welsh 2004). But is not intervention just that, whatever the justification? The same logic used by Mill to defend 'illiberal' attacks on other states and peoples is now being used to justify dealing with 'failed states' in Africa and elsewhere. The liberal is seemingly always being thrust back onto 'realist' actions by necessity and self-defence. Again the communitarian attack on interventionist liberalism strikes home – we act because what we need to do is 'right' for us, not necessarily 'good' for 'them'.

The tradition of using liberal principles to justify 'imperialist' practices thus pre-dates the modern era by over a hundred years. Duncan Bell's (2005) article on John Robert Seeley, the Victorian 'public intellectual' and historian, shows this well. Seeley had a 'good claim to being the individual most responsible for broadening the imaginative horizons of Victorian political thought', yet was clearly a 'realist' in that he is often seen as being in the same political lineage as George Kennan, Martin Wight, Herbert Butterfield or Reinhold Niebuhr, some key members of the realist canon (as for example by Deudney 2001). Bell shows how Seeley has been subsumed into what Karma Nabulsi (1999) calls the 'martialist' tradition of late nineteenth-century thinkers who lauded the development of the Britain Empire.

But as Bell points out, he was also a fervent believer in 'progress' and '[l]ike many liberals, he [Seeley] supported the utilization of political violence in the struggle for national liberation'. He was a great supporter of Kantian and other ideas of federation, in line with many liberals of his day and since, even to the point of a 'federal Greater Britain and a reunion with America'. His imperialism was that of the typical liberal, one which saw the Empire as 'civilizing' and having within it a 'moral obligation to support [for example] the Indian people in the quest for progress…. The British, that is, were to act as the midwives of Indian modernity'. As Bell goes on to say: 'Once again, such a heavily moralized concern with what we might now call "nation-building" does not find prominent place in the constellation of realist thought' (Bell 2005, 567).

So how can Seeley (or for that matter Mill, Locke or Blair) be a liberal in some ways but not others? David Williams (2001) has suggested that liberalism as a 'political project' is not just 'the production of theoretically justified ends and arrangements'. It has to include a 'sociological and political account of the barriers to achieving those desirable ends and arrangements', it 'involves the use of certain characteristic "techniques of transformation" [and it] can only be a project embodied in a political agency'. It has, in other words, no reality without practice.

A greater test than imperialism of such practice is surely liberalism's attitude to war itself, the great leveller of international and national politics. If James Bryce's comments above were sincere in wishing liberalism to be seen as trying to bring about a better way of doing international relations, without constant recourse to war, then how can that be seen as having had any success in practice? One answer lies in the belief that liberty has on occasion to be fought for. Prominent early twentieth-century British liberal Gilbert Murray opined: 'Nothing but the sincere practice of liberal principles will save European society from imminent revolutions and collapse' (Morefield 2005, 1). On another occasion in 1921 he wrote:

> *I start from the profound conviction that what the world needs is peace. There has been too much war, and too much of too many things that go with war…. Before the [Great] war I was a Liberal, and I believe now that nothing but the sincere practice of Liberal principles will save European society from imminent revolution and collapse (1921, 5–6).*

He had had no problem in supporting the war against Germany; 'Of course I supported the war. I believe it was necessary' (*ibid.*). This belief was once again shaken by experience. The 1930s were a period of particular challenge for liberalism, as capitalism seemingly collapsed across much of Europe and democracy came under great strain. In the heartlands of the US and the UK 'planning' became the order of the day, and government interference in economic life became accepted in a way that would have been unthinkable before 1914. L.T. Hobhouse predicted that liberalism would be in trouble even before 1914: 'The nineteenth century might be called the age of Liberalism, yet its close saw the fortunes of that great movement bought to their lowest ebb' (1964, 110).

Another prophet of doom, Reinhold Niebuhr, the celebrated theological 'realist', predicted the end of the age of liberalism was nigh in 1934 in that there were forces developing even then that he thought would put an end to the age of seemingly unending progress that had produced such liberty of thought and action in the West (Lovin 2008, 158). These forces would be both political and economic. The political he saw in the rise of the totalitarian dictatorships, the economic was emerging in what we would now call 'globalization' and the apocalyptic results of global climate change. Such apocalyptic thinking was not the preserve of theologians. The emergence of what, at the time, seemed to be the counter-promise of liberalism – the Soviet system – led Stephen Spender to write a tract entitled *Forward From Liberalism*. Although his flirtation with the Communist Party of Great Britain was brief, as he was expelled for being, predictably, unable to conform to strict Party guidance, he represented a whole generation of young Western intellectuals who felt that liberal democracy was doomed. Spender was not wrong when he said: 'Democracies are passing through a stage of acute disappointment with the very limited and ineffective political power which they enjoy' (1937, 17). Such paralysis was indeed to lead to 'apathy [and] despair', for liberal democracy only works when the people feel themselves empowered by it to change their lives and those of others, for the better.

In the contemporary era after the end of the Cold War, several pundits have declared that liberalism had finally triumphed. The 'End of History' has been announced by Francis Fukuyama with his claim that 'the modern liberal democratic state … is free of contradictions' and that the world will from now on become a 'universal and homogenous state … resting on the twin pillars of economics and recognition' (1992, 139, 204). But even he encapsulated the inherent pessimism of all liberal triumphalism by warning in his book's title about the dangers of excessive consumerism, in the figure of Nietzsche's 'Last Man'. Since 1992 a whole industry has sprung up to denounce such 'speech acts' and 'critical theory' has been reborn to attack liberalism on its own turf of excessive 'possessive individualism' and lack of emancipatory politics (see el-Ojeili and Hayden 2006, 10). In the international sphere that critique has concentrated on the evident contradictions of the Kantian claim that Western triumph in the Cold War has led to an unthinking imposition of the 'liberal' (or 'democratic') peace in attempts to bring democracy to states that cannot handle it or capitalism to places that will be destroyed by it (see Richmond 2005; MacGinty and Williams 2009). One of the key accusations is that liberalism

rides roughshod over local cultures and practices, that it misunderstands the very nature of what it seeks to transform, which is often local 'identity', and is in the process self-destructive and also destructive of the 'other' (see, for example, Krause and Williams 1997).

Distributive 'Justice'

Along with its desire to bring peoples into Locke's 'civil society', liberalism has both figuratively and actually always put emphasis on both economic efficiency and justice. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* of 1776 and his classical economic liberal followers could see no problem with the idea that increasing the economic pie through capitalism would benefit all classes of society though the notion of 'comparative advantage'. The encouragement of trade has played a significant role in this liberal thinking about comparative advantage ever since, as well as the idea that trade links encourage peace. As Jacoby has succinctly put it: 'Living freely is thus trading freely' (2007, 524). The question has always been, and will continue to be, how this justice can be delivered in economic terms; that is, how wealth can be both created and distributed. Socialism, it has often been suggested, is bad on the first count, but very keen on the second; liberals argue about how to balance the two.

But we also need to ask what 'justice' means. Brian Barry suggests that there are two versions of this, 'justice as mutual advantage and … justice as impartiality'. Both derive from the observation that *in* all societies and also *across* societies there are 'unequal relations between people', the 'high' and the 'low'. In justice as 'mutual advantage' we are asked to accept that hierarchy is inevitable and that therefore cooperation is better than conflict, a policy of 'rational prudence'. In the second way of thinking about it, Barry says that justice should be based on 'impartiality' in that for those lower down the pecking order not only 'is a just state of affairs … one that people can accept not merely in the sense that they cannot reasonably *expect* to get more but in the stronger sense that they cannot reasonably *claim* more' (1989, 3–9). This view of justice is much more in the utilitarian mode of Bentham of the beginning of the nineteenth century than in the 'new' liberal mode of the end of it. Brown makes a similar point: international 'justice' meant for many centuries 'respect for the rights of sovereigns' not 'social' rights (2002, 9). So why should there be 'distributive justice' not only within states but also internationally?

John Stuart Mill's attack on Benthamite utilitarianism (which led to a more welfarist turn in liberal thinking and practice) and the New Liberalism of the nineteenth century (which led to even more of the same) showed a clear commitment to economic as well as political fairness. In recent years, as has been mentioned, John Rawls's book *A Theory of Justice* of 1971 is seen as the most stimulating statement of this principle. Richard Rorty, who in the US is seen as, and described himself as, a 'leftist' (1998), is another writer who might be said to have unusually pursued the idea of American 'welfare-state liberalism'. So liberals from Locke in the seventeenth century, through Kant and Mill in the eighteenth and nineteenth, and Rawls (1971;

1993) in the late twentieth centuries have all had the idea that communities can be made fairer or more just by the application of liberal principles. Each of these reiterations of that basic idea has evoked their counter-arguers. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Jean-Jacques Rousseau and G.W.F. Hegel posited that freedom and justice could only come through the liberating role of the state, and that without such institutions individual liberty was meaningless. In a comment on this communitarian debate Michael Sandel summed it up as a debate 'on the challenge to the priority of the right over the good' (see Mulhall and Swift 1992).

Others have also seen problems in Rawls's absolute belief in the need for fairness in domestic and, though Rawls does not claim this, international society. For Michael Walzer (1992), for example, this personalizing of politics is again a problem given that the inevitable consequence of such thinking may be to interfere in the lives of individuals and polities that do not want such interference, which leads to internal contradictions within the liberal impulse itself. Much of the communitarian critique of liberalism is, again not directed at overthrowing its tenets but rather not wanting it to be imposed on those who do not choose it of their own free will (Mulhall and Swift 1992) It is a tension at the heart of liberalism, summed up by Isaiah Berlin as the clash between 'positive' ('freedom which consists in being one's own master') and 'negative' ('not being prevented from choosing as I do by other men') freedoms (Bellamy 2000, Chapter 2).[5]

Conclusions: Simpering Idealists or Monstrous Imperialists?

What is striking in all of this is that for such a vibrant, if contested, ideology, liberalism has been declared dead very many times. All the way through the twentieth century its 'optimism' has been deemed dangerous or deluded. Georges Sorel wrote that 'the optimist in politics is an inconstant and even dangerous man, because he takes no account of the great difficulties presented by his projects … Liberal political economy is one of the best examples of a Utopia that could be given' (1941, 9, 33). John Pilger, a prominent journalist for the *New Statesman*, itself a British periodical that has its roots firmly embedded in the liberal tradition of the beginning of the twentieth century, asserted that '[s]hould Obama beat John McCain to the White House in November it will be liberalism's last fling. In the United States and Britain, liberalism as war-making, divisive ideology is once again being used to destroy liberalism as a reality' (2008, 32). Richard Bellamy has called the nineteenth century the 'golden age of liberalism' (2000), as did Hobhouse, quoted above, and it was against the complacency of a seemingly triumphant liberal capitalism that Sorel was railing.

He might just as well have been complaining about Norman Angell in *The Great Illusion* (1910) proclaiming war as illogical and therefore impossible between

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5   Bellamy denies Berlin's claim that Mill is a representative of 'positive' freedom and Green of 'negative'.

the great powers of Europe. Right and Left in Western politics have always simultaneously accused liberalism of perpetrating what Johan Galtung (1969) terms 'structural violence', or misunderstanding the necessary purificatory violence by the working class, advocated by the syndicalist Sorel or indeed the national socialists Adolf Hitler or Benito Mussolini. This way of reasoning has formed the basis for criticizing liberalism, which always resorts to violence in what it always claims is 'the last resort'. Hence the easy accusations of hypocrisy, of covering up the 'real' motives of a dominant capitalist bourgeoisie, with the fine words of liberal emancipation.

So what conclusions can we draw after briefly examining the evidence for the prosecution and the defence? Liberalism has been widely attacked for its conflation of 'justice' and 'fairness', especially in light of the domestic and international experience of politics in the past century. Perhaps liberalism is at its best when it pursues what philosopher Gillian Rose (1997) terms 'good enough justice' – a recognition that there is no perfection and therefore that we have to try to achieve it by accepting inevitable moral compromises.[6] This is a hopeful way of looking at the world, and counters both liberal hubris in its desire to 'fix' the world's ills, and poststructural inertia, in its tendency to wallow in them. Another way might be to ask if the liberal knight has more dragons to slay in the seeming triumph of globalization and the widespread acceptance of the norms of democracy and human rights. Indeed he or she does. Extreme and potentially violent nationalism still rears its head, and increasingly so, in China and Russia. More worrying is that there are nations who would consider themselves 'liberal', like the French, that talk about the problems of '*hyper-liberalisme*' and the '*détournement*' by the US of the principles of the Rights of Man that France did so much to promote (see Laurent 2006). If the liberal credo has been declared dead in error over three centuries, might this one prove to be its last? Maybe liberalism just represents the 'optimistic' side of thinking in the West about the possibility of political agency, with Sorel and others cited above the 'pessimists'. When the West feels good about itself, as in 1990–92 or most of the nineteenth century, liberalism flourishes. When the West is despondent, as it is now, liberalism is put on the back foot. But it would be dangerous to predict its total demise any time soon.

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6   Although Rose herself is not of liberal persuasion. My thanks to Kate Schick for this quote.

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