

Liberalism Series - Abstracts

"Philosophical Background of Liberalism" - John Dewey

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To profess liberal beliefs today amounts to making yourself a target for reproaches from all sides. This state of affairs leads to the investigation of the actual meaning of liberalism. Too often all liberals are condemned because of the presence in their ranks of persons whose only claim to be there is their temperament. This liberal temperament is amiable and kindly. It is optimistic. It would like conditions improved for the underdog. However, faced with the price of reform, they leave all change to "natural forces" which automatically operate for "PROGRESS", by the process of evolution, not revolution. These qualities, though admirable ones and often very useful, cannot stand the strain of a crisis. At such a time these liberals are unable to face criticism, because of the absence of any well thought-out, philosophical basis.

There is a second type of liberalism, however, that has more right to be considered a philosophy. This is the liberalism that has formed the backbone of political democracy, with the slogan of the French Revolution, "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity". Because of the intensity of the suffering from political injustice around them at that time, they overlooked the economic, industrial, and social elements of society, forgetting that these could not be controlled through political measures. However, in spite of their narrowness, they laid the foundations for our present day society.

An offshoot of political liberalism, which crystalized and became the war cry of the privileged class, was the attitude best expressed in the term, "laissez-faire". In the 18th century liberty and equality meant mainly the overthrow of feudalism. The group most interested in this process was the rising industrial class. Liberty became identified with freedom in choice

of occupation and divine right of private property, without legal restriction or government control. Government was thus reduced to a mere policeman, to prevent actual crime. This economic liberty protected the expansion of capital, so it is not surprising that the "Rugged Individualists" adopted it as their slogan. All these liberals, in assuming that liberty is a birthright, mistook for a starting point what is actually a result. Liberty cannot be achieved without the primary existence of suitable social conditions. In fact, the underlying weakness of all these types of liberalism is in their separation of means from end.

The genuine liberal philosopher, then, realizes that the means are bound to affect the ends and that the two must be harmonious. He is willing to pay whatever price his intelligence advises to attain his ideals, liberty and equality, but considers first what course will leave the least undesirable effects. Therefore, to fulfill this requirement, he substitutes for impetuous action the free play of intelligence aided by freedom of speech and communication. Contrasted to this theory is that of the communists who consider any means justified by the end and who blindly follow the dogmatic teachings of Marx, neglecting entirely changing conditions. But the genuine liberal is above all not dogmatic. His is the method of experimentation which analyzes existing conditions and finally leads to inventive construction. This is, in short, the scientific approach, which because it is so new still seems vague to the average person. But the real liberal believes that in this method lies the hope of humanity and is willing to sacrifice himself to keep it alive.

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