

Liberalism Series - Abstracts

"Liberalism" - Alvin Johnson

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Enthusiasm for liberalism comes in cycles. We are now on the down swing of a cycle. It is not only that Germany, Russia and Italy are throwing their liberals out, but in less disrupted countries young men and women who would in the last century have boasted liberalism, are now joining the Communist ranks. The reason is that today we have an ideology for action which regards liberalism as suspiciously mild.

Since, judging from the regular recurrence of enthusiastic liberalism in history, it apparently has definite characteristics and ideals, how should liberalism be defined? Some consider liberalism to consist of laissez-faire in economics and suspended judgment in the arts, but there are more general traits that characterize a liberal. First he believes in the fundamental importance and potentiality of the individual. He is an environmentalist as contrasted to the conservative who believes in heredity and original sin. Secondly, it follows that the liberal will never think of the state as an organic entity, but rather as a collection of individuals. Hence he will never talk in such terms as "socializing society". Thirdly, he believes that individuals can develop only with liberty. The disorder brought about by interfering with freedom of speech and movement is apt to be more injurious than the results of allowing it. Fourthly, the liberal is interested in variation among individuals as a stimulus for greater development of individual potentialities. He has no sympathy with throwing out of a society all non-conforming elements. Fifthly, he believes that to deal with all political, economic and social affairs, we need only to apply enlightened reason. These problems are simple if nobody has an interest in making them complicated.

Lastly, he believes a system is not a bit safe where liberalism is suppressed and everyone is uneasy and scared. An explosion is bound to result.

The liberal is not afraid of necessary compromises. We find him joining the French physiocrats, or again the socialists, believing that either absolute monarchy on one hand or governmental control on the other, is less of a hindrance to liberty than the pressure of the privileged class. The position of the liberal in regard to matters of religion and race is naturally tolerant because of his belief in freedom and the value of variety. In regard to war and revolution, he is pacifist, not only because they grind up liberty and democracy, but because he believes it possible for battles of words to settle controversies without the blood and fuss.

In the historical development of liberalism we see not only its cycles of popularity but the kind of setting in which it thrives. There are traces of it in the stoic philosophy at the time of the later Roman Empire, when wealth and power seemed hollow. It does not appear again until the 17th century when it flourishes for three centuries mainly in England and France, at one point supporting a revolution, and thereafter transferring its interest from the bourgeoisie to the laboring class. The United States has never matured to the point of welcoming liberalism, as have these European countries. She has not the clear-cut class struggle over human rights and property rights that is the setting required to accommodate liberalism. The absence of this clear conflict as well as our fear of variety and of all that is foreign, have so far counteracted the influence of our deep democratic principles and our emphasis on individualism, and has kept liberalism from growing here.

From history, what has seemed to be the function of liberalism? The liberals are not advocates of any special party because you find them in



every party; they are rather the ones who give direction and symbol to the classes struggling for a change, and hence, by their reasoning non-partisanship, cause many of the neutrals also to desire change. Liberalization cannot be applied to a situation after the dye is cast; to be of any use it must be allowed to exert its influence during the struggle.

What are the chances of this type of liberalism operating in this country? The relative equilibrium of the last century is gone and a struggle is inevitable. It is time for the up-swing of the cycle. Will the liberal attitude be strong enough to do any good? The steady drift in education toward liberalism may bring about the exception which proves the rule, that liberalism shall exercise an important function in effecting a result otherwise requiring revolution.

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