Liberalism

William Wallace traces the origins of Liberal political thought.

The Origins of Liberalism

Liberalism is a broad river of political thought, which bubbled up from many sources and has flowed into different streams and eddies. Its core elements, as it took shape in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were a belief in the importance of the individual, an assertion that each individual was entitled to freedom of belief and speech, opposition to imposed orthodoxy in religion, public life and education, and a commitment to limited government against monarchy and tyranny.[1] In an era in which kings might confiscate their subjects' property, with monarchs and state churches together imposing strict limits on permitted speaking and writing, two other elements also emerged: the sanctity of private property, widely spread across society, and toleration of dissenting opinions and beliefs.

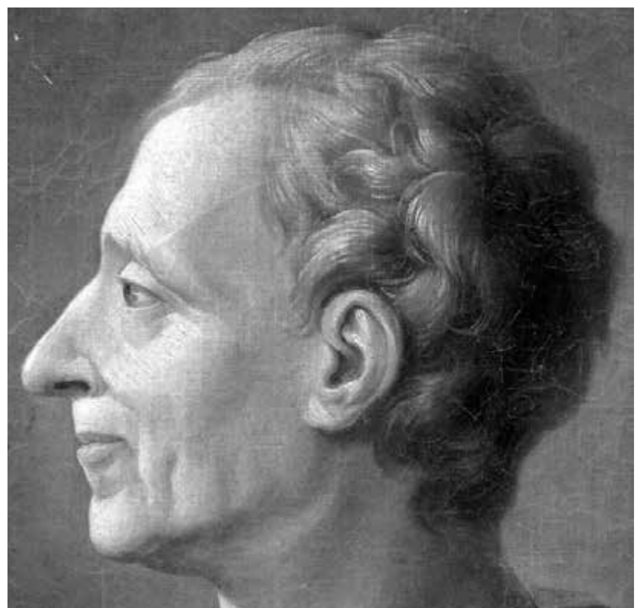
Organised political liberalism did not develop across Europe until the early nineteenth century, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, which had destroyed traditional power structures and orthodoxies. But it built on ideas – and, in the USA, on constitution-building – that had spread during the two hundred years before the 1820s and 1830s, when political Liberalism emerged in practice. Some philosophers have traced elements of liberal thought back to the Athenians.[2] The evolution of liberalism as a trigger for political engagement, however, is more clearly rooted in the turbulent period that followed the European Reformation, as the printing press made the Bible available for all literate people to read and interpret, and with the continuing growth of towns, of schools and universities and of prosperous traders and craftsmen making it more difficult for the authorities to contain heterodox publications and ideas. What we now call 'the Enlightenment' was a move towards reason against faith, and towards individual rights against state and established church, underpinned by an optimistic view of human nature and of the possibilities of social and political progress. Looking back at the limits and inconsistencies of early liberal efforts, we should bear in mind that, in the seventeenth century, Europe was emerging from bitter religious wars, with contending efforts to impose absolute rule and doctrines and to exclude, exile or execute those who disagreed. Those who thought for themselves were acting dangerously.

Dissident philosophers on the European continent such as René Descartes (1596–1650) and Baruch Spinoza (1633–77) asserted the primacy of the individual over the group and the centrality of reason over faith, as they dodged Catholic, Calvinist or Jewish enforcers of competing orthodoxies.[3] But it was in England that the absence of a standing army, the financial weakness of the Crown and the resistance of parliament, and others of the rising gentry and trading classes, to Stuart attempts to impose strong monarchy first allowed these ideas to burst into public debate. John Milton wrote his pamphlet *Areopagitica* in 1644, after parliament's early victories in the civil war, to protest against parliament's censorship of publications, reimposing previous Stuart practice. He defended the right of

individual readers to assess conflicting arguments about political and social order: 'Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.' Presidents of the Liberal Party from 1945 to the merger with the Social Democrats handed on to their successors a copy of Milton's treatise, as a founding document of Liberal principles.

Because the defeated King Charles would not compromise on forms of monarchical government, the New Model Army and its commanders had to develop alternative justifications for political and social order. During the Putney Debates in 1647, which were chaired by Oliver Cromwell, the radical Colonel Rainsborough argued that 'every man that is to live under a Government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that Government', and Henry Ireton (Cromwell's son-in-law) for the army hierarchy responded that 'no man hath a right to an interest or share in the disposing of the affairs of the kingdom … that hath not a permanent fixed interest [property] in this kingdom' – an issue about which liberals and radicals argued for the following 200 years.[4]

Religious and political authority were intertwined across sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. In Germany, the Peasants' War (1524–5), the violent anabaptist occupation of Munster (1534–5), and continuing religious conflicts had convinced both Catholic and Lutheran rulers that order and security required imposition of a single, hierarchical religious order in each state.[5] King James I (of England, VI of Scotland) resisted the collective oligarchy of the presbyterian church as undermining royal authority, bluntly telling a Scottish delegation that 'no



Liberal philosophers:
René Descartes (1596–1650)
Baruch Spinoza (1632–77)
Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu (1689–1755)

bishop [would lead to] no king.' Against the background of the bloody Thirty Years' War in Germany and continuing conflict within France, fear of anarchy, of the collapse of political and social order, was the core thrust of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*; but it also gripped the army hierarchy after the English civil war.

Commonwealth-supporting clergy met for far longer debates in Westminster Abbey, disputing alternative forms of religious organisation. The majority supported a presbyterian structure, but dissent from more radical 'independents' led to calls for toleration of alternative approaches to worship. Congregationalists, Baptists and Quakers emerged from these disputes as distinct radical Christian groups.[6] The Stuart Restoration in 1660 thus found a diverse pattern of forms of worship, with the king's ministers having to decide how broad or narrow the conditions for the re-establishment of a state church should be. Strict tests imposed to demonstrate individual conformity with the Church of England's 39 Articles led to the withdrawal of over 2000 'nonconformist' clergy and the exclusion of a far larger number of people from public office, Oxford and Cambridge and other educational institutions.[7] Nonconformists continued to suffer discrimination in political life until the repeal of these Test and Corporation Acts in 1828, introduced by the Whig Lord John Russell in Canning's coalition government – after which Nonconformist churches and their members became one of the most important elements of Gladstone's Liberal Party.

Toleration of dissent – freedom of belief – remained sharply contested throughout the reigns of Charles II and James II, with both Nonconformists and Catholics excluded from public life, and with Catholics associated with fears of an attempt to re-establish absolute monarchy. John Locke, a published supporter of the emerging limited-government 'Whigs' against the royalist 'Tories', wrote *A Letter concerning Toleration* in 1685, arguing for full freedom for Nonconformists and conditional emancipation for Catholics in the midst of embittered controversies over James II's succession to the throne and Louis XIV's revocation of toleration for French Protestants. But he wrote this in exile, in Amsterdam, and it was not published until after William III and Mary had taken the British throne, with the English parliament passing an Act of Toleration that removed some of the disabilities imposed upon dissenting Protestants.[8]

Restoration politics set supporters of strong monarchy against those who saw government as emerging from an imagined 'social contract' between ruler and ruled. Thomas Hobbes, writing as a Royalist at the outset of the Civil War, interpreted this concept as a commitment by the ruler to maintain order against the chaos of ungoverned societies, in return for which their subjects owed unconditional loyalty.[9] Those who had a more optimistic view of human nature and society interpreted the social contract as conditional, in which the ruler retained legitimacy so long as government was limited in its powers and individual rights to property, belief and speech were respected. The 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688–9 marked the victory of the Whig interpretation, with the passage of the Bill of Rights and the installation of a dual monarchy (William and Mary) that understood that there were limits to its authority. Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* (1689) provided the intellectual justification for this conditional approach to authority, arguing that government derived its legitimacy from the consent of the governed, and that revolution was legitimate when a ruler failed to protect individual rights and property – the implicit conditions of the social contract.[10]

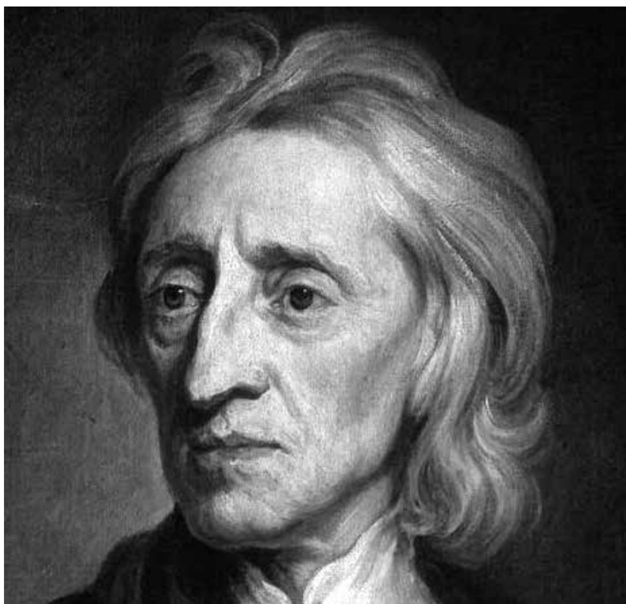
Debates about political authority in England in the seventeenth century influenced developments in other countries, and were influenced in turn by them. Scottish

Presbyterians took part in the Westminster Assembly; English and Scottish settlers moved across the Atlantic and transported religious and political debates to the emerging colonies.[11] The Netherlands provided asylum for successive English and Scottish dissidents, bringing them together with Dutch philosophers and theologians – and, after 1689, Dutch politicians and scholars followed William III to London, Edinburgh and beyond. Hobbes corresponded with Descartes; Locke's *Letter on Toleration* drew on his friendship with a Dutch Divinity Professor. French Huguenots came to England before and after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Some of those who stayed in France, philosophical dissidents under an absolute Catholic monarchy, looked longingly across the Channel at an apparently freer state.

Baron Montesquieu (1689–1755) was a particular admirer of the eighteenth-century British constitution in comparison with the French. He made a number of visits to London, became a member of the Royal Society, and mixed with many leading politicians. His *L'Esprit des Lois* (1748; English translation 1750) portrayed the British constitution as resting on the separation of powers between legislative, judicial and executive arms: a generous and mistaken interpretation of the working of eighteenth-century British politics, which nevertheless left a profound impression on liberal understandings of constitutional government.

The American colonists who revolted against London rule echoed Locke's language on liberty and consent in drafting the Declaration of Independence. A decade later the federal constitution followed Montesquieu's principles. The *Federalist Papers*, written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay in 1787–8 to make the case for the new constitution, should rank among the founding documents of the Liberal tradition. They distinguished between popular and liberal democracy, reflecting on the chaotic politics and occasional rebellions in different states in their first years of independence. They were wary of the potential tyranny both of unchecked executive power and of surges of popular sentiment. Careful checks and balances were needed to contain them. Federal government was designed to be slow-moving and dependent on cooperation among its different elements. The first amendment to the US Constitution added freedom of speech and religion to the text. Milton's *Areopagitica* has since been cited in interpreting the amendment in a number of Supreme Court cases.

Scotland, much poorer than England in the late seventeenth century and limited in permitted debates by the established Presbyterian church, had lagged behind England in addressing forms of government and freedom of belief.[12] In the decades that followed, however, the influence of a 'moderate' party in the Church, the prosperity which the opening of English commerce brought to Glasgow and the rest of lowland Scotland, and the exchange of ideas with intellectuals in England, France, the Netherlands and beyond made Edinburgh the centre of what is now labelled 'the Scottish Enlightenment'.[13] David Hume (1711–1776) explored the balance between reason and 'the passions' and between authority and liberty. He also tested the limits of Presbyterian tolerance in his philosophical writings; his alleged atheism denied him a university post. Principal (of Edinburgh University) William Robertson first used the term 'liberal' (in 1769) to describe mercantile societies that rested on collective government and the rule of law and promoted 'liberties and rights' for their citizens.[14] His friend Adam Smith applied a similar analysis to trade and the economy, arguing for limiting state interference in commerce and industry, allowing the self-interested interactions of merchants and manufacturers to generate private and public benefits. *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) provided the



foundation for nineteenth-century Liberal commitments to free trade and peace, and later became the bible of 'economic liberals' against those who were beginning to use state resources and finance to support society and economy.[15] Hume, Smith and their colleagues directly influenced the English utilitarians of the next generation, and through them John Stuart Mill. A century after Mill, John Rawls wrote that 'the conception of justice I set out is perhaps closer to Hume's than any other.'[16]

Whigs in Britain were sympathetic to the claims the American colonists made. The young Edmund Burke wrote and spoke in favour of conciliation with the colonists as relations moved towards armed conflict. It was the French Revolution, in which the pursuit of reason and representative government rapidly deteriorated into revolution, chaos and bloodshed that turned Burke and many other Whigs against ideas of consent and wider representation, giving Britain two decades of Tory government and wars with France. The rump of the Whig Party, led by Charles James Fox until his death in 1806, continued to argue for political reform, peace with France, abolition of slavery and the reduction of restrictions on civil liberties, but as a beleaguered minority inside parliament and out.[17]

Napoleon's conquests destroyed the structures of pre-modern order across the European continent, modernising administration, education and law. In exile, French intellectuals mingled with others displaced by war and revolution. An extraordinary couple, Germaine de Stael and Benjamin Constant, moved across Europe, drawing lessons from the excesses of the Revolution and the Napoleonic response as well as from Locke, Smith and others. They gathered German, Italian

Liberal philosophers:
John Locke (1632–1704)
David Hume (1711–76) (© National Portrait Gallery, London)
Adam Smith (1723–90)

and British interlocuters – from Lord Byron to Wilhelm von Humboldt – as they wrote about individual liberty, constitutional government, the balance between reason and emotion, the rights of women, the role of education and the dangers of mob rule. Constant even drafted a (rejected) constitution for the restored French monarchy.[18]

Attempts on the European continent to 'restore' the old order after 1815 found weakened aristocratic and religious hierarchies facing a more educated and active population in towns and cities, and groups – and secret societies like the Freemasons – who were plotting to replace authoritarian monarchy with more representative and constrained forms of government and freer civil societies. In Germany and Italy, Liberal movements developed together with efforts to build national states; in France, Liberals prioritised constrained and constitutional government.[19] Continental Liberalism was partly shaped by opposition to the partnership between the Catholic Church and absolutist monarchies. Control of education, as a central aspect of individual and social development, was almost as contested as constitutional structure. Independence for Belgium, in 1830, was immediately followed by a drive to establish a university free of Catholic control; the Free University of Brussels, founded in 1834, still thanks the freemasons for their role in its foundation.[20]

Reform of education was also a key issue for Liberals in Protestant countries. Whigs and Radicals broke the monopoly of the established church on English higher education, as they recovered their confidence after the defeat of Napoleon. In partnership with the Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham and with support from leading Nonconformists, Catholics and Jews, Whigs proposed in 1827 to establish a University of London on the model of the Scottish universities. Vigorous Tory opposition ended in the creation of a 'federal' university, with a charter for the 'godly' King's College as well as the allegedly 'godless' University College. Humboldt transformed the Prussian education system after Prussia's defeat by Napoleon. Berlin University (now Humboldt University) provided a model for university reform and expansion across the German states, closely followed also in the USA.

With the removal of restrictions on Nonconformists and Catholic emancipation in 1828–9, the first Reform Act of 1832, and the rapid growth of industry, towns and cities, British politics moved towards organised parties. Those who came together to constitute the Liberal Party in the 1840s and 1850s brought with them a distrust of over-mighty government, of high taxes raised to finance foreign wars, of efforts to censor dissident opinions and beliefs, and an optimism about human nature and the possibility of progress that extended to seeing free trade as a means to international cooperation as well as prosperity. The challenges of industrial and urban development forced them to reconsider the role of public intervention in social and economic life, first in local government and later at national level. Liberal politicians and Liberal thinkers, in England and elsewhere, adapted their ideas to the pressures and problems that faced them. Liberals in local government led municipal improvement schemes; T. H. Green taught many of those later dubbed the 'New Liberals' that state action on welfare, public health and utilities contributed to the public good.[21]

Michael Freeden defines the early writers covered here as 'proto-Liberals': setting out some of the principles and dilemmas that later shaped the Liberal tradition, but in pre-modern societies without the complexities with which their successors have grappled.[22] Unavoidably, succeeding generations have reinterpreted their ideas to suit current circumstances – Hobhouse and Hobson to tackle the problems of urban poverty and social division, Friedrich von Hayek to warn against the threat of totalitarian rule. In several European

democracies, the twentieth century saw two liberal-labelled parties, one economically liberal insisting on limits to state action, the other socially liberal promoting educational development, welfare and market regulation. In the United States the term 'liberal' has become a term of abuse for many, denoting an overpowerful interventionist and redistributive state and an intolerant 'woke' culture. The Liberal tradition is wide and contains many elements that are hard to reconcile.

From today's perspective, almost all proto-Liberals have feet of clay. Locke, and the army hierarchy of the Putney Debates, wanted liberty and representation for men of property, not for every man. The Scottish Enlightenment which allowed Hume and Smith to travel round Europe and dedicate evenings to intellectual discussions in Edinburgh's new town was built on the profits of the tobacco and sugar trades, and thus on slavery. Thomas Jefferson's drafting of the US Declaration of Independence left out the slaves he owned and on which the economy of the southern US states depended. None until the end of the eighteenth century raised the question of the rights of women.

Yet many of the principles that they propounded retain their value today. Human rights, freedom of speech and belief, individual liberty within the law, economic opportunity and limited government: they have become underlying assumptions about the nature of a liberal society, shared by other democratic parties but opposed by authoritarian movements. The distinction between liberal democracy and populist rule, the eighteenth-century concern about the tyranny of the majority, is painfully relevant to contemporary politics. Even the concept of a social contract, of mutual obligations between states and citizens, has returned to the political discourse, as governments and citizens grapple with what levels of economic security, education and welfare the state can or should provide.[23] The transformation of societies and economies from seventeenth-century agrarian through industrial revolution to global capitalism and technological transformation have forced liberals to adapt their political priorities to different challenges. Libertarians have parted from the mainstream. Social liberals have struggled to reconcile liberty, equality and community, and to support an active but not over-dominant state.

But Liberalism is more an idealist project than a political programme. 'A liberal society can never be more than a practical "success" by its own standards: its aspirations for the individual, for society and for the conduct of government guarantee that its ambitions will always exceed its performance.'[24]

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1 Definitions of Liberalism and the historical threads of its development have been – and remain – sharply contested. What follows is unavoidably a personal interpretation. For an overview of the debate, see Duncan Bell, 'What is Liberalism?', *Political Theory*, 42 (2014), pp. 682–715.

2 John Gray in *Liberalism* (OUP, 1986) sees 'pre-modern anticipations' of liberal arguments in ancient Greek philosophy and early Christian disputes.

3 Ian Dunt's *How to be a Liberal* (Canbury Press, 2020) places Descartes, with his insistence on uncertainty, evidence and the centrality of the individual at 'the birth' of liberalism – 'liberalism and reason were born as twins'; John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1993), identifies the origins of liberalism as coming from the post-Reformation disputes over religious and political authority.

4 Geoffrey Robertson (ed.), *The Putney Debates* (Verso, 2007). The origins of English Radicalism also lie in these debates and the Civil War, from those who argued the case for equality as strongly as for liberty. S. Maccoby's *The Radical Tradition* (A & C Black, 1952) starts in the 1770s with John Wilkes, followed by Tom Paine. Radicalism is as contested a term as Liberalism, though the two terms have also overlapped; in

the 19th century the term 'radical' designated the left wing of the Liberal Party.

5 Historians disagree on how violent and anarchic the brief Anabaptist regime in Munster was; the Catholic response was extremely violent. But both for Luther and for Catholic rulers the reported horrors of the Munster revolution became a justification for resisting any loosening of the bond between political and religious authority. In the Netherlands and England a century later, this was still an argument used to discredit self-governing Baptist congregations. Michael A. G. Haykin, 'Separatists and Baptists', ch. 5 in John Coffey (ed.), *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions*, i (OUP, 2020).

6 The early Quakers were seen (and persecuted after the Stuart Restoration) as the most destructive of social order in their refusal to take off their hats to monarch or magistrate, insisting that they deferred only to God.

7 One of the first ceremonies of each session of parliament from 1662 on was to process to Westminster Abbey for Holy Communion, to ensure that every peer and MP was a communing member of the Church of England. Under William and Mary, Tory politicians attacked 'occasional conformists' – Whigs who would take communion only on official occasions.

8 Locke's attitude to toleration for Catholics is disputed by scholars; and he did not seek to extend toleration to atheists.

9 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, originally published in 1651, provided intellectual support for the Royalist cause in the Civil war, and for Tories in post-Restoration English politics.

10 The second verse of the British national anthem has this conditional, social contract, pledge of loyalty: 'May he defend our laws, and ever give us cause to sing … God Save the King.'

11 Locke, for example, was one of the drafters of South Carolina's constitution in 1669, as a legal document prepared in London.

12 Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots' invention of the modern world* (Fourth Estate, 2001), notes that an Edinburgh student was executed for blasphemy in 1697. John Locke took an active interest in this notorious case. Two generations later, many of the leading figures of the Scottish Enlightenment were moderate Presbyterian ministers, who sought to reconcile faith and reason.

13 Adam Smith tutored the young Duke of Buccleuch on a Grand Tour which included a stay in Paris, where Smith was feted for his recently published *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. David Hume was briefly attached to the British Embassy in Paris. He later invited Jean-Jacques Rousseau to London, where they fell out spectacularly and publicly.

14 Daniel B. Klein, 'The Origin of "Liberalism"', *The Atlantic*, 13 Feb. 2014, concludes that this is the earliest use of the term from an extensive search on Google. Earlier experts had traced the origins of the term as a political label to Spanish political factions in the 1820s.

15 Historical context matters in modern interpretations of Smith, Locke and other writers. Smith, following Hume and others, was attacking the mercantile system through which privileged monopolies, the East India Company above all, gained enormous profits while using force to protect and promote their interests. The young Edmund Burke led the prosecution of Warren Hastings for alleged East India Company excesses in Bengal.

16 Quoted in Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the remaking of political philosphy* (Princeton University Press 2019), p. 12.

17 Alan Bullock and Maurice Shock (eds.), *The Liberal Tradition* (A & C Black, 1956) starts with Charles James Fox as the first clearly Liberal political figure, defending civil liberties to a hostile Commons in the 1790s.

18 Ian Dunt makes Constant one of the major figures in the development of Liberal thought. Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism* (Princeton University Press, 2014), starts with Humboldt and Constant as articulating liberal ideas in a rapidly changing Europe. John Stuart Mill acknowledged his intellectual debt to Humboldt by attaching a quotation from his *Sphere and Duties of Government* (1792) to the opening page of *On Liberty*.

19 Guido de Ruggiero, *The History of European Liberalism* (OUP, 1927), is still a valuable study of the development of Liberalism in France, Germany and Italy.

20 I listened to an account of the ULB's foundation at a graduation ceremony some years ago.

21 Michael Freeden, *The New Liberalism: An ideology of social reform* (Clarendon Press, 1978).

22 Freeden, *Liberalism: A very short introduction* (OUP, 2015), pp. 71–2.

23 See for example Minouche Shafik, *What We Owe Each Other: A New Social Contract* (Bodley Head, 2021), and Mark Carney, *Values: An Economist's Guide to Everything That Matters* (Collins, 2021).

24 Alan Ryan, 'Liberalism', ch. 14 in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, i (Blackwell, 2007).