

Classical liberalism concepts essay (article)



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Classical Liberalism is a set of ideas about the way people should live together, and the role of government, which were articulated from the 17th century through the 19th century.

These concepts have their roots in earlier centuries and still reverberate today. Affecting everything from revolution to evolution, and wage controls to welfare, classical liberalism, and its critique, has helped to shape society in the UK, the Commonwealth countries, and the USA.

Classical liberalism differed from previous views of the world in that it de-emphasized the unquestioned absolute control of human affairs by the Catholic Church, and/or the monarchy with supposed divine right, and/or aristocratic oligarchy.

The nature of humans was described, as E. K. Hunt asserts, as “ egoistic, coldly calculating, essentially inert and atomistic” (wikipedia, 2011) quoting E. K. Hunt (Hunt, 2003, p. 44) Instead, thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Baron Charles de Montesquieu, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and David Ricardo all assented to the necessity for the rule of law. This substitution of a legal code or system for the uncontrolled power of the monarch was expected to protect the individual’s rights, which themselves were a novel idea.

These philosophers also believed that the right to own, profit from, and dispose of private property rather than living as serfs, tied to the land without owning it, would contribute to the health and wealth of the nation. Further, these rights, they began to assert, needed to be exercised in a context of economic freedoms, such as freedom to trade, and to compete.

The origins of these ideas can be discerned in developments in Europe starting perhaps as early as the Crusades. These adventures exposed the Europeans to other religions, and other ways of living, as well as ancient Greek and Roman philosophical and scientific texts and knowledge that had survived in Arab libraries and traditions (p. 69) (e. g. *De Rerum Natura*, by Lucretius, lost, and re-discovered by a 15th century Florentine (National Public Radio, 2011)).

The human-centered, rational focus of the Renaissance can be said to have benefitted from such rediscoveries of lost knowledge (p. 68). Factors such as the Black Death, and trends away from an exclusive dependence on agriculture all contributed to increasing the value of serfs' labor and thereby increasing their options. This contributed to the detaching of serfs from the land and creating an urban merchant society (Hunt, 2003, p. 22).

The Industrial Revolution made a definite break with agriculture, and brought with it many new problems as well as great wealth for some. This led thinkers to reconsider the previously accepted relationship between government and the governed, workers and the products of their work, and many other important issues.

John Locke proposed that humans enter the world as blank slates without evil, which was not necessarily in line with the Catholic Church's view, and that our impulses tend to be positive towards each other. In his view, as reasonable entities of basic goodness, humans deserve basic rights to live, to do what they wish, and to own property (p. 109). Government, in a social

contract with the governed, should be responsible for ensuring that these rights are protected, in Locke's view.

This notion of the 'social contract' was deeply felt in the British colonies and contributed to the American Revolutionary war for independence. Thomas Hobbes, on the other hand, held a rather more negative view of human nature, and this is reflected in a concomitant difference in the role he assigned to government.

He felt that humans' overwhelming self-interest required powerful supervision to avoid people preying on each other and making each other's lives "nasty, brutish, and short" (p. 108). Charles de Montesquieu proposed that governments, chosen by their citizens, should have their power constrained by having their functions separated into three elements.

He suggested that they be as follows: the legislative to create laws, the executive to implement them, and the judicial to punish when laws are broken. This model has been used by many modern democratic governments. It was applied very explicitly by the American colonies after their bid for independence (p. 110).

John Stuart Mill was a proponent of the protection of individual rights within a functioning democracy. He believed that where the majority could vote to affect society, the minority could be thereby tyrannized. To avoid this, he suggested that unless behavior (and speech) harmed others, it be allowed, even if it were self-destructive (p. *ibid*).

This idea is particularly significant today, when modern democracies face the bill for medical costs for people's self-harm (e. g., smoking-related lung diseases, drinking-related liver damage, and sexually transmitted diseases, all of which arise from personal behavioral choices).

Adam Smith, following the laissez-faire ideas of the French physiocrats, believed that individuals operating in unconstrained fashion in their own best interests would, without even being aware of it, contribute to the nation's economic betterment (p. 112).

He opposed the control of trade by the Crown for the purposes of collecting money for the treasury, and limitations on trade with other nations. He believed that such controls and fees on commerce interfered with free trade and blocked the beneficial action of the "invisible hand" in increasing overall wealth (p. 79). David Ricardo helped to clarify the value of labor, and the relationship of labor supply, demand, and wages (p. 103).

These ideas, all of which were passionately argued for several centuries, together lead to a model of economic behavior that is sometimes termed capitalism. Countries led by governments that are chosen with the consent of the governed, encouraging through their inaction the active trade, exchange, and commerce between individuals, entities and nations, were believed to permit the accumulation of wealth and the increase of production.

This model allowed for the rise and spread of industrialization, and the amassing of great fortunes, but also permitted hideous abuses of labor. The discontent on the part of thoughtful people with such deficiencies in the

system (exemplified in the powerful satirical commentary by the writer and journalist Charles Dickens) led to the development of Modern Liberalism (p. 103). This movement also has a long-lived legacy.

Modern Liberalism developed as an attempt to respond constructively to the truly horrible side effects of classical liberalism. To the industrialists of the time, there seemed to be no profit advantage to be gained by treating laborers well. Unfortunately, there were no laws requiring any better treatment. Both from laborers in industry themselves, and from thinkers who were observing industry and society, there were powerful reactions.

Ranging from the direct destructive action of the Luddites, to the more peaceful efforts of the Chartists, to the Utopian philosophizing of George Bernard Shaw and the Fabian Society, and moving on to the near-religious convictions of committed Marxists, these were all attempts to redress and prevent perceived wrongs inflicted on workers. They all have had a definite and continuing impact on the way modern democracies operate by contributing to the development of Modern Liberalism.

An early and tangible objection to the treatment of laborers in the time of Classical Liberalism came from the laborers themselves. When machines began replacing skilled artisans with minimally trained machine operators, especially in the textile industry, workers saw a threat to their livelihoods.

They attempted to destroy the machines themselves, in various places, starting with the actions of a laborer named Ludd. The workers who followed this example were called Luddites. So dramatic was this protest actions, that

this name was later applied to anybody who objected to all sorts of innovations and discoveries.

The mill owners successfully called on the government to suppress these protests with force, on the grounds that they were being prevented from doing business freely (pp. 131-132). Coming somewhat later, and seeking a solution to the problems of society attributed to classical liberalism, the Chartists focused on voting and representation.

These activists were named for the People's Charter (there were three of these, signed by many thousands) that outlined their proposals. They pushed for universal adult male suffrage, equalizing the size of electoral districts, secret ballots, elimination of property qualifications for Parliamentary candidates, a concomitant institution of a salary for MPs, and regular yearly elections.

All these reforms except the annual Parliamentary elections were implemented. These changes would, the Chartists hoped, lead to a more democratic political process, and allow wider participation in governance. Names such as Feargus O'Connor, John Frost, William Lovett, Henry Vincent and Earnest Jones are associated with this comprehensive attempt to create a more equitable society (Chartists. net, 2011) (pp. 132-133).

The Utopian socialists took the notion of creating an ideal society further. Visionaries such the British industrialist Robert Owen, in Great Britain, and the American journalist Horace Greeley, supported improving the conditions under which people worked and lived, by means of education, labor, and health reforms (pp. 134-135).

These ideas were not extreme enough for other socialists, such as Karl Marx. These thinkers and activists believed that society must be changed from the ground up, literally.

They asserted that the whole concept of private ownership of anything that could be used to generate profit (e. g., land, mills, machinery; the means of production) led inevitably to the evil of exploitation of one class by another. They asserted that the government should impose economic equality and ensure a classless society (p. 136).

While the complexities of the internal conflicts between various flavors of socialism and communism are beyond the scope of this essay question, the principles that the communists and socialists debated and even died for, have had a definite effect on government policies and continue to do so today (pp. 136-139). The ideas of Marx and Engels thus contributed substantially to the formation of Modern Liberalism.

It was especially during the Great Depression that the deficiencies of laissez-faire capitalism, and even of the mitigating efforts of welfare capitalism, became apparent (p. 142). With people literally starving, many thoughtful people acknowledged the need to implement some sort of safety net. This was yet another step in the development of Modern Liberalism (p. 145). During the Depression, many reforms were implemented that redistributed resources to stimulate the economy, and protect families from tragedy.

Thinkers such as economist John Maynard Keynes asserted that the government needed to smooth out the fluctuations in the economy that were inevitable in a capitalist system where demand and supply rise and fall all

the time (pp. 146-149). This fiscal approach has been implemented to some degree in the USA, and in fact, these ideas are the subject of intense public debate right now in the current economic crisis.

In day-to-day life, the best practical ideas arising from the principles of Modern Liberalism, such as Medicare, have been more or less successfully, implemented to ensure that people do not fall into the cracks through no fault of their own.

Such efforts to prevent illness or job loss from causing unnecessary death are the essence of Modern Liberalism as it is seen today, at its best. Society is viewed under Modern Liberalism as needing to be cajoled, nudged, bullied, disciplined, and supported in its efforts to avoid trampling or leaving behind its weaker members, and the government is allotted these tasks.

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