

## **LIBERALISM**

Liberalism, rooted in the concept of liberty, is the foremost ideology in the developed world and a principle that is striven for in much of the rest. However, it is also considered to be greatly misinterpreted, and it is important to understand that liberalism is not one thing but an assemblage of related concepts that have, over the ages, changed. Despite its many variations, liberalism at its core upholds individualism, celebrates liberty and autonomy, commits to develop procedures to uphold and protect individual rights and equality while restricting social and political power that can impede individual freedom. As such, in contrast to conservatism, liberalism favours change, and has trust in rationalism and greater hope in human nature. Furthermore, it is predisposed towards directing state power to ameliorate the human condition. Even as set as these fundamentals of liberalisms may seem, they have not been uncontroversial.

### **Trajectory of Liberalism**

Early liberals widely held the concept of a 'social contract' as they believed that individual freedom could not flourish outside of the rule of law, stable institutions, and some form of moderated social accord. The social contract merged a philosophy of individualism which made provision for choices and personal freedom of expression with an inclination toward upholding constitutional order which safeguarded the weak, circumvented the likelihood of elite domination and permitted continuity through time. Theoretically, by recognizing the state and its institutions as human creations, the social contract subordinated them to the individual will and its needs. The above tendency allowed liberalism to make universal claims about its inevitability as the logical outcome of rationally driven individuals pursuing social aims and happiness. Even when the concept of the social contract was later discarded, the notion that social institutions are intelligently designed to look after the welfare of the people and the belief in a politics free from malice endured in liberal thought.

Later in the nineteenth century, a liberal avenue opened with the attachment of human will as the driving force of entrepreneurship and innovation. Free trade became the ultimate expression of an individual's capacity to take initiative, helped by the establishment of private property and the facility to voyage across the world. Free trade was personal expression on a global stage, but it also had a civilising, missionary ethos as liberals were committed to moulding the world in their image. Imperialism, the shape that free trade took during colonialism, now tends to be associated with exploitation which is considered to be a deviation from liberalism and not a feature.

Over the last century, the diversity of Western societies insofar as ethnicity and religion were concerned created the need for liberal thought to be inclusive toward difference and appreciative of social life in all its plurality. That entailed a move away from liberalism's earlier faith in universal solutions to social issues arising from a unitary conception of society. This has given rise to complications in both liberalism as an ideology and in the policies it has brought

about. At a local level, the liberals' need to augment their principled respect for individual will and autonomy with respect for the perceived will and autonomy of cultural groups has resulted in a zero-sum confrontation within liberal precepts.

### **Boundaries of Liberalism**

Liberalism's critics have refuted the ideology on the grounds that the urge for liberation, achieved through the individual's creativity upended entrenched social norms. There were also critics who believed that liberalism's challenge of the set order of things was not vigorous enough and that it ignored power outside of the state. Post-war critiques of liberalism have accused it of being imperialistic while a Marxist critique of it is that it is the ideological rationale for aggressive, property-owning, *laissez-faire* capitalism and the subsequent neglect of those who have failed to thrive in that domain.

### **Contemporary Liberal Ideologies**

In current times, we must deal with an obvious conundrum: just as when liberalism appears to have triumphed in nearly all areas of academic, social, and cultural life, it also appears quite frail in the real political arena. Despite being an ideology whose victory is manifest, it seems unable to gather enough political momentum towards a specific end. The reason could be that while liberalism's claims to universalism and transcendence give it its mainstream cultural lustre, the very same qualities situate it outside formal politics. What is lacking is practicality in the political arena and that is achieved through offering material benefits to real people and not just through abstract thinking. However, it must be understood that an ideology that claims simultaneously to celebrate the free, autonomous individual, as well as the uniqueness of groups, while shaping and limiting government is bound to run into contradictions.

Adapted from Michael Freeden and Marc Stears, 'Liberalism' in Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargeant and Marc Stears (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (OUP 2013)