



Illiberal Liberalism: A Genealogy

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Abstract

Illiberalism is invariably associated with right-wing authoritarian or populist movements. Yet at times liberalism itself can take an illiberal turn. This essay explores the historical and philosophical origins of contemporary illiberal liberalism. It suggests that illiberal liberalism was and remains motivated by a powerful anti-democratic impulse that is often expressed as disdain for people's capacity to act with reason.

Keywords: illiberal liberalism, individual reasoning, political philosophy, democracy, elitism

In contemporary discussions, illiberalism tends to be associated with right-wing populism, authoritarianism or conservatism. Now and again, concern about the growth of illiberalism in Anglo-American higher education and about some of the anti-universalistic impulses driving identity politics has led some liberal academics and commentators to raise concerns about a strikingly different form of illiberalism: the “creeping illiberalism” influencing university campuses.¹ However, although this trend has rightly been perceived as illiberal, there has been a reluctance to elaborate its relationship to contemporary forms of liberalism.

The acquiescence of individuals who perceive themselves as liberals to the policing of dissenting viewpoints suggests that far from being confined to the authoritarian right, manifestations of illiberalism are evident within the ranks of self-defined liberals. In her discussion of the history of illiberalism, Helena Rosenblatt suggests that those who highlight this development are likely to be enemies of liberalism because they “claim that liberalism is *itself* illiberal or, at least, that it breeds illiberal sentiments and practices.”² In contrast to such claims, we argue that illiberal liberalism is antithetical to the spirit and values of liberalism. This phenomenon expresses the failure to act in accordance with liberalism’s foundational values.

Illiberal liberals often think of themselves as liberals. But their version of liberalism has little to do with the classical Enlightenment version of this doctrine. Classical liberalism asserts the primacy of the status of the individual and supports its autonomy. It upholds the value of tolerance and freedom in its different forms—from the freedom to own property to the freedom of speech. By upholding the moral worth of all humans, it is both egalitarian and universalistic. Illiberal liberalism, particularly in its current version of identity politics, calls into question the value of these principles and often shows itself to be as intolerant as the authoritarian movements it criticizes.

By adopting a perspective based on the sociology of history, this contribution explores the genealogy of the convergence of liberalism with illiberal attitudes toward public life. We argue that illiberal liberalism stems from liberalism’s uneasy relationship with public opinion, majoritarianism, and democracy. This sentiment is underpinned by the conviction that most individuals, especially when they are part of a wider public, lack the moral and intellectual resources to act as reasoning people. As a result, often illiberal conclusions are drawn about the status of individual reasoning, individual autonomy, and the exercise of freedom.

As noted by the editors of *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, anti-liberalism should not be confused with illiberalism. Anti-liberal theories blame liberalism for the corruption of society, the decline of its culture, and a variety of social ills.³ Anti-liberal theories are classically associated with the conservative reaction to liberalism in the nineteenth century. By contrast, illiberalism is represented as a manifestation of relatively incoherent, populist political practices that challenge the norms of liberal democracy. As I have noted elsewhere, this concept of illiberalism is incomplete and one-sided.⁴ Its emergence as a focus of academic interest is closely linked to the growing influence of populist movements and the emergence of political regimes that are critical of the practices and values of contemporary liberal democracy. Yet this representation of illiberalism fails to engage with the historical tendency for liberal thought itself to fall prey to illiberal ideas and practices.

1 This development is discussed by Helena Rosenblatt, “The History of Illiberalism” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. András Sajó, Renáta Úitz, and Stephen Holmes (London: Routledge, 2021), 25.

2 *Ibid.*, 25.

3 András Sajó, Renáta Úitz, and Stephen Holmes, “Preface,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. András Sajó, Renáta Úitz, and Stephen Holmes (London: Routledge, 2021), xxii.

4 Frank Furedi, “The Psychological Construction of the Illiberal Subject,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. András Sajó, Renáta Úitz, and Stephen Holmes (London: Routledge, 2021), 617.

As Marlene Laruelle suggests, illiberalism should be conceived as being “in a permanent situational relation to liberalism.”⁵

Illiberal liberalism offers not so much a “thin” version of the liberal doctrine as an incoherent and unsystematic orientation that can be interpreted as a form of “bad-faith” liberalism. As we argue, over the centuries, illiberal liberalism has become increasingly estranged from—and in some cases even hostile to—such classical liberal values as freedom, tolerance, individual reasoning, autonomy, and universalism. In his *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (2022), Francis Fukuyama refers to the authors of these attacks on classical liberal values as progressive or left-wing critics of liberalism.⁶ However, these attacks, often by self-designated liberals, on such values as tolerance or autonomy should be interpreted as emanating from within liberalism—an expression of illiberal liberalism.

Conceptually, it is possible to identify different motives for the crystallization of illiberal liberalisms. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, anxiety about public opinion and the expansion of the electorate led many liberals to draw illiberal conclusions about people’s capacity to exercise autonomy and behave rationally. Their fear of majority opinion led them to support measures that restricted the freedom of the press and limited the franchise to the middle class and educated members of the public. In his discussion of what he characterized as “aristocratic liberals,” Alan Kahan drew attention to their ambiguous relation to freedom. While they all favored a free press in the abstract, they “grew dubious about its effects” in practice.⁷

At that point in time, anti-majoritarian sentiments were justified on the ground that the individual needed protection from the potential despotism of the majority. Even John Stuart Mill, author of *On Liberty*, one of the most important statements of liberal principles in the nineteenth century, was worried on this score. He wrote that “where public opinion is sovereign, an individual who is oppressed by the sovereign does not, as in most other states of things, find a rival power to which he can appeal for relief.”⁸

Concern about the suppression of the individual by majority despotism was in some cases accompanied by skepticism about the capacity of the majority to reason. In the eighteenth century, liberalism was associated with an optimistic view of individual reasoning. Yet by the nineteenth century, the tendency to perceive the masses as irrational was coupled with a growing skepticism about the exercise of individual reason. One of the earliest pioneers of irrationalist liberalism was the French historian and social critic Hippolyte Taine. Taine’s work illustrates a fundamental change of focus “within Liberalism from rationalism towards the emphasis on the power of the unconscious.”⁹

Disenchantment with the principle of individual reasoning had important implications for the development of liberal thought. It is worth recalling that modern utilitarian and liberal theory emerged in the eighteenth century on the supposition that the “foundation of order in society is reason in individuals.”¹⁰ The celebration of individual reasoning was an important feature of Enlightenment liberal thought. The belief that persuasion, rather than force, constituted the foundation of order had as

5 Marlene Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction,” *East European Politics* (2022): 1.

6 Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (London: Profile Books, 2022).

7 Alan S. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 66.

8 Cited in Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism*, 65.

9 Alan Pitt, “The Irrationalist Liberalism of Hippolyte Taine,” *The Historical Journal* 41, no. 4 (1998): 1035, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X98008152>.

10 Leon Mayhew, “In Defense of Modernity: Talcott Parsons and the Utilitarian Tradition,” *American Journal of Sociology* 89, no. 6 (1984): 1285, <https://doi.org/10.1086/228016>.

its premise the belief that, through free speech and communication, the public could be influenced to act in accordance with reason and their own interest. Moreover, the liberal utilitarian theories of the eighteenth century regarded the “development of public opinion as a constituent component of social order.”¹¹ Such optimistic views of public opinion were antithetical to the subsequent psychological turn in political thought, with its claim that order was founded on irrational and non-rational sentiments. As we shall see, this pessimistic reorientation toward human subjectivity led many liberals to draw illiberal conclusions.

A Half-Hearted Commitment to Human Reasoning

One of the most poignant historical illustrations of an emergent liberalism’s difficulty reconciling majoritarian passions with the liberal ideal of human reasoning is the dilemma that confronted the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza. One of the founders of modern liberal philosophy, he stands out as the only seventeenth-century philosopher to take a positive view of democracy, to the point that he has been described as “the first democrat in the history of philosophy.”¹² In this respect, Spinoza was a genuine pioneer. In opposition to the consensus among every school of political philosophy at the time, Spinoza held the view that democracy possessed advantages over other forms of rule. His belief in the natural equality of all men provided the normative foundation for this attitude.

Spinoza had another, more instrumental, justification for democracy, namely his belief that a democratic electorate and assembly provided a safeguard against arbitrary rule. To some extent, Spinoza shared Machiavelli’s belief in the wisdom of the masses. In anticipation of the crystallization of nineteenth-century radical liberal attitudes toward free speech and debate, he argued that a democratic assembly is likely to make sounder decisions than a monarch or an oligarchy because people will make better judgments in an assembly than if they have to make decisions without the opportunity “to have their wits sharpened by discussing, listening to others, and debating.”¹³ He concluded that popular assemblies tend to deliberate and legislate more wisely than more restricted political bodies.

Spinoza tended to have a hopeful view of people’s potential: he disagreed with the assertion that there is “no truth or judgment in the common people” and believed that all “men share in one and the same nature.”¹⁴ Spinoza wrote that “the true aim of government is liberty” and embraced democracy as the medium through which the objective of freedom could be realized. One study of Spinoza’s life contends that the philosopher’s “social feelings led him to sympathy with the common man; as a social scientist, however, he noted that common men were often irrational and hostile to freedom.”¹⁵

From his writings and behavior, Spinoza comes across as a man divided between his democratic sympathies and his concern that people could be manipulated and misled by the anti-liberal Calvinist monarchist establishment in seventeenth-century Holland. Writing at the time of the establishment of the first Republic in the Netherlands, Spinoza was anxious about the behavior of what he saw as the “superstitious Calvinist monarchist masses.” Along with his friend John de Witt, the head of the Republic, Spinoza feared the capacity of the Calvinist Establishment to stir up opposition to the new regime.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1282.

¹² Lewis S. Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987 [1958]), 139.

¹³ Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁵ Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, ix.

In writing his most important study, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*Theological-Political-Treatise*), Spinoza was preoccupied with such questions as:

Was the Republic then a form of government ahead of its time for the Netherlands? Could men of reason persuade the ordinary people that a republic would make for their greater happiness? Could men of reason undermine the irrational authority which benighted Calvinist divines exercised upon their congregations? How could the multitude be taught that freedom was their highest virtue?¹⁶

In the end, Spinoza's worst fears were realized when the Dutch lower classes turned against the Republic and played an active role in its overthrow. The savage lynching of John de Witt had a profound impact on Spinoza's view of the world, and his apprehension mutated into a sense of bitterness about what he perceived as the irrationality of the masses. The man who once stated that "in a free state, every man may think what he likes and say what he thinks" went on to argue that his *Theological-Political-Treatise* was not written for ordinary people because they were too prejudiced to give his ideas a hearing:

To the rest of mankind I care not to commend my treatise; for I cannot expect that it contains anything to please them: I know how deeply are the prejudices embraced under the name of religion; I am aware that in the minds of the masses superstition is no less rooted than fear....they are led to praise or blame by impulse rather than reason.¹⁷

Evidently, he now answered his question "Could men of reason persuade the ordinary people that a republic would make for their greater happiness?" in the negative.

Spinoza's disenchantment with the ability of the man of reason to triumph over the forces of irrationality led him to draw pessimistic conclusions about the conduct of public life. His belief in man's potential to play a public role diminished, and instead of relying on reason he looked to the politics of fear to maintain social order. He wrote that the "multitude becomes a thing to be feared if it has nothing to fear."¹⁸

The evident tension within Spinoza's outlook can also be found in the outlook of many Enlightenment thinkers. Immanuel Kant's contribution is paradigmatic in this respect. More than any other thinker, Kant personified Enlightenment thought. His motto, "Dare to Know," challenged his contemporaries to take charge of their lives and use their ability to reason to advance human development. "Have the courage of your understanding," he exhorted his audience,¹⁹ claiming that enlightenment "requires nothing but freedom." At the same time, Kant opposed the rule of the majority, asserting that "democracy is, properly speaking, necessarily despotism because it establishes an executive power in which 'all' decide for or even against one who does not agree."²⁰ From his standpoint, democracy contradicted freedom.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁷ Cited in Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, 80.

¹⁸ Cited in Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, 87-88.

¹⁹ See Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?," trans. Mary C. Smith, <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>.

²⁰ See Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace* (Oxford: FQ Classics, 2007), 37.

Ambivalence toward Individual Reasoning

That liberalism often had an uneasy relationship with public opinion in its majoritarian form is well known. But what is far less discussed is its ambivalence toward placing trust in individual reasoning. Despite its defense of the individual against the so-called despotism of the majority, liberalism was far from consistent in its advocacy of the individual and of individual reasoning.

Elitist theories of liberalism did not explicitly reject the principle of individual reasoning. Instead, they claimed that the capacity to reason was confined to a minority of educated individuals like the theorists themselves. However, once the human capacity for reasoning was called into question, it was only a matter of time before some would query the moral primacy of the individual.

In a sweeping generalization, Marx stated that the eighteenth century was defined by the “principle of individualism.”²¹ This was indeed the century where the individual became an object of veneration. As Zeev Sternhell notes, the “Enlightenment wished to liberate the individual from the constraints of history, from the yoke of traditional unproven beliefs.”²² Historians of the eighteenth century frequently represent the rise of liberalism as the political expression of the principle of individualism. As Glen Morrow explained:

The political liberalism, the religious liberalism, and the economic liberalism of the eighteenth century were merely separate manifestations of one and the same attempt to break down the older institutional forms and set free human energies and allow satisfaction to human aspirations that could no longer find expression in those forms. Liberalism in all its manifestations was essentially a doctrine of the rights of the individual, and a criticism of the claims of existing institutions to regulate his activity. Individual liberty, in politics, in religion, in industry, was felt to be the first and sometimes the only thing necessary for the introduction of a better social and political order. Other ages have perhaps appreciated more fully the meaning of individuality, but no age ever desired or fought for it with greater zeal than the century of Voltaire, Rousseau, and Adam Smith.²³

While these thinkers did indeed endorse the principle of individuality, they were also concerned with granting individual subjectivity too much latitude. That is why they felt the need to limit people’s involvement in democratic decision-making.

Today, when the individual’s capacity to reason and exercise autonomy is so frequently deprecated by self-described liberals, it is easy to overlook their foundational role in the emergence of modern liberalism. Even conservative-liberal figures such as Francois Guizot, a leading political figure in post-Napoleonic France, upheld the sovereignty of reason.²⁴ However, during the second half of the nineteenth century, with the expansion of the franchise, the growth of public pressure on parliaments and assemblies, and the radicalization of political life, concern with the behavior of the public gained momentum.

21 Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1955), 125.

22 Sternhell, Z (2010) *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, Yale University Press : New Haven, p.7

23 Glenn R. Morrow, “Adam Smith: Moralist and Philosopher,” *Journal of Political Economy* 35 (1927): 325-326, <https://doi.org/10.1086/253854>.

24 Aurelian Craiutu, “Guizot’s Elitist Theory of Representative Government,” *Critical Review* 15, no. 3-4 (2003): 270, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913810308443583>.

Anxieties regarding the behavior of the public were legitimated by drawing on the claims of the new science of crowd psychology, which in effect repudiated the Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous reasoning citizen. The new narrative did not formally repudiate democracy but questioned the capacity of people to behave as responsible citizens. Its dominant theme was the alleged irrationality of the masses. The emerging discipline of psychology, with its theories of the “crowd,” played an important role in providing a narrative through which the alleged mismatch between rational institutions and an irrational public were systematically expressed.

Crowd psychologists diagnosed the new collectivities of the masses in a language that “contrasted unfavourably with the liberal ideas of the rational and conscious human individual.”²⁵

The psychology of collective irrationality became an expression of both the conservative and the liberal reaction to the democratization of public life. As Robert Nye stated, “collective psychology thus articulated a liberal critique of democratic tendencies in industrial societies with a facade of ‘scientific’ and clinical terminology that lent a certain respectability to its pronouncements.”²⁶ The historian Reba Soffer noted that psychology should be seen as a constituent element of a new liberal elitist theory that developed as a response to the “unreasonable and unpredictable behaviour of the new democracy” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.²⁷ Soffer suggests that psychology provided liberal elitist theory with “scientific” arguments about the incompatibility of democracy with the reality of people’s behavior. Notably, censure of public behavior as motivated by unconscious and irrational motives continues to be used by critics of mass society to this day.²⁸

Stephen Holmes rightly argues that “hostility to liberal individualism” constitutes an “enduring core of the antiliberal mindset.”²⁹ However, what has rarely been commented on is the uneasy relationship of liberalism with its original version: individual rationality. By the turn of the twentieth century, the ideal of individual reasoning gradually gave way to its pessimistic representation within liberal thought. It was increasingly argued that the discovery of the power of the unconscious called into question the Kantian model of autonomy.³⁰ It was as if psychology had seriously undermined one of the fundamental assumptions of classical liberalism. In the twentieth century, the reorientation away from the foundational principle of individual reasoning was not confined to the more conservative wing of liberalism. John Dewey, arguably the leading American progressive liberal thinker of the twentieth century, played an important role in executing a major revision of this principle.

Dewey’s downgrading of the significance that liberals should attach to the individual was integral to a more fundamental rethink, which led to the emergence of a new liberalism. In *The Future of Liberalism*, a monograph published in 1935, Dewey drew a clear distinction between what he referred to as the old and the new liberalism.³¹ While he conceded that the “earlier liberal philosophy rendered valiant service,” he

²⁵ Robert A. Nye, *The Anti-Democratic Sources of Elite Theories: Pareto, Mosca, Michels* (London: Sage Publications, 1977), 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁷ R.N. Soffer, “New Elitism: Social Psychology in Prewar England,” *Journal of British Studies* 8, no. 2. (1969): 111, <https://doi.org/10.1086/385573>.

²⁸ Pitt, “The Irrationalist Liberalism of Hippolyte Taine,” 1049.

²⁹ Stephen Holmes, “The Antiliberal Idea,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (London: Routledge, 2021), 4.

³⁰ On the influence of the unconscious in early twentieth-century European culture, see the magisterial study of H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (London: Routledge, 2017).

³¹ John Dewey, “The Future of Liberalism,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 32, no. 9 (1935), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2015856>.

claimed that it had now become irrevocably irrelevant.³² According to him, one of the defects of the old version of liberalism was its conceptualization of the individual. Dewey dismissed old liberalism's tendency to depict the individual as "something given, complete in itself, and of liberty as a ready-made possession of the individual."³³

The claim that the old liberalism depicted the individual as "complete in itself" is a caricature that is frequently attributed to Enlightenment liberalism. It is worth recalling that this argument was integral to the doctrine advanced by the Counter-Enlightenment and to nineteenth-century conservative thought, which was dominated by hostility both to reason and to the rights of the individual.

As far as Dewey was concerned, old liberalism—which was in fact another name for Enlightenment liberalism—had turned into "pseudo liberalism." His aim was to distance his revised concept of liberalism from the old version, which he denounced for its support of the small state and its individualistic orientation. He added, "I shall identify what I mean by this spurious liberalism," which he indicated was comprised of the "kind of social ideas 'represented by the 'Liberty League' and ex-President Hoover.'" Dewey's alternative was a liberalism that relied on the state to realize its goals. As he observed:

The historic tendency to conceive the whole question of liberty as a matter in which individual and government are opposed parties has borne bitter fruit. Born of despotic government, it has continued to influence thinking and action after government had become popular and in theory the servant of the people.³⁴

Dewey's anti-individualistic philosophy relied on state intervention and institutional support to cultivate responsible citizens. He believed that the corrosive impact of market forces on people would be corrected through institutional intervention.

Dewey's critique of the principle of the individual was justified by representing the latter in a caricatured form. In his *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), Dewey denounced the old conception of individual for being anti-social and hostile to the state. He criticized John Locke, one of the founders of liberalism, for limiting role of state to the "protection of individuals in the rights which were theirs by nature."³⁵ He took exception to Locke and other classical liberals' affirmation of a limited state and asserted that this view led to the "celebrated modern antithesis of the Individual and Social" and to celebration of individualism.

In Dewey's account of the rise of liberalism, the principle of individual reasoning possesses merely a pragmatic and instrumental character. He explained that the status accorded to the individual was motivated by the goal of providing an alternative source of authority to that of the early modern absolutist establishment. He argued that since democracy needed an intellectual justification for its revolt against established authority,

the natural recourse was appeal to some inalienable sacred authority resident in the protesting individuals. Thus "individualism" was born, a theory which endowed singular persons in isolation from any associations, except those which they deliberately formed for their own ends, with native or natural rights.³⁶

³² Ibid., 226.

³³ Ibid., 226.

³⁴ Ibid., 227.

³⁵ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1954), 87

³⁶ Ibid., 86.

Since Dewey's time, the supposed authorization of the isolated individual by classical liberalism has served as a straw man to demolish by proponents of communitarian and collectivists thinkers. Over the decades, the cumulative effect of this representation of individualism has been to legitimate new liberalism's distance from the principle of individual reasoning.

At the same time, Dewey wished to rescue the word "liberal," which he conceded is "still employed to designate a progressive in political matters."³⁷ Dewey's progressive liberalism was implicitly anti-individualistic and oriented toward promoting state intervention in social and economic life. The dramatic reversal of the meaning of liberalism overseen by Dewey codified the tendency to detach it from its classical version. Dewey recognized that the meaning of liberalism had been reversed, but he tended to ascribe this shift to its supposed capture by right-wing capitalist interests. He stated that:

In most other countries, the "liberal" party is that which represents established and vested commercial and financial interests in protest against governmental regulation. The irony of history is nowhere more evident than in the reversal of the practical meaning of the term "liberalism" in spite of a literal continuity of theory.³⁸

One of the consequences of Dewey's revision of liberal doctrine was to forge an association between a version of an individuality-oriented account of liberty and right-wing ideology. He wrote that whereas before "progressives were for liberty now it is the watch word of the 'standpatter and reactionary.'" As it happens, Dewey's progressive reformulation of liberalism rendered it susceptible to an illiberal orientation toward public life.³⁹

Dewey's revision of the liberal doctrine has had an enduring influence, particularly in the United States. In her study *Individualism in the United States: A Transformation in American Political Thought* (2015), Stephanie Walls echoes Dewey's views on the individual and blames individualism, particularly in its economic form, for the erosion of social bonds and solidarity.⁴⁰ She identifies the "strength of society" with an interventionist state that protects people. Yet history shows that community and social solidarity emerge through the shared experience of individuals collaborating with one another, often in opposition to the state.

In Dewey's philosophy, the individual appears in a morally downsized form. It lacks agency and the capacity for self-determination. People require public institutions to cultivate their individuality. As he explained:

Liberalism knows that social conditions may restrict, distort, and almost prevent the development of individuality. It therefore takes an active interest in the working of social institutions that have a bearing, positive or negative, upon the growth of individuals who shall be rugged in fact and not merely in abstract theory. It is as much interested in the positive construction of favorable institutions, legal, political, and economic, as it is in the work of removing abuses and overt oppressions.⁴¹

37 *Ibid.*, 134.

38 *Ibid.*, 134.

39 For a discussion of progressivism's illiberal turn, see Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

40 Stephanie M. Walls, *Individualism in the United States: A Transformation in American Political Thought* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 154.

41 Dewey, "The Future of Liberalism," 227.

Dewey's advocacy of building social institutions to oversee and influence the growth of individuals assumed that through education and resocialization, the distortions of the people's individuality could be overcome.

Dewey regarded the public as an unreliable agent of decision-making. Adopting the paternalistic tone of a social engineer, he claimed the public lacked the knowledge and expertise necessary to make decisions.⁴² Dewey and other progressive commentators justified this approach on the ground that new technology and rapid change had created a world where people's affairs were dominated by "remote and invisible organizations" too complex to be apprehended by laymen.⁴³

Dewey went so far as to blame an irrational public for the political crisis faced by the liberal creed in the interwar era. He claimed that mass society was inhospitable to the workings of a rational democracy. Although Dewey avoided the explicit contempt that the elite theories of his time directed toward the masses, he still characterized the emotional life of the American public as "undiscriminating, lacking in individuality and in direction by intellectual life." His diagnosis of the problem was that "our pronounced trait is mass suggestibility."⁴⁴ In his discussion of the public and of public opinion, Dewey assumed that citizens lacked the expertise necessary for deliberation on the political issues facing society and therefore required experts and managers to provide them with guidance for decision-making. In contrast to classical liberal philosophers such as John Locke, who criticized paternalistic political power, Dewey embraced a form of technocratic paternalism to promote his progressive ideals.⁴⁵ At times, Dewey referred to education as a form of "moral engineering."⁴⁶ Elsewhere, as in his 1922 essay "Education as Engineering," Dewey presented "educational practice as a kind of social engineering."⁴⁷ Dewey extolled the virtues of "constructive social engineering," which relied on the adoption of the techniques of scientific inquiry in the classroom.

Dewey's interest in education through social engineering was reinforced by the conviction that children played a critical role in the realization of social change. As one commentator explained, "Dewey argued that the most fruitful breeding ground for social improvement was to be found in the relatively flexible and immature, rather than in adults whose 'habits of thought and feeling' were more or less fixed, and whose environment was relatively rigid."⁴⁸ Dewey's tendency to belittle the capacity of adults to yield to new experience reflected his paternalistic instincts. These paternalistic instincts—which synthesized skepticism toward the principle of individual reasoning with a degree of disdain toward public opinion—became one of the hallmarks of the "new liberalism." In his *Liberalism* (1911), the British liberal political theorist L.T. Hobhouse communicated this paternalistic sensibility by supporting the ideal of the state as an "over-parent":

I would, however, strongly maintain that the general conception of the State as Over-parent is quite as truly Liberal as Socialistic. It is the basis of the rights of the child, of his protection against parental neglect, of the equality of opportunity which he may

42 Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 123.

43 *Ibid.*, 98.

44 John Dewey, *Individualism: Old and New* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1931), 36.

45 On Locke's views, see John Locke, "Locke on Parental Power," *Population and Development Review* 15, no. 4 (1989), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1972599>.

46 See the discussion in John Dewey, "Reconstruction in Moral Conceptions," in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: H. Holt, 1920), 160), <https://archive.org/details/reconstructionin00deweyoft/page/160>.

47 John Dewey, "Education as Engineering," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 41, no. 1 (2009): 1-5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270802169345>, <http://middlegradescurriculum.yolasite.com/resources/Education%20Engineering-Dewey.pdf>.

48 See Mats Bergman, "Minimal Meliorism: Finding a Balance between Conservative and Progressive Pragmatism," *Action, Belief and Inquiry* 2 (2015): 2.

claim as a future citizen, of his training to fill his place as a grown-up person in the social system.⁴⁹

As I argue in my study *100 Years of Identity Crisis: The Culture War Over Socialization*, social engineering and illiberal paternalistic ambitions continue to influence liberal policymaking to this day.⁵⁰

In recent times, the social-engineering ambitions of new liberalism have assumed their most systematic form in the doctrine of “libertarian paternalism.” Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, the most influential advocates of libertarian paternalism, claim that since people lack the ability to make rational decisions for themselves, the state should step in and “nudge” people to make good choices. Cass Sunstein coined the term “nudge” to describe the policy of using paternalistic, psychologically informed measures to protect people from themselves. His objective is to replace the unreliably formed moral judgments of individuals with the wisdom of behavioral science.⁵¹ With nudging, the ideologically informed paternalism implicit in the practice of new liberalism becomes far more explicit than heretofore.

Commentaries on *Nudge* rarely note its intellectual distance from the philosophical tradition associated with Enlightenment Liberalism. Locke’s critique of paternalism was integral to the crystallization of modern liberal thought. As one commentator explained, for Locke:

The very vocabulary of paternalism betrays its anti-political character. It is not the language of individuality—“choice,” “liberty,” “industry”—but of childhood—“protection,” “tutelage.” Its purpose when extended into adult life can only be the destruction of individuality by taking matters out of the hands of individuals where they belong.⁵²

Kant used the “imagery of paternal authority” to heap scorn on it. As one summary of Kant’s contention outlines, “accepting guidance from another was to remain at the level of the child; short of intellectual deficiency, the only reasons for doing so were lethargy and cowardice.”⁵³

In his *Why Nudge*, Sunstein relies on the supposed insights of science to authorize government to adopt paternalistic measures to protect people from themselves. Sunstein argues that the “unifying theme” of such paternalistic approaches is that “government does not believe that people’s choices will promote their welfare, and it is taking steps to influence or alter people’s choices for their own good.”⁵⁴

Sunstein tends to present his version of “libertarian paternalism” as a relatively mild and benign corrective to the otherwise unpredictable chaos of human choice-making. He argues that his idea of “nudging” people constitutes a comparatively moderate form of coercing human behavior. Sunstein claims that he is not interested in forcing people to alter their ends, only the means through which they seek to realize their objectives. He distinguishes between “ends paternalism” and “means paternalism,” and he is clearly in favor of the latter.

49 See “Modern History Sourcebook: L. T. Hobhouse: from Liberalism, 1911,” *Fordham University Modern History Sourcebook*, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1911hobhouse.asp>.

50 See Frank Furedi, *One Hundred Years Of Identity Crisis: Culture War Over Socialisation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

51 See Cass R. Sunstein, *Why Nudge? The Politics of Libertarian Paternalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

52 Geraint Parry, “Individuality, Politics and the Critique of Paternalism in John Locke,” *Political Studies* 12, no. 2 (1964): 174, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1964.tb00715.x>.

53 Peter M.R. Stirk and David Weigall, *An Introduction To Political Ideas* (London: Pinter, 1995), 42.

54 Cass R. Sunstein, *Why Nudge? The Politics of Libertarian Paternalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 55.

It is worth noting that the authoritarian and illiberal implications of abandoning a commitment to the ideal of individual reasoning are rarely noted. But as Geraint Parry reminds us, “self-reliance, the readiness, in Rousseau’s phrase, to ‘think one’s own thoughts’ were to be the marks of the emancipated individual of the Enlightenment.”⁵⁵ Once the capacity of individuals to reason is displaced in favor of paternalistic social engineering, the liberal valuation of autonomy is itself called into question.

Sunstein explicitly argues for reframing autonomy as a second-order ideal. In his writing, he distinguishes between a “thick version of autonomy,” which is the belief that the freedom to choose is an end in itself, and a “thin version of autonomy,” where freedom of choice does not enjoy the status of a fundamental principle or what he calls an “exalted” value. Sunstein opts for the thin version on the ground that individual autonomy is not a good in itself. His casual attitude toward the ideal of moral autonomy means that the freedom to choose is subordinated to the imperative of what he calls the “master concept of social welfare.” According to Sunstein, when social welfare is at issue, “harder forms of paternalism are not off-limits.”

Loss of Respect for Moral Autonomy Renders Liberalism Illiberal

Enlightenment liberalism in its most influential variants—including those of Locke, Kant, and Mill—placed a high value on individual autonomy and self-governance as central goals of political life. It recognized that liberalism works best when a society combines a robust moral sensibility with an unyielding commitment to the flourishing of individual autonomy. In contrast, historically, conservative opponents of autonomy claimed that it had a corrosive impact on community and social solidarity. In the contemporary era, however, critics of autonomy are frequently associated with viewpoints that are perceived as liberal. Yet today, as in the past, autonomy is questioned from an elitist and paternalistic standpoint that insists that people lack the capacity, time, resources or opportunity required for self-determination.

Sunstein’s argument for a paternalistic form of governance has been criticized by the legal scholar Steven Gey, who has pointed out that Sunstein thinks “government should be given the authority both to sort out the ‘actual’ from the merely ‘subjectively perceived’ individual preferences and to correct for ‘bad’ social conditioning by creating an elaborate system of social controls and value instructions intended to produce individuals imbued with a range of government-dictated ‘actual’ preferences.”⁵⁶ Sunstein’s appointment by President Obama to run the White House’s Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs indicates that his paternalistic approach to governance resonates with what passes for mainstream liberalism in the United States.

Sunstein’s call to use state intervention to regulate private preference is motivated by his conviction that enlightened policies formulated by experts and government could influence people to make the kind of positive choices that benefit society as a whole. Ironically, he seems unaware of the contradictions between government intrusion into the domain of private choice and the workings of a democratic society. Typically, he applauds dissent, but only as long as it is constructive! “Sometimes dissenters lead people in bad directions,” he warns. Dissenting views can confuse and disorient people. However, from the standpoint of liberalism, the tolerance of dissent is not predicated on critics always being right. As J.S. Mill and other liberals noted, even dissent that is totally erroneous can be valuable for assisting the process of intellectual clarification. Unfortunately, once people are perceived as likely to be irrational about making the “right” choices, dissent itself is rejected as a risky luxury. Sunstein echoes this sentiment when he states that “when conformists are doing the

55 Parry, “Individuality, Politics and the Critique of Paternalism in John Locke,” 176.

56 Steven G. Gey, “The Case against Postmodern Censorship Theory,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 145, no. 2 (1996): 214, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3312658>.

right thing, there is far less need for dissent.” But who gets to decide what is the “right thing”? Certainly not the citizenry.

Proponents of *Nudge* often delude themselves into believing that their paternalism is liberal and that their policies are neither authoritarian nor coercive. However, their objectives are far-reaching and resemble ambitions usually associated with totalitarian regimes. The UK’s former Deputy Prime Minister, the Liberal Democrat Nick Clegg, casually remarked that his Government’s Nudge Unit “could change the way citizens think.”⁵⁷ But since when has it been a democratic government’s brief to alter its citizens’ thoughts? The project of remolding the way people think and act requires a significant erosion of people’s right to assent or reject policies.

This approach clearly presupposes the elimination of a two-way process of discussion between citizens and their rulers.

Lack of respect for autonomy and individual choice inexorably encourages an instrumental orientation toward the exercise of free speech. It is therefore unsurprising that Sunstein wishes to change or reform the ideals embodied in the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment. The free speech doctrine as expressed by the First Amendment regards the state’s regulation of speech with suspicion. In his book *Democracy and the Problem of Free Speech*, Sunstein calls for a New Deal for “free speech under which government would be authorized to intervene dramatically in aid of weak speakers and vulnerable hearers.”⁵⁸ Sunstein’s displacement of free speech with managed speech is no doubt well-intentioned, but it opens the door for the kind of illiberal censorship practices that flourish on campuses and many cultural institutions in the Anglo-American world.

Free Speech and Tolerance Become Negotiable Commodities

Sunstein’s call for protecting “weak speakers and vulnerable hearers” echoes an argument for the policing of language frequently made by censorious liberal and leftist academics. His conceptual leap from people who lack the rationality to make good choices to ones who lack the maturity and confidence to deal with strong views and offensive words is underpinned by a belief that people have to be protected not only from themselves, but also from other people’s speech acts. The advocacy of therapeutic censorship on the ground of protecting people from offence of harm is widely echoed by illiberal advocates of identity politics.

Widespread skepticism about people’s capacity to respond to dangerous ideas with maturity correlates with a disposition that finds it difficult to take seriously the value of moral autonomy. Autonomy is an attribute of a person who engages with the world as an active, reasoning, and conscious individual. The etymology of this word—*autos* (self) and *nomos* (rule or law)—conveys the meaning of self-rule. The term was first used in the Greek city-states: according to one account, a “city has *autonomia* when its citizens make their own laws, as opposed being under the control of some conquering power.”⁵⁹

An autonomous person is presumed to possess moral independence—in other words, to act with moral responsibility. It is a moral value that protects and upholds people’s capacity to express themselves and to be themselves. Through the exercise of autonomy, people can develop their personality by assuming responsibility for their life.

57 Cited in Patrick Wintour, “David Cameron’s ‘Nudge Unit’ Aims to Improve Economic Behaviour,” *The Guardian*; September 9, 2010.

58 See a review of Sunstein’s book on free speech by Burt Neuborne, “Blues for the Left Hand: A Critique of Cass Sunstein’s *Democracy and the Problem of Free Speech*,” *The University of Chicago Law Review*, vol. 62.

59 Gerald Dworkin, “Autonomy and Behaviour Control,” *Hastings Center Report* 6, no. 1 (1976): 23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3560358>.

Frank Furedi

The cultivation of moral independence requires that people be free to deliberate and come to their own conclusions about the views and opinions they hear. As the liberal political philosopher Ronald Dworkin explained:

Government insults its citizens, and denies their moral responsibility, when it decrees that they cannot be trusted to hear opinions that might persuade them to dangerous or offensive convictions. We retain our dignity, as individual, only by insisting that no one—no official and no majority—has the right to withhold an opinion from us on the ground that we are not fit to hear and consider it.⁶⁰

According to this argument, it is by reflecting freely on opinions and deciding for ourselves on what is good and bad that we learn to behave as responsible and independent citizens. In the course of such deliberations, people not only forge their own opinions, but also influence the views of others.

Freedom of expression is one of the foundational values of liberalism. As Holmes observed, “that public disagreement is a creative force may have been the most novel and radical principle of liberal politics.”⁶¹ Unfortunately, in recent times there has been a spectacular decline in the valuation of free speech among people who perceive themselves as liberals. As an editorial in *The New York Times* reminded its readers:

The full-throated defense of free speech was once a liberal ideal. Many of the legal victories that expanded the realm of permissible speech in the United States came in defense of liberal speakers against the power of the government.⁶²

The New York Times’ use of the past tense regarding liberals’ “full-throated defense of free speech” reflected its recognition that “many progressives appear to have lost faith” in the principle of free speech.

That free speech may no longer be an ideal that inspires many self-ascribed liberals was shown by a *New York Times*-sponsored poll. The poll found that 30 percent of those surveyed agreed that “while I support free speech, sometimes you have to shut down speech that is antidemocratic, bigoted or simply untrue.” The survey indicated that those “who identified themselves as Democrats and liberals showed a higher level of support for ‘sometimes shutting down such speech.’”

The attitude highlighted by *The New York Times* can be summed up by the frequently repeated illiberal assertion “I believe in free speech, but.....” This selective approach to its application renders free speech a second-order value, leading to what one commentator has described as “The Great Free-Speech Reversal,” whereby it is conservatives and not liberals who appear to be most worried about protecting the First Amendment.⁶³ Yet when liberalism devalues one of its foundational principles, it ceases to be liberal. An apparent tendency to regard robust debate and opponents’ views with suspicion is one of the hallmarks of illiberal liberalism in the current era. It is underwritten by a variant of the same paternalistic outlook that dismissed the public as irrational and immature in the nineteenth century.

60 Ronald Dworkin, *Freedom’s Law: The Moral Reading of the American Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 200.

61 Holmes, “The Antiliberal Idea,” 4.

62 The New York Times Editorial Board, “America Has a Free Speech Problem,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/opinion/cancel-culture-free-speech-poll.html>.

63 Genevieve Lakier, “The Great Free-Speech Reversal,” *The Atlantic*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/first-amendment-regulation/617827/>. For a discussion of the free-speech reversal from a conservative perspective, see Wayne Batchis, *The Right’s First Amendment: The Politics of Free Speech and the Return of Conservative Libertarianism* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

The ambivalence—and, at times, hostility—of illiberal liberalism toward the principle of free speech is often justified on therapeutic grounds. The rise of therapeutic censorship is underwritten by a radically pessimistic account of personhood. Powerlessness, fragility, and vulnerability are the characteristics that resonate with the current therapeutic representation of personhood. As I have argued elsewhere, contemporary accounts of personhood often convey the assumption that vulnerability constitutes the essence of what it means to be human.⁶⁴ Such sentiments are conveyed in a therapeutic language that suggests that people are “fragile,” “damaged,” “scarred for life” or “broken.” From this it follows that people need to be protected from the harm caused by words that they find offensive. In effect, by downsizing adults’ capacity to deal with offensive words, they become infantilized. Therapeutic censorship expands the paternalistic rhetoric of “not in front of the children” to the domain of adulthood.

The principal premise of the case for the devaluation of the freedom of speech is the supposition that people lack the intellectual or moral independence to evaluate critically the views to which they are exposed. Unfortunately, the transmission of this message by well-meaning educators, intellectuals, and policymakers has had the effect of discouraging people from discovering their own road to moral independence. The inference to be drawn from this negative assessment of people’s mental capacities is that because citizens cannot exercise independent judgment, they require someone else to do it for them. Like the “nudgers,” those who espouse therapeutic censorship assume that people lack the capacity to know what is in their best interest.

Illiberal liberals do not attack the principle of free speech outright. The “I believe in free speech...but” argument is premised on the assumption that a consistent and unwavering commitment to tolerance and free speech can clash with—and undermine—people’s well-being and self-worth. This is the argument adopted by the political theorist Bhiku Parekh to justify the banning of “hate speech.” Parekh accepts that “free speech is an important value,” but states that “it is not the only one.” He counterposes the value of free speech to that of human dignity and insists that “since these values conflict, either inherently or in particular contexts, they need to be balanced.” For Parekh, tolerance and freedom of speech ought not to be perceived as stand-alone principles that are inherently valuable. Instead, their moral worth is relative, hence “free speech needs to be balanced against other great political values.”⁶⁵

Assertions about the necessity of trading off freedoms for alleged benefit have been used frequently by critics of liberty, and these benefits have turned out to be illusory. The belief that human dignity and the sense of self-worth require protection from the pain inflicted by hurtful speech is possibly the most counterproductive example of the trade-off argument. People acquire dignity and esteem by dealing with the problems that confront them rather than by relying on the good will of the censor or the police. As Dworkin argued, “in a culture of liberty,” the public “shares a sense, almost as a matter of secular religion, that certain freedoms are in principle exempt” from the “ordinary process of balancing and regulation.” He fears that “liberty is already lost” as “soon as old freedoms are put at risk in cost-benefit politics.”⁶⁶

Yet far too many liberals have signed up for the trading-off of freedom for some alleged benefit. Influenced by Dewey’s social engineering ambitions, many liberals are committed to trading freedom for what they suppose is equality. As one of America’s leading liberal thinkers, Francis Fukuyama, has argued:

64 See Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (London: Routledge, 2004).

65 Bhikhu Parekh, “Hate Speech: Is There a Case for Banning?” *Public Policy Research* (2006): 216, 220.

66 Dworkin, *Freedom’s Law*, 354.

If you have more liberty, the fact that people have different resources and that they are born with different talents and social endowments means they're not going to end up equal in terms of outcomes. Some people are going to be rich, and some people are not going to succeed, and I think that in order to correct that and equalize outcomes, you need to restrict people's liberty.⁶⁷

Such an instrumental view of the exercise of liberty is widespread among contemporary representatives of liberalism.

Conclusion: Reducing Democracy to a Second-Order Principle

Despite its positive reforming impulses, classical liberalism always possessed an elitist dimension. Its elitist sensibility was often expressed through a quasi-aristocratic disdain for what it perceived as the corrupting influence of mass culture and society. Elitist disdain for public opinion continues to be communicated by many twenty-first-century liberals. The American "liberal" philosopher Jason Brennan wrote a hard-hitting invective against democracy. In his book *Against Democracy*, he wrote that "Most citizens are not doing us any favors by voting," adding, "asking everyone to vote is like asking everyone to litter." When the casting of a ballot is analogized to littering, you know that the democratic way of life is in serious trouble.⁶⁸

In recent years, skepticism toward the value of democracy has mutated into its outright condemnation. For the philosopher A.C. Grayling, the author of *Democracy and its Crisis* (2017), the results of the Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. presidential election served as proof that "something has gone seriously wrong in the state of democracy." Grayling's sentiment is widely articulated by many supporters of liberal democracy, for whom the liberal principle of the rule of law is a first-order principle, and democracy a second-order one. This sentiment is forcefully expressed by Grayling, who claims that "democracy is not just elections, and can sometimes even exist de facto without them," but it cannot exist without the rule of law. This legalistic model of a democracy that exists without elections is one that assigns citizens to the role of a stage army that can periodically be mobilized to acclaim the decisions arrived at by its superiors.

Grayling's disenchantment with democracy coexists with an unswerving faith in rules and procedures. This is a sentiment that is shared by many supporters of liberal democracy, who are nevertheless skeptical of the value of democracy. Fareed Zakaria, who⁶⁹ originated the concept of illiberal democracy in 1997, conveyed not only a sense of anxiety about illiberalism, but also a profound sense of mistrust toward democracy.⁷⁰ One of the aims of Zakaria's contribution was to highlight the tension between liberalism and democracy. He argued that liberalism was "theoretically different and historically distinct from democracy." The manner in which Zakaria drew the distinction between democracy and liberalism inflated the tension between the two and transformed it into a potentially antagonistic relationship. In his view, democracy is about procedures to select a government, whereas liberalism is about the promotion of goals such as the protection of individual autonomy, individual liberty, and constitutionalism. According to this schema, liberalism is endowed with normative content, whereas democracy possesses only procedural qualities.

Zakaria's account of illiberalism is coupled with a distinct lack of enthusiasm for democracy. He seems to suggest that in the modern era, democracy is something that

67 Francis Fukuyama, *After the End of History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021), <https://www.perlego.com/book/2359649/after-the-end-of-history-pdf>.

68 Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

69 Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (1997): 42.

70 *Ibid.*, 22.

we have to put up with. With a hint of resignation, he notes that “there are no longer respectable alternatives to democracy; it is part of the fashionable attire of modernity.” His mistrust of democracy is most strikingly affirmed in the statement “democracy without constitutional liberalism is not simply inadequate but dangerous.”⁷¹ Unlike Woodrow Wilson, who aspired to make the world *safe for* democracy, Zakaria hopes to protect the world from the threat *posed by* democracy: “As we approach the next century, our task is to make democracy safe for the world.”⁷²

It seems that despite his concern with the “spreading virus of illiberalism,” Zakaria is unaware of—and certainly unconcerned with—its illiberal liberal variant.⁷³ Yet it could be argued that in the contemporary era, illiberal liberalism constitutes a significant threat to the authority of liberal values. Its historical indifference toward the principles of individual reasoning, autonomy, freedom of speech, and democracy has found a contemporary manifestation in the cultural politics of identity.

Identity politics, which displaces the principal of individualism with that of the group and downgrades Enlightenment universalism in favor of the particular, has been seamlessly internalized by many who perceive themselves as liberals. Some American liberals go so far as to represent identity politics as the apotheosis of liberal thinking. In a plea for renewing liberalism, the commentator Zack Beauchamp writes that “identity politics isn’t hurting liberalism. It’s saving it.”⁷⁴ Beauchamp’s sentiment is shared by numerous liberal academics and commentators. The Canadian philosopher Cressida Heyes notes that “Increasingly, it is difficult to see what divides anything called ‘liberalism’ from anything called ‘identity politics.’”⁷⁵

The attempt to forge a rapprochement between liberalism and identity politics calls into question the foundational values of liberalism. Holmes has commented on the “centrality of identity politics to antiliberal movements.” He adds that when identity politics is turned into a worldview, it is “just another name for antiliberalism.”⁷⁶ Nevertheless, there have been relatively few liberals who have been prepared to challenge identity politics. Indeed, it often seems that their criticism is restricted to the identity politics of the right, while the identity politics of the left is given a free pass. Even Fukuyama, who is concerned about the need to revitalize liberalism, makes concessions to identity politics. He draws a distinction between two versions of identity politics, one of which he claims should be interpreted as “the completion of liberal politics.”⁷⁷ Holmes recognizes this tension when he writes that “the identity politics of the left, although more morally decent and generous than the identity politics of the right, must still be classified as exemplifying the antiliberal spirit of the age.”⁷⁸

To draw a moral distinction between the illiberal temper of the left and that of the right is to underestimate the authoritarian impulse and justify it on the ground of “moral decency.” “Liberals who repress speech to prevent harm risk inviting authoritarianism,” warned Claire Fox of the Academy of Ideas in 2018.⁷⁹ The identity politics of the left is no less alien to the tradition of Enlightenment liberalism than that of the right. As I have argued elsewhere, it is hostile to the values of tolerance,

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid., 43.

73 Ibid., 42.

74 Zack Beauchamp, “Identity Politics Isn’t Hurting Liberalism. It’s Saving It.” *Vox*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/2/20/20954059/liberalism-identity-politics-defense>.

75 Cressida Heyes, “Identity Politics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/identity-politics>.

76 Holmes, “The Antiliberal Idea,” 7

77 Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, 97.

78 Holmes, “The Antiliberal Idea,” 7.

79 Claire Fox, “The Dangers of Illiberal Liberalism,” *The Economist*, August 17, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/08/17/the-dangers-of-illiberal-liberalism>.

autonomy, and freedom of expression.⁸⁰ The embrace of identity politics inevitably leads to the mutation of liberalism into an illiberal worldview.

Responding to the illiberal turn of liberalism, professor of humanities Mark Lilla has warned about what he sees as the danger of liberalism becoming wedded to illiberal identity politics. He observes that “In recent years American liberalism has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism’s message and prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing.”⁸¹ Lilla is right to highlight the illiberal temper of liberal identity politics. Through its embrace of identity politics, liberalism risks being emptied of the values that led to its historical emergence.

In their overview of illiberalism research, András Sajó and Renata Uitz note that “liberalism as a competitive movement develops illiberal, even antiliberal traits along the way.” They raise the possibility that liberalism might have been “tainted by illiberalism both politically and theoretically all along.”⁸² From our perspective, illiberal liberalism emerged from a tendency to underestimate the public’s capacity to reason and to act in accordance with its own interest. A pessimistic and even paternalistic outlook on public opinion has encouraged the downgrading of democracy and the perception of this ideal in instrumental terms. Unfortunately, too often, liberals have uncritically accommodated to illiberal anti-democratic influences. Moreover, their commitment to the core principles of the Enlightenment has tended to be selective, especially in relation to the valuing of individual reasoning and autonomy. To free itself from its illiberal influences and renew its commitment to the values of the Enlightenment is the challenge facing twenty-first-century liberalism.

80 See Frank Furedi, *Tolerance: A Defence of Moral Independence* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2011).

81 Mark Lilla, “The End of Identity Liberalism,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html>.

82 András Sajó and Renata Uitz, “A Compass for Illiberalism Research,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (London: Routledge, 2021), 978.