

Liberalism: What is it?

An Annotated Bibliography¹

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As an initial point of departure, please note that liberalism does not exist as a theory that has been thought out and then put into a systematic order that can be easily learned about by encountering its verbalized, conceptualized form. In contrast, Marxism exists more or less as a unified theory and, if we are to understand it, we can turn to a number of authoritative, classic texts. But, on the other hand, liberalism exists as a more ambiguous, slippery kind of thing and no one set of texts will necessarily serve as sources that, inevitably, we should all read and consult. Hence, in the bibliography that is constructed and presented below, we begin with one particular point of entry and then move from there through a number of different texts and stages: beginning firstly with an introductory level of analysis and presentation which articulates what liberalism is and what kind of problematic exists within it before moving into later stages of analysis which try to find explanations that can encompass a larger number of distinct variables.

Dawson's *Progress and Religion* gives us an initial sense of things as this was understood prior to the Second World War (*circa* 1929). Pabst's *Demons of Liberal Democracy* identifies current difficulties which expand on the findings and the conclusions of Dawson's earlier work. The initial object in reading Dawson and Pabst is an understanding which can point to inner contradictions which exist within liberalism as a general perspective and trenchant point of view, contradictions which need to be evaluated and understood if better judgments are to be made about the scope and the viability of liberalism as both a philosophy and as a praxis or practice of human freedom in the choices that we corporately and individually make. Legutko's *The Demon in Democracy* can be cited as a case in point to the degree that it adverts to an unexpected, strange kind of authoritarianism that could be found within liberal democracies as we find them within the government of our world today.²

A second, further stage is introduced by Siedentop's *Inventing the Individual* when Siedentop looks at premodern points of origin with respect to a number of earlier, cultural changes and the influence of one key variable which is his primary object of focus, and then, lastly, a further stage is introduced by

¹Please note that this bibliography has been drawn up as a response to the US presidential electoral campaign of 2020. The enormous divisions that were being more fully revealed by the words and actions of many participants and observers has been suggesting and, to date, they continue to imply and suggest that something is amiss in the life of our western liberal democracies. The American situation is not entirely unique. Hence, if, in the US, a liberal democracy allegedly exists, then why or what is a liberal democracy? Where does it come from? What are its roots? Can we come to a better understanding of it? Can we come to a better understanding of ourselves within our current social and political context? In some way, can things improve? To whom or what do we move? It is to be admitted, however, that, as given, liberalism exists as a kind of genus and that, from it or from within it, we have economic liberalism, political liberalism, and philosophic liberalism. To focus our attention initially on the meaning of liberalism soon shifts and dovetails into specifications and ramifications which exist as economic liberalism, political liberalism, and philosophic liberalism.

²See Ryszard Legutko, *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies*, trans. Teresa Adelson (New York: Encounter Books, 2016).

Gillespie's *Theological Origins of Modernity* when Gillespie points to the impact of a number of changes that have emerged through time within the history of philosophical and theological reflection as this has existed within the Christian west. Jones's *Before Church and State* gives a clearer understanding or perception of liberalism if a pre-liberal context can be more fully described and narrated in a way which points to a distinct ordering of meaning (an *episteme*) which characterizes another world of believing, feeling, thinking, and understanding. What kind of human world exists as, allegedly, a pre-modern or a pre-liberal type of world?

Lastly, how can liberalism be understood within a transcendental perspective: within a larger or a wider order of meaning and being which can act as a base, catalyst, or solvent for effecting changes that can add to the good of things which exists within current liberal practice? Always, in its distinctiveness, liberalism is best understood if other points of view can be determined and identified in terms of other variables that can be known and appreciated in some way.

Six Texts

1. Christopher Dawson. *Progress and Religion: An Historical Inquiry*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1929.³

If progress within the order of our human history has religious roots which refer to the emergence and the call of Israel in a tradition that has been carried over into the belief and practice of Christianity, the origins of a secular or a materialistic notion of progress within the stuff of our human history ground the origins of a new point of view which refers to modern liberalism: liberalism as the secularization of our western European culture. Its ground is belief in the workings of a mechanical, automatic law of progress that is somehow operative within our human history. Our human good is achieved with every kind of advance which occurs within the order of business, technology, and economics. Quantifiable material well being implies every other kind of human well being. Cause and effect. The eighth chapter and following attend to the rise and the decline of modern liberalism. A concluding chapter looks at a possible solution. A good point of entry exists in reading the first chapter which looks at the idea of progress in a way which foreshadows the details and lines of its later discussion.

2. Adrian Pabst. *The Demons of Liberal Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.⁴

³For additional, supplementary reading, see Christopher Dawson's later work, *The Gods of Revolution [An Analysis of the French Revolution]* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015) which dates from the mid-1930s. Part One is entitled as the "Revolution of Ideas" and, within it, the second chapter refers to the "Historic Origins of Liberalism," although, for a more complete grasp, the three chapters comprising Part One should all be read according the order that they are given.

⁴For another introduction to liberalism although one that is less immediately readable and understandable because, partly, it comes to us from a translation of writings by a contemporary French philosopher who thinks and writes from within his own literary, cultural, and political context, see Jean-Claude Michéa's, *The Realm of Lesser Evil: An Essay on Liberal Civilization*, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009). To summarize this work, no better summary is available

Surveying liberal democracy in terms of problems that are currently besetting it (as these derive from certain tenets that belong to the order of our liberal democracy), Pabst distinguishes between traditional conservative/liberal, rightist/leftist political conflicts and arrangements and its replacement by a new form of conflict. An authoritarian, liberal, political, economic elite is being challenged by an insurgent grassroots political protest (that is not without an authoritarianism and a totalitarianism of its own). Monopolies in the order of business and economics have been leading to income disparity and greater inequalities in how people can live in their standard of living. Fewer opportunities exist for entrepreneurs to begin new things: invent new products or start new businesses. In terms of understanding, negotiation, and dialogue, rational considerations tend to be increasingly brushed aside. They lack a basis of their own in a cultural context which more strongly holds to the primacy of our desires and passions in an understanding of our human freedom that thinks more in terms of the good of self-definition and the good of our acts of self-willing. How to transcend?

3. Larry Siedentop. *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*. London: Penguin Books, 2015.

While many interpretations of liberalism point to 16th Century roots and the history of the Reformation which, in turn, was succeeded in the 17th Century by the reflections and thought of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, Siedentop traces a history of individualism which dates from Christian origins: most prominently, from the

other than quoting, paraphrasing, and adapting words which come to us from A. J. Sutter.

Liberalism originates in reaction to the civil and religious wars of the 17th Century when thinkers, like Hobbes, came to believe that it is universally natural for us to exist and live as selfish human beings and so, if internecine conflicts are to be avoided, one best turns to the regulative law of the all powerful state and the good of a life that is given to the goods of trade and commerce. As human beings, we exist essentially as individuals and so, to avoid conflicts, civil law tries to keep individuals apart from each other. Freedom is measured in terms of interpersonal distance. Tolerance is indifference. The growth of our human economy is fueled by our selfish interests which, according to Adam Smith's economic judgment, exists as a kind of good although, as things turn out, the emphasis on the good of competition fuels conflicts between persons and groups in a way which points to inner contradictions and tensions which exist within the liberal order of political and economic life. From a doctrinal perspective, liberalism exists as a lesser good because it favors avoiding moral considerations whenever political and economic decisions need to be made.

See https://www.amazon.com/Realm-Lesser-Evil-Jean-Claude-Michea/dp/0745646204/ref=sr_1_1?crid=1XUVUZHJ6R6EI&dchild=1&keywords=jean-claude+michea&qid=1605282116&s=books&sprefix=Jean-Claude+Michea%2Caps%2C173&sr=1-1#customerReviews (accessed November 13, 2020).

preaching of St. Paul and the proclaiming of a saving message that is intended for all persons, irrespective of any social and cultural differences. All persons exist as brothers and sisters, one to another. By postulating a fundamental form of equality that exists among all human persons who stand before the sight of God, the human individual emerges as a primary unit within first the order of religion and then, later, within the order of society and civic life. Each person, as human, possesses a common nature which in turn explains why each person must possess an identical set of fundamental rights that which all must respect if each person to live a truly human life, in each their own way. The human individual emerges as a Christian notion (as a fundamental presupposition for the life of faith which belongs to Christian life and practice).

4. Michael Allen Gillespie. *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008.⁵

Our current culture is best understood not from a viewpoint which takes its point of departure from the 18th Century Enlightenment but from philosophical developments in the 13th Century within a theological context when the primacy of our human acts of reasoning was replaced by an alleged primacy that belongs to our human acts of willing. Willing trumps understanding. If Aquinas, in the middle of the *Summa Theologiae*, begins to articulate a distinct philosophy of the human will, Duns Scotus, later in the 13th Century, begins to speak about the primacy of our acts of human willing over and against an alleged primacy that had belonged to our human acts of understanding and judgment. From a growing emphasis on the power and scope of willing comes a different theology of God and a different anthropology which creates conditions which lead to a focus in the role and place of individuality in the understanding that we are to have about how we exist and ought to live as human beings. The change in anthropology also points to a different notion of freedom and how, in liberalism, a different notion of freedom is to be alluded to as, for liberalism, it functions as a species of first principle.

5. Andrew Willard Jones. *Before Church and State: A Study of Social Order in the Sacramental Kingdom of St. Louis IX*. Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Academic, 2017.

If, in our contemporary understanding of the relation which exists between society and state, it is commonly believed that human conflict exists as a fundamental problem and point of departure in how human beings live and exist and that only the state has the right to use force to solve human problems (only the state has the right to use force to solve human problems, to suppress the violence of other parties and groups), a different perspective exists if we allude to how, before Luther and Hobbes,

⁵Please note that modernity often stands as a synonym for liberalism. A more readable text that can be possibly consulted is Rodney Stark's *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2014). Modernity can be approached from only a philosophical perspective although, if we realize how philosophical and theological reasons are closely intertwined with each other, a better approach wants to look also at the influence of theological causes. A mutual form of causality tends to exist between philosophical and theological causes.

a different way of thinking had existed which supposes that peace exists as a fundamental point of departure. Conflicts inevitably arise later and in trying to deal with difficult human problems in any conflicts that have arisen, one tries to return things to an original and prior condition of peace and concord which tries to determine the customs and traditions which had regulated how persons and groups could amicably live with each other. Church and State exist and work together to determine the relevant customs and traditions where each relies on the other in a way that the other respects and desires. Friendship exists as a necessary requirement if difficult human problems are to be successfully addressed and resolved.

6. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “Essay in Fundamental Sociology – Philosophy of History” and “*Pantōn Anakephalaiōsis: A Theory of Human Solidarity*,” *Archival Material: Early Papers on History*, eds. Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), pp. 5-64.⁶

In the context of a philosophy of history that Lonergan articulates in his “Essay in Fundamental Sociology – Philosophy of History,” it is admitted that our human story is filled with contradictions and conflicts. Some things get better; other things get worse. History is filled with many ambiguous changes. How to differentiate? If the birth of philosophy is taken as a kind of bench mark (and this birth refers to a discovery which now knows about the authority and the powers of our human reason), we can distinguish between a dialectics of fact and a dialectics of thought. Three phases or elements exist in each. In terms of fact, a law of progress exists when we look at how developments within the order of our human technology had led to changes within the order of economics and politics. A human society grows in

⁶For a larger, more comprehensive grasp of things which attends to tensions which exist within the fabric of human history and which distinguishes between tensions that are normative and creative and conflicts and contradictions which exist as dialectics, see the detailed discussion that comes to us from Matthew L. Lamb in his “The Social and Political Dimensions of Lonergan's Theology,” *The Desires of the Human Heart: An Introduction to the Theology of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Vernon Gregson (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 255-284. While an adequate understanding of Lamb's summary and analysis invites readers into the kind of work that is suggested and required if Bernard Lonergan's *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* is to be adequately understood (if its insights are to be appropriated by us in a way what can add to the powers and the scope of our cognition), an initial reading of Lamb's paper alludes to how liberalism can be understood in a way which distinguishes between measures of good that can be found to exist within it and how liberalism also exists as a kind of corrupting restriction. Its scope or general perspective encompasses a number of variables that are too limited in number and, in turn, this limitation leads to exaggerations of emphasis that are given to the life and being of distinct variables. To conclude thus with a question: if “capitalist individualism” is to be contrasted with “Marxist collectivism,” if this is a reasonable question, does the posing of this type of question point to a deficient understanding of human individualism (an understanding which would exist as an ideology) and, as the same time also, to a deficient understanding about how human beings can live together in a way which is other than that which is meant if we should want to speak about how human communities exist and about how, in their flourishing, the good of our human individuality is something which exists as a kind of product, the good of one requiring the good of the other?

the degree of its organization. But, as a second variable, the good which is achieved is undermined by how evil exists as a mysterious force (as a kind of undertow) to corrupt the life of a given society. The good and evil grow together but in a manner which is challenged by religious claims which refer to events that exist within our world as divinely revealed intrusions. In terms of thought, a law of progress exists if, as a first variable or premiss, we move into critical forms of understanding and cognition which exist as the emergence of philosophy and science (the two initially existing together). We are less tempted to think in terms of short term solutions that would be adequate for solving our human problems. However, as a second variable, the progress which exists in our understanding is interrupted and complicated if, in rationalism, our understanding is separated from the good of belief which exists within the order of transcendence and religion: if our understanding is turned into something which exists on its own, independently and apart from anything else. Liberalism exists within a perspective that values this autonomy and independence. Our understanding is seen to exist as a self-sufficient kind of thing. We can solve our own problems! A concluding term or variable is the possibility of faith as this exists within us as a subjective response. The good of our reasoning and understanding is restored and raised to new heights through an openness which turns insoluble human problems into a means which converts or turns an evil into a good through a form of agency which we can participate in though it does not belong to us as human subjects.

In the context of a philosophy or a theology of redemption which Lonergan articulates in "*Pantōn Anakephalaiōsis: A Theory of Human Solidarity*," Lonergan contrasts two orders of premotion where premotion, as a species of precondition, exists as some kind of external or extrinsic cause. A first premotion is natural and so it is natural for us that our willing exists in lieu of our understanding and knowing. Failure to act or respond in this way points to the existence of moral evil. The good that we enjoy in our understanding and the good that we do in our willing exist fundamentally as receptions in us although, in both cases, our cooperation, as an active principle, is always needed since we can neither force our understanding nor force any of our acts of self-sacrifice that joyfully lead to actions and deeds which are loving, wise, charitable, and good. The corruption of this first order of premotion points to consequences which exist in terms of a growing "atomization" of human beings; a breakdown of human community that is informed by different kinds of violence, violence existing not only as a material or physical kind of thing. The impotence of our human situation exists as a kind of material cause. It points to the reasonableness or the rationality of a second order of premotion which is not natural but which is supernatural. It is transcendent and, through our acquiescence, reception, and cooperation, it can join human persons into a form of solidarity that cannot be effected by human beings, acting on their own (within a frame of mind and attitude which thinks in terms of self-sufficiency).