Moderate and Radical Liberalism

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Moderate and Radical Liberalism

The Enlightenment Sources of Liberal Thought

By

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Preface

In the ocean of scholarship on the history of political thought, and particularly among studies of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment on the one hand, and nineteenth-century liberalism on the other, there are very few detailed studies focusing specifically on the transition from the Enlightenment to liberalism. This transition has either been accepted as a truism, often interchanging the terms "Enlightenment" and "liberalism" uncritically, and thus with facile assumptions often obscuring a proper historical understanding, or else, more often, historians have pessimistically insisted on a distinct break between the two eras. A consequence of this latter approach is the claim that liberalism, in contrast with the Enlightenment, became a more guarded and moderate outlook. Indeed, this conception of what might be termed the "illiberalism of liberalism" in the nineteenth century has led some scholars to question the salience of the term "liberalism" itself. This book will present a sharp contrast with this prevalent outlook. To substantiate this controversial interpretation it seemed necessary to examine as wide a range of sources as possible, and of necessity this is also a detailed, though by no means comprehensive, history of what will be termed here the "Enlightenment-liberal tradition" throughout this period, on both sides of the Atlantic, though with particular attention to European thought. To present what will often be a complicated argument in the simplest terms, the claim of this book is that the only way to understand the emergence of liberalism is as a continuation of the Enlightenment.

At the outset, it is important to insist on not providing any concise definition of the Enlightenment-liberal tradition. Any such definition would lead to imprecise generalizations and a narrowed perspective. In a more amorphous sense, however, this tradition may be viewed as the social, economic, and political philosophy which defined the long eighteenth century, and which led to progress in several key fields, all of which will be examined in the following pages—increasing democratization of political systems (while remembering that democratization by definition means systems which were not yet fully democratic), revolutions and their intellectual consideration, increasing rationalistic and secularizing modes of thought (again, differentiating between "secularization," a relative term, and the categorical term "secular"), religious toleration, abolition, the rights of non-Europeans and colored people more generally, free trade economics, and women's rights. In all these fields the Enlightenment-liberal tradition defined and promoted progress, and in this way was the crucial force which shaped the incipient modern democratic world. This is inherently a "working definition," in the sense that it sustains the

discussion of underlying ideas, while maintaining its own flexible approach. Any attempt at a more precise terminological definition would be counterproductive, and would go against the grain of the shifting emphases which emerged in the development of this tradition. In other words, if we insist on a strict set of defining characteristics of a certain eighteenth-century political outlook, any differences compared with the nineteenth century would seem to deny the portrayal of a shared perspective. This book, however, shuns such an approach, and insists on continuities more than discontinuities.

The idea for this book emerged from a sustained consideration of Jonathan Israel's studies of the history of the Radical Enlightenment. Unlike many other scholars, I find at least some of Israel's claims persuasive, particularly his differentiation between the Moderate and Radical Enlightenments. Israel, however, has also insisted on a version of the more common interpretation claiming that in the post-revolutionary environment of the early nineteenth century the ideals of the Radical Enlightenment, and specifically its democratic import, essentially failed, leaving to nascent socialism the advancement of political radicalism. This has led him to share the view that the very term "liberalism" is distortive of the historical reality, and unhelpful for historical study. His recent book *The Enlightenment that Failed*, though examining some similar topics to those discussed here, presents, as its title demonstrates, an essentially different interpretation from the one which will be outlined here. With all of Israel's influence on my own study of this topic, my interpretation of the nineteenth-century continuation of the Enlightenment is much more optimistic than his.

The main point which will be argued in these pages is that to understand how the Enlightenment transmuted into liberalism, the differentiation between moderation and radicalism needs to be projected not only on the Enlightenment, but on liberalism as well. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries what were initially radical ideas were gradually accepted by moderates, and it was they who ended up ingraining them into the mainstream of Western political culture. It is this process, though less dramatic than the seemingly failed history of the rebellions of the Age of Democratic Revolution, and later 1830 and 1848, which constitutes the true explanation for the perpetuation of Enlightenment ideals, and their eventual constitutive role in defining the modern world. It was Moderate Liberalism which eventually preserved the values of Radical Liberalism even during the horrific challenges of the first half of the twentieth century (the terms will be capitalized throughout to emphasize their conceptual salience). It is only the longstanding influence of the Enlightenment-liberal tradition which can explain the existence of a viable intellectual and ideological basis powerful enough to enable this continuing process. There is, admittedly, no doubt that the history of modern

liberalism from the late nineteenth century to our own time, and hence beyond the purview of the present book, witnessed a growing complexity and lack of unity in what has often been included under the term "liberalism." Yet the case can be made that this is also a sign of the growing distance which developed between modern liberalism and its Enlightenment origins, in a way which has not always been conducive to furthering its aims. Nevertheless, underneath the appalling currents of modern history, the Enlightenment-liberal tradition has proven persistent and influential enough to retain its ongoing relevance, even if this relevance has often gone unnoticed. It is only by searching for the origins of this tradition in the long eighteenth century that it can be truly comprehended, and its core unity revitalized and reshaped for the needs of contemporary political debate.

The methodological approach I have chosen for presenting this interpretation of the history of political thought is open to several criticisms. Above all, it might be condemned as tendentious. After all, the cardinal sin of historians is to come up with a theory and then selectively pick the supporting evidence. The history of political thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is particularly rich, and one might easily find evidence which could disprove the theory presented here. Nevertheless, I believe that the amount of material examined here, and supporting this interpretation, is overwhelming. Books of this type, however, opting for general overviews of large topics, go against the grain of contemporary scholarly practice, particularly in historical study, with its emphasis on precision, focus on close scrutiny of sources, and its antipathy to sweeping generalizations. Coming, as I do, precisely from this tradition, and having published for many years work in this vein, I think, however, that it is nonetheless inappropriate for some historical studies. The tendency to concentrate on specific topics and to study them in exhaustive detail has its benefits, yet it comes at the price of the ability to take a general look at broad historical developments. This wider perspective, given the amount of particularistic research which has accumulated about almost any given topic, is destined from the start to dissatisfy historians who expect a detailed scholarly apparatus buttressing any significant assertion. But this is a price worth paying for enabling such a wider point of view, for seeing the forest and not only the trees, even if in the process one has to forgo seeing the leaves on the trees.

As far as the history of the Enlightenment and liberalism is concerned, the insistence on particularity also comes at the expense of clarity and unity, and hence of the political effectiveness of liberal ideals, precisely at our point in historical time when these ideals are sorely needed. Insisting on the overall unity of the Enlightenment-liberal tradition affords such scholarly clarity, and perhaps also political effectiveness. Yet it should be emphasized at the outset

that this political aim is only a byproduct of what is a strictly historical study, and will barely be mentioned directly in the many following pages. Even more importantly, at no point has the desire (which I do not deny) of wishing to see enlightened and liberal ideals prevail predetermined any aspect of what I hope is truthful and precise historical analysis. This is not to claim any attempt at impossible objectivity or detachment. Yet the historical evidence for assuming this political efficacy of an otherwise strictly scholarly discussion seems to me quite convincing, and in the conclusion to this book, though only rarely in the intervening pages, I allow myself a few general observations from this point of view.

As an intellectual historian I have often, in my previous work, insisted on the importance of studying the ideas of minor figures, based on the view that these were no less representative of their times, indeed perhaps occasionally even more so, than more famous and innovative ones. The broader perspective of the present book, however, with very few exceptions, cannot accommodate this approach, and will concentrate on well-known luminaries, though in the period in question there were many of these. This has nonetheless not obviated numerous hard choices, both regarding primary sources, and even more so regarding secondary literature. To read everything written on the intellectual history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would take several lifetimes even for more consummate scholars than myself. What has been totally excluded from the discussion, however, is the history of conservative thought on the one hand, and of socialism on the other. Regarding the latter, this is not an unproblematic decision. Socialism, after all, was in its own way part of the history of Enlightenment ideas, and a valid argument could be made that it was the true heir to the Radical Enlightenment. Nevertheless, there is no denying that most types of socialist thought insisted from the start on central control and planning, primarily in restricting free markets, yet by implication in other spheres as well. In this sense socialism was inherently illiberal, and remains outside the limits of the present study. Around the middle of the nineteenth century some liberals began recognizing the need for combining certain socialistic principles within liberalism, yet this would only effectively happen at a later period than the one discussed here.

In general, in examining the very large body of literature which a study of this type necessitates, I have given preference to primary sources, in the belief that it is important to let contemporary voices speak for themselves. Nonetheless, the extensive introduction centers on the secondary literature, and attempts to define the singularity of the interpretation developed here. In doing so, it criticizes the interpretations which have been put forward by many prominent scholars over many years. Lest it is unclear from the respectful

tone of these critiques, and notwithstanding these disagreements, I want to express my indebtedness to the work of these, and many other, scholars, who have mapped the terrain which I tread in this book, and without whose efforts I would never have been able to conceive it, let alone finish writing it. As for primary sources, in almost all cases I have relied on reliable translations where these exist; in the many other instances where they do not, all translations are my own. All of the chapters of this book are published here for the first time, with the one exception of the first part of chapter 15, which is a revised version of a previously published article, "Barbarian Tribes, American Indians and Cultural Transmission: Changing Perspectives from the Enlightenment to Tocqueville," *History of Political Thought*, 34 (2013), 507–39.

I am an independent scholar, which means that this book was researched and published without any kind of institutional or other official support. A small part of the research was done during a self-funded sabbatical at the Institute for Historical Studies at the Department of History at the University of Texas at Austin, and during a short period as a visiting lecturer at the Department of History at the University of Alabama. I would like to thank my friends and colleagues in both places for their kind support. This is also an opportunity to thank my friends and colleagues at the Mediterranean Society for Enlightenment Studies for many valuable conversations over the years. The topic of this book was presented in lectures on two occasions, to members of this wonderful society, and to my hospitable colleagues in Alabama, and I want to thank them all for their helpful remarks. Almost twenty years ago, one of those who would later found the Mediterranean Society for Enlightenment Studies, the late Michael Heyd, as always both knowledgeable and supportive, drew my attention to a recently published book by Jonathan Israel on the Radical Enlightenment. Till then, I had been familiar with Israel's work mainly in the field of Dutch history. Little could I foresee back then that my interest in his ideas about the Enlightenment, and my study of the history of the Enlightenment and liberalism more generally, would eventually lead to such a huge project as the present book. I also want to thank Jonathan Israel himself for his personal support for this project.

I would like to thank everyone at Brill for their generous and consummate professionalism, and in particular the editors of the series History of European Political and Constitutional Thought, the two reviewers who exhibited unusual collegiality in agreeing to review such a huge manuscript in such a timely manner and while providing very helpful remarks and suggestions, and above all my main contact at Brill, the wonderful Alessandra Giliberto.

As always, my greatest thanks by far are happily due to my family. An independent scholar without family support is a lonely person indeed, but thanks

to them I have never faced this problem. None of my work would ever have been finished or published without them, and this is particularly true of the present book.