

'Liberty as equality of restraint':
social freedom beyond autonomy and coercion

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'The liberty I mean is social freedom. It is that state of things in which liberty is secured by the equality of restraint'.

Edmund Burke

1. Introduction

Thank you for your more than generous words of welcome and introduction. It is an immense honour to be invited by you and an absolute pleasure to give the keynote lecture on the occasion of the launch of your essay collection. I'd like to extend my warmest congratulation to both co-editors Patrick and Hans-Martien and to all the contributors. The breadth and depth of your engagement with postliberal thinking makes this publication a seminal contribution to the debate – a contribution that is as comprehensive as it is concise. Thank you. Before I say more about the symposium, the people and the place, let me outline the argument I will make.

Liberalism's claim to universality rests on the primacy of the autonomous, sovereign self who endowed with the capacity to reason and choose freely. While the liberal tradition was a powerful force for liberation and social justice, contemporary liberalism destroys the liberal promise of tolerance, generosity, fair play, and liberty. And as liberal ideas and practices increasingly with a slide into authoritarian control, a space is opening up for genuine alternatives – a space that is postliberal in three senses (a point made by Patrick & Hans-Martien in their introduction): first, that which comes after the end of liberal hegemony; second, that which criticises the excesses and errors of liberalism without being anti-liberal; third, that which overcomes the collusion of liberal with authoritarian modes in the direction of a pluralist politics – a subsidiary state, mutual markets and strong civic institutions that embed both capital and labour. Such politics blends local tradition, national belonging and international solidarity under perennial civic and religious values.

The increasing convergence of extreme capitalism with state surveillance must be resisted in favour of mixed constitution, subsidiarity and a new and more democratic model of corporatism. At the heart of this lies a conception of humans as social beings (as mentioned by Bas Hengstmengel) and of human agency that balances freedom with self-restraint. Social freedom blends the liberal invocation of individual liberty with a small-'c' conservative yearning for community and socialist disposition towards lived solidarity. That is the post-liberalism I will outline.

2. What post-liberalism is and isn't

At the outset it is worth acknowledging that the term 'post-liberal' is doubly contested. For some, adding the prefix 'post' accords too much importance to that which it aims at overcoming – namely liberalism – and it fails to name alternatives anchored in reality. This criticism has been addressed to philosophers like John Gray and authors like David Goodhart whose position is routinely portrayed as a 'nicer' form of liberalism – more freedom, more tolerance, more true diversity in the face of liberal authoritarianism.

For others, post-liberalism is almost entirely sinister – at best nostalgic of the past and at worst a reactionary roll-back of rights and freedoms in an attempt to restore a pre-modern, neo-medieval vision dominated by imperial and ecclesial power. The fascination with strongmen such as Putin, Trump or Orban reflects this facet of right-wing post-liberalism well: part of their appeal is a blend of national populism with ethno-centric atavism in opposition to cosmopolitan liberalism and multicultural globalism. Part was a more amorphous but nevertheless deeply held view that these strongmen uphold cultural tradition over against liberal decadence – social conservatism over against 'woke' progressivism. As such, the Post-liberal Populist International represents an alliance of nationalists at the heart of a countermovement to the US-led unipolar order.

But to describe these positions as 'post-liberal' is really a misnomer. They are to varying degrees anti-liberal in rejecting the whole of liberalism and trying to undo liberal rights, freedoms and institutions: rolling back minority rights and the rights of immigrants; curtailing the freedom of association of groups deemed anti-patriotic ('foreign agents'); eroding the independence of the judiciary and the press.

But the post-liberalism that these groups advocate is also paradoxically hyper-liberal in that it rests on the same foundational assumptions: the primacy of the individual or of the nation, modelled on the idea of a sovereign individual writ large; the triumph of the central state over all intermediary institutions; the oscillation between freedom and security, individual release and collective control – a conception of individual liberty paradoxically compatible with central coercion.

Liberalism and anti-liberalism converge and collude in complex ways. National populism and other forms of anti-liberal thinking appeal to notions of sovereign will and embrace variants of state capitalism reliant on fiscal dumping and deregulation to attract foreign capital, which is compatible with contemporary liberalism.

And the claim that national populists transcend liberalism by turning 'left on the economy' and 'right on culture' is spurious. Governments with this outlook are mostly variants of state-market power that are economically liberal (as with Keynesian spending) and socially antiliberal (as with Trump and aspects of the Hungarian and Polish governments) – not genuinely postliberal. Behind the simplistic slogan 'left on the economy and right on culture' lurks an admiration for a politics of state control and the rule of strongmen. The ruling parties of Poland and Hungary, which have fostered a

climate of impunity for virulent nationalism and anti-Semitism, are not exactly paragons of Christian democracy. As Ringo Ossewaarde has shown in his chapter, this also applies to US Catholic postliberals.

In the UK, the rhetoric of one-nation or national conservatism is a cipher for the free-market fundamentalism of regulatory divergence and global trade deals, combined with social regression and culture wars. What may look postliberal turns out to be a combination of the old and the new right orthodoxies and so is doubly wrong. This is what the populist and now post-pandemic moment brings to the fore. The Brazilian leader Jair Bolsonaro, rather like Trump, combines elements of economic libertarianism with nationalist undertones or even atavistic ethno-centrism.

This may sound antiliberal and it is, but in reality it reinforces a certain underlying liberal logic. First, there is the unmediated will of the individual (Hobbes) or the masses (Rousseau) – or both at once. Second, there is the subordination of any substantive notion of the common good to individual freedoms (Locke) or collective material utility (Bentham) – or again both at once. We have come full circle from liberalism to distorted forms of post-liberalism that are at once ultraliberal in economic terms and antiliberal in social terms. A truly postliberal party or government is yet to emerge.

3. The limits of liberal autonomy

Liberal liberty leaves us in an impasse. Since Hobbes and Locke, liberals have championed a conception of freedom as ‘negative liberty’ – the absence of constraints on individual choice other than the law and private conscience. But since maximal freedom trumps any notion of dignity or the common good, liberalism ends up promoting an empty liberty of endless self-release where will and desire define what makes us human. It is therefore hardly surprising that liberalism is compatible with capitalism and also authoritarianism. As the philosopher Raymond Geuss writes in his forthcoming book *Not Thinking Like a Liberal* (p. xiv), we face a ‘total ideology of our era, the conjunction of democracy, liberalism and capitalism’.

First, they champion a form of liberty that is purely negative – a liberty that is “freedom from” any restrictions on our ability to choose how we wish to live, as long as we remain within the law. Initially, this was seen as emancipatory and liberating, helping people out of exploitation, oppression and discrimination. And certainly many minorities and members of majority groups constrained by old cultural conventions or legal barriers – women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities – benefitted from these “freedoms from”.

But over time “negative liberty” has now been radicalised to the point where it flips over into the tyranny of individual choice abstracted from any relational constraints of family, community, history, or even nature. An older liberalism of the civil rights movement in the US or the era of Harold Wilson in the UK morphed into unfettered progressivism. This blends the idea of total social

equalisation with untrammelled cultural individualism and the reign of the market over all other forms of social organisation – the centre-left and the centre-right since the 1990s.

Moreover, the idea of emancipation became debased to mean liberation not simply from the prejudiced social exclusion of certain groups and from arbitrary inequalities but also from almost all restrictions on individual choice. As the unleashing of choice always involves new restrictions of the choices of some by the choices of others, it leads to new and draconian restrictions on citizens' freedoms – an argument made by Patrick Deneen, as Sophie van Bijsterveld points out. But since rival rights and freedoms collide, power decides, such that contemporary liberalism results in an oscillation between release and control.

This logic underpinned the politics of both the George W. Bush and Obama administration as well as the government led by David Cameron. In the US today, the fusion does not appear as a single force but rather the combined actions of the two parties: the Democrats are not market fundamentalist while the GOP is not “woke,” but they constrain the political space such that any policy change that is adopted follows this logic of fusion, even though neither party fully represents both poles. It equates to a position of freedom without fraternity and liberty as individual entitlement without obligations to others. Meanwhile deepening disparities of wealth and power exacerbate social divisions.

At the heart of the progressivist creed lies the worship of individual autonomy. And far from benefitting some of the most marginalised and economically deprived communities, progressives have further marginalised and alienated all those who desire greater communal solidarity – the deep desire for community we witnessed during the first Covid-19 lockdown last Spring.

4. Ultraliberal identity

Second, this form of liberalism has given rise to a phenomenon that in some sense is a backlash against it, but in another way intensifies its inner logic: identitarianism. Contemporary identitarianism grows out of ultraprogressive identity politics and elevates all minority norms over majority interests. It is a fusion of elements of revolutionary Marxist thought with cultural egalitarianism and strands in critical race, gender, and queer theory, which undermines free inquiry and free speech on university campuses and beyond. Insofar as it opposes certain individual rights, identitarian ideology is deeply antiliberal. By radicalizing all aspects of social life in a Manichaean way, it slides into a fanaticism that is authoritarian and collectivist: pitting all the oppressed and exploited minorities against their supposedly racist oppressor majorities.

It is both a backlash against ultraprogressivism and an intensification of its inner logic that places in-groups and out-groups in opposition with no possibility of a negotiated compromise. The irony of imposing a uniform view about everything in the name of equality, diversity, and inclusion seems lost on its advocates. Far from upholding tolerance and pluralism, they seek to enforce a single

worldview based on intimidating and demonizing any opposition. The obsessive self-stylization as the ultimate bulwark against rightwing fascism betokens of an ideological absolutism that is ahistorical, Manichean and gives this politics a rhetorically totalitarian cast.

Worst of all, the will to freedom as liberation from limits on human volition is in reality a will to power of some over others and essentially the strong over the weak. Ultraprogressives and identitarians advance an agenda of introducing new rights to terminate the lives of the older or the suffering, including terminally ill children without any parental involvement. If the unique value of each human person is not upheld, then nothing prevents ending the lives of children and adults deemed to be too ill or too frail. With roots in nineteenth-century eugenics, this social Darwinism now takes on a fascistic form under a new guise. Such a twenty-first century neo-fascism is less politically explicit than the original twentieth-century version, yet perhaps for that reason all the more insidiously effective – more subtle and more sinister both at once.

Liberal liberty as absolute autonomy from any constraints on individual choice paradoxically leads to total unfreedom. As the revolutionary character Shigalyov in Dostoevsky's novel *The Demons* puts it, "Proceeding from unlimited freedom, I end with unlimited despotism". Dostoevsky's dictum is doubly prophetic. He anticipated not only the twentieth-century descent of revolutionary liberation into totalitarian rule but also the twenty-first-century slide from ultraliberalism into increasingly authoritarian control. This is best illustrated by recent attacks on free speech and pluralism, indulgence in groupthink within "safe spaces" to promote ideological uniformity, besides enhanced social engineering based on high-tech surveillance.

5. Social freedom

To avert a false choice between autonomy and coercion, we need an alternative account of liberty – one which I would call 'social freedom'. It rests on a new conception of mutual obligation anchored in common culture and a sense of limits. Our first obligation is to respect natural, human and social limits. This emphasis on restraint echoes Burke's conception of 'that state of things in which liberty is secured by equality of restraint' and it is key to limiting vice and human wrongs.⁸ Here it is worth quoting Burke at some length:

Men are qualified for civil liberty, in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites; in proportion as their love of justice is above their rapacity; in proportion as their soundness and sobriety of understanding is above their vanity and presumption; in proportion as they are more disposed to listen to the counsels of the wise and good, in preference to the flattery of knaves. Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.⁹

The idea of boundless progress violates a popular sense of shared customs and of intrinsic limits on human power to control society, nature and the body. By contrast, true social advancement is the sense of obligation that every generation has to improve its inheritance and pass it on to the next – socially and ecologically.

In our time, this is an argument that has perhaps been best stated by the American social theorist Christopher Lasch, notably in this book *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. The importance of limits is why Lasch became increasingly opposed to both the New Left and the New Right. During the Reagan years, he rejected the New Right's economic orthodoxy of wealth disparity masquerading as market competition based on supposedly equal opportunity. Rising inequality is both materially damaging and morally corrupting, as it entails the use of political power for private gain and the erosion of Republican virtue along with the hollowing out of the middle class and the collapse of national cohesion (a point made by Marin Terpstra).

Lasch was equally critical of the New Left, holding it responsible for the decline of a common culture under attack from 1960s radicalism and from the progressive movement, which equated its self-serving values with the interests of society as a whole. The writer Ed West summarizes the relevance of Lasch's thought for our present predicament very well:

If there were no common values to hold people together, what was to stop the rich and powerful trampling over the rest of society, cloaking their self-interest in furious self-righteousness? And so it has come to pass, with the rise of woke capital, an amoral business model in which CEOs make thousands of times more than their lowest earners, all the while distracting attention with support for therapeutic but increasingly extreme politics. It was Lasch who saw more clearly than anyone that the New Left had a symbiotic relationship with the culture of modern corporate capitalism – emphasising choice, therapy, self-actualisation, narcissism and the rejection of limits, not just physical but financial and moral.¹⁰

Lasch anticipated the left's economically liberal turn in the 1990s and the ultraliberal fusion of market fundamentalism with identity politics in the 2010s. As he wrote, 'The revolt of the masses that Ortega feared is no longer a plausible threat. But the revolt of the elites against time-honored traditions of locality, obligation, and restraint may yet unleash a war of all against all.'¹⁶

As the Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes* now unfolds, a postliberal politics has to combine scepticism with hopefulness: a healthy sceptical attitude towards all utopian projects with their dystopian consequences, while being hopeful that realistic, viable alternatives anchored in the nurturing of social virtue and mutual obligations might emerge – a point that Maarten Neuteboom rightly emphasizes in his contribution. It is what we owe ourselves and our generations. And here I would be curious to learn more about Dutch thinkers such as Kohnstamm (as Ronald van Raak has suggested) or Kuyper – or the work of the American constitutionalist Michael Paulsen (as argued by Hans-Martien). Not to forget how to rethink international solidarity without sliding into a violent order – a danger to which Menno Kamminga alerts us.

The bonds of family and friends, the givenness of our biological selves, the constraints of law, custom and faith, as well as our obligations to one another, all confer limits on personal autonomy. But they are also rich sources of relational meaning and dignity. A plural search for shared meaning defines the space for postliberal politics. So even in times of social fragmentation and political polarization, the good life is a realistic ideal because it reflects the popular desire for relationships that balance individual fulfilment with mutual flourishing. My well-being is inextricably intertwined with yours, just like the equality of all depends on the dignified treatment of each.

This is only unrealistic as long as we remain wedded to the dominant assumptions. If, however, we embrace the actually realistic perspective of mutual benefit, then the public realm is conceivably able to tolerate legitimate moral differences and will not turn them into conflicts which can no longer be settled by reasonable compromise. All this requires good government and a politics that starts with shared interests rather than divisive values – reconciling the estranged interests of capital and labour, young and old, urban and rural/coastal, the university educated & those who are not. Some of the building blocks for a postliberal politics are community, state and religion (as Patrick argues in his chapter), besides the dignity of work, family and friends and a fusion of patriotism with internationalism.

6. Gift, friendship, people, place

In the final part of my lecture, let me say that today's event encapsulates the best of post-liberalism. At the heart of a vibrant society in which people can flourish lies the practice of gift exchange – the ceaseless giving, receiving, and returning of gifts. You have given me the gift of your invitation and of your book, which I have received with enormous gratitude and which I hope I was able to return with the gift of my lecture – but that is of course for you all to judge!

Since every act and every speech act is a gift, our symposium is a microcosm of the macrocosm that is the building of a shared society. In the wake of Marcel Mauss and his disciples Alain Caillé and Jacques Godbout, we can conceptualise society as a spiral paradox whereby the giving of gifts half-expects but cannot compel a return gift. This is the very fabric of all human society. It is a political, an economic and a social fabric at all once.

Society as gift exchange also reminds us that politics is about friendship, indeed *is* friendship. If individually and together we could act with more receptive gratitude, more communicated generosity, and in such a way that in turn opens up the possibility of trust and further self-giving on the part of others, then our present politics would be less polarised and 'more in common', reconciling estranged interest in pursuit of the public good.

To act in this manner is virtuous, and you will not be surprised to hear me say that virtue and gift are inseparable: virtue is sustained only through an honourable 'seeming to be virtuous' as well as having the inwardly right intention. Deeds must be publicly enacted and so *offered*, and the highest

outcome of virtuous practice is the reciprocal giving that is friendship, upon which – as for the older Western tradition, but not for liberalism – the human city is founded.

In this manner inner virtue is inseparable from external, manifest honour. Like justice, it must be seen to be performed if it is really to abide. As Aristotle taught us, ‘the whole of justice is in relation to a friend, for what is just is just for certain persons, and persons who are partners, and a friend is a partner, either in one’s family or in one’s life’ (*Eudemian Ethics*, VII, x, 5.).

Patrick and Hans-Martien have already offered me the gift of friendship by engaging with my work and with the work of my friends, and once more it is my hope that I can reciprocate their – and your – friendship here this afternoon and beyond as we build a pan-European movement of post-liberals – though we surely need a better name...

Receiving this invaluable gift of friendship opens up another core dimension of post-liberalism – the primacy of the person and the particular places in which we are rooted. It is special honour to meet you and speak to, and with, you in this wonderful palazzo of the *Fundatie van Renswoude* and above all to be hosted by the *Thijmgenootschap* – a century old association in the best tradition of medieval guilds. Just when old empires collapsed and modern states waged war, it was guilds that helped to secure civil life and the civic foundations of polities. Ever since, intermediary institutions have been the bedrock of a plural polity – a bulwark against the centralising and commodifying pressures of the central bureaucratic state and the global free market.

They provide us a space for agency, for collective action, for the discovery of our talents and vocations, for our dignity. This association, in the beating heart of Utrecht – itself a major university city in the Netherlands and Europe – both symbolises and embodies what makes us human: building a common life in pursuit of dignity, personal fulfilment and mutual flourishing. Gift, friendship, people, and place are some of the building blocks of post-liberalism. Far from being a theory or an ideology, postliberalism is anchored in a practice, a way of life full of joy and conviviality, and I look forward to our debate, drinks and dinner.

Thank you.