

THE DECLINE OF  
AMERICAN LIBERALISM

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## The European Experience

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LIBERALISM has deep roots in the past. Historically its origins may be traced back to the Humanists of the Renaissance, to the religious reformers of the Reformation, and to the many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century advocates of the natural rights philosophy. In its early stages liberalism was in large part concerned with criticism of existing society and institutions. It tended to be destructive or even revolutionary; thus it sought to limit the authority of both church and state, and to protect certain fundamental individual rights from interference by the governing powers. Along with their assertion of the claims of the individual conscience, liberals favored self-government and national self-determination. Sympathetic to the rights of minority groups, liberals were suspicious of any effort to control or suppress freedom of thought and expression. On the economic side, liberalism emerged from the feudal economy of the Middle Ages and early became identified with the pretensions and outlook of the rising middle class, standing for a philosophy allowing the utmost economic freedom to the individual.<sup>1</sup>

In its emphasis upon the free individual, liberalism is closely allied with many of the tenets of modern democracy. But there are also important differences. Freedom of the individual, for example, conflicts with such democratic principles as equality and majority rule. Thus majorities are not always stanch guardians of minority rights, and the

struggle for equality encroaches inevitably upon the privileges or rights of some individuals.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, liberalism is not the same as anarchism. Libertarian in its stress on minority rights and individual freedom, liberalism nevertheless accepts the necessity of government and of certain social and economic restraints. Accordingly, though it may often tend logically in that direction, liberalism differs from philosophical anarchism. Perhaps it is best therefore if we think of liberalism, not as a well-defined political or economic system, but as a collection of ideas or principles which go to make up an attitude or "habit of mind."<sup>3</sup> But within this liberal climate of opinion, however broadly or narrowly it may be defined, it is necessary to include the concept of limited representative government and the widest possible freedom of the individual — both intellectually and economically. Although not a system, liberalism in such periods as the Age of the Enlightenment became an articulate and unified movement.

Side by side with the liberal idea of the freedom of the individual went the concept of his enlightenment. In Western Europe and in the American colonies by the time of the eighteenth century, man was breaking the bonds that tied him to a feudal serfdom, universal state church, or absolute national monarch. The first task of liberalism therefore was the largely negative one of freeing the individual from the various absolutes of state, church, and feudal economy. Though this destructive, critical function was immensely important to the liberal tradition, liberalism was also a philosophy or way of life that had its positive, constructive features. This side of liberalism received perhaps its most notable first expression in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Although its roots lay in the scientific discoveries and nascent individualism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Enlightenment reached its great-

est extent and influence in the following century, when the leading scientists and philosophers of Western civilization achieved a virtual intellectual revolution in the history of mankind.

Of first importance, and stemming logically from the tremendous scientific discoveries of Newton and his predecessors, was the idea of a universe governed by natural laws. The scientists' increasing knowledge of the world and its relationship to other heavenly bodies inspired the hope that man might penetrate the mysteries of the universe and reduce the supernatural to natural and knowledgeable terms. Corollary to this hope was a faith in human reason and in the ability of the educated individual to understand the laws of nature and guide himself accordingly. From these beliefs in natural law and in human reason derived the concept of natural religion, in which religious truth conformed to the evidence of science and nature and was accepted as a matter of reason instead of by faith. In politics, economics, and even psychology, natural laws also determined the course of events. Accordingly, arbitrary state regulations not only interfered with the operation of natural laws, but also curbed the natural rights of the individual. It followed therefore that political economy was a science devoted to the discovery and better understanding of natural laws, while the state was limited in its scope of operations to the preservation and protection of the natural rights of its citizens.

Assuming that man would use his reason and obey the natural law, the philosophers of the Age of the Enlightenment envisioned a steady progress on the part of society toward the ultimate goal of the perfectibility of mankind. Realistically, however, it was apparent to even the most optimistic of utopians that a state of perfection was still in the offing. It was only natural therefore that enlightened thinkers should, in the meantime, maintain a keen humani-

tarian interest in reforming, or at least in alleviating, evils that currently oppressed the individual and slowed the progress of society. Negro slavery, for example, was in obvious contradiction to the theory of natural rights; and in other respects as well individuals suffered from the effects of their environment. The improvement of society through private and charitable efforts was thus often the most practical and immediate task of the eighteenth-century enlightened liberal.

As a way of life, European liberalism achieved its greatest popular influence and most widespread geographical extent during the middle of the nineteenth century. Along with its growth, however, came signs of decline, and after 1870 liberalism was no longer ascendant even in its cradle, England, though the beginnings of its decline in Europe may be traced back as far as the time of the French Revolution. Before the Revolution, and in the age of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, liberals had prided themselves on their cosmopolitan, humanitarian outlook. Laying great stress on the efficacy of men's reason, they had valued education and the scientific method as the two chief instruments of progress. But this faith in progress by gradual, evolutionary steps, central to liberal hopes for the future, was rudely interrupted when the Reign of Terror, and ensuing Napoleonic military despotism, shattered the early idealism of the French Revolution.

At first the Revolution had seemed to promise the realization of the dreams of the French *philosophes* and *idéologues*. The Revolutionary cry of liberty, equality, and fraternity was the counterpart of the popular sovereignty, democracy, and republicanism of Rousseau's famous *Social Contract* (1761). But Rousseau's mystical and romantic concept of the general will, however well it agreed with the Revolutionary democracy of the French masses, was in conflict with much

of eighteenth-century liberalism. Wars and violent revolutions, pushing people into extremes of thought, are always dangerous to a moderate point of view, and it was not surprising therefore that in the course of the French Revolution the liberalism of 1789 was stifled by the Terror of 1793. In order to maintain itself, the Revolution was forced to suppress, one by one, all the liberties it had previously proclaimed, until eventually it was confronted by Caesarism in the person of Napoleon. The tyranny of the many had culminated in the dictatorship of the First Consul and Emperor.<sup>4</sup>

The period of restoration, which followed in the wake of the defeat of the Napoleonic conscript armies, ushered in an age of reaction during which liberalism remained in eclipse. With disillusion over the perversion of the ideals of the French Revolution there also developed a strong feeling against the liberal principles of the Enlightenment. Europe was now embarked on "the search for a principle of authority," characterized by "a general and widespread weariness of intellectual analysis combined with an appeal to faith, to sentiment, to history, in fact to anything that ran counter to the ideals of the Enlightenment." Intellectuals were oppressed by the kind of spiritual vacuum symbolized in Goethe's *Faust*, while they sought something — almost anything — to believe in. This emotional reaction was exemplified by Pietism and Methodism in religion, by Burke's appeal to history and tradition, and by the general aura of Romanticism. It was also apparent in the construction of German idealism by Hegel and his followers.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, though liberalism seemed dying in 1815, it presently revived, even if in a somewhat less original or daring form. Jeremy Bentham, the English reformer, was a bridge between the old and the new in liberalism, and also a characteristic figure with his emphasis on liberty and utility —

words that soon became the motto of the rising English middle-class Liberals. By mid-century, such major components of liberalism as laissez-faire economics, constitutional government, national self-determination, and popular education seemed well on the road to realization. But liberalism, as Carlton Hayes has pointed out, was also becoming more conservative and was in grave danger of being a philosophy of all things to all men. There was even some doubt about its one historical constant — the liberty of the individual against all despotic authority. Most threatening of all, undoubtedly, was the disastrous effect on liberalism of a growing economic nationalism and imperialism, the seedbed of the totalitarian nationalisms of the twentieth century. After the 1870's, reforms carried out in Western Europe under the banners of liberalism and democracy occurred only at a rising cost in individual liberties. Plans for state education and social security were advanced side by side with the conscription of individuals for military service. It was not surprising therefore that liberals were occasionally wont to complain that the new solicitude of the national state for the physical and mental well-being of its citizens was merely the direct concomitant of its own selfish and warlike purposes.<sup>6</sup>

The impact of nationalism and the decline of liberalism were most apparent in the German states. In Prussia, after the failure of the revolutionary movements of 1848, the conservatives gained control and backed the king in his efforts to reform the army along militarist lines. The old citizen army, supported by units of state militia, had proved unreliable during the revolution and was now transformed into a professional body of regulars and reservists. When the liberals in parliament refused to vote the necessary credits, the king appointed Bismarck as his chief minister. Announcing a policy of "blood and iron," Bismarck proceeded to



govern Prussia during the 1860's without a legal budget and without calling parliament into session.<sup>7</sup>

By 1871, under Bismarck's chancellorship, a militarist Prussian state had achieved domination over the German peoples and had defeated in swift succession Denmark, Austria, and France. The new German Empire of William I and Bismarck, which arose from these military victories, gave short shrift to liberalism. Though the imperial Reichstag had the right to vote the army credits, it had no influence over the management of military affairs. At the same time, opposition to Bismarck's domestic policies on the part of labor and socialist groups was overcome by a broad program of social security legislation. This was designed not only to lessen the economic grievances on which the Social Democratic party grew strong, but also to attach the masses more loyally to the German Empire and to ensure their physical fitness to serve in the imperial conscript army. Meanwhile German industry was tied more closely to the militarist program of rearmament. A half century later the Nazi state under Hitler wrote the final chapter of what Friedrich Meinecke has called *The German Catastrophe*.

In England, in contrast to Germany, the problems of political nationalism, except as they developed into overseas imperialism, were less intense. But by the last quarter of the nineteenth century there were growing symptoms of an economic decline in the British Isles and a rising discontent with the fruits of industrialism and the philosophy of liberalism. Earlier in the century, under the impact of the industrial revolution, the older eighteenth-century philosophical liberalism had won new practical support from business and the middle class. At the same time, the Manchester school of economists preached the doctrines of laissez faire, which Gladstone and his Liberal party translated into practical

politics. The Reform bills, beginning with that of 1832, slowly widened the suffrage, but without giving full power to the masses. Nevertheless, the extension of the suffrage gradually transformed the personal relationship between members of Parliament and their constituents. The discipline of parties had to be substituted, while the tyranny of public opinion and despotism of the administrative state, so feared by John Stuart Mill, Lord Acton, and other nineteenth-century English liberals, hovered on the horizon. During these years certain English intellectuals became admirers of Bismarck's state socialism; while Hegel, according to the French historian Halévy, had more avowed followers in Britain than in Germany. Other Englishmen of the Victorian era became disillusioned with the inefficiency of liberal democracy and were prepared to welcome a coming era of strong executive administration.<sup>8</sup>

By the turn of the century, liberalism in England was faced with a growing pressure from two extremes. On the left, and in the ranks of labor, there were those demanding social legislation and economic reforms. On the right, the Conservative proponents of a greater empire were advocating the adoption of a protective tariff to support a larger navy. In theory the Liberals, occupying a middle ground, could have withheld these social reforms or, adhering to their traditional antimilitarism, have refused the demand for larger naval appropriations. As a practical matter, however, the Liberals gave up their individualism and instead turned to new taxes. The additional funds were to finance the navy and to pay for the program of social security legislation inaugurated for the English worker by the Lloyd George budget of 1909.<sup>9</sup>

In the realm of foreign policy, the Liberal leaders, Grey and Asquith, now sided with the imperialist and militarist Conservatives to such an extent that there "was a veritable

cult of the principle of continuity . . .”<sup>10</sup> Thus the English Liberal ministers moved on the two planes of domestic reform and of preparation for a possible war. Unable to confide in Parliament because of rank-and-file opposition to the idea of war, Asquith and Grey bided their time until the German invasion of Belgium furnished the occasion for a decision. It was apparent then that a war decided upon by the Liberal government, rather than by the Conservatives, would be less unpopular with the masses and might also serve as a release from the almost unbearable tensions that had been building up to a near-revolutionary climax in 1914.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, however, the war was to wreck the Liberal party and fatally undermine traditional English liberalism.

The collapse of liberalism in England in the midst of World War I brought to a close a century marked by a series of crises in the history of the liberal tradition of Western Europe. Beginning with its subversion in Revolutionary France, liberalism finally succumbed to the nationalism and imperialism rampant in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century.

In the United States the rise and fall of the liberal tradition was marked by something of the same succession of recurrent crises and over-all decline that characterized its course in Europe. A rising colonial and Revolutionary liberalism was modified by the conservative reaction after the War of Independence. A reviving liberalism in the early nineteenth century, exemplified in part by Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy, and paralleling a similar development in Europe, foundered during the Civil War. Although there seemed to be ample evidence of a liberal recovery early in the twentieth century, progressivism in the United States was actually as delusive as Lloyd George's reform program

in England, and World War I was as disastrous to liberalism in the New World as in the Old.

In the perspectives offered by time, it has been possible to see that liberalism has survived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in an increasingly attenuated form. Along with such precarious existence has gone a gradual loss of vitality. This seems clearer today than it did fifty years ago. But because historians, in such overwhelming numbers, have focused their attention on elements of strength and growth in the American liberal tradition, the other side has been almost completely ignored. It is the purpose of the following pages therefore to trace the factors in American life that have pointed toward a declining liberalism. This we can best do by examining first, and rather briefly, the establishment of a liberal society in colonial America.