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Some Theoretical Coordinates of Radical Liberalism

By PETER M. LICHTENSTEIN*

ABSTRACT. The term *radical liberalism* is frequently used to describe a particular branch of *liberal social theory*. However, a great deal of ambiguity normally surrounds the use of this term. A working definition of radical liberalism can be constructed by first isolating the key principles of *liberalism*. These are *individualism, private property,* and *political democracy*. The initial impulse of radical liberalism comes from its critique of these principles. In particular, radical liberals see a contradiction between political democracy, which extends *human rights,* and private property, which abridges human rights. Finally, radical liberalism can best be defined to represent six theoretical propositions: *pluralism, developmental* (as opposed to *possessive*) *individualism, solidarity, egalitarianism, participatory democracy,* and *social transformation.*

I

Introduction

THE TERM "RADICAL LIBERALISM," as it is applied to social theory, is a well established category which has its roots in early 19th century European political philosophy. As such it shares not only the heritage of classical (laissez-faire) and modern (étatist) liberalism but also the heritage of left wing revolutionary thought. Both of these orientations originate, after all, in a common ideological base supplied by Enlightenment Liberalism. Radical liberalism is therefore an association of two divergent philosophical perspectives, one a "liberal" perspective which seeks to liberate individuals from political and/or economic power, the other a "radical" perspective which seeks to overturn a social order based on privilege and property.

A great deal of ambiguity nevertheless surrounds the term radical liberalism. This is quite understandable because both the terms 'radicalism' and 'liberalism' have undergone many changes in usage.

The purpose of this paper is to help diminish the ambiguity of radical liberalism. In order to accomplish this, the three key principles of both laissez-faire and étatist liberalism are isolated. These three principles help identify

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the points at which radical liberalism begins to separate itself from liberalism. Finally, and most importantly, six fundamental coordinates of radical liberalism are suggested as an aid for understanding this particular branch of social theory.

II

Liberalism and Its Main Principles

THE HISTORY OF LIBERALISM parallels the history of capitalism, emerging as a direct response to absolutism and feudal privilege during a time when the capitalist mode of production was beginning to take shape. Expressing the interests of the growing capitalist class against the entrenched interests of the aristocracy, monarchy and church, liberal philosophy came to provide the ideological foundation for a society increasingly dominated by commerce and production for profit.

As mentioned above, liberalism is rooted in early 19th century Enlightenment philosophy. From this philosophy grew, as Tholfsen observes,

> a trenchant rationalism, a vision of human emancipation, the expectation of progress based on reason, and an inclination to take the action necessary to bring society into conformity with rationally demonstrable principles. [Tholfsen, 1977, p. 25]

This rationalistic philosophy of human emancipation was, however, interpreted in many ways in different countries and at different times.

In England, for example, liberalism at first came to mean freedom from the constraints imposed by the State. This theory of the "minimum State," based firmly on the Lockean principles of "life, liberty, and property," merged with classical laissez faire economic doctrine. However, the later influence of utilitarianism, and the "radical" philosophy of Bentham, pulled liberalism in another direction. Under the influence of left wing ideology, liberals came to see the State as essential to a reform program designed to liberate people from misery, inequality and ignorance. This apparent contradiction among liberals over the role of the State lead to the split (and ultimate decay) of the British Liberal Party into a right wing, in which laissez faire theorists joined with conservatives, and the "radical liberals," most of whom joined with the socialists. [Cranston, 1967, pp. 458–61]

In France, liberalism also possessed various meanings, at times being associated entirely with the left wing ideologies of the anarchists, socialists, syndicalists, and communists, and at other times being associated with a middle ground between the left wing and the royalists and conservatives. Generally speaking, however, French liberalism, like British liberalism, also experienced a tension between the laissez-faire, Lockean liberalism popularized in France

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by Voltaire, and the étatist, democratic and egalitarian variety represented by Rousseau.

While the industrial revolution in England and the political revolution in France each influenced the particular shapes which liberalism took on, it was the struggles over nationalism that gave liberalism its particular character in Germany. There, a similar division of liberalism into laissez faire and étatist branches occurred, the latter taking on a uniquely nationalistic meaning in which the collective nature of man replaced the individualistic basis of English and French philosophy. And in the United States the meaning of liberalism has also been influenced by unique social and political events, events that have made the term even more ambiguous than in Europe (*e.g.*, the influence of the progressives, the fractionalization of the left wing, the absence of a Liberal Party, the New Deal, etc.)

Despite this apparent lack of uniformity, the various meanings that have been attached to liberalism, in *both* their laissez faire and étatist forms, do have in common several principles. Of these, three are essential to identify in order to derive a workable definition of radical liberalism.

The first principle is individualism, a moral affirmation of natural rights doctrines. Individualism itself, however, has followed at least two separate paths. As Macpherson [1980] observes, individualism can either be possessive or developmental. Possessive individualism is the dominant version and the basis of neoclassical economics and the atomistic view of society. Developmental individualism, on the other hand, rejects this atomism and stresses instead, as Wood observes, "the impulse towards self-activity, creativity and self-development" [quoted in Duncan, 1978, p. 59]. Thus, developmental individualism gives wider scope to human behavior and human relationships and admits interdependencies otherwise denied by possessive individualism. It is the kind of individualism that is frequently found among heterodox social theories.

The second main principle of liberalism is the sanctity of private property. This ultimately implies the legitimation of the private accumulation of capital and of the private, exclusive control of society's resources by a minority of property owners. The third element is the principle of political democracy. It is distinguished by the theoretical separation of the political sphere from the social-economic sphere and by the confinement of democratic practices to the former and not the latter. Moreover, political democracy is justified by the pluralistic requirement that all parties and groups in society have an equal voice in political decision making and by the expressed need to prevent any group from gaining disproportionate political power.

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III

Coordinates of Radical Liberalism

BASIC TO *radical* LIBERALISM is its critique of these three liberal principles and the viewpoints built upon them. In particular, radical criticisms attack the liberal notion of equal opportunity and unequal results. This bifurcation of equality into opportunities and results ignores the self-reinforcing and reproducing nature of inequality: unequal results beget unequal opportunity.

Another important criticism is that, while political democracy extends human rights by allowing equal political representation, the institution of private property abridges human rights by denying participation in decisions which affect the use of society's resources. Political democracy and private property are therefore contradictory positions. This contradiction is explained by Clark and Gintis:

> . . . democracy requires that the historical evolution of society be responsive to the popular will; while capitalism, as an essential determinant of social evolution, rests on fundamental inequalities in wealth, power, and participation. Quintessentially, capitalism vests rights in *property,* however it is distributed among persons; while democracy vests rights in *persons,* however they are situated with respect to property. [Clark and Gintis, 1978, p. 305]

A similar observation was made by Dewey:

> But they [the liberals] had no glimpse of the fact that private control of the new forces of production, forces which affect the life of everyone, would operate in the same way as private unchecked control of political power. [Dewey, 1962, p. 36]

Finally, liberalism is generally ambiguous on the issue of collective action. Because of this ambiguity, the two wings of liberalism described earlier have come into prominence, the laissez-faire Libertarian wing condemning collective action and an étatist wing condoning collective action. The tension created by these two alternatives is of crisis proportions and can only be eliminated by infringing upon the institution of private property, something which liberals have historically been unwilling to do, or by limiting the application of democracy to areas in which its exercise would not jeopardize existing social relations. In either case, observes Stanfield, "Contemporary liberalism is then in the service of reactionary historic forces which threaten to return man to paternalistic tutelage of his life." [Stanfield, 1975, p. 163]

The initial impulse of radical liberalism comes from these criticisms. The adjective "radical" implies acceptance of these criticisms, and a rejection of many of the traditional, liberal premises. On the other hand, the noun "liberal" implies, as we shall see, a strong affinity to the liberationist quality of traditional liberal philosophy.

There are six general coordinates which define radical liberalism and which

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distinguish it from traditional liberalism (laissez-faire and étatist). The first coordinate is *pluralism*. Pluralism also has had multiple definitions, but the one accepted here is based on the supremacy of autonomous, voluntary associations of people in which political and economic power is equally vested. Pluralism opposes the sovereignty of the centralized State, as well as all concentrations of political and economic power and envisions a society made up of multiple centers of power and large collections of people with diverse interests, each having some legitimate claim to being heard.[1]

In the final analysis, pluralism is rooted in individualism and individual rights. According to Macpherson, "pluralism *is* individualism writ large." [Macpherson, 1980, p. 25] However, the individualism which here underlies the pluralistic ethic is the more heterodox, developmental variety, not the possessive variety.

Possessive individualism is epitomized by neoclassical economic theory and, observes Macpherson [1980], starts

> from a concept of the individual as a morally self-sufficient being who seeks, and is justified in seeking, his or her own satisfactions whether as consumer of utilities or as exerter and developer of potentialities. [These individualists] recognize, of course, that individuals must live in society, must exist in various relations of interdependence. But they do not commonly see the individual as the product of the relations, nor as being fully human only as a member of a community. [p. 24]

This brand of individualism came to dominate economic theory in the late 19th century as a consequence of the marginal revolution. Its dominance in economics remains intact and continues to foster the belief that the laws of society can be deduced from the laws which govern an individual's behavior.

Radical liberals, on the other hand, are generally hostile to the possessive nature of neoclassical economic theory and instead "see the human essence not as a consumption of utilities but as the active exertion and development of individual potentialities." [Macpherson, 1980, p. 25] Thus, *developmental individualism* is the second coordinate of radical liberalism.

The third coordinate is *solidarity* among members of a community. Solidarity refers to the individual's identification with the group (community, nation, etc.). It is a form of collective consciousness which appears in many philosophical writings. For instance, among contractarians, Rousseau envisioned a political community brought together by a social contract, a community with a General Will. Rawls' theory of justice also contains a solidaristic component. This is expressed by his Difference Principle, which suggests that social and economic inequalities cannot be defended unless that inequality can be shown to be in the best interest of those at the bottom: "One is not allowed to justify differences

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in income or organization powers on the ground that the disadvantages of those in one position are outweighed by the greater advantages of those in another." [Rawls, 1971, pp. 64–65] As Horvat [1980] points out, this principle conveys the same meaning as the French revolutionary slogan "fraternité." It implies that we are all in the same boat and must travel in the same direction without leaving anyone behind. It contains sentiments of anti-authoritarianism, and is fundamentally opposed to systems of meritocracy and hierarchy. [Crocker, 1977; Sen, 1977] It stops short, however, of embracing the collectivist ideology of étatist socialism. For this reason we shall distinguish between "weak" solidarity, which is the radical liberal position, and "strong" solidarity, which is central to the étatist socialist view.

Among non-contractarians, a very clear expression of solidarity also came from Dewey. He viewed society as being made up of collections of social groups, each consisting of people with shared interests and concerns, a plurality of aggregations, each of which possesses a sense of solidarity. Dewey's democratic ideal was a state of affairs in which greater reliance is placed upon "the recognition of mutual shared interests as a factor of social control" [Dewey, 1916, p. 100] and free intercourse between groups. This sentiment is also aptly described by Horvat:

> If *everybody* is to be *free*, everybody must be *equally* free. My liberty must be consistent with the liberty of others. If some are less privileged, they are also unfree to that extent. . . . Without human solidarity, inequality and unfreedom would immediately reappear . . . solidarity makes freedom and equality possible. [Horvat, 1980, p. 11]

The fourth coordinate of radical liberalism is *egalitarianism.* This principle logically follows from the previous three, and addresses the criticism suggested above, namely, that equality of opportunity must not be viewed as distinct from equality of results. Egalitarianism manifests itself among radical liberals as a total rejection of social privilege and social oppression, and envisions a classless future in which all individuals are "equally free."

The fifth coordinate is *participatory democracy.* It, too, logically follows from the previous coordinates. Ultimately, participatory democracy, as used here, implies the negation of the mainstream liberal distinction between the political and the social-economic spheres and entails the application of *participatory* (as opposed to merely representative) democratic principles to all spheres of life. [Pateman, 1970; Mason, 1982] Participatory democracy is a system in which all people who are fundamentally affected by a decision actively participate in the making of that decision. This principle has no clear support among laissez faire and étatist liberals.

The last coordinate of radical liberalism is its revolutionary stance. It calls

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for a *radical transformation* of modern industrial society and espouses egalitarian, developmental, solidaristic, participatory, democratic ideals. Radical liberals therefore reject the more narrow view embraced by mainstream liberalism, although they continue to share the liberal goal of emancipating people from the bondage of dogma and tradition and of liberating their creative potential.

Notes

1. For two excellent treatments of pluralism see Lively (1978) and MacPherson (1980).
2. This study of radical liberalism is continued in my paper, "Radical Liberalism and Radical Education: A Synthesis and Critical Evaluation of Illich, Freire and Dewey," forthcoming in the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology.*

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