



1958

3. The Progress of Political Liberalism

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Bloom, Robert L. et al. "3. The Progress of Political Liberalism. XIII: Political Liberalism and Nationalism, 1815-1871." Ideas and Institutions of Western Man (Gettysburg College, 1958), 37-44.

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3. The Progress of Political Liberalism

Abstract

Political liberalism was first stabilized in Great Britain and the United States. Although the British avoided many of the difficulties that beset the Continent immediately following Napoleon Bonaparte's downfall in 1815, they had succumbed temporarily to the spirit of reaction. The Industrial Revolution brought to England considerable social discontent which was accentuated by the economic difficulties of the postwar years. Radical agitators insisted that evolutionary reform was not possible in an England where the masses were not genuinely represented in Parliament. When the malcontents adopted extremist measures — strikes, mass meetings, and riots — the propertied and politically effective classes supported a reactionary ministry.
[excerpt]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Political Liberalism, Habeas Corpus, Political Reform, Parliamentary Reform

Disciplines

European History | European Languages and Societies | History | Political History | Political Science | Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration

Comments

This is a part of [Section XIII: Political Liberalism and Nationalism, 1815-1871](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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3. The Progress of Political Liberalism

Political liberalism was first stabilized in Great Britain and the United States. Although the British avoided many of the difficulties that beset the Continent immediately following Napoleon Bonaparte's downfall in 1815, they had succumbed temporarily to the spirit of reaction. The Industrial Revolution brought to England considerable social discontent which was accentuated by the economic difficulties of the postwar years. Radical agitators insisted that evolutionary reform was not possible in an England where the masses were not genuinely represented in Parliament. When the malcontents adopted extremist measures -- strikes, mass meetings, and riots -- the propertied and politically effective classes supported a reactionary ministry.

In 1817, when a crowd gathered at a mass meeting destroyed some property, a panicky government was persuaded to ban public meetings and suspend the writ of habeas corpus. This action infringed on rights precious to Englishmen for generations and led one contemporary observer to refer to them as the "liberticide acts." They were followed in 1819 by the "Peterloo Massacre" near Manchester, where soldiers bore down on a crowd of 60,000 assembled to hear orators discuss parliamentary reform. In the ensuing melee eleven people were killed and 400 wounded. After an investigation Parliament saw fit to enact a code of

* John Stuart Mill, On Liberty (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1868), pp. 22-31, 33-36, 101-106, 181-194, 197-199, 202-206, 209-218, 219-220, 222-223.

repressive laws severely restrictive of traditional English liberties. Repeated deeds of violence and conspiracy on the part of the radical reformers, however, enabled the Tory party to remain in control and for a time the cause of political reform in England suffered.

Eventually some British conservatives were prepared to make concessions. The peculiar political genius of the upper classes in England has been their readiness to note and then act to relieve the discontent of the masses. This partially explains why modern Britain has usually been able to escape the violent upheavals such as have plagued nations on the other side of the English Channel. The first important concession was the repeal of the Combination Laws. This legislation, enacted during the anti-Jacobin hysteria at the turn of the century, had outlawed working-class organizations. Its repeal in 1824 now opened the way for British trade-union activity. Parliamentary grants of political equality to Protestant dissenters in 1828, and to Roman Catholics in 1829, marked a continuing liberal trend. But these concessions were won frequently only after threats of disorder and violence, and thus they lost much of the good will which they might have inspired. British radical reformers were still dissatisfied and continued their agitation.

Public opinion in England did not remain unaffected by the revolutionary events of 1830 on the Continent. The British counterpart was the Reform Bill of 1832, designed to correct the political inequities inherent in the disproportionate system of representation in Parliament. Since medieval times English counties (shires) and certain towns (boroughs) had the right to send representatives to sit in the House of Commons. Such had served the needs of an earlier day, but by the nineteenth century some of the boroughs had lost population to the extent that little remained but a house, a park, or as in the case of Old Sarum, a deserted hill. Yet, because the seats had not been redistributed, these "rotten boroughs" still enjoyed the right of representation while rising industrial centers such as Manchester or Birmingham were denied it. Furthermore, in most constituencies property qualifications for voting enabled the most important landlord to name the candidates and control the elections to Parliament. These "pocket boroughs" were equally a travesty on fair representative government. Finally, the fact that in early nineteenth century Britain less than four per cent of the population enjoyed the right to vote made corruption of the elective process a relatively easy matter.

Parliamentary reform had been urged in England as early as the eighteenth century, but the twin spectres of Jacobinism and Bonapartism frightened conservatives and precluded reform until the liberal surge of 1830. Factory owners in the cities, anxious to weaken the control exercised by landowning country squires, at length joined with other liberal elements in propagandizing for reform. In 1831, a Whig ministry, anxious to gain greater popular support, went before Parliament with a

Liberals - worked for representative institutions, to reform the institutions (if existed) unify & broaden, also involved a redistribution of the seats. Opposed limiting representation to the property owners and.

measure which now had a chance for enactment. It proposed to redistribute the seats in the House of Commons more nearly on the basis of population and give the vote to the middle class.

Lord John Russell (1792-1878), a member of the Cabinet, introduced the Reform Bill in an able speech. He reminded the House of Commons that the English constitution excluded taxation without representation. Moreover, he declared:

The House of Commons, as it now subsists, does not represent the people of England. The confidence of the country in the construction and constitution of the House is gone. If, therefore, the question is one of right, right is in favour of Reform; if it be a question of reason, reason is in favour of Reform; if it be a question of policy and expediency, policy and expediency are in favour of Reform.

He carefully avoided advocating universal manhood suffrage. "I contend," he assured the members, "that it is proper to give the real property and real respectability of the... cities and towns the right of voting for members of Parliament." Political power under the constitution was still to be based on property, but in the mind of Russell and his fellow Whigs the term property should now be interpreted to include the interests of the business community.

The conservative Tory opposition fought manfully to defeat this bill. Its passage was delayed until the Whigs persuaded the king to threaten the appointment of enough additional peers to pack the House of Lords and thus insure favorable action. At this threat conservative opposition collapsed and in 1832 the bill became law. One Tory sadly complained that "the four M's, the Monarch, the Ministry, the Members, and the Multitude [are] all against us." What he did not realize was that the measure probably saved England from revolutionary turmoil such as was to rack the Continent in 1848.

The Reform Bill of 1832 did little to promote democracy as that creed was understood in the nineteenth century. Its most significant accomplishment was the ending of the political monopoly held since 1689 by the agricultural landowning classes. At their side rose a new oligarchy -- the factory owners and the middle class generally. In the last analysis the government of Great Britain was still under the control of a minority, albeit a different minority. The working class urban population and agricultural labor still had no direct voice in the government which now was more representative but not yet democratic.

The oligarchic nature of the new system is seen in Parliaments' cold reception of the proposed "People's Charter," a document drawn up in 1838 by London artisans and supported by the industrial population of northern England. The Chartists, as these energetic agitators were called, drafted a six-point

*Establishment of a written constitution, equality under the law
Reform of town governments, secret ballot - rather slow
abolition of slavery & serfdom. Paying of members of Parliament
freedom of worship, religious equality. Civil rights - speech, press, assembly, association*

program demanding universal manhood suffrage, equal electoral districts, the secret ballot, annual elections of Parliament, salaries for members of Parliament, and the removal of property qualifications for seats in Parliament. On three different occasions between 1838 and 1848, Parliament rejected these propositions. Chartism, as a democratic mass movement, ended in failure as the government proved intransigent. British workers turned increasingly to the trade-union movement, and for nearly two decades the surface of political life was relatively untroubled in England. Yet, in the long run, five of the six points listed by the Chartists were adopted.

Another result of the Reform Bill of 1832 was that it provided assistance to the manufacturers in their campaign against the Corn Laws. These were tariffs designed to protect agricultural interests in Britain against foreign imports. The factory owners desired to cheapen the price of bread so as to lessen workers' pressure for higher wages, but this ran counter to the interests of the landed gentry. After a bitter Parliamentary battle the free-trade interests won a victory in the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. This was not so much a triumph for political liberalism as it was for economic liberalism, but the resultant decline in bread prices probably weakened lower class support for radical reform.

In this epoch of reform in England two other parliamentary acts should be mentioned -- the abolition of slavery within the empire and the improvement of municipal government in English cities and towns. After reformers had succeeded in getting the prohibition of the slave trade in 1807, they continued their efforts to abolish slavery. In this they were aided by a growing favorable response from the public at large and by the decline of West Indian planter influence in Parliament. The act of abolition provided that after 1834 slavery should cease wherever waved the Union Jack, and the sincerity of the British public is seen in the fact that they contributed £20,000,000 to compensate the slave owners for their losses. In 1835, a long overdue reorganization of town government was provided. In most cities municipal government was in the hands of an unrepresentative oligarchy. The Reform Bill of 1832 had given more townspeople the vote, and they straightway brought pressure to eliminate the corrupt and inefficient governments which controlled local communities. Parliament enacted the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, which deprived a large number of the smaller boroughs of their municipal charters, placed the remainder (except London) under a council chosen by the resident taxpayers, and then made this council responsible for the whole government of the borough. This reform did away with corruption and inefficiency almost entirely, and provided the fundamental organization of British municipal government to the present day.

In the twenty years following 1848 liberal principles of self-government were extended to Canada and later to other colonies. More Englishmen had been granted the right to vote, but not until the Reform Act of 1867 were the majority of English

should be able to defend each of these.
written constitution - utility - don't want individual to be hurt by another; allow you to do what you want to do, without hurting others. (at this time - gov't wasn't much, it was the last resort. Will has a lot of flexibility. Gov't might not always rightly be right.

industrial workers given the franchise. By that time both the Conservative and Liberal parties (successors respectively of the Tories and Whigs) were competing for popular support. The 1867 law was a relatively democratic measure which doubled the size of the electorate. Voting was still limited to property holders, however, and agricultural workers were still excluded from the franchise. Britain now had a government which, though predominantly aristocratic in leadership, was increasingly democratic at its base.

Some Englishmen feared lest democratization had come too rapidly. "The common ordinary mind is quite unfit to fix for itself what political question it shall attend to," wrote the political essayist, Walter Bagehot (1826-1877). "It is for our principal statesmen to lead the public, and not to let the public lead them," he insisted. Otherwise, Bagehot feared, English politics would descend into demagoguery:

In plain English, what I fear is that both our political parties will bid for the support of the working-man; that both of them will promise to do as he likes if he will only tell them what it is; that, as he now holds the casting vote in our affairs, both parties will beg and pray him to give that vote to them.... Vox populi will be Vox diaboli if it is worked in that manner.

Bagehot's alarm was not entirely groundless, since the problem he posed is one common to democratic polities and has not been satisfactorily resolved even in our own day. Yet, the legislation of 1867, like that of 1832, served to ease the pressure for revolutionary reform in Britain. Another act in 1884 granted the vote to agricultural laborers, and in Great Britain democracy and liberal government continued to pursue evolutionary rather than revolutionary paths.

Evolutionary development of democracy was perhaps best exemplified by the United States, where the Old World system of absolutism and privilege had never taken root. As a consequence, the political institutions of the United States evolved with a nice balance between innovation and tradition, between liberty and law. As we noted in an earlier chapter, the American nation was born during the eighteenth century's emphasis on liberty, equality, and fraternity. The Constitution of 1787 set up republican institutions on a liberal foundation, but in the first half of the nineteenth century Americans argued, without reaching an agreement, whether their political experiment should be guided by an enlightened aristocracy or by an egalitarian democracy.

From the beginning Alexander Hamilton (c. 1757-1804) and Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) were the giant protagonists of these opposing schools of thought. Coming to power in 1801, the Jeffersonians initiated an atmosphere of political tolerance and faith in the common man. In terms of a later age their

By the mid-19th century, all or 't went through crises of liberation in U.S. Civil War. Britain - Reform of 1832 - 1867. Revolutionary changes on the continent. from the bottom in France, to the upper class in Russia. Decembrists - staged a palace revolution - enlightened upper classmen. (some had gone to Paris) Tsar did do things for idealistic reasons. many thought liberation was at a minimum.

program was moderate, and in some ways even slightly neoaristocratic. By the 1830's two transcendent social developments drastically altered American political theory and practice. The first was the expanding frontier, which increased Western influence and introduced a rough and ready element into American democracy. The second development was the first blush of the Industrial Revolution in America, which sharpened class-consciousness in American life. During and after the presidency of Andrew Jackson (1829-1837) the United States experienced a great wave of social and political reform. Americans turned their backs on the old "silk stocking" plutocracy, eagerly embracing free public education, a more extended franchise, a greater humanitarian concern for the underprivileged, and, in one section, at least, hostility to Negro slavery.

Yet, not every part of America welcomed either the theory or the practice of egalitarian democracy. To Southern plantation owners the status quo seemed good, while the burgeoning democracy of the North and West aroused their distrust and alarm. The American Civil War (1861-1865) had many causes, including sectional economic rivalry, states rights, and the institution of slavery. To these perhaps should be added a disparate devotion to democratic principles existing in the North and the South. John C. Calhoun (1782-1850), the patron saint of Southern conservatism, entertained strong doubts respecting the desirability of majority rule. In contrast, Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) proclaimed his faith in "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." Even in the Northern states many neoaristocrats were skeptical of the ability of the masses to choose the right course in political matters. However, the larger body of Northern opinion followed the line laid down by gifted writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Walt Whitman (1819-1892).

There was much to criticize in American democracy as it had evolved by the middle of the nineteenth century. Many of its weaknesses were caused, no doubt, by the inherent difficulty of making democracy work in a new land among a practical people engaged in turning a wilderness into a civilization. The voice of the people was not always the voice of God. Yet, European observers such as France's Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) found much to admire in the American system. While the Civil War ended the debate over the form of the American government, it did not eliminate the weaknesses which often characterize popular rule. In fact, it accentuated some old faults and produced new ones. Nevertheless, the survival of their constitutional union in the ordeal of civil strife reassured Americans that their political institutions were both the most ideal and practical which the world had even seen. The post-Civil War years witnessed growing power and stability, all of which confirmed Americans in their self-esteem.

Eastern Europe could hardly remain untouched by the liberal agitation of the midnineteenth century, and waves of reform

sentiment even lapped over the boundaries into the Russian Empire. Ever since the collapse of the Decembrist movement in 1825, educated and informed Russians chafed at the prevailing conditions, which compared unfavorably with those in the West. A collective sense of guilt and frustration pervaded the upper classes as they continually judged Russian society by the standards of Western liberal thought and yet found no constitutional means of improving conditions. Some of this sentiment found an outlet in the remarkable literary productions of such men as Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) and Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883).

Since the days of Peter the Great (1682-1725), the tsars had alternated between reaction and reform. During the nineteenth century Alexander I, a sentimental idealist for much of his reign, was followed by the reactionary Nicholas I, who in turn left the throne to his son, Alexander II (1855-1881). Unrest provoked by the unsuccessful Crimean War (1853-1856) led the second Alexander to grant moderate reforms as a means of allaying domestic grievances. For almost a decade the new tsar's policies earned him the sobriquet, "the reforming tsar."

Nineteenth century Russia was still primarily an agrarian country in which ninety per cent of the soil was tilled by serfs. The lot of these downtrodden people, under the complete overlordship of the great noble landowners, was sorry in the extreme. In addition, serfdom meant primitive and wasteful methods of farming and explains in large measure the economic backwardness of the country. Alexander began his reforms by freeing the serfs in 1861 -- a qualified emancipation in that the serfs were to compensate their former owners -- just as the American Civil War began. In 1864, the tsar authorized the formation of provincial assemblies, the zemstvos, in which a degree of local self-government was granted. Finally, Alexander undertook to reform the Russian judicial system, modeling the courts after those in Western Europe, codifying the laws, providing for jury trial in criminal cases, and, except for political offenses, holding trials in public. Russian liberals greeted these reforms as preliminary to the establishment of a constitutional and parliamentary regime.

After a decade of mild reform Alexander turned conservative. The concessions he had granted had been, in most cases, an impulsive response to the criticisms leveled by the Westernizers among his people. Opposed to them were the Slavophiles, who believed that Russian culture was superior to that of the West and wished to keep their country aloof from the liberal currents washing over the Western World. When rebellions broke out once more in Poland in 1863, conservatives persuaded the tsar that his leniency was responsible for the insurrections. Several attempts on his life and the sheer magnitude of the task of reform further weakened Alexander's devotion to change, and from 1865 on he matched his predecessors in his reactionary policy. He reimposed rigid press censorship and strengthened his control of the central government. In 1881, Alexander fell a victim to the assassin's bomb, and under his son and successor

Russia became a stronghold of reaction.

Varying gestures toward liberalism in government took place in the smaller states of western Europe between 1848 and 1871. Following the separation of the Netherlands and Belgium in 1831, the economically advanced and politically progressive Belgians enjoyed a liberal constitutional government under Leopold I (1831-1865) and his successors. In both the Netherlands and Denmark the restiveness of 1848 had persuaded their respective monarchs to accede to popular demands for parliamentary government. The vote and the right to hold office in these states were still restricted to propertyholders, yet their governments were liberal to the extent that they were constitutional. Even in conservative Sweden the king heeded public clamor, and in 1866 consented to political reform. Swiss liberals used force to compel the seven conservatively ruled cantons to adopt constitutions, expel religious orders, and consent to a closer union of all the Swiss cantons (1847-1848).

In Spain the corrupt and incompetent reign of Queen Isabella II (1833-1868) closed in a revolution which forced her from the throne. The following year a democratically elected constituent assembly adopted a new constitution which promised individual liberties and provided for a parliament chosen by popular vote. Henceforth, Spanish monarchs were to have but limited authority, much as those in Great Britain. Although this new political arrangement did not bring liberalism immediately or permanently to Spain, it placed the nation in the company of other states and seemed to mark the direction in which Spanish public opinion was tending. Elsewhere on the Iberian peninsula, the form, at least, of liberal and parliamentary government was maintained in Portugal.

In summary, political liberalism had made definite gains by 1871, but its most striking successes had come in those states which had functioned under constitutional government before 1815. In Great Britain and the United States parliamentary institutions were strong and stable. It is perhaps significant that liberalism's greatest achievements were found in these two commonwealths which had acquired a large degree of national cohesion and unity even before, and an expanding industrial and urban economy during, the nineteenth century. However, political liberals had realized but limited objectives elsewhere, and hardly any of them in the regions east of the Rhine. Liberalism had but a precarious hold in Spain; Germany and Italy were subordinating it to a nationalistic Realpolitik; *what is the reality?* *what is the power?* what small degree remained in the Austrian Empire and in Russia *what is the reality?* *what is the power?* was on the wane; and even in revolution-prone France liberal government faltered under Napoleon III. Yet, conservatives could not rest easy. A more formidable adversary of the status quo was rising. After 1848, a new version of an old creed, militant nationalism, came to dominate European attitudes to an extent never realized by political liberalism during the nineteenth century.

In the central countries liberalism was less successful, became Realpolitik. nationalism stronger than liberalism.