Liberalism Manifest

Jon Canel

Historians have long understood modern American liberalism as a direct descendent of the Lockean political tradition articulated in the Two Treatises of Government. Although American conservatives would claim Edmund Burke as their ideological forbearer, the conservative remains equally, if not more committed to the strict protection of property rights that characterized Lockean political theory than the liberal. This essay proposes an alternative vision of modern American liberalism. It argues that American liberalism is not Lockean. It sees the Declaration of Independence as the origin of the modern liberal tradition, which contends that government functions to facilitate the “pursuit of happiness.” Whereas the conservative correlates individual autonomy with a zealous protection of private property, the modern liberal holds as inalienable the right of each individual to pursue the ends of self-determination and self-actualization.

A political ideology requires an identifiable historical origin in order to inform its practical function and determine the theoretical end toward which it aspires. Unfortunately, because no widely accepted manifesto of modern liberal ideology exists, liberalism has subjected itself to gross distortions. Even Barack Obama—the purported twenty-first-century standard-bearer of the liberal political cause—has attempted to subsume his commitment to canonically liberal policies in a pragmatism adverse to ideology.

Modern American conservatism, on the other hand, has attempted to fashion itself as a coherent theoretical system. Although the connection between a classical conservative thinker like Edmund Burke and the modern Republican Party might at best be described as tenuous, the work of conservative intellectuals such as Russell Kirk provided a foundation from which figures like Barry Goldwater and William Buckley could articulate a “conservative” political platform that challenged the post-New Deal liberal status quo of the mid twentieth-century. If conservatism possesses both a clear historical antecedent and a set of essential, definitional convictions, it would stand to reason that liberalism, its self-avowed antithesis, should as well.

Many political historians have identified John Locke as the originator of the American liberal tradition. In his discussion of the New Deal, Louis Hartz goes so far as to argue that the “radicalism” of the New Deal lay in its implementation of a welfare program in which the “American Lockean faith” smothered any serious socialist challenge (Hartz 261). Locke’s vision of a society in which government is obligated to protect the life, liberty and property of its subjects certainly distinguishes Lockean liberalism from the collectivism of Marxism or socialism. However, it offers little by which to distinguish the modern American liberal from his conservative counterpart. Both the liberal and the conservative regard life, liberty and private property as inalienable American rights. Though conservatives like Buckley argued that “the growth of government must be fought relentlessly,” liberal reforms of the twentieth-century never threatened to nationalize the means of production and eliminate private property.

As on the issue of property, the liberal cannot adequately distinguish himself from the conservative by claiming to better represent a Lockean commitment to life and liberty. Although John Dewey asserted that liberalism endeavored to “liberate” the individual, Barry Goldwater also identified the preservation and extension of freedom as the “first concern” of the American conservative (Dewey 323; Goldwater 6). Even Edmund Burke, the proclaimed “founder” of modern conservatism, remained deeply committed to the protection of individual autonomy through the protection of private property. According to Russell Kirk, the Burkian conservative perceives freedom and property as “closely linked.” By advocating the protection of private property rights, Kirk sought to safeguard the liberty of the individual from the propensity of a Leviathan state to become “master of all” (Kirk 8).

Thus, modern liberalism finds itself in the predicament of being unable to distinguish its ideology from that of the conservative so long as it claims John Locke as its genitor. Unlike the conservative who equates individual autonomy with the protection of private property, the liberal recognizes as inalienable the right of each individual to aspire toward self-determination and self-actualization. The ultimate function of government lies in its capacity to facilitate the “pursuit of happiness,” as happiness comprises...
both the purpose of life and the object of liberty. The Declaration of Independence marks the critical point of philosophical divergence between modern liberalism and Lockean values. The liberal understands happiness as a fundamental right, and as a consequence, does not permit an unshakeable faith in the sanctity of private property to rule his interpretation of the Constitution and impede the welfare of the nation’s citizenry.

According to Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*, “Government has no other end, but the preservation of property” (Locke 329). Such a characterization of government differs substantially from the perceptions of most twentieth-century American liberals, who appeared more sympathetic to John Dewey’s definition of liberalism as the “liberation of individuals so that realization of their capacities may be the law of their life” (Dewey 323). Like Dewey, Franklin Roosevelt argued that government existed foremost to protect rights of “personal competency,” such as free thought, free speech and free “personal living” (Roosevelt 746). Because he understood the laissez-faire economic policies of the early 1930s as “steering a steady course toward economic oligarchy,” Roosevelt believed such protections of property must be revised, “not to destroy individualism, but to protect it” (Roosevelt 746-751).

Dewey conceded that, at one point, Lockean classical liberalism may have effectively safeguarded personal competency (Dewey 326). Yet, with the rise of corporate Goliaths in the late nineteenth-century, economic interests assumed the “coercive power” and “violent force” previously regarded as the reserve of a political state. Some early twentieth-century liberals would persist in defending their opposition to corporate interests under the pretext of protecting traditional property rights. Walter Lippmann, for instance, argued that ownership interests in public stock companies bore no resemblance to Lockean land rights, and as a consequence, did not merit the protections traditionally afforded to private property (Lippmann 45-51). Likewise, Franklin Roosevelt asserted that government non-interference in high business had come to violate the Lockean social contract on which the American government had been founded, as it showed favor to a “small group at the expense of its duty to protect the rights of personal freedom and of private property for all its citizens” (Roosevelt 748).

By the 1930s, few liberals actually advocated the complete disestablishment of the “centralized economic system” (Roosevelt 749). Despite his rhetorical deference to the traditional Lockean conception of the state as protector of property, Roosevelt did not regard land and decentralized business as the only “genuine private property” worthy of legal protection (Lippmann 51). Many had hoped that a mechanized economy could raise the national standard of living, release Americans from the toil of manual labor, and make luxury accessible to all. Industrialization was, therefore, not inherently antithetical to property interests. The threat to American liberty posed by the new economic order arose from its tendency to reduce masses of laborers to complete dependence on industrial oligarchs, who, if left uncontrolled, could easily subject their dependents to “starvation and penury” (Roosevelt 749).

To Roosevelt, little distinguished the economic dependency of the individual from his political subjugation by a despotic government. Similarly, Dewey understood economic security as a necessary prerequisite to the development of personal competency. According to Dewey, “the basis of life” must first be secure before an individual can realize his “capacities” and contribute to the cultural enrichment of society (Dewey 323). In Dewey’s opinion, such self-realization functioned as the necessary “key” to happiness (Dewey 360). Because the preservation of competency constituted the function of a government that aspired to the promotion of happiness, both Roosevelt and Dewey concurred that, in order to protect competency, the state must secure its citizens from severe destitution and ensure the fulfillment of their basic material welfare.

In reference to private property, modern liberalism espouses convictions contrary to both classical Lockean liberalism and the Burkian conservatism articulated by Russell Kirk. Government has an end beyond the preservation of property interests. It must defend the capacity of the individual to think and act freely, to determine his own fortune and manner of contribution to society. “Happiness,” as President Franklin Roosevelt stated, “lies in the joy of achievement and the thrill of creative effort” (Roosevelt). Freedom of the individual is not necessarily linked to government non-interference in the domain of property, as Kirk would contend. Because economic institutions risk devolving into Leviathans as much as states, conservatism sacrifices the sanctity of individual autonomy to the inviolability of property rights.
This modern liberalism rejects the social contract articulated by Locke, in which people voluntarily enter into a state of society only to ensure the preservation of property (Locke 355-360). Government is instituted with the aim of securing each individual’s right to self-actualization and personal competency. As a result, it is the responsibility of government to secure for the governed the basic economic and social protections necessary to pursue happiness. The liberal’s social contract is, therefore, the evident heir of the social contract proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence. All men, though unequal in most degrees, retain an equal and inalienable entitlement to life, liberty, and happiness. Government is instituted for the protection of such rights, and consequently, any polity destructive to them can claim no legitimate sovereignty over the people. Insofar as the economic order threatens to subjugate the greater populace to a coercive and despotic penury, it imposes upon their rights to pursue happiness. It remains the responsibility of government to protect its people against such tyrannical property interests, and thus, the government may justly overstep its traditional non-interference in private business. Failure to do so would amount to nothing less than a breach of the social contract that would invalidate the government’s claim to hold sovereign authority over the governed.

The great purpose of government, according to Barack Obama, lies in its ability to help citizens live with dignity (Obama 361). The government must actively promote happiness, and as a consequence, the liberal favors the implantation of programs that assure a basic level of social welfare for all. Conservatives, such as William Buckley, argued that “freedom goes hand in hand with a state of political decentralization” (Buckley 197). True to the “conservative mind” of Edmund Burke, freedom requires the preservation of private property and traditional social hierarchies. Any centralization of government that threatened these structures would constitute a repressive Leviathan (Kirk 8). Yet how can an individual exercise the “organized intelligence” Dewey considered vital to society if he does not possess such “bases of life” as food, shelter, and education (Dewey 323-330)?

In an echo of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the liberal believes that the attainment of happiness, social intelligence, and self-actualization presuppose the fulfillment of certain basic necessities. Since the New Deal, American liberalism has distinguished itself from conservatism by its support of welfare programs. Some historians, such as Louis Hartz, have argued that New Deal liberals, in their departure from the classical liberalism of Locke, came to resemble the Marxists of Europe (Hartz 266). With no serious socialist threat in America, Franklin Roosevelt could challenge traditional property interests without ceding the legitimacy of America’s Lockean republic. Though Roosevelt may have proven more antagonistic to property interests than European liberals, a commitment to neither Lockean property rights nor Marxist collectivism motivated his support for New Deal welfare programs. Rather, he remained committed to the Jeffersonian belief that government existed to protect the liberty and happiness of all of its citizens (Roosevelt 748, 755). All citizens possessed the fundamental right to “make a comfortable living” (Roosevelt 754). As a consequence, Roosevelt understood the New Deal to be a new set of terms for the old social contract of 1776. It represented the course of action necessary to prevent “a rising tide of misery” from devouring the Declaration’s vision of a state dedicated to the “never-ending seeking for better things” for all (Roosevelt 744).

The modern liberal remains committed to Roosevelt’s vision of a government that actively promotes such “rights of personal competency” as free thought, free speech and a comfortable livelihood free from “famine or dearth” (Roosevelt 744). To secure these rights and foster a society in which individuals can achieve the “realization of their capacities,” the liberal has come to see certain social services, such as education, as a fundamental right of the populace (Dewey 323). Barry Goldwater regarded federal aid to education initiatives as illegal. According to Goldwater, the federal government possessed neither the “right” nor the “duty” to intervene in education, as the Constitution does not explicitly delegate authority over education to the national government (Goldwater 72). In contrast, Barack Obama has proposed the extension of federal education programs to encompass government-subsidized daycare (Obama 342). If the Constitution does not enumerate the right of the government to regulate education, it certainly does not empower it to fund early-childhood programs, such as daycare. Yet the stark division between Goldwater and Obama on the question of education underscores the root ideological distinctions between the modern
American liberal and his conservative counterpart. Conservatives adhere strictly to Lockean property concerns. Because the conservative understands property as intimately tied to personal freedom, federal education systems endanger liberty by wrongly appropriating money that should be spent voluntarily (Goldwater 76-77). On the contrary, John Dewey concluded that the work of the liberal “is first of all education” because “such happiness as life is capable of” derives from the discernment of meaning from the experience of “genuine education” (Dewey). Without a sufficient education, an individual cannot fully realize the extent of his capacity to achieve self-actualization or to effect societal change. Thus, to not pursue universal, high quality education only condemns America’s poor and middle-classes to a life of partially-fulfilled competency. Though Goldwater would argue that it is neither the right nor duty of government to provide its citizens with education, as each state must regulate the adequacy of its own educational programs, the liberal believes that the federal government possesses both the authority and the responsibility to secure the “personal competency” (and thereby “secure” the liberty and happiness) of all its citizens.

In his discussion of constitutional construction, Barack Obama stated that the Constitution has succeeded in defending America against tyranny because it represented a repudiation of absolute truth and an affirmation of the fallibility of all ideas and ideologies (Obama 93). Such a statement, no matter its rhetorical flourish, is simply untrue. As Abraham Lincoln affirmed on the blood stained fields of Gettysburg, our nation was founded upon ideology. It was conceived in liberty and dedicated to the explicit proposition that all men are created equal. The founders’ faith in the self-evident equality of man and the tyranny of monarchy certainly served to repudiate the socio-political structures of monarchy and aristocratic oligarchy. Yet, the social contract expounded by the Declaration of Independence also rejected one of the fundamental premises of Lockean philosophy. It affirmed that governments are instituted among men to protect the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, not merely to ensure the protection of private property.

Those Americans who persist in formulating a government focused primarily on interests of private property are, in effect, violating the terms of America’s social contract. America was not fashioned as a socialist state, and as a consequence, the modern American liberal concedes the importance in protecting private property, so long as such property interests do not prohibit other Americans from living freely and pursuing happiness. A conservative critic might counter that the subjective nature of happiness renders it a useless tool in guiding government policy and that Marxists and socialists have justified the elimination of private property on the grounds of promoting societal happiness. The conservative may proceed to conclude that private property cannot be protected at all if it is not protected absolutely. In response, the liberal must reply that much like governments, long established precedents regarding property “must not be changed for light and transient causes.”

All men are created equally entitled to pursue happiness. Thus, concerns of private property become tyrannous, not when they introduce economic stratification, but when they subjugate the average American so fully to the economic elite that self-actualization and self-determination become infeasible. America must protect the “personal ambitions” of each individual, but in so doing, it must not allow a desire by the prosperous to “add more to the abundance” to obscure the government’s moral and contractual duty to provide “enough for those who have little” (Roosevelt). As a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to equality, it remains the responsibility of our government to recognize each individual as equally valuable and equally entitled to pursue happiness with the same degree of liberty as his peers.

The modern conservative movement has affirmed many ideologies but has lost sight of the true purpose of the American government, offered of the people’s representatives, for the benefit of the American people, and contractually accepted by the people themselves. Many liberals have also lost sight of this fundamental American ideology. However, even within the guise of the pragmatic and anti-ideological, the American liberal distinguishes himself by an unwavering commitment to America’s most fundamental promise:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

This optimistic faith, this simple but
revolutionary premise that government can promote a “morally better world” of “ever-richer life” constitutes the true genius of America (Roosevelt; Obama). Thus, despite his commitment to a pragmatic politics of “what works” even Barack Obama can concede that “If the people cannot trust their government to do the job for which it exists—to protect them and to promote their common welfare—all else is lost (Obama).

References


Jonathan Canel is a senior at Stanford, majoring in history. Upon graduation, he intends to pursue the study of law. Originally from Highland Park, Illinois, Jonathan has loved his years in California, though he admits that, at time, he misses the cold of a Midwest winter. Outside the classroom, Jonathan participates in many on-campus organizations and currently serves as Director-General for the Stanford Model United Nations Conference and president of Salon, a campus poetry society. His favorite activity, however, has been tutoring middle school students in East Palo Alto through the program “Closing the Gap.”