

## DECLINE OF LIBERAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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### ABSTRACT

*Liberalism as an idea grew immensely in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The French Revolution, World War I and World War II laid down the foundation of many liberal and democratic governments across the world. However with time, growth of globalization and competition among the countries, reduced the notion and importance of Liberty. The concept of Liberalism is a political philosophy which connotes to an ideology propagating free will and individualism. Proposed by John Locke, it calls for individual will of the people free from interference from the Government. Thomas Paine, John Stuart Mill and Adam Smith were propagators of free will and individualism. T.H. Green later criticized the concept propagated by traditional liberalists and gave the modern theory of Liberalism, which lays stress on 'Welfare State'. But even the theory given by Green has failed. The reasons for the decline of liberalism are the fact that the liberalists ignore the ethical basis of society. In a society we live together in a cohesive manner and not segregated as individuals, with no interference. For being a welfare state, the State shall have to interfere in the lives of the people, no interference and discipline will lead to a society of anarchy. In everyday, practical globalized and free market life liberalism does not prove to be as fruitful as thought and proves to be a Utopian idea. The decline in liberalism has led to a shift towards Utilitarianism and Communitarianism. To save the idea of Liberalism, it is important to develop it in a practicable and modern theory which encompasses the needs of people and the core idea of Liberalism, at the same time, reducing the xenophobia and utilitarianism.*

**KEY WORDS:** Politics, Philosophy, Decline, Liberalism

### INTRODUCTION

Donald Trump's triumph in the US elections, rise of Le Pen in France, England's choice to leave the EU, and also the continuous political emergency in numerous European nations obviously exhibits a genuine decrease of (neo) liberal thoughts. These thoughts (counting their different subordinates) have been the reason for a significant number of the present issues which have prompted the development of populism, dissatisfaction in globalization, and the main endeavors to change the current course of worldwide relations.

In his book -*The Retreat of Western Liberalism: How Democracy is defeating itself*- Edward Luce states, "Western liberal democracy is not yet dead, but it is far closer to collapse than we may wish to believe. It is facing its gravest challenge since the Second World War. This time, however, we have conjured up the enemy from within. At home and abroad, America's best liberal traditions are under assault from its own president. We have put arsonists in charge of the fire brigade." (Luce, 2017)

The recede of liberalism from the political narrative of the liberal democracies seems to be a piece of bigger patterns on the world stage, including the failure of two dozen democratic systems since the turn of the millennium (counting three in Europe — Russia, Hungary and Turkey) and developing descending weights on the West's white collar classes (created by the growing powers of globalization and computerization) that are instigating patriotism and populist revolts.

These advancements, thusly, show a revocation of the assured expectations, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, that liberal popular government was on an all engulfing walk over the planet, and they additionally represent a trend toward the West's confidence in reason and straight advance. In light of this rising right- wing populist tendency, it is important to analyze the causes of such rise, hidden in the decline of Liberal Political thought and its implications at a global platform.

### WHAT IS LIBERALISM?

Liberalism as a political philosophy can be defined as an ideology propagating free will and individualism. It

## JAIN : DECLINE OF LIBERAL PHILOSOPHY

was first proposed by John Locke in his Social Contract theory of Origin of State. Reinhold Niebuhr emphasizes the novelty of this conception of individuality while analyzing renaissance in relation to Christianity. He says: *If Protestantism represents the final heightening of the idea of individuality within terms of the Christian religion, the Renaissance is the real cradle of that very unchristian concept and reality: the autonomous individual.* (Neibuhr, 1939)

Thus, the idea of an autonomous individual is at the heart of Liberalism. Political Liberalism can be roughly divided into Classical and Modern Liberalism. While Classical Liberalism called for a more indifferent approach while defining political interactions and associations between the individual and the state, the modern liberalism propagated the idea of a welfare state.

Classical liberalism at its core called for minimum interference by the state, although several liberal philosophers decried government outright, with Thomas Paine writing, *"Government even in its best state is a necessary evil."* (Young, 2002) From the 17th century until the 19th century, liberals – from Adam Smith to John Stuart Mill – intellectualized liberty as the non-interference from government and from other individuals, persons and organizations, claiming that each and every person has the freedom and liberty to develop his or her own unique abilities and capacities without being disrupted by others. Mill's *On Liberty* (1859), stated, *"The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way."* (Young, 2002)". This approach towards Liberalism was, in principle quite alluring, however, in practice, it led to the development of a neo-capitalist class. The rise of Capitalism prompted the Liberalists to come forward with a more radical approach which led to the birth of Modern Liberalism.

Modern Liberalism started with T H Green who criticized the traditional concept of liberalism which had a 'negative' connotation and tried to replace it with a positive of form of liberal philosophy which entailed the development of a 'welfare' state. Modern Liberalism was a response to capitalism which had arisen due to 'Laissez Faire' policy of the state as advocated by the classical liberalists. Modern Liberalism as an idea, was both a panacea for rising capitalism as well as a substantial improvement on the classical idea of Liberalism.

However, while modern liberalism placated the debate, among the political philosophers, regarding the

question of state's involvement in the lives of individuals, it started a new debate with regards to the degree and nature of such involvement. It is the inability of the proponents of liberalism to tackle the issue of extent of state's involvement and ambit of individual's rights, which has led to the decline of Liberal political thought.

### ANALYSIS OF THE CAUSES OF DECLINE OF LIBERAL POLITICAL THOUGHT:

What applies to an individual's thinking is applicable as well to the thought of any particular period. As Whitehead has expressed it: *"There will be some fundamental assumptions which adherents of all the variant systems within the epoch unconsciously presupposes. Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them."* (Hallowell, 2002) As such any ideology is a product of time and place and in order to survive the oblivious wrath of time, it needs to continuously evolve itself. Liberalism like any other philosophy had to withstand the test of time and it is the slow evolution in Liberal thought which has significantly reduced the impact of Liberal Political Philosophy. With regards to this, following factors have played a significant role in the decline of Liberal Philosophy.

**Ignoring the ethical basis of Society:** One of the most conspicuous problems with Liberalism has been its failure to provide a cogent defensive argument on matters relating to Prostitution, Euthanasia, Pornography, Use of Drugs etc. The liberalists believe in giving freedom to the people to choose whether they want to take drugs or sell their bodies for money or watch porn etc., which in principle, sounds cogent and in line with the democratic principles. However, while doing so they ignore the social stigma associated with these activities and the role that ethics, morality, or culture play while determining the social validity of these acts.

The attribution to each individual of an element of "divine reason", as proposed by John Locke, made it possible to ascribe a dignity and autonomy of will to every human being in a way that had not been possible in the Middle Ages. However, in the era of globalization and cosmopolitanization, this 'divine reason' has lost its absoluteness. For example the 'divine reason' of one person or culture may allow prostitution whereas the 'divine reason' of another culture may not. As such in case of a conflict the liberal philosophy fails to provide a way out.

## JAIN : DECLINE OF LIBERAL PHILOSOPHY

**Argument ad-absurdum:** Furthermore, the strongest argument that liberalists have often loses its virility when confronted with real life problems and arguments of human dignity, bodily integrity or greater good. For example, the argument of freedom of choice cannot be applied to events like Dwarf Tossing and Consensual Cannibalism or even in cases of Suicide as such acts are either demeaning or against public policy.

Furthermore, this line of argumentation has not adequately explained by the philosophers like Immanuel Kant and John Locke. According to Kant, "*Liberty consists in power to do anything which inflicts no injury on one's neighbour*". (Jayapalan, 2002) In his book 'Critique of Pure Reason', Kant proposed the idea of 'Categorical Imperative', which provided for a moral basis of human behavior- 'Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.' (Kant, 2009); Which means, treat others how you wish to be treated? If we read these two concepts together, we can infer that Kantian Liberty would essentially include doing any act which would not harm another and if the doer of the act becomes the receiver of that act, he would not mind.

There are two problems with this concept, firstly, Kant failed to define 'injury'; he failed to clarify whether by injury he meant only physical harm or it included psychological harm as well. In the absence of this clarification, it becomes very difficult to resolve real life issues which involve a conflict between material and metaphysical. For example, with regard to eating beef in India, there is no common consensus among the liberals as to the social validity of such actions. The Hindus consider Cow to be holy and as such not only do they not eat beef but also believe it to be their religious responsibility to protect cows from getting butchered for meat. The other religious communities have no such religious obligations and as such any attempt by the Hindus to prevent other communities from eating beef is seen as an attack on the freedom of choice of the individuals belonging to those communities.

Furthermore, the idea of Categorical Imperative, is very idealistic both with respect to individuals and the State. According to Vaughan, "*Kant hovered between entirely different conceptions of the state. He tossed between individualism and idealism*" (Jayapalan, 2002). When Kant says that a person should behave with others in a way he expects others to behave with him, he in a way, defines the behavior of a person to be regulated by others; as such gives more power to that 'other' and consequently raises liberalism to a plane of idealistic wishful thinking. Because in order for an act to fall within the ambit of liberal

endorsement, that 'other' should have the same social, political, cultural and economic upbringing as the person who is expecting such kind of behavior; which in reality, doesn't happen.

### **Focusing on right instead of good:**

The modern critics of liberalism like Michael Sandel and Michael Walzer have criticized Liberalism as giving too much emphasis on individualism and rights. "*The priority of the right signifies two things: a first-order moral claim that there are rights or entitlements of justice which must not be preempted by social welfare or other goals including promoting an ideal of personal development; and, more contentiously, a second-order epistemological claim that the justification of such rights and entitlements is neutral vis-a-vis the varying ends, commitments, conceptions of the good, etc.; in other words, that the rationale for rights and principles of justice is impartial, and that that fact is vital to their acceptability as the rules of the (democratic) game.*" (Aronovitch, 2000)

However, individuals, no matter how progressive they are, suffer from psychological bias which has its roots in societal interactions. As such any idea of individualism cannot survive as long as it doesn't have society's approval which would mean that the idea of 'common good' would, by far, outweigh the individual 'right'.

According to Walzer, even the idea of individual right cannot be separated from the society, as such the conception of 'right' bestowed upon an individual, which according to the narrow definition of Rawls and Kant, would impliedly be an isolated individual, would lose its plausible meaning. He, while analyzing the Marxian concept of individual rights, states, "*In Marx's eyes even the egotism of the separated individual was a social product-required. Indeed, by the relations of production and then reproduced in all the spheres of social activity Society remained an organized whole even if its members had lost their sense of connection.*" (Walzer, 1984)

### **Unable to keep up with the 'progressive' society:**

Philosophers like T.H. Green, Immanuel Kant, John Rawls etc. have had a very narrow idea of liberalism which made its application, beyond lab environment, very difficult as it did not take into account the conflict which would arise as a result of two opposing acts motivated by liberalism. Sandel, while criticizing Rawls' 'isolated liberal individual', states, "*[The unencumbered self] rules out the possibility of a public life in which, for good or ill, the identity as well as the interests of the participants could be*

## JAIN : DECLINE OF LIBERAL PHILOSOPHY

at stake. And it rules out the possibility that common purposes and ends could inspire more or less expansive self-understandings and so define a community in the constitutive sense, a community describing the subject and not just the objects of shared aspiration". (Sandel, Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy, 1996)

Furthermore, in terms of practicing liberal philosophy, there have been no recent developments in the liberal philosophy which would have any practical application without having to confront any utilitarian arguments. There have been no new interpretations of the ideas of justice, freedom, equality etc., by the liberal philosophers.

However, the definition of autonomy with respect to its nature and extent is still very subjective and varies across different cultures and political systems, as such, on the issues of right to privacy versus state action, Sharia Laws, Cultural Festivals which are not in consonance with the general principles of law for example Jallikattu etc., the liberals have failed to come up with a solution that would satisfy both the opposing approaches.

### Neo- Liberal Global Capitalism:

Liberalism prides itself upon the fact that it has given power to the common people to pursue what they want in the name of individual liberty, within the confine of a legal and social framework. In fact, the very origin of both classical as well as modern liberalism as a radical philosophy propagating freedom, was initiated by increasing despotism, state arbitrariness and capitalism. However, after a century of following liberal philosophy, there has been no substantial improvement in the social lives of the common people. As a matter of fact, with the coming of democratic institutions, capitalism has become institutionalized.

The free market mechanism which the liberals so profoundly propagated has increased the income as well as power disparity between the rich and the poor. As such instead of curbing capitalism, which was one of the main aims of modern liberalism, it created a new form of organized capitalism backed by state itself. This caused a disillusionment among the common mass against the authority based on Liberalism. As stated by Reinhold:-

*"The Utopian illusions and sentimental aberrations of modern liberal culture are really all derived from the basic error of negating the fact of original sin. This error . . . continually betrays modern man to equate the goodness of men with the virtue of their various schemes for social justice and international peace. When these schemes fail of*

*realization or are realized only after tragic conflicts, modern men either turn from utopianism to disillusionment and despair, or they seek to place the onus of their failure upon some particular social group or upon some particular form of economic and social organization."* (Neibuhr, 1939)

### Marketization of Civic Value:

Another important factor which has led to the decline of liberalism is, as stated by Michael Sandel in his book *What Money cannot Buy?: Moral Limits of Market* (Sandel, What Money Can't Buy?: Moral Limits of Market, 2013), the marketization of Civic Values. As our society became more and more market oriented. Money and market started to affect our day to day social interactions. Our decisions which had earlier been motivated by considerations of ethics and morality were now being increasingly affected by prospects of monetary benefits.

This trend in itself is not detrimental as long as it envelopes the entire society equally. However, in practice, it is not so. Benefits in a market oriented society are directly proportional to the degree of financial well-being of an individual. Consequently, people having more money are not only able tap better into the commoditized- society, they also wield more social power and influence than common people, often too the extent transgressing laws and democratic principles without having to worry about legal sanctions.

Thus, the class of people who got deprived of enjoying the exploits of this marketized system due to financial constraints realized the futility and paradoxical nature of liberalist approach and endorsed a more conventional for of political ideology which appealed more to their social bias.

### IMPACT OF DECLINE OF LIBERAL POLITICAL THOUGHT:

Michael Sandel in his book Democracy's Discontent, published in 1996, wrote that- "*Liberalism would give way to those who would shore up borders, harden the distinction between insiders and outsiders and promise a politics "to take back our culture and take back our country."* (Sandel, Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy, 1996)

After 20 years, we are seeing this kind of trend in global politics, especially among the nations which have had a history of walking on the footsteps of liberal philosophy. The rise of Donald J. Trump in United States, Marine Le Pen in France, Narendra Modi in India, Rashtriya Prajatantra Party in Nepal, Far-Right Nationalist Party in Germany as well as Britain's exit from the European Union clearly shows a trend of declining political liberalism. However, the more vexing problem is that it is not declining on a superficial level which affects technocrats and bureaucrats

## JAIN : DECLINE OF LIBERAL PHILOSOPHY

only, this trend reflects a deep seated discontent among the general public against the failure of liberal philosophy to deliver on its promises.

Another significant impact of decline in Liberal Philosophy has been the rise of Communitarianism and a shift towards Utilitarianism. Communitarianism as a philosophy incorporates a functional relationship between an individual and the society. The close relation between the individual and the community was discussed on a theoretical level by Sandel and Taylor, in their criticisms of philosophical liberalism, including the works of Rawls and Kant. They argued that contemporary liberalism and libertarianism presuppose an incoherent notion of the individual as existing outside and apart from society rather than embedded within it. (Shiltz, 2015)

With the decline of liberalism, communitarianism started to take its place. However, when we start to associate individual identity as a part of Social Identity, we, evidently give more power to the society and since society is not a homogeneous mixture of a common culture, ideology and belief, it consequently leads to moral relativism and in a system where a person is right not because he is right but the other is wrong and a person is wrong not because he is wrong but the other claims him to be wrong, the notions of right and wrong would be decided by those holding more social power. This development manifests itself in the form of nepotism, intolerance, chauvinism, and populist politics.

### SOLUTION AND CONCLUSION

#### Development of a meaningful narrative:

As stated above, one of the problems with Liberalism has been that there has been no new development in terms of practicing liberal philosophy so as to develop a meaningful narrative for the society to follow. Furthermore, issues like terrorism, frequent financial meltdowns, over population, local and global corruption have significantly marred any and all attempts to revive liberalism. There are no more heroes and champions of liberal philosophy like Patrick Harris, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi who not only preached liberalism but also followed it in their day-to-day life, thus keeping the practical aspect of liberalism alive.

However, as for theoretical liberalism, two familiar developments within it as a consequence of the critique by communitarians must be recorded before moving on. One development is the attention to notions of community and culture by some liberal theorists, arguing, in various ways,

that far from being at odds with such concerns liberalism is centrally committed to them compatibly with its fundamental endorsement of individualism. (Aronovitch, 2000) Dworkin on liberal community and liberal foundations, Kymlicka on culture, and Macedo on liberal virtues are examples. (Kymlicka, 1986)

The other development is the more special one connected with Rawls but pervading widely beyond him, namely the transition from A Theory of Justice to Political Liberalism, (Rawls, 1971) a transition meant to fully accommodate a pluralism of (reasonable) 'comprehensive views' or philosophies of life and to make the case for the principles of justice without presuming a contentious commitment to any such view, including the ideal of (Kantian) self-rule; and drawing instead on a particular history and political culture (that of present-day United States) as a basis for an overlapping consensus from different points of views. These developments seem to find a mod-way between liberalism and communitarianism, which if capitalized well, by the liberalists can not only help in the revival of liberalism but would also bolster its practice in political life. (Aronovitch, 2000)

#### Populist backlash:

Right wing rose to power riding upon populist demands of the general mass. The general disdain of common people against the liberal political philosophy manifested itself in the overthrow of political regime endorsing free market mechanism and liberal political ideology. As stated by Michel Foucault, "*a dark and rigid discipline has been clamped down upon a whole series of institutions-and that this is the work of internal elites, professional men and women with claims to scientific knowledge, not of political officials*" (Foucault, 1979). Thus, it is important for the liberalists to provide an alternative to the technocratic administrative system.

#### Identity re-establishment:

Humans have a tendency to coalesce around a belief system which gives them a sense of identity and social acceptance. The liberalists with their focus upon individualism, tend to undermine this mode of identity. However, with the weakening of liberalist philosophy, people started looking back to their social affiliations for identity. The right wing populists appealed to that ideology and this resulted in their phenomenal rise globally. In order to revive liberalism, it is imperative to re-establish individualism as the basis of identity.

#### Endorsing Conventional ideas:

## JAIN : DECLINE OF LIBERAL PHILOSOPHY

One of the problems with liberalism has been that, over a period of time, it has been started to be associated with anti-nationalism. Because most of the times liberalists have only criticized extremist nationalism instead of proposing counter argument against such concepts. Even Kant and Rawls did not lay much emphasis on nationalism. In fact, while discussing national feeling (*Nationalgefühl*), Kant emphasizes that as a citizen of the world one may develop the feeling toward cosmopolitanism. He states that Transcendental illusions, such as the conviction that the immortality of the soul is guaranteed and the final end of humankind is realized, find their political and secular equivalents in nationalism's alleged claim that both a sense of one's immortality and the final end will be attained and guaranteed in and by the nation one belongs to. Kant uses the terms fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*) and delusion (*Wahn*) to characterize the ills and excesses of nationalism (Saji, 2015).

This kind of approach doesn't go well with the people who have a strong sense of nationalism and with the increase in terrorism and border incursions the feeling of nationalism and xenophobia have increased significantly. A rejuvenated liberal political philosophy should try to endorse concepts like nationalism, religion, customs etc., instead of out rightly berating them and come up with their own interpretations of these social concepts.

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