

# Ten Antinomies of Liberalism / Anti-Liberalism

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**Abstract:** Liberalism is not only ambiguous. It is antinomial. In this article I sketch ten antinomies in order to support the claim that no one should write about liberalism as if it is a simple or singular thing unless they are explicitly engaged in advocacy of a particular policy. Liberalism no doubt wants to bring everything into harmony, but actually brings everything into what is at best harmonious discord. As such liberalism is always locked in battle with anti-liberalism. But it is not only this fact which bedevils liberalism. For liberalism itself is itself a *concordia discors* or *complexio oppositorum*. Liberalism is itself fundamentally harmoniously discordant. From now on our model of liberalism should be that of a harmoniously discordant impetus to bring rival positions, some of which are liberal and some of which are not, into harmonious discord.

**Keywords:** Liberalism, Anti-Liberalism, Liberty, Liberality, Populism, Political Correctness.

## 1. WE NEED NOT SPEAK OF 'LIBERALISM' / WE MAY SPEAK OF IT

It is a *choice* whether or not to speak of 'liberalism'. 'Liberalism' is a great word in, a great word of, and perhaps a great word about modern politics.<sup>1</sup> But it is not always necessary to use it. It might reveal something about modern politics, or politics in general: but it might also obscure something about it. Oakeshott, said by many scholars to have been 'liberal', mostly avoided the word in his writings. He used more specific words like 'civility', 'conversation', 'individuality', 'civil association', 'the rule of law'. In other words, he had a strong awareness of not only the grand scale of liberalism but also its confusions: and it is surely significant that he tended to associate the word with the sort of politics he disliked: rational, progressive, puritanical, insensitively moderate, ideological. If one of the major modern exponents of 'liberalism' was wary about the word 'liberalism' then this indicates that there is a certain danger in using the word to characterise anything in politics.

Yet at the same time we may use the word 'liberalism' to characterise an element in politics, or even to characterise all of politics. This has been done a great deal since the term was invented in the nineteenth century but especially since thinkers began to theorise liberalism in the twentieth century. Think of L. T. Hobhouse's *Liberalism* of 1911 or Guido du Ruggiero's *Storia del Liberalismo Europeo* of 1925,

translated by R. G. Collingwood in 1927. Many writers troubled about liberalism afterwards, including the heroic figures of Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin and Friedrich Hayek, but also, later on, John Gray in his, in retrospect, rather amusing series of books, *Liberalism* of 1986, *Liberalisms* of 1989, *Postliberalism* of 1993: which indicated that the subject, originally singular, first fractured and then dissolved as he began to handle it. Defences of liberalism and assaults on it have, if anything, been even more common in the last twenty or so years. Even in this year of 2022 two significant figures have written books pointing in different directions: Francis Fukuyama with his *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, trying to save it, and Raymond Geuss with his *Not Thinking Like a Liberal*, trying to bury it.

Liberalism is everywhere, but perhaps it should be nowhere. It is modern: so it is part of the historical, accelerated, ideological, rivalrous politics of modernity, and not part of the philosophical, theological, objective, neutral politics of antiquity. It seems to be part of a temporal frame rather than part of an eternal ordinance. It might be transitional. But it might be fundamental: the consummation in our modernity of all prior history. So I think it follows that it should be handled tentatively if we are to understand it: unless we intend to simply advocate something very particular in its name.

Liberalism, on examination, is ambiguous; and if we are to clarify its ambiguities then we find that it is antinomial. An antinomy is just an ambiguity seen clearly and resolved into an open question. I think liberalism is ambiguous all the way through, and hence can be seen as antinomial all the way through: and that seeing it as antinomial is better than any attempt to see it as a singular or simple thing—even for the sake of advocacy.

## 2. LIBERALISM IS OLD / LIBERALISM IS NEW

However we define liberalism—and we are not yet defining it—we may find things we consider liberal in all eras of human history. There is a concern to defend the weak in some of the oldest political writings, the inscriptions of ancient Egypt and Babylon. There is a concern to engage in dialogue with others in the oldest philosophical writings about politics, in what Plato wrote about Socrates: and there is, of course, its corollary, an admission, as Protagoras put it, that ‘on every subject there are two *logoi* opposed to one another’ (D. L. 9.51). There is a concern with breach of contract in such writings, and of course a concern with law, justice, and abuse of power. Yet everyone knows that ‘liberalism’—as well as ‘liberals’ and ‘liberal’ in a political sense—are modern: they did not exist before the nineteenth century. It is possible to retroject our modern meaning of ‘liberal’ onto earlier experience; but it is also possible to project older meanings onto our modern experience without using the word ‘liberal’. Much depends on how we wish to use the word, and for what purpose. Since ‘liberalism’ is a *political* word there is certainly much good reason to be wary of its use: since we are using something which contains political twist and crook and shade within it: it is not necessarily the most straightforward of instruments.

## 3. LIBERALISM IS ABOUT LIBERTY / LIBERALISM IS ABOUT LIBERALITY

Here we approach, for the first time, a definition of ‘liberalism’. I say, ‘Liberalism is about *liberty*; and yet liberalism is about *liberality*’. It is very common to suppose that liberalism is about liberty. Yet ‘liberty’ is itself a vexed term, and something which cannot be used to explain liberalism, because it itself is in need of explanation. Liberty, as Isaiah Berlin famously showed, may be a ‘negative’ *freedom from* some constraint (in which case it is a general condition) or a ‘positive’ *freedom to* do or be something (in which case it is tied to a specific status): here we may distinguish a high or pure Hobbesian doctrine of liberty—as being unopposed in motion—from a republican or religious form of liberty which supposes that we experience liberty in some shared condition or community like a *polis*, an *ecclesia* or a ‘republic’. (And there is also the ‘third’ concept of liberty, somewhere in between these two, or partaking of both, advocated by Pettit and Skinner, whereby liberty is not freedom from some constraint but freedom from being ruled by others: therefore justifying the republican view that, somehow or other, we have to rule ourselves. I think this is just a statement

of the positive view in terms which make it an exact rival of the negative view: so that ‘republicanism’ can be opposed to ‘liberalism’: but what we may observe here is that it is spectacularly hopeful, since it is hard to see in what situation we could ever imagine ourselves to be free from domination without believing uncritically in some remarkable and hypocritical doctrines.)

If we restrict ourselves to the ‘negative’ view of liberty—which is always said to be a constitutive part of this thing ‘liberalism’—then what we have to observe is that this sort of liberty is a status in which one does not owe anything to others (unless one has chosen to be under an obligation). This liberty is selfish, literally: it insists that all obligations must originate freely out of one’s own transactions and commerce. It is selfish, also, in the sense that it sees the individual human as someone who *takes*. If one is free then one is not obliged to do anything except whatever one has freely and explicitly willed, contracted or covenanted. (No ‘social contract’ here.) This is an important ideal within most of what is called ‘liberalism’, this free, self-created, self-identifying, self-willing, self-obligating individual, but it is clearly only a proposition for a politics, and only the barest postulate to support a vision of what politics might be (Stonehenge theorised in terms of pebbles). Socrates famously, in Plato’s *Republic*, commented that a city composed of such men would not last long: even though it would be the most beautiful of cities.

Attention to etymology suggests, however, that the root of ‘liberalism’ is less likely to be ‘liberty’ than ‘liberality’. If liberty is to do with taking, liberality is to do with giving. Liberality in the eighteenth century, before it had political connotations, meant generosity. It was the specific characteristic of the *liber*, or free man. Johnson’s *Dictionary* suggested that ‘liberal’ meant well-born on the one hand and well-educated on the other hand, and therefore ‘munificent; generous; bountiful; not parcimonious’. What has for a long time been called a ‘liberal education’ was the sort of education a *free* human deserved: an education which would create the sort of sensibility that someone who was free should exhibit: a sensibility which was benevolent, not only in a material sense, but in a spiritual sense: interested in others, so expressing the sympathy Hume and Smith thought was so important, and the pity Rousseau thought was so important, but also the elevated interest in other, usually, ancient cultures—the subject of the ‘classics’—but later on, also an elevated interest in other, even primitive societies (hence Lubbock, Tylor and the anthropologists of the nineteenth century), and an elevated interest in the marginal or poor classes within one’s own society (hence Engels, Carlyle and the socialists and sociologists of the nineteenth century). G. de Bertier de Sauvigny suggested half a century ago that liberalism is ‘generosity applied in the field of politics’ (1970, p. 152). And Kant in lectures published in 1798 made the astounding suggestion that the following principle was the distinctive one of ‘*die Liberalen*’: ‘To think oneself (in communication with human beings) into the place of every *other person*’ (2006, p. 124). If we required one sentence which could explain liberalism-in-terms-of-liberality it would be this: the suggestion that the distinctive and original liberal disposition is to think oneself into the position of others. Liberalism, as a political entity, is what comes of trying to construct a political order in terms of the imperative to think oneself into the position of others.

The obvious corollary is that one suspends one’s own beliefs in order to engage conversationally with the beliefs of others. One is not dogmatic. Cardinal Newman famously and right declared that liberalism was ‘the anti-dogmatic principle’ (1890, p. 288). One does not intend to *convert* others to one’s position, but, at most, to *converse* them to one’s position—as a liberal (that is, as someone concerned to think oneself into the position of others). And in order to do this one has to exhibit spiritual generosity: a willingness to suspend one’s own beliefs in order to fully learn about the beliefs of others. This sort of liberalism is not merely tolerant: it lacks the sort of armour and contempt implied in the word ‘tolerate’. It seeks some sort of full exposure and engagement, even embrace. Liberalism, seen this way, is a politics of full engagement between people of different statuses, possessions, beliefs, languages, cultures.

Liberality is liberalism on its *giving* rather than on its *taking* side. The liberal, seen this way, is someone who in the first instance tries to engage with others; and then tries to create a setting, a political order, in which everyone will be encouraged to engage with each other in this way: an order not based on dogma. This certainly sketches more of a political basis that is evident from ‘liberalism’ constructed solely in terms of ‘liberty’, that is, *negative* liberty. But one can see liberalism from both sides. Our contemporaries who are

opposed to ‘liberalism’ emphasise the most selfish aspects of liberalism on the side of liberty, while those who are in favour of ‘liberalism’ emphasise the most generous aspects of liberalism on the side of liberality. And liberalism is both.

#### 4. LIBERALISM IS NOT POLITICAL / LIBERALISM IS POLITICAL

Liberalism—in relation to both ‘liberty’ and ‘liberality’—is *both* a pre-political or non-political set of inclinations (and not even completely coherent inclinations) *and* a political creed, though, again, not a necessarily very coherent political creed, because it, too, has variations. Liberalism, on one side, is a contradictory set of inclinations to defend one’s ‘liberty’ or to exhibit one’s ‘liberality’: and these are negative or positive tendencies within any sort of life, and within any sort of political order. A liberal politics only exists where these inclinations, confused as they are, cross the threshold and come into politics. By this I mean that they are supposed to not only influence political debate *internally* but also to establish criteria by which the entire political order can be judged *externally*. In other words, if the initial aspiration of any sort of ‘liberal’ politics is to exhibit liberal arguments and conduct, then a subsequent interim aspiration is to convert—or, more properly, ‘converse’ with—others so they also are willing to exhibit themselves liberally; and the final aspiration is not only to convert everyone to ‘liberalism’ but also to establish the foundations of all order on a liberal basis, so that every sort of political deliberation is conducted within a ‘liberal’ frame.

#### 5. LIBERALISM IS AGAINST RELIGION / LIBERALISM IS NOT AGAINST RELIGION

The next question is what we mean by a ‘liberal’ frame. This can only be understood in the grandest historical context. If we ascend to the historical empyrean we may observe that, before the refinements of the eighteenth century already discussed, the early seventeenth century had seen the final, brutal conflict, which came out of the Reformation: the religious wars which dominated Europe, and even England, until 1648 and 1649. The political solutions were *ad hoc*, and included absolutism, in France, and constitutionalism, in England: but from the time of Hobbes onwards, everyone was concerned with the problem of how to solve the problem of politics, which was the problem of religion-and-politics. This was one aspect of what we usually call the Enlightenment. It eventuated ultimately in the separation of church and state: and this was explicit after 1776 and 1789, though not before. The problem was that churches had the power to disturb the peace of the state by challenging its authority. The Eusebian fusion of church-and-state was being replaced by a revived Augustinian separation of church and state. The Enlightenment was, on this side, the aspiration of a certain section of the educated elites, in J. G. A. Pocock’s words, to reduce ‘philosophy and theology from perception of reality to sociable discourse’, and ‘to subject disputatious religion to the imperatives of civil society’ (1999, p. 19; 2018, p. 269).

In short, what this meant was that the old Bede-Hooker-Burke doctrine that the state is the church and the church is the state was abandoned. The alternative, when called ‘liberal’, was not Hobbes’s Erastian suggestion that the church remain what it was in Constantine’s Rome, or Putin’s Russia: the religious department of what Walter Ullmann called a ‘Caesaro-Papist’ state. It was on the contrary, that religion be stripped out of the counsels of the state, be stripped out of the constitution of the state. Religion was to be tolerated; and historic religion was perhaps to be more than tolerated (since it was the cultural foundation of the traditions of the people), but it was not to be of legislative significance. Religion was private, not public: it was to exist only within the interstices of the state order. It was not foundational; and it was not the role of any politician to use religious language.

‘Liberalism’, seen this way, involves a depoliticisation of the church, of religion—and it ignores any problems this causes for religions which suppose, like Islam, that religion and politics cannot be separated: and it also ignores the fact that ‘liberalism’, in instantiating what we can only call a *liberal culture of the state* to replace religion as the conscientious basis of state order may be supplying a surrogate religion, a civil religion. Liberalism, seen this way, is officially neutral as regards religion: though, as we have suggested, it may

be tolerant of the historic religion of the state, and it may be tolerant of other religions and even the historic religion in ways that are offensive to those religions. But we also have to admit that liberalism is also not neutral, in that its favoured foundational beliefs are explicitly not religious, and that, since politics is politics, and the need for justifying ideological beliefs is perennial, a liberal order may have to offer something like a surrogate for what other religions offer if it is not to be ultimately displaced by one of them.

## 6. LIBERALISM SEES THE STATE AS ONE OF ITS ENEMIES / LIBERALISM SEES THE STATE AS ITS INSTRUMENT

Here we are on ground familiar to anyone who has studied the most simple account of the history of liberalism. According to this account, the first liberalism, the ‘classical liberalism’ of the nineteenth century, was wary of the state, since it classed the state as only the greatest of possible enemies to ‘liberty’ (or even ‘liberality’). Sure enough, it was within such a state that liberals had to form parties, and it was such a state that liberals had to attempt to reconstitute on a secular basis, but the state itself, as the holder of ultimate sovereignty, ultimate legislative power, and the holder of all the instruments of coercion and constraint, was a necessary instrument, though one that should not be trusted. This was perhaps a transitional stage in the history of liberalism, but it is a transition which has never been escaped, since wariness of the state, or of the tyranny of the majority, has never disappeared, and cannot, as long as ‘liberalism’ retains its original concerns with ‘liberty’ or ‘liberality’. This the liberalism of the individual who wants to be let alone as much as possible, to conduct business privately, and wants the state to restrict itself to law and order, and war, and, if possible, only law and order.

Against this ‘classical’ liberalism there arose the ‘new’ liberalism, found in England in the late nineteenth century and again in America in the early twentieth century, which saw the state as its instrument. Here, as more and more proponents of a liberal politics emerged, and as society shifted in a liberal direction, exhibiting a liberal culture, as liberalism became the model of education, as religion receded, and as state moralities emerged—such as socialism—some liberals saw the state, if harnessed, as the only instrument which could establish the conditions for a fully liberal society. This has remained a powerful vision of ‘liberalism’. It remains, famously, the meaning of the word ‘liberal’ in America, whereas, for most of the twentieth century, ‘liberal’ in England, still referred to the classical creed. This was perhaps because the Liberal Party was eclipsed by a Labour Party in the 1920s and Labour took over the ultimately moderate though socialistically-inflected politics of welfare which flourished after 1945s, whereas from the 1930s it was the Democrats in America (where there had never been a Liberal Party as such) who advocated welfare politics. Here we have the simplest of all antinomies of liberalism: that it is both wary of the state—sees it as an enemy—and enthusiastic about it—sees it as the only friend. So what we see is that the distinction between an individualistic and a collectivistic politics is a distinction *within* liberalism. Liberalism can be both advocacy of a small state, and advocacy of a great one. It supports both the ‘night-watchman’ state and the ‘nanny’ state.

## 7. LIBERALISM IS A PARTY DOCTRINE / LIBERALISM IS A CONDITION OF SOCIETY

If we were to tell a very simple history of liberalism we might suggest that at first there were only individuals, concerned with liberty or liberality; then, after the political threshold was crossed, there were liberal individuals who organised themselves into a party, and thus contributed to the politics of government-and-opposition, the politics of *pro* and *contra*, the politics of discussion and deliberation. In any situation there were usually two parties, and the ‘liberal’ party was one of them. In England in the nineteenth century the Liberal Party faced as its antitype a Conservative Party; and in America in the twentieth century the Democrat Party (which took over the language of ‘liberalism’ leaving the nineteenth century language of ‘conservatism’ for its opponents, as is still the case) faced as its antitype a Republican Party. In England in

the twentieth century things were complicated, as ‘liberalism’, liberated from the Liberal Party in the 1920s, became a sort of dual legacy, available for use on both the ‘classical’ and ‘new’ sides: as part of the language both of the politics of individualistic advocacy and of the politics of collectivist advocacy. As a third stage, then, we might posit that the historic English Liberal party—dominant, by and large, from the 1830s to the 1910s—was successful in establishing liberal assumptions throughout society. Ironically, perhaps, this was because the order which stood behind it was already in some sense ‘liberal’: because it was an order based on government-and-opposition, on discussion and deliberation in parliament. But we may say, then, that what happened was that Westminster assumptions about the need to consult the opposition, and at least notionally attempt to persuade them through reasonable engagement and argument, was transferred, by education and example (through deference, newspapers and so on), to the population at large, so that the population internalised the parliamentary assumption that opposition was justified, and that minority reports were as important as majority reports. The result was what we call a ‘liberal society’: a name for what we suppose to be a liberal constitution—one lacking any religious basis—containing a liberal politics (where all parties, and not just one party, is liberal) and a broadly liberal society: that is, a society in which everyone accepts the liberal constitution and customs. The *telos* of this vision is a world in which *everything is liberal*. Alas, unfortunately this is not the case. In a so-called liberal society, there is always a need for a liberal party, or, at least, individuals with a liberal disposition, who are willing to continue to advocate that a liberal order be maintained.

#### 8. LIBERALISM IS A SUFFICIENT AND COMPLETE SYSTEM / LIBERALISM CONTAINS WITHIN ITSELF SOMETHING FUNDAMENTALLY ANTI-LIBERAL AND WHICH IS AN INELIMINABLE ELEMENT OF A LIBERAL SYSTEM

The belief that liberalism is a sufficient and complete system is a legacy of political theory: especially the political theory in the twentieth century which retrojected its assumptions and found them originating in the writings of John Locke. This tradition, which is still with us, and which has John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* as its major stepping stone—though supported by an entire culture (especially the literary culture of Mill, Russell, Dewey, Leavis, Trilling, Orwell)—is enthusiastically defended by political scientists, political theorists (though not all of them: some are unaligned because ‘radical’ and some, even fewer, are not even aligned with radicalism) and especially, perhaps, defended by legal theorists in the tradition of Kelsen, Hart, Raz and Dworkin. A belief in law, especially a high or ‘pure’ belief in law, certainly supports a liberal politics, because it attempts to eliminate, except as a servant, the politics of power: everything in law is to be explained in terms of law, so we are supposed to imagine that our future constitutions are to be built only on liberal principles, even as adjusted for those who do not believe in liberal principles but are willing to live by them as part of a necessary *modus vivendi*.

Against this, is the fact—*de facto* against academic *de iure*—of a resilient and rising ‘populism’, but also unreconstructed religious traditions, which suppose that religion and politics should not be separated. Populism is, of course, not always religious: and it does not have to be since what ‘populism’ is is a reaction to liberalism: a *refusal*, an explicit refusal, to abide by liberal assumptions. In a ‘liberal society’ run by ‘liberal elites’ some people, amusingly calling themselves ‘the people’ (hence ‘populists’)—illegitimately, which is why they irritate liberal academics so much—form parties which attempt to express a primitive because usually non-religious version of a residual hostility to liberal assumptions. Since liberalism, whatever it is, is a late and sophisticated manifestation of certain tendencies in politics, populism is somewhat atavistic, crude by comparison. It asserts things which liberals have sought to abolish: including perhaps, religion, but also tribal morality of one sort or another, as well as exhibiting a certain solipsism (a reluctance to engage too involvedly with what is not of local concern) and exhibiting, whether ironically or not, the sort of prejudices, usually anti-liberal, which liberals expressly do not like, and which are, as a consequence, extremely politically useful in disturbing liberal formations—‘liberal society’, ‘liberal elites’ and any parties which still see themselves as in any sense advocating ‘liberalism’ (which in most cases means all of them,

though in some cases it only means some of them). Populism is crude, as I say, but it is a reaction to liberalism built out of a consciousness of what modern liberalism has become—whatever it has become—and out of a rather inchoate (given the inchoate nature of liberalism) resistance to it.

There are two reasons why such populism is ineliminable, apart from its intrinsic attractions as a reaction against an excessively complacent liberalism. One is that certain religious traditions, including obviously Islam though less obviously but ultimately equally significantly, Judaism and even Christianity (except where it falls into absolute Augustinianism), will continue to reject the entire separation of church and state on which liberal society depends. Another is the one suggested by Collingwood in *The New Leviathan*, which is that every generation has to be educated into what he called ‘civility’ and what we may as well call ‘liberalism’—that confluence of ‘liberty’ on its negative side and ‘liberality’ on its positive side. We emerge as children requiring heavily anti-liberal or at least non-liberal instruction in the early years of our life, which may be increasingly replaced by liberal instruction as we advance in point of civility or liberty-and-liberality. On the one hand in so far as we are children, and the state is a nursery, there is a continual conversion or conversation of us into liberalism. On the other hand, quite apart from this fact of perennial significance, there is likely to be always an atavistic remainder in society which refuses to be educated by the state into a morality of liberalism, and hence there will always be an ineliminable non-liberal and possibly even anti-liberal element which attempts to countermand the education of everyone into liberalism.

## 9. LIBERALISM IS LIBERAL / LIBERALISM IS NOT LIBERAL

So far I have not mentioned the crisis of ‘late liberalism’. The current ‘culture war’ of ‘political correctness’, ‘identity politics’, ‘social justice’, ‘critical race theory’, ‘wokery’ is—though some deny it—ubiquitous in ‘liberal societies’, especially those which speak and write in English. The ironies are more exquisite here than anywhere else. For both those in favour of ‘freedom of speech’ and those not in favour of it—to pull it down to the simplest problem—are both liberal. Currently there is a battle within the liberal elites for the soul of liberalism. On the one hand there are those, who generally favour a state, collectivised sort of liberalism, who say that liberalism has always concerned itself with the poor, the weak, the marginal, and who extend this to a concern with racial, gender, sexual minorities, and what should be done by way of ‘equity’ to rectify the imbalances in society and in unconscious structures within that society, including our assumptions, which prevent anything being done about them. On the other hand there are those, generally those who favour an anti-state, individualistic sort of liberalism, who say that liberalism has always concerned itself with exposing everyone to the most sharp or thorough of criticisms in civilised debate so that the best thoughts may rise to the surface. The ‘woke’ say that such criticism is not only brutal but harmful, and is allowing atavistic remainders to exclude minorities. The ‘anti-woke’ liberals—since we have no name for them yet—say that such criticism is necessary if we are to avoid lapsing into a new form of inquisitorial society in which ‘correct’ opinions about various political matters, including not only matters of race, gender and sexuality, but also ‘climate change’ and Covid-19 (though these are also ‘scientifically’ correct and raise a separate argument), are imposed by coercion and censorship. This should be seen for what it is, a battle within liberalism. If ‘populism’ is our current word for the battle between liberals and anti-liberals, then the ‘culture war’ is our current phrase for the battle between two types of liberal, the liberal who is pure about the liberty to say anything and the liberal who is pure about the liberality to be extended to those most in need of protection from the harm caused by others saying anything. One emphasises liberalism on its benevolent side; the other emphasises liberalism on its recipient side.

I mentioned ‘climate change’ and Covid-19, because these are not explicitly part of a culture war, but have generally involved similar prescriptions as those involved in the culture war: that is, a tendency by states, along with favoured corporations, including media corporations, to use censorship, financial inducement and propaganda, to further a particular policy agenda, and to attempt to forbid or restrict or marginalise criticism of such government policies. To some extent, politically correct, but not scientifically correct, views such as those associated with race, gender and sexuality, have also been part of this revived

inquisitorial culture, in which certain opinions—legitimate according to the older sort of liberal—are condemned as ‘deplorable’ by the newer sort of liberal.

## 10. LIBERALISM IS RATIONAL / LIBERALISM IS NOT RATIONAL

This perhaps raises a final question. Liberalism in its ‘late’ or ‘left’ form, as interventionist, educated, supported by elites, attempts to monopolise rationality. This is done using ‘science’ in relation to climate and Covid-19, but it is done by other means in relation to politically correct concerns: appeals to ‘identity’, ‘pride’, ‘exclusion’. It is ‘rationalist’: an outcome of a politics of abstraction and abridgement and ultimately the imposition of simple instructions by the central power: instructions which certainly deny or diffuse or deflect any criticisms of these instructions in terms of the complexity of existence. On the other hand liberalism, perhaps in its original form, its ‘early’ or ‘right’ form, is a resistance to being manipulated by any sort of authority, comes out of wanting to be left alone, and as such exhibits a broader reasonableness, which finds recent ‘liberalism’, especially on the left of politics, excessively simplistic and rationalistic, and fears that it might ultimately doom ‘liberalism’ as a whole to some sort of dissolvent reaction, as it ceases to hold onto whatever of common sense enabled it to emerge against the old absolutisms and theocracies in the first place.

Croce once wrote that liberalism is ‘centred on the idea of dialectics’. ‘Rather than set limits and checks on [rival] tendencies and rather than subject them to restrictions and repression, the liberal doctrine offers an open field so that they may compete among themselves and co-operate in harmonious discord’ (1946, p. 79). But liberalism is, as an element in politics, not above the fray, and cannot be above the fray: and, as something involved in the battles of politics and the wars of ideas, it is not only dialectically opposed to many other lines of thought caught up within this harmonious discord: it is also, taken alone, internally dialectical or antinomial. Liberalism is what Oakeshott called a *concordia discors* or what Schmitt called a *complexio oppositorum*. It is a discordant harmony, a complex of opposites.

From now on our model of liberalism should be that of a harmoniously discordant impetus to bring rival positions, some of which are liberal and some of which are not, into harmonious discord. The impetus, the struggle and the result are all, it should be noted, harmoniously discordant: though at any point we may find liberalism here rather than there, behaving like an emperor sometimes engaging in gladiatorial battle and sometimes laying down the law, behaving like a quantum particle, or behaving like the set of all sets which are not members of themselves. If it were a physical or logical construct, we would talk about liberalism as if it were Schrödinger’s cat or Russell’s paradox, something perpetually uncertain or indeterminate. Liberalism certainly is paradoxical: but since it is political as well as paradoxical, we for the most part accept its paradoxes, for the reason that political language is by its very nature paradoxical. I say we accept the paradoxes: but specifically I should say that I think this is true in practice only, and only at certain times. It is not yet true in theory. But what I think is interesting about our own time is that it is gradually becoming clear to everyone that liberalism is no simple or singular thing.

## NOTES

1 This article is a successor to Alexander 2020.

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