

How far and to what extent, have modern liberals departed from the ideas of classical liberalism?

It is recognised by students of politics that ideologies can be very broad, encompassing varying competing schools of philosophy. Liberalism is often seen to contain two such streams: classical liberalism, which developed alongside industrialization and the end of the feudal age, and modern liberalism, which developed at the tail end of the industrial revolution. The terms are misleading, insofar as both ideologies continue to compete today. Modern liberalism therefore, should be seen as a divergent of the ideas proposed by the classical liberal theorists, rather than a replacement thereof.

This essay will explore liberalism thematically, explaining the classical view, then discussing the deviation or agreement by modern liberals.

Liberals are insistent on the primacy of the individual and his freedoms. Classical liberals tend to see man as selfish and egoistic, acting only in his own interests and happiness. They therefore argue for a limited state that exists only to defend the freedoms of one individual from another, a “nightwatchman”, as John Locke, a 17th Century English philosopher, put it. Modern liberals concur with the idea of ‘putting the individual first’ and ensuring his freedoms by way of government but believe that humans are inclined to good deeds towards the community as a whole. For example, John Stuart Mill, a 19th Century philosopher, differentiated between, ‘lower’, self-concerned pleasures and ‘higher’, altruistic pleasures. Therefore, social liberals postulate that the state should act to grant positive freedoms, such as the education, health and work, rather than merely granting the negative freedom of safeguarding people from each other.

All liberals believe that humans are equal, but the classical and modern schools disagree on the meaning of the ‘equality’. Liberals stress that ‘all men are created equal’ (US Declaration of Independence, 1776), meaning that all ideas and peoples should be judged on their merits, giving rise to toleration and pluralism as universal liberal values. Meritocracy also meant that members of society should be judged for positions or before the law. Modern liberals however, are disposed to point out that people are born into positions of differing wealth and influence and that are, therefore, born with distinct inequalities. Thus is it vital that the state acts to level the playing field by a variety of means. First and foremost, the state should provide educate for all, giving everyone the opportunity to equality of knowledge and capacity for rational argument. Some modern liberals agree with the socialist doctrine of wealth redistribution to grant an equal financial footing, and many believe in affirmative action, or positive discrimination, for those against whom society has traditionally discriminated by virtue of their birth, including racial and religious minorities and women. A further example is the formation by universities of quotas to ensure that those who have not received a private education are not discriminated against on the basis of wealth (gripped teeth). Classical liberals oppose welfarism by opposition on to wealth redistribution and an emphasis on self-help. They claim that redistribution of wealth is unfair because it erodes the doctrine of right to property. According to theorists such as JS Mill, individuals should be able to dispose of fairly-gained wealth in whatever way they ordain, and that the state has only the right to tax for policing that would safeguard their

freedoms. If people work hard for wealth, and then have it removed, their incentive to work hard is taken away. Furthermore, classical liberals argue that by a welfare system, one allows the working man to become lazy as he can simply rely on the state to furnish his needs. Only by forcing him to work will you save him from the gutter.

“The drunkard in the gutter is exactly where he ought to be”, is, in fact, a quote of William Sumner, a follower of the classical liberal doctrine of ‘social darwinism’, a proposed by Herbert Spencer. Having studied Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, Spencer argued that humans also conformed to the biological pattern of ‘survival of the fittest’ and that only those who adapt to their circumstances will survive. As survival is a natural instinct, humans will adapt to the conditions around them without the need for social welfare. Furthermore, welfarism would kill the survival instinct and encourage indolence.

On the basis of human equality, many liberals believe in democracy as the fairest path to election of government, whether the state is minimalist or enabling. On the back of this, Jeremy Bentham proposed the doctrine of utilitarianism, or the greatest ‘happinest for the greatest number’, subscribed to by many classical liberals. This idea came under criticism by liberals on both sides of the divide, including Alexis de Tocqueville, who described democracy as “a tyranny of the majority”. Many liberals believe that it is the right of every individual to enjoy happiness, not the majority. However, democracy endures in many ‘liberal’ systems due to the lack of a creditable alternative.

The concept of a limited state opened a new battleground between modern and classical liberals, in the field of economics. Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) suggested that governments should conduct a policy of non-interventionism as regards business, believing that economic problems could right themselves naturally without government help, through a ‘market solution’. For example, on the question of unemployment, Smith believed that employers and employees are mutually dependent, but that their relationship, as with other economic relationships, exists on a basis of supply and demand. Therefore, if unemployment rose, the employers would be able to negotiate lower wages and accept more workers. Smith’s economics also promoted the removal of tariffs and ‘free trade’, which would raise the total wealth of nations and give the individual consumer more freedom of choice, by forcing competition and lower costs. However, the Wall Street Crash of 1929, caused the Great Depression of high unemployment worldwide throughout the 1930’s and therefore an economic rethink. Lower wages brought about by ‘market forces’ meant workers had less money to spend on goods, so as the demand dropped so did the supply, and producers were forced into bankruptcy or to make redundancies, creating a vicious circle. The Keynesian solution to this problem was ‘government interventionism’, by creating artificial jobs, which would cause workers to spend more on goods, which would allow producers to exist and employ, creating a virtuous circle.