

How far has Modern Liberalism departed from Classical Liberalism?

Liberalism did not denote a political allegiance until the early part of the nineteenth Century, and was first used in Spain in 1812. The first real Liberal government in the UK was Gladstone's in 1868. Liberal ideas resulted from the breakdown of feudalism in Europe and the growth of its replacement of a market or capitalist society. At first, Liberal ideas were radical because they sought fundamental reform and even revolutionary change. This early, or Classical, liberalism advocated an industrialized and market economic order free from government intervention. However, these views and beliefs later changed during the twentieth century, to become, what is commonly known as modern liberalism. The question is how far has modern liberalism departed from the original classical liberal ideas?

Liberals believe in the supreme importance of the individual. Therefore, they want a society in which each individual is capable of developing to their full potential. This is where there is a difference between classical and modern liberals. Classical liberals believe that individuals are egoistical, this means self-interested and self-reliant, basically selfish. Therefore, society is a collection of self-interested individuals. This view has been called atomistic, in that it conceives of individuals as 'isolated atoms' within society; in fact it can lead to the belief that society does not exist at all, but is merely a collection of self-sufficient individuals. C. B. Macpherson characterized classical liberalism as 'possessive individualism' because, he argued it regarded the individual as 'the proprietor of his own person and capabilities, owing nothing to society for them'. Modern liberals, however see the individual as altruistic because the individual possesses social responsibility for one another, especially those who are unable to look after themselves. This view of individuals is much more optimistic when compared to the view of classical liberals. A belief in the supreme importance of the individual leads naturally to a commitment to individual freedom. There is also a difference between classical and modern liberalism regarding freedom, with classical believing in negative freedom whilst modern believes in positive freedom. The classical liberal idea is that individuals can do whatever they please as long as it does not infringe upon others freedom. It involves government not interfering with individuals by passing laws restricting what they can do, unless it is to stop individuals doing something which affects other people's freedom. Whereas modern liberals would be in favour of having compulsory seatbelt wearing as a law because it would protect individuals from being injured in the event of a crash, which is providing guidance. It is obvious that there are some differences of opinion between classical and modern liberals as far as the individual is concerned. However, there is a consistent view that there needs to be a society where individuals can fulfil their potential. Therefore, it is clear that modern liberalism has, on this issue, departed by quite an extent from the classical liberal beliefs.

Classical liberals regard the state as best as, in Thomas Paine's words, a 'necessary evil'. It is necessary in that, at the very least, it lays down the conditions for orderly existence; and it is evil in that it imposes a collective will upon society, thereby limiting the freedom and responsibilities of the individual. Thus they believe in what is known as a 'night watchman' government which is restricted to the maintenance of domestic order, the enforcement of contracts, and the protection of society from external attack. This is in contrast to the modern liberal view of the state, the modern

liberal view is that the state is invested with social responsibility for its citizens. It is seen not merely as a threat to individual liberty, but, in a sense, as its guarantor. Unlike classical liberals modern liberals have been prepared to view the state positively as an enabling state, exercising an increasingly wide range of social and economic responsibilities. Linked to that point, is the fact that classical liberals believe that the state diminishes freedom, whilst modern liberals believe that the state enlarges freedom. Therefore, classical liberals believe that there should be a minimal state because the state diminishes freedom, and modern liberals believe in almost the exact opposite which means that on the issue of the state modern liberalism had departed almost completely from classical liberalism.

Another important issue to liberalism is the economy; classical liberalism advocates a laissez faire economy where as modern liberalism advocates economic management. Both of these involve private enterprise, the question is how much, laissez faire economics is the belief that there is no need for the government/state to interfere in the economy, where as economic management involves government intervention. This is similar to classical liberalism believing in the free market economy and modern liberalism believing in a Keynesian economy. Where again one has government intervention and the other does not. Classical liberals believe in no state intervention in the economy because Governments are economically incompetent because the market is too complex for them. Economic intervention by governments threatens individual liberty because if government gets involved in economics it will inevitably get involved in other social issues leading to totalitarianism. Also because the market is self-regulation it makes the need for government intervention non existent.

Finally, there are distinct differences between the beliefs of classical and modern liberals on the society. With the classical liberals believing in an atomistic society, a safety net welfare for society, an inequality in society that is natural and inevitable and a strict meritocracy. As opposed to the modern liberal beliefs of; an altruistic society, welfare cradle to the grave for society, redistribution in society to lessen inequality and social reform. Classical liberals believe in an atomistic society which means that society is made up of a collection of self-interested and largely self-sufficient individuals, or atoms, rather than social groups. Whereas modern liberals believe in an altruistic society where individuals have concern for the interests and welfare of others, and people try to help others to achieve their goals. Classical liberals believe in safety net welfare for society which is the bare minimum as opposed to welfare cradle to the grave which is welfarism for life. Then both believe that inequality will always be present in society however, classical liberals believe that it has to be this way in order for a meritocracy to be present, whereas modern liberals believe that the government should intervene and redistribute the wealth in order to give everyone a chance.

In conclusion, it is obvious that there are several distinct differences in the beliefs of classical and modern liberals. In my opinion they are not as dissimilar as to be classified as separate distinct political ideologies, however there are at different ends of the liberal scale. For example, the two different ideas about how the economy should be run, they are not completely different they both agree that there should be private enterprise, it is just that they differ in how much private enterprise there should be, the same applies for the society, individual and state.

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