

Liberalism has a dual commitment both to individual freedom and equality. How does liberalism try to reconcile these two commitments? Does it succeed? Can freedom and equality really co-exist?

The ideas of liberalism have been around for more than three hundred years and inevitably these ideas have changed over time. These changes led to the development of two strands of liberalism, which are referred to as 'classical liberalism' and 'modern liberalism'. These two liberal traditions clashed over their views on certain aspects of society, particularly on the role of the state. Many key political ideas were derived from liberalism, both classical and modern. The work of the classical liberal Adam Smith on protections in international and national trade could be clearly seen in Margaret Thatcher's economic policies and ideas on the free market. Her ideas on the role that the state should play in society also followed a classical liberalist approach. Due to the emergence of the two strands the ideology of liberalism was now subject to inherent contradictory beliefs.

Almost all supporters of liberalism argue the supremacy of the individual and believe that every one's greatest concern should be their individual happiness. Liberalism promises all individuals equal rights and freedoms regardless of their economic or social status.

Liberalism commits itself to individual freedom and to equality. A big problem with this is that a classical liberal would hold a different idea about what individual freedom and equality should entail, in comparison with a modern liberal. "Many of the disagreements within liberal ideology can be traced back to these rival ideas of uniqueness and equality¹".

According to classical liberals freedom is the absence of restrictions. Extreme theorists would not agree with any form of restriction which infringes on an individual's freedom. For example they are against restrictions on speeding, self harm and the use of addictive drugs. Classical liberals explain that with this freedom comes a large responsibility. Although individuals would have complete control over their body and mind they would also have to fully comprehend that every individual has an equal right to this liberty. This idea on freedom and equality has often been branded the negative theory of liberty. It is the modern liberal theory which has been referred to as the positive theory of liberty and it is this theory which has more relevance to contemporary British society. Modern liberals believe that it is the presence of restrictions which enables individuals to reach their full potential and

¹ Heywood

prosper. This is because situations would constantly arise where one individual's freedom would conflict with another's. If only one of the clashing freedoms is pursued then the other individual's freedom will be greatly restricted. This would cause a severe inequality. Under this example the two cannot co-exist, one must give way to the other. For example, if one man wants to kill another man, it is impossible for both men to have absolute freedom of choice. It is this which led modern liberals to the conclusion that, the very existence of freedoms leads to a necessity for restrictions. If equal restrictions are placed on each and every individual then perhaps it becomes possible for freedom and equality to co-exist.

Individual freedom itself provides a commitment to equality. The belief that all individuals are born equal is embedded in a set of basic and irrefutable human rights. All liberals unite in the belief that individuals should not be disadvantaged in society on the grounds of gender, class or ethnicity and that every individual should be granted equal legal and political equality.

It is clear that liberals believe that every individual must have an equal opportunity to achieve success. However, it's important to understand that liberal thinkers do not necessarily believe that all individuals should have an equal result in terms of their success. Liberals acknowledge that individuals are all different from one another and therefore possess different talents, skills and work ethics. This idea that individuals should have an equal opportunity to develop their unequal abilities holds strong ties to the theory of meritocracy. This is the idea that the most able and most hard working people will succeed the most in life.

Classical liberals believe that meritocracy works and can be applied to all aspects of life for any member of society, regardless of class. They have come under heavy criticism for idealising society and neglecting the class inequalities within it.

The idea that if you work hard you will do well has a huge implication and it had caused Marxist thinkers to suggest that liberal ideas only reflect the interests of the bourgeoisie in a capitalist society.

Modern liberals, such as John Rawls, claim that before all individuals can become truly equal a redistribution of wealth must occur. Those on the bottom end of the economic system must have an equal opportunity to achieve success as those on the top end of the system before the theory of meritocracy should be applied.

These different ideas on how social equality relates to individual freedom equality can be achieved causes yet another rift between the two strands of liberalism.

There is no doubt that liberalism does make an effort to fulfil its commitment to both individual freedom and equality. However, liberalism itself is particularly diverse and depending on the position one takes on the ideological spectrum, it can be seen to succeed or not succeed in fulfilling the dual commitments.

A huge obstacle on the narrow path to deciding whether individual freedom and equality can really co-exist is the presence of both conservative and socialist ideas which both help lay the foundation of liberalism. This mixture of ideologies within liberalism has led commentators to argue that it is best described as a “general attitude and not a distinct set of political beliefs²”.

Perhaps the most accepted answer in modern society is that individual freedom and equality do co-exist to an extent. However, many would argue that it is impossible to achieve individual freedom and equality unless all wealth including property was redistributed first. Others would disagree claiming that the cream would always rise to the top and even after wealth had been redistributed and freedom and equality co-existed successfully an elite would once again come to be in a better position due to the theory of meritocracy.

Perhaps it is best to see individual freedom and equality co-existing as much as they can and at certain times maybe one has more influence over the other, interchangeably.

Thank you

² Freedon pg 141