

Liberalism's Ambitions

JOHN ROSKAM

There is a certain attitude in the world, by some, that says that it's a waste of time to try to promote free societies in parts of the world ... I just strongly disagree with those who do not see the wisdom of trying to promote free societies around the world. If we are interested in protecting our country for the long-term, the best way to do so is to promote freedom and democracy. And I simply do not agree with those who either say overtly or believe that certain societies cannot be free. It's just not a part of my thinking.

— George W. Bush at his first press conference after being re-elected as US President, 4 November 2004

For most of the twentieth century it was the political Left which proclaimed that the world could be made better. Liberalism, as the most important philosophical alternative to the Left, was portrayed as narrow, self-interested, and without hope. Taking as its cue *The Communist Manifesto*, the Left argued that the individual liberties of liberalism were ideas designed merely to protect 'bourgeois society'. Perhaps Marx's most significant contributions to the philosophy of the Left was his belief that to aspire to freedom was illegitimate because freedom was only a 'bourgeois conception' that operated to protect the economic interests of the privileged classes. And of course the freedom at which Marx directed most of his criticism was the freedom to possess private property. Under the lib-

eralism of John Locke, the right to private property flowed inevitably from the recognition that individuals had the right to the fruits of their own labour.

The Australian federal election of 2004 is a long way distant from the 1840s of Karl Marx, but his arguments still resonate. Many in the Labor Party and on the Left have blamed the 'selfishness' of families with mortgages who overwhelmingly voted for the Coalition and who supported John Howard because they believed that the Coalition was more likely than the ALP to keep interest rates low. Barry Jones, the former national president of the ALP, wrote after the election that the Liberal Party could be renamed the 'self-interest party' because 'the main beneficiaries of Liberal rule are essentially the voter and his/her children'. The basis of Jones's complaint—which is that the desire of individuals to own a home and provide financial security for their families is for some reason illegitimate—is little different from that put over 150 years earlier.

Socialism and communism, the two most important ideologies of the Left, differed in some respects, but the objective of each was the same—to achieve nothing less than a dramatically improved society. The Left promised to overcome ignorance, abolish poverty, and institute peace. Ideological and practical revolutionaries of the Left were proud of the fact that they believed their vision was universally applicable to all people of all nations.

The collapse of communism and the failure of socialist states

around the world revealed the Left's vision to be unattainable. In countries where policies inspired by the Left were implemented, the condition of the people was made worse. The record is unambiguous to all except those such as the Hungarian theorist, Gyorgy Lukacs, who asserted in 1919 that Marxism would still be 'true' even if every one of its specific historical claims turned out to be empirically false.

The Left is now beginning to recognize that the obvious can't be ignored indefinitely. Given that the Left's policies have proved disastrous, it might have been assumed that the attraction of its policies might have waned. This is true to some extent, but in the institutions where the Left still holds sway, particularly in parts of the media and academia, those who regard themselves to be of the Left cling to their position as firmly as ever, if not even more firmly than before. What has changed, though, is that no longer does the Left proselytize its own cause in the way that it did, say, in the 1940s or 1950s. It can't do so because the historical record is now apparent. The Left has abandoned the pretence that its policies offer any solutions for the problems of the twenty-first century, and instead its efforts are now devoted to attacking liberalism. Ironically, one of the main criticisms of liberalism made by the Left is that its principles purport to be appropriate regardless of an individual's culture, religion, race or sex. On this basis, the promise of liberalism as something available to all people is no different from the promise made by communism

and socialism. But while the Left incorrectly decries liberalism as 'imperialist' for this reason, it doesn't acknowledge that its own philosophy would be no less 'imperialist'.

A lesson from the history of the twentieth century that the Left pretends it has learned is one which dictates that because the Left's hope for the implementation of a universal philosophy failed, then any other philosophy which likewise aims to be universal will also fail. Such false logic is heard every day, but it is demonstrably wrong. An overweight, middle-aged man would be incorrect if he assumed that because he could not run 100 metres in less than ten seconds then the feat is impossible. It isn't. Even Oxford dons sometimes fall for a similar sort of reasoning.

The once liberal, but now liberal-sceptic, John Gray recently questioned in the *New Statesman* whether liberalism was viable in the long term. He assumed that because neither socialism or communism were viable in the long term, so too liberalism could not be, and he went on to criticize those such as Margaret Thatcher for believing 'that freedom is the natural human condition'. Gray would be more accurate if he had said that for Thatcher, and for George W. Bush, there existed a belief that freedom *should* be the natural human condition, even if, for millions around the world, it was not currently. In their eagerness to condemn Thatcher, Bush and others, Gray and the Left have condemned themselves to a position which accepts that freedom is to be available only to the lucky few.

LIBERALISM'S RESPONSE

In contrast to their opponents, supporters of liberalism have been generally reluctant to make any grandiose claims for their philosophy. Before the Second World War, in those countries where liberalism prevailed, it was assumed to be the

natural political condition. There was little consideration given to enunciating its benefits, and the totalitarian challenges to liberalism were regarded as distant. After 1945, and with the advent of the Cold War, the efforts of liberals were devoted simply to defending liberalism in those places where it existed. Liberals had little commitment to spread the virtues of their philosophy, for to attempt to do so would invite reprisals from those nations that were anything but liberal.

In the second half of the twentieth century, liberalism also became a less coherent philosophical direction, just as 'classical liberalism'—centred on the protection of

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rights—was challenged by 'social liberalism'—founded in the writings of John Stuart Mill, which held that, in some circumstances, government could intrude on the rights of some in order to provide 'positive' rights for others. This was the principle of the 'welfare state' which did much to undermine the faith in liberalism.

Some of the ambivalence liberals have had about their own philosophy was the result of the success of the Left in convincing liberals that liberalism was not uni-

versally applicable, and could only operate in particular communities under special circumstances.

The post-War victories of liberalism around the globe did not embolden liberalism's advocates to take deliberate steps to spread their philosophy. Not until the 1980s did liberal leaders in the West begin to assert the strength of their vision, and proclaim a belief that their own actions could hasten the demise of liberalism's alternatives. There are three essential reasons for the aversion liberals have in advancing their cause, and an examination of those reasons reveals a great deal about the development of liberalism as a political force during the twentieth century.

First, liberalism had no experience in disseminating its message. Liberalism was rooted firmly in the domestic conditions of individual countries, and in so far as liberalism had any international dimension, it was restricted to economics and the freedom to trade. It had no world view, unlike socialism or communism and, before the 1980s, the last time it could be said that it took a position on political and social conditions on a global scale was in the nineteenth century in relation to the abolition of slavery.

Second was the fact that even among some of its most fervent adherents there existed a view that it was unnecessary to promote liberalism because its success was inevitable. This is the basis of Fukuyama's 'the end of history' thesis and it is found in various forms in works such as Thomas Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. Fukuyama and Friedman both believe that the expansion of liberalism cannot be stopped and is irreversible. To Fukuyama, human agency does not have a great deal to do with the adoption of capitalist liberal democracy, and for him the spread of liberalism has as much to do with the inherent weaknesses of socialism and communism as it does with its intrinsic benefits. As

Fukuyama acknowledges, there is a large element of historical determinism in his view that politicians can accelerate or slow the adoption of liberalism, but the process cannot be halted. It is therefore somewhat of a paradox that ‘the end of history’ thesis didn’t appear until after Ronald Reagan had committed the United States to fighting and defeating communism. Fukuyama doesn’t appreciate that the ‘end of history’ was only inevitable because Reagan made it inevitable. Given his position, it is not surprising that Fukuyama has recently expressed doubts about what has been called ‘democratic globalization’—the idea that democracy can become a global phenomenon.

The third reason why the spread of liberalism did not become an objective of liberal countries was that such an aim conflicted with ‘realism’, the dominant theory of foreign relations as practised in the West since at least the Congress of Vienna after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Realism made the defence of self-interest the goal of diplomacy, even if to do so required accommodation with countries that were not liberal. Realists scoffed at suggestions that foreign policy should in any way be motivated by ideology. The convenience of realism made it attractive to generations of Western diplomats who, under its doctrine, had to do nothing more than maintain the international *status quo*.

One of the consequences of realism was to embed a moral equivalence into foreign affairs because whether an ally or enemy operated under a liberal regime was not to be taken into account when determining national interests. A particular problem for realists (and one which they have suffered acutely after September 11) is that if the only approach that they apply to foreign policy is one of practicality and so-called ‘reality’, they have no way of understanding, let alone

dealing with, those who do not decide their actions according to practical or realistic measures—for example, fundamentalist religious terrorists.

NEO-CONSERVATISM AND LIBERALISM

In the last few years, ‘neo-conservatism’ is the label that has been given to the idea that liberal nations can, and should attempt to, spread political and economic liberalism to nations that are not liberal. Interestingly, 20 years ago, neo-conservatives were usually defined as ‘realists’, but now the two are regarded as polar opposites. Those who believe in ‘neo-conservatism’, the ‘neo-cons’, are thought

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to be epitomised in George W. Bush. ‘Neo-conservative’ is a complete misdescription, because such a doctrine is anything but conservative, for it is a repudiation of the methods employed by liberal states in the West for the last 100 years.

Neo-conservatism is often presented as something new and radical, but its underlying assumption, which is that liberalism is a non-negotiable value, is hardly original. This premise motivated the great statesmen of the Second World War—Churchill, Roosevelt, and Truman. The Left persists in using

the term ‘neo-conservative’ because it refuses to acknowledge that the philosophical basis of neo-conservatism lies in liberalism. If anything, ‘neo-liberalism’ would be a more appropriate term, if it were not for the complication that neo-liberalism itself has already come to take up such a broad range of connotations as to be almost meaningless.

Neo-conservatism has been attacked by both the Left and the realists. The Left’s criticism of neo-conservatism can be easily understood because the Left is opposed to the liberalism upon which neo-conservatism is grounded. The objection of realists to neo-conservatism arises from a different perspective. Realists argue that the ideal of twenty-first-century neo-conservatism, which is the establishment of political and economic liberalism throughout the world, is as unattainable as was the twentieth century ideal of the Left. However, such a position only considers *what* happened, and it ignores *why* it happened. Further, consistent with their tradition, which discounts the role of ideology, realists forget the essential differences between the doctrines of the Left and of liberals.

The vision of the Left failed because socialism and communism denied the essential human desire for self-determination. Liberalism offers many things, but, at its core, it recognizes that all individuals, regardless of their race, sex or religion, should decide for themselves how they are to live. In so far as this is its core principle, neo-conservatism provides a far greater chance of overcoming ignorance, abolishing poverty, and instituting peace, than ever did its alternatives.

John Roskam is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs and a former Executive Director of The Menzies Research Centre in Canberra.

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