

IEA Discussion Paper No.113

# TAKING LIBERTIES

Why postliberals are wrong about  
personal freedom

Jamie Whyte  
September 2022



**iea**  
Institute of  
Economic Affairs

With some exceptions, such as with the publication of lectures, IEA Discussion Papers are blind peer-reviewed by at least one academic or researcher who is an expert in the field. As with all IEA publications, the views expressed in IEA Discussion Papers are those of the author and not those of the Institute (which has no corporate view), its managing trustees, Academic Advisory Council or senior staff.

# Contents

About the author	4
Summary	6
Introduction	7
How bad is the modern world?	10
The welfare state versus social solidarity	13
Individualism and the big state	18
Why politicians should not decide how you live	22
References	27



**Jamie Whyte** is the former Research Director at the Institute of Economic Affairs. Prior to joining the IEA, Jamie was the leader of ACT New Zealand as well as the Head of Research and Publishing at Oliver Wyman Financial Services. He has previously worked as a management consultant for the Boston Consulting Group, as a philosophy lecturer at Cambridge University and as a foreign currency trader.

## Summary

- Postliberalism has emerged as an influential ideology, especially on the political right. Its leading figures include Patrick Deneen and Adrian Vermeule in the U.S. and Philip Blond and Nick Timothy in the U.K.
- Postliberals claim that liberalism has caused the woes of the contemporary West. They use 'liberalism' to cover both classical liberals and liberals in the modern American sense: that is, left-wing progressives. Postliberals reject the liberal tenet that the state should be neutral about the nature of the good life. Instead, it should use its powers to promote a Christian and communitarian conception of the good life.
- Postliberals fail to make their case that liberalism has harmed Western populations because they do not take proper account of the gains due to liberalism. And much of what they lament is caused not by individual liberty but by the growth of the state since WWI.
- Postliberals claim, however, that the individualism of classical liberalism inevitably leads to the growth of the state. Alas, they mistake individualism for the view that the state should remove all impediments to the satisfaction of individuals' desires when, in fact, it is the view that individuals should make decisions for themselves. They are wrong to conflate classical liberalism and progressivism.
- They are also wrong to recommend that politicians promote a particular conception of the good life. No one is clever enough to know how strangers should live better than those strangers do themselves. And no one is virtuous enough to be trusted with the power to make others live as he sees fit.

# Introduction

Phillip Blond is a theologian, political theorist and director of the think tank ResPublica. He came to prominence in 2010 with the publication of his *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It*, which rejected the economic and social liberalism that he believed had dominated British public policy for too long. For a while he had the ear of David Cameron, and his thinking lay behind the Big Society policy programme.

Nothing much came of the Big Society, and Blond is no longer a topic of newspaper articles. Yet his ideas thrive. Over the last five years, enough other intellectuals have joined him to give us a proper movement, going by the name of *postliberalism*.<sup>1</sup> The leading postliberal intellectuals in America are Patrick Deneen, a professor of political theory at the University of Notre Dame, the Harvard legal scholar Adrian Vermeule and Sohrab Ahmari, a columnist. In England, the big names on the postliberal right are Blond and Nick Timothy, Theresa May's campaign manager in the 2017 general election. On the postliberal left – the 'Blue Labour' movement – are Adrian Pabst, a political theorist at the University of Kent, and David Goodhart, the journalist who founded *Prospect* magazine. All have recently published books espousing a version of postliberalism.<sup>2</sup>

Postliberals are left-wingers about economic policy. Like any *Guardian* columnist, they believe free markets cause unfair inequality, undermine

---

1 The political philosopher John Gray published *Post-liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* in 1993. And he has been expressing scepticism about human progress under liberalism for many years before Blond (2010). But his early use of 'postliberalism' did not catch on, perhaps because he did not advance a postliberal policy agenda.

2 See Goodhart (2017), Deneen (2018), Timothy (2020), Pabst (2021), Ahmari (2021) and Vermeule (2022).

social solidarity and damage the environment. But they are right-wingers about social policy. They think the left's obsession with diversity and 'identity' and its hostility to patriotism and religion undermine social solidarity and detach people from what gives life meaning.

More generally, postliberals reject the liberal idea that the state should be neutral about the nature of 'the good life'. On the contrary, they believe politicians should take a view about the good life – specifically, the postliberals' traditionalist view – and use the powers of the state to make sure that people live it. Describing his postliberal legal philosophy, Vermeule explains that

unlike legal liberalism, common-good constitutionalism does not suffer from a horror of political domination and hierarchy, because it sees that law is parental, a wise teacher and an inculcator of good habits. Just authority in rulers can be exercised for the good of subjects, if necessary even against the subjects' own perceptions of what is best for them.<sup>3</sup>

The countries now governed in the way most congenial to the (right-wing) postliberals are Hungary and Poland.<sup>4</sup> And many right-wing politicians in other Western countries are coming around. Not only populist right-wingers, such as Marine Le Pen, but centrists, such as Theresa May, espouse roughly the same ideas as the intellectual postliberals, if not in the same words. America's Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) was held in Budapest this year.

This rejection of liberalism is a serious mistake. But that is not what I argue in this paper, except briefly, at the end. Rather, I argue that the postliberals' argument against liberalism – that it has immiserated the populations of modern Western countries – is mistaken. Postliberals are overly gloomy about the modern world. And most of the things they lament, insofar as they are genuinely lamentable, are products not of liberalism but of the progressive ideas that produced the welfare state – the ideas characteristic of the UK Labour Party and of the US Democratic Party since World War I.

---

3 Vermeule, A. Beyond Originalism. *The Atlantic*, 31 March 2020 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/common-good-constitutionalism/609037/>)

4 'The future of post-liberalism; an international seminar', ResPublica (<https://www.respublica.org.uk/event/the-future-of-post-liberalism-an-international-seminar/>)



Postliberals recognise that the growth of the state has produced much of what they dislike about the modern world. But they claim that a big state is not contrary to classical liberalism. Rather, they claim, it is necessary for it and, therefore, a consequence of it. Postliberals conflate the liberalism of Margaret Thatcher with the liberalism of Hillary Clinton, not from confusion caused by a homonym, but as an explicit thesis. Nevertheless, the conflation is spurious. It is based on misunderstanding the individualism of classical liberalism – taking it to mean that people should be freed from impediments to the satisfaction of their desires when in fact it means that they should make decisions for themselves.

Postliberals reject individualism, properly understood, for the same reason that progressives do. When individual choice is maximised, social arrangements cannot be planned. Society is then a ‘spontaneous order’, as Hayek (1967) put it: the unplanned result of countless decisions by millions of individual people. This is disagreeable to postliberals because they believe themselves to know how society should be arranged. They think they know what people should value, how they should live, and who should have how much of what.

That’s where they go wrong.

## How bad is the modern world?

Liberalism has harmed society. That's what postliberals claim. As with an accusation of grievous bodily harm, where the prosecution must show both that someone has been injured and that the accused did it, postliberals must show both that society has been harmed and that liberalism did it. This section concerns the first of the postliberals' obligations. Has life really become worse during the last two centuries in which liberalism has (more or less) prevailed?

No one can seriously deny that the material condition of modern Westerners is better than it was in 1822. Life expectancy in the UK has risen from 40 to 80. Per capita GDP in the UK has risen from \$3,000 to \$42,000 (in 2022 dollars) and to \$64,000 in the US. These impressive numbers do not reveal the extraordinary advances in the kinds of goods that are now available. In 1822 much of what we now take for granted was hardly imaginable: electric lighting, antibiotics, jet airlines, television, mobile phones, computers, instant access to all human knowledge via the internet... And this astonishing progress is not merely coincident with liberalism but produced by it. More precisely, it is a result of free-market capitalism, however imperfectly realised, which is simply liberalism applied to the economic sphere.

Of course, postliberals do not complain about the material progress caused by economic liberalism (except when it produces isolating technology, such as mobile phones). They are concerned with the moral or social effects of liberalism. Phillip Blond begins his 2010 *Red Tory* with a list of his concerns:

Something is seriously wrong with Britain. This is an intuition that everybody, whatever their politics, shares. But what is this malaise from which we suffer? We all know the symptoms: increasing fear, lack of trust and abundance of suspicion, long-term increase in

---

violent crime, loneliness, recession, depression, private and public debt, family break-up, divorce, infidelity, bureaucratic and unresponsive public services, dirty hospitals, powerlessness, the rise of racism, excessive paperwork, longer and longer working hours, children who have no parents, concentrated and seemingly irremovable poverty, the permanence of inequality, teenagers with knives, teenagers being knifed, the decline of politeness, aggressive youths, the erosion of our civil liberties and the increase of obsessive surveillance, public authoritarianism, private libertarianism, general pointlessness, political cynicism and a pervading lack of daily joy.

Many of these claims are difficult to test. How, for example, might we measure the quantity of general pointlessness suffered by the population. Other claims are simply false. For example, in 2010 working hours were not getting 'longer and longer'. On the contrary, average weekly working hours per worker had never been lower, having fallen to 32 from 34 in 1980 and 53 in 1870.<sup>5</sup> Nor was violent crime on the rise. The homicide rate in the UK was 0.6 per 100,000 people in 2010, having fallen from 1.2 in 1984 and 2 in 1812.<sup>6</sup>

Never mind these errors. You get the gist of what Blond disliked about the Britain of 2010 and, his current commentary suggests, still dislikes about the Britain of 2022.<sup>7</sup> His fellow right-wing postliberals share his sentiments. They behold the modern world with the disapproval that you might expect from a time-travelling eighteenth century clergyman, which is unsurprising given that they are Christians – the Americans Catholic and the Brits Anglican. I make this observation only to clarify the postliberals' concerns, not to dismiss them. Many people, whether religious or not, will lament the prevalence of single parent households, of knife crime among teenagers, of isolated and lonely old people.

The important question is whether such regrettable features of modern life really are consequences of liberalism. In the next section, I will argue that they are not. But before doing so, we should note that, even if they were, this would not suffice to condemn liberalism. For great moral and

---

5 Giattino, C., Ortiz-Ospina, E., & Roser, M. (2020) Working Hours. OurWorldInData.org. (<https://ourworldindata.org/working-hours>)

6 Roser, M., & Ritchie, H. (2013) Homicides. OurWorldInData.org. (<https://ourworldindata.org/homicides>)

7 See, for example, 'The future of post-liberalism; an international seminar', ResPublica (<https://www.respublica.org.uk/event/the-future-of-post-liberalism-an-international-seminar/>)

social progress has been made during the liberal era. Slavery has been abolished. Women can now attend university, vote, and borrow money without the permission of a male relative. In the US, blacks and Jews may now attend university. Homosexuality is no longer illegal. The penal system is less brutal and, as Pinker (2011) has shown, people are generally subject to less violence. The law no longer permits a man to beat or rape his wife.

Postliberals have little-to-nothing to say about this progress.<sup>8</sup> It is a serious weakness in their argument. Liberalism may have had ill-effects A, B and C. But this does not suffice to condemn it if it has also had good effects X, Y and Z. Perhaps X, Y and Z are worth A, B and C. No strict accounting may be possible when it comes to social or moral goods and ills, no precise calculation of the net gain or loss. But a rough-and-ready weighing-up is possible. Ask yourself if you would rather live in the Britain or America of today or of 1822. To be clear that only social changes are being considered, imagine the material conditions of life today were unchanged from 1822 (though, of course, material and social conditions are never entirely separate). I, for one, would rather live in 1822 material conditions combined with 2022 social conditions than in the material and social conditions of 1822. And I imagine the same would be true of most people I know. By our lights, the combined social gains and losses of the liberal era have been net positive.

Perhaps we are wrong. But if the postliberals are going to argue against liberalism on the basis of the social harm it has caused, they need to *show* that we are wrong. Which they cannot do if they simply ignore the gains. Everything comes at a price, including liberalism. That doesn't suffice to show that it is a bad deal.

---

8 Deneen (2018: 182) concedes that 'the achievements of liberalism must be acknowledged'. But he violates his own imperative by acknowledging none. Nor, therefore, does he weigh the gains against what he claims to be losses caused by liberalism.

## The welfare state versus social solidarity

Imagine a society where the state played the minimal role advocated by libertarians such as Robert Nozick (1974). It protects the population from external aggression by supplying an army; it protects the population from crime by supplying a criminal justice system; it enforces property rights and contracts. It does not regulate commerce; it does not supply healthcare or education; and it does not provide pensions or income insurance. Would society suffer more or less of what bothers postliberals? Would society be more or less 'atomised'?

Start with single-parent households. Without tax-funded welfare payments, many people who are now single parents could not afford to be. They would need financial support from a spouse or the equivalent. By providing a tax-funded income to single parents, the government subsidises single-parent households. And what you subsidise, you get more of.

This straightforward economic analysis is supported by history. Single parenthood has increased dramatically since the advent of the welfare state after World War II. And it explains why it has increased most among the poor. Single parenthood on the state-supplied income is a bad deal for someone who would otherwise earn a high income but a good deal for someone who would otherwise earn little.

The US provides a vivid illustration of this dynamic. In 1950, nine per cent of black children lived with a single parent (usually their mother), roughly the same as the rate for white children. By 2019, 64 per cent did, more

than double the 24 per cent rate for white children.<sup>9</sup> Most of this change happened in the 1970s and 1980s. Why? The obvious explanation is the advent of generous single-mother benefits as part of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society policies introduced in 1964. In 1975, a mother with no 'man in the house' could receive \$20,000 [over \$90,000 in 2022 dollars] a year from the government (Peterson 2015). In other words, Great Society policies made cohabiting with low-income fathers a financial loss for mothers. And black men, on average, have lower incomes than white men.

Of course, the advent of the welfare state is not the only change that encouraged single-parent families. Divorce became legally easier in the UK in 1969 and the social stigma associated with divorce and with having children out of wedlock declined. Incomes have also risen considerably since 1945, which means that more people who prefer raising a child without a partner can afford to do so even without tax-funded benefits. But this doesn't show that tax-funded incomes for single parents did not also increase the number of single-parent families. A social trend can have more than one cause.

What's more, social welfare probably played a role in reducing the stigma associated with a man abandoning his family. Prior to the introduction of the welfare state, he might have been leaving them destitute. After its introduction, he was not. His action was no longer quite so harmful for the mother and children and, as a consequence, people became less disapproving of it. The welfare state relaxes the social discipline on biological fathers.

Similarly, when relieved of the burden of supporting the unplanned offspring of their teenaged children, parents are less concerned to police their sexual conduct. The welfare state makes parents more permissive. All of which is to say that, if the British state conformed to the model recommended by libertarianism, single-parent families would be less common and social attitudes would be more conservative. Society would be more congenial to those with the sensibilities of postliberals.

---

9 'Children in single-parent families by race', KIDS COUNT Data Center (<https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/107-children-in-single-parent-families-by-race#detailed/1/any/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/10,11,9,12,1,185,13/432,431>)

Or consider what postliberals call intermediary institutions – trade unions, friendly societies, churches, and the like – whose decline they lament. All flourished in the late nineteenth century, the period of British history which most closely conformed to the libertarian model. As with families, one reason for belonging to these organisations is that they provide income insurance. Fall on hard times and you can seek help from your friendly society, trade union or church.

This means that the role and importance of these institutions is reduced by tax-funded government-supplied income insurance. If the government taxes you to contribute to its income insurance scheme, you have less need of a friendly society or trade union and less money to pay the membership fees (insurance premiums). In 1892, six million of the UK's seven million male industrial workers were members of a friendly society (Bartholomew 2006, Ch. 2). They paid in their fees and, if they became ill or lost their job through no fault of their own, they were paid out an income from the pooled fees of all the members. Membership of friendly societies began to decline from 1911 when the UK government introduced a compulsory national insurance scheme covering loss of income due to illness or incapacity. And it collapsed after 1946 when the scheme was extended to cover unemployment unrelated to incapacity (Bartholomew 2006, Ch. 2). Similarly, government intervention in the labour market, such as minimum wages and the regulation of working conditions and hours, reduces workers' incentive to join a trade union.

As these examples should make clear, friendly societies, trade unions and the like are not intermediary institutions. They do not intermediate between the state and citizens. Rather, they provide services that the state now also provides. They compete with the state. But it is not a competition they can win because, unlike the state, they cannot force people to pay for their services. The welfare state crowds out these voluntary organisations. So, again, if the state played the minimal role advocated by libertarians, society would be more to the liking of postliberals, with income insurance being supplied by a variety of organisations, some of which would probably be based on the shared characteristics of policy-holders, such as their profession or religion.

One last example of libertarian social solidarity. Postliberals are hostile to immigration because the cultural diversity it creates breaks down social

solidarity, which they believe is premised on a shared culture.<sup>10</sup> Let's accept the idea that people with the same culture find it easier to trust one another and to cooperate. This fact means that, left to their own devices, people will tend to live in places where most people share their culture – at least, insofar as they care about solidarity enough to bear whatever costs this choice entails.

A vivid example is provided by immigration to New York during the nineteenth century, when America more closely resembled the libertarian model. Chinese congregated in lower Manhattan, Germans in the lower East Side, Irish in Hell's Kitchen, Italians in Brooklyn. The same phenomenon can be observed at the level of whole cities or states. The Irish concentrated in Boston, Germans in Pennsylvania, Swedes in Wisconsin. As the immigrants and their children adopted the norms of the evolving wider culture, these concentrations dispersed. In short, social solidarity based on a common culture is likely to be achieved under a libertarian regime with open immigration.

I presume that postliberals would approve of this voluntary cultural sorting, since, they believe, it promotes social solidarity within local communities (if not nationally). Such voluntary cultural sorting is still possible and, indeed, still happens. In England, for example, West Indians are concentrated in South London, Bangladeshis in East London and Pakistanis in northern cities such as Bradford, Leeds and Manchester. Outside the cities, Britain is populated almost entirely by white Brits. The localities people live in are thus less culturally diverse than Britain is. And within these localities, people are free to associate with whomever they like. Those who find it difficult to trust people with different cultures can restrict their important relationships to people within their culture.

Except when the state interferes. Many poor people in Britain and America are housed by the state. This reduces their ability to choose where they live and thereby increases the chance that people who do not trust each other will be forced to associate. State schools have the same effect. The government taxes people to fund schools that are then provided at no price. Only the rich can afford to throw away the free education offered to them by the state and pay for a private education from their post-tax income. Sex education at state schools attended by Muslim pupils has

---

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Goodhart (2013) who broke ranks with the left-wing consensus in favour of immigration because, he believes, it undermines social solidarity among the British working class.



become a fraught issue in the UK. The problem is a consequence of the government's involvement in education. If they had any effective choice in the matter, many Muslim parents would not send their children to schools that give the sex education now supplied by the British state. Again, the absence of solidarity is caused not by individual liberty but by the state's interference with it.

## Individualism and the big state

As noted, postliberals reject the argument of the previous section because they believe that classical liberalism or libertarianism inevitably leads to progressive policies. In the end, classical liberalism and a big state are a package deal. Or, as expressed in the idiom of Blond (2010):

Liberalism, then, paradoxically tends to promote a totalising unity within an overriding collectivist framework that nullifies opposition in the very name of negative freedom. (Kindle edition, location 2108)

But why does classical liberalism lead to a big state? Blond, Deneen and Pabst all make the same argument, which runs like this:

1. Classical liberalism is committed to individualism
2. Individualism is the idea that obstacles to the gratification of individuals' desires should be removed by the state
3. Traditional bonds of family, community and church are obstacles to gratifying the desires of individuals
4. Therefore: Classical liberalism requires the state to replace the family, community and church in performing the economic and disciplining roles that these institutions had traditionally played.

Many readers will find it hard to believe that this is the argument. So, before showing where it goes wrong, I should quote the authors concerned. According to Blond (2010):

...an authoritarian state claims only to intrude upon the will of the individual when it moves against those associations that are restrictive of individual freedom. By attacking potential constraints,

rather than promoting specific goals, it seeks to insulate itself against opposition *by perpetually eradicating anything that might prove a barrier to self-gratification* ... Competing claims to loyalty, from customary tradition, localities and the family, are anathema to this modern state, because they are supposedly anathema to the unfettered freedom of individual agency. (Kindle edition, location 2115: my italics)

Here is Deneen (2018: 48-49):

...the definition of natural liberty posited in the “state of nature” becomes a regulative ideal – liberty is ideally the agent’s ability to do whatever he likes ... Thus one of the liberal state’s main roles becomes the active liberation of individuals *from any limiting conditions*. At the forefront of liberal theory is the liberation from natural limitations on the achievement of our desires... (my italics)

Finally Pabst. Here I quote not from his 2021 book but from an interview with Jason Cowley, the editor of the *New Statesman*, upon its publication.<sup>11</sup> When Cowley asks ‘what is the essence of individualism, liberal individualism?’, Pabst replies:

Unrestrained, unlimited desire. That means that our individual desires will trump anything else. So selfishness and greed will trump any form of generosity or solidarity. And [this] will mean it is not just atomization or fragmentation but, as Hobbes already diagnosed, paradoxically, the war of all against all. But it will then mean precisely authoritarian power to keep that anarchy somehow in check. So individualism and some form of authoritarian power always go hand in hand. And that’s what neither liberals nor authoritarians really understand. They’re just two sides of the same coin.

The first mistake in the postliberals’ argument is in their characterisation of individualism. It is not the thesis that the state should relieve individuals of any impediment to the gratification of their desires. It is the idea that individuals should make decisions for themselves. Imagine a man getting dressed before going to work. An individualist says that he should decide for himself what he will wear. This is quite different from saying that he

---

<sup>11</sup> ‘The Postliberal Moment’, Adrian Pabst in conversation with Jason Cowley. YouTube ([Minute 29](#)).

should face no obstacles in dressing how he wants. For example, I would like to wear tailor made Savile Row suits to work. But I face an obstacle: they cost about £5,000. An individualist thinks that this price is something I should take into account when making my decision, not an obstacle that the state should remove.

As this example shows, everyone is an individualist about some things. Even Blond, Deneen and Pabst will not, I trust, deny that adults should decide for themselves who to marry, what to eat, which music to listen to, what time to go to bed and so on and on? What distinguishes those who are properly called individualists is that they think individual decision making should be given the widest possible scope. Or, to put it the other way around, they think that the proper limitations on individual decision making are very small.

We need not take any view on precisely what these proper limits are. What matters here is simply to note that individualism is a thesis about decision making, not about removing impediments to the gratification of desire. In fact, this characterisation is diametrically opposed to the views of classical liberals. Consider the owner of a company trying to raise capital to invest in a new venture. An obstacle he faces to the gratification of this desire is the reluctance of investors to part with their money unless they feel confident of getting a good return on their investment. Governments occasionally relieve business owners of this obstacle by giving them capital acquired by taxation. Classical liberals *object* to this. They think business owners should face the obstacle of raising capital from willing investors. More generally, they object to governments distorting markets by selectively removing obstacles, such as foreign competition, for the benefit of people they favour, such as domestic farmers. The market or price system, beloved of classical liberals, is not a mechanism for removing the obstacle (to sellers) presented by buyers' preferences or the obstacle (to buyers) of competition for scarce resources. It is a way of making those obstacles constrain economic activity.

The postliberals' misrepresentation of individualism is strange. To the best of my knowledge, no serious individualist thinker has ever suggested that liberty requires the government to remove obstacles to the gratification of desires – not John Locke, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Frédéric Bastiat, Friedrich Hayek or Milton Friedman. Indeed, Hayek (1960: 15) explicitly rejects the idea:

...until comparative recently few people seriously confused this “freedom from” obstacles, this freedom that means omnipotence, with the individual freedom that any kind of social order can achieve.

Never mind how the postliberals could have made this mistake. They *have* made a serious mistake. The second premise of their argument is false.

So is the third. Traditional bonds of family, community and church are not necessarily impediments to the gratification of individual desires. It all depends on what you want. Imagine an 18-year-old woman living in traditional church-going Catholic family in a conservative American town. These bonds will impede her if she wants to have pre-marital sex or if, having done so and fallen pregnant, she wants an abortion. But they will help her if she is short of money or wants contacts that will help her get a job. More directly, people feel affection for their families, neighbours and colleagues. For example, many parents want to spend time with their children. Some children even want to spend time with their parents.

Immediately after absurdly claiming that individualism means ‘selfishness and greed will trump any form of generosity or solidarity’ – can Pabst really believe this is what individualists recommend? – he goes on to say that ‘the alternative is quite simply to follow through on our natural desire, our natural longing for solidarity and fraternity’.<sup>12</sup> But if we have a natural desire for solidarity and fraternity, why are families and communities impediments to the gratification of our desires? Why is individualism at odds with social institutions of the kind valued by postliberals? The answer, of course, is that it isn’t.

---

12 *Ibid.* (Minute 30).

## Why politicians should not decide how you live

Classical liberalism does not really entail statism. Lumping classical liberalism and progressivism together under 'liberalism' is a mistake. Nevertheless, postliberals really do reject classical liberalism, even when properly understood. As noted in the introduction, they reject the idea that the state should be neutral about the nature of 'the good life'. Rather, politicians should take a view on the proper way of life and use the state's powers – in law-making, state education, taxation, immigration policy and the like – to promote it.

As noted, postliberals are keen on 'solidarity'. They think a good life is 'embedded', by which they mean that it revolves around associations of family, church, local community and nation. And they think that economic activity should be politically directed towards reducing inequality (within countries, if not between them) and giving workers job security. During an online conference on the Future of Postliberalism, hosted by Blond's thinktank ResPublica, Deneen summarised their goals thus:

The goods of a postliberal society are ... certain universal human goods. And those universal human goods would have to begin with the formation of good and sound families, good and sound marriages, education that works in concert with families to cultivate virtue and good character in children, a market and economic order that is embedded within a political order and therefore oriented toward the common good...<sup>13</sup>

---

13 'The future of post-liberalism; an international seminar', ResPublica (<https://www.respublica.org.uk/event/the-future-of-post-liberalism-an-international-seminar/>) (Minute 63).

Showing where the postliberals' moral authoritarianism goes wrong could occupy a book, not because there is so much wrong with it but because properly explaining the error takes us into deep territory. Nevertheless, I will try to do the job in just a few pages by making a simple argument with as few contentious commitments as possible.

Start by asking what is required for people to benefit from living under a regime in which politicians use state power to make them live 'the good life'. First, there must be such a thing as the good life. If there is no such thing, politicians cannot discover it and make everyone live it. But the idea that there is a single 'good life', which everyone would benefit from living, is an implausible idea.

For simplicity, and just to get started, suppose that an outcome is good for someone insofar as it makes her happy. Suppose, in other words, that we equate value with happiness – the happier something makes someone, the better it is for her. This theory of value means that there are universal human goods, to use Deneen's expression, only if some things make everyone happy. This is an empirical question that cannot be answered by the theory of value itself. But let's concede that there are some. We still don't have enough for a single 'good life' nor for the weaker claim that everyone is better off with these universal goods.

Suppose that being in a 'good and sound marriage', which Deneen claims to be a universal good, is a source of happiness for all humans. Policies that cause more people to marry, perhaps by way of tax incentives, can still harm them. For being in a good and sound marriage involves forgoing other sources of happiness. John might also gain happiness from travelling the world alone, from seducing strangers at nightclubs, from studying philosophy in every hour available to him, or from all manner of things that are at odds with a good and sound marriage.

The best outcome for John is the best *trade-off* between incompatible sources of happiness. Even if marriage is, in itself, a source of happiness for everyone, it doesn't follow that John will be happier married than single. Which trade-off will make John happiest depends on things particular to him, such as his circumstances, capabilities and tastes. Since the same goes for everyone else, and since the relevant circumstances, capabilities and tastes vary, so do the best trade-offs.

It may seem that my argument here depends on the happiness theory of value, which many reject. It doesn't. We get the same result if we adopt the view that something is good for someone insofar as she prefers it to her alternatives (when well informed).<sup>14</sup> Perhaps there are some things that everyone prefers to nothing: that is, some things that everyone values positively. It doesn't follow that everyone's preferred life includes these universal human goods. John might value marriage positively but prefer to be single. I value the money in my bank account but I still spend it when I prefer having what I buy with it. And preferences, like the causes of happiness, vary between people. If value is preference satisfaction, there is no single good life nor any universal goods which are part of every good life.

Or consider the so-called objective list approach to analysing value.<sup>15</sup> On this approach, the theorist simply lists the things that make a life good. I call it an approach rather than a theory because different theorists offer different lists and hence different theories. For example, according to Baron Skidelsky of Tilton and his son Edward Skidelsky (2013), a good life is one that contains health, security, friendship, leisure, personality, respect and harmony with nature.

Let's grant that this list omits nothing it should contain and contains nothing it should omit. Still, it does not specify the good life. For the elements on the list are often at odds with one another. Jill lives in the country where she enjoys harmony with nature. But she misses her friends who live in London. Which life is better? The one with more harmony with nature but less friendship or the one with more friendship but less harmony with nature. Unlike the happiness and preference theories, the Skidelskys' theory lacks the resources to answer the question, as do all versions of the objective list approach. Even the objective list approach – apparently, the most congenial to moral authoritarians – gives us no reason to believe there is a good life.

In short, the first requirement for justifying the postliberals' proposed way-of-life authoritarianism is not met. The idea that there is a good life that everyone should live is implausible. But even if postliberals or some other theorists could make a convincing argument that one exists, that wouldn't

---

14 See, for example, Sobel (2017).

15 Parfitt (1984: 493) claims that theories of well-being come in three varieties: hedonistic theories, preference satisfaction theories and objective list theories. The happiness theory discussed above is a variety of a hedonistic theory, as would be a theory that equates value with pleasure.



suffice to warrant politicians using state power to impose it on the population. The politicians concerned would also need to know what this good life is, while the people on whom it is imposed do not. But why should we believe that politicians are especially good at identifying facts about value?

Suppose they deferred to the experts when it comes to such matters: namely, the philosophers who work in this field. If they deferred to those philosophers who equate value with happiness or preference satisfaction, they would soon be told that there is no one good life for everyone. If they deferred to objective list theorists, matters would not be much improved. Because, whatever the method or methods used by these theorists, they deliver quite different lists of universal human goods. We have already seen the Skidelskys' list. Here are the lists of three other philosophers who take this approach:

According to Finnis (1980) anyone has a good life insofar as he has the following: Life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, sociability (friendship), practical reasonableness and 'religion' (his quotation marks).

Murphy (2001) thinks Finnis got it wrong. He claims that a good life consists in: Life, knowledge, aesthetic experience, excellence in work and play, excellence in agency, inner peace, friendship and community, religion, happiness.

Fletcher (2013) disagrees with both of the above and with the Skidelskys. According to him, the proper list is: Achievement, Friendship, Happiness, Pleasure, Self-Respect, Virtue (his capitals).

Perhaps one of them has really got it right. But how should the Minister for the Good Life know which one? And even if, implausibly, the Minister is a brilliant philosopher who can decide this matter correctly, she will still face the trade-off problem. How will she know which trade-off between the competing goods on the correct list is best for the millions of individuals on whom she imposes her conception of the good life?

Of course, the Minister doesn't need perfect knowledge of how you should live to benefit you with her state-backed guidance. She need only know better than you do. But how could she? You know an enormous amount about yourself and your circumstances. The Minister knows next to nothing about either.

The postliberals' proposal assumes a remarkable degree of wisdom and virtue on the part of politicians. They apparently imagine politicians to be superior beings of some kind. Yet they are all too human. The closest the UK now has to a Minister for the Good Life is the Minister for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. The role is currently occupied by Nadine Dorries. The idea that Nadine Dorries knows better than you do how you should lead your life is preposterous. I do not mean to pick on Ms Dorries. I cannot think of any government minister who is up to the job. Nor anyone in the shadow cabinet. Indeed, I cannot think of any religious or political leader up to the job – not the Pope, not the Dalai Lama, not Ali Khamenei, not Xi Jinping, not Kim Jong-un, not Donald Trump, not Joe Biden, not Volodymyr Zelenskyy, not Justin Trudeau, not even Jacinda Ardern. Nor is any public intellectual or business titan or sports star up to the job.

Human fallibility, both intellectual and moral, furnishes a simple argument for liberalism. No one is smart enough to know how strangers should live better than those strangers do themselves. And no one is sufficiently virtuous to be trusted with the power to make others live as she wants them to.

Postliberals should not need to be reminded that humility is a Christian virtue.

## References

Ahmari, S. (2021) *The Unbroken Thread: Discovering the Wisdom of Tradition in an Age of Chaos*. New York: Hodder & Stroughton.

Bartholomew, J. (2006) *The Welfare State We're In*. London: Politico's.

Blond, P. (2010) *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It*. London: Faber and Faber.

Deneen, P. (2018) *Why Liberalism Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Finnis, J. (1980) *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Fletcher, G. (2013) A Fresh Start for the Objective List Theory of Well-Being. *Utilitas* 25: 206-220.

Goodhart, D. (2013) *The British Dream: Successes and Failures of Post-War Immigration*. London: Atlantic.

Goodhart, D. (2017) *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*. London: Hurst.

Gray, J. (1993) *Post-liberalism: Studies in Political Thought*. London & New York: Routledge.

Jefferson, T. (1997) [1776] *Declaration of Independence*. New York: Applewood Books.

Hayek, F. (1960) *The Constitution of Liberty*. London: Routledge.

- Hayek, F. (1967) The Result of Human Action but not of Human Design, in in *Studies in Philosophy: Politics and Economics*. London: Routledge
- Hayek, F. (1988) *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Locke, J. (1988) [1689] *Two Treatises of Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Murphy, M. (2001) *Natural Law and Natural Rationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nozick, R. (1974) *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Pabst, A. (2021) *Postliberal Politics: The Coming Era of Renewal*. London: Polity.
- Parfitt, D. (1984) *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Peterson, P. E. (2015) Government should subsidize, not tax, marriage: Social policies have influenced the rate of growth in single parent families. *Education Next* 15: 64-68.
- Pinker, S. (2011) *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity*. London: Penguin.
- Skidelsky, E. and Skidelsky, R. (2013) *How Much is Enough: Money and the Good Life*. London: Penguin.
- Sobel, D. (2017) *From Valuing to Value: A Defense of Subjectivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Timothy, N. (2020) *Remaking One Nation: The Future of Conservatism*. London: Polity.
- Vermeule, A. (2022) *Common Good Constitutionalism*. Oxford: Polity.

The Institute of Economic Affairs  
2 Lord North Street  
London SW1P 3LB  
Tel 020 7799 8900  
email [iea@iea.org.uk](mailto:iea@iea.org.uk)

The logo for the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) features the lowercase letters 'iea' in a bold, serif font. A small red dot is positioned above the letter 'i'.

Institute of  
Economic Affairs