Is Liberalism Dead? Part 1

By Steven Yates

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“So much of liberalism in its classical sense is taken for granted in the West today and even disrespected. We take freedom for granted, and because of this we don’t understand how incredibly vulnerable it is.” —Niall Ferguson

What is liberalism? How did it originate?

A specter is haunting Western civilization: the specter of the *demise of liberalism* — completely, in all forms. What is, or perhaps was, liberalism? What made it attractive. What seemed to make it successful? What has undermined its apparent success? What replaces it? These are themes I wish to explore in this series.

The terms *liberal* and *liberalism* have more than one meaning, obviously. To some, *liberalism* just means what the Democratic Party has been promoting for the past 60-odd years, although I’ve the sense that most liberals in that sense would rather be called progressives today. That’s an indication that the word is somewhat sullied. We’ll see that liberalism in this sense is a misnomer, in any event: “liberals” in that sense aren’t really *liberal* at all as the idea was once conceived.

Once, long ago, there was *classical* liberalism, associated with nineteenth century economic thinkers like Frederic Bastiat (author of *The Law*, *Economic Sophisms*, etc.) and nineteenth century philosophers like John Stuart Mill (who penned the seminal tracts *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism*).

Classical liberalism promoted free (though not necessarily unregulated!) markets and maximal personal autonomy, still bound by rules against doing harm. Bastiat's classical liberalism was embedded in a Christian worldview. *Law* was of God, who created a universe of order – *natural law*. This encompassed both nature and humanity. Different rules emerged for us because we have free will.

But in general, we either learn and apply the rules governing the world, including the human world, or they automatically work against us. Certain ways of arranging societies are *objectively better* than others. They get results that sustain us long term. Liberty, as Bastiat saw things, fits the bill. Arrangements that are out of accord with nature, and *human* nature, fail – sometimes spectacularly. Bastiat criticized *socialism* as a guarantor of poverty, as it crushed everything that makes it possible for us to climb out of poverty and flourish.

Human flourishing seemed to be the basic goal of an advancing civilization.

To achieve this, the classicals came to champion free speech, the right to practice one's faith, freedom of assembly, and a right to petition the authorities. They also defended the right to own property, to confront your accuser(s) if charged with a crime (*habeas corpus*), the right to a fair trial by a jury of one's peers, and so on. Some of these dated back to the Magna Carta of 1215.

Mill's worldview and ethics were *secular*: liberty was good not because it accorded with God's law or "natural law" but because it promoted utility and *the greatest good for the greatest number*. *Good* meant happiness or pleasure. Mill's 'greatest happiness principle' held that actions are right to the extent they increase overall happiness / pleasure and wrong to the extent they do the reverse.

This seemed to suffice for the British Empire which, at the time, spanned the globe.

America's founders had built their national ideals around *constitutionalism* with its origins in British political thinking as expressed in such documents as the English Bill of Rights. For liberty were needed clear limitations on government, a division of its powers into separate branches able to check and balance one another, and a further division between the *federal* government and state governments: *federalism*, America's unique contribution to political philosophy.

America's founders did not speak with a single voice on what worldview to endorse. Some of their statements are explicitly Christian; others, less so; some not at all. What is clear: *none trusted concentrations of power*. Liberty could only thrive if centralized power could be constrained, and they tried to build mechanisms that could be invoked to constrain it if it ever failed to constrain itself.

Many observers would judge this experiment – it was that, after all – to have failed. Hence the idea of the slow, agonizing death of liberalism.

Let's look at some additional background. This may be tedious. But I don't think we can understand what's gone wrong if we don't take a substantial look at civilizational development and its overall trajectory.

Auguste Comte's Law of Three Stages and Liberalism's Emergence.

I've elsewhere (see also here) recounted Auguste Comte's *Law of Three Stages*, which I've augmented by describing postmodernity as a Fourth Stage Comte couldn't have anticipated. He also calls them *states* or *conditions*. Out of a desire for consistence I will stay with *Stages*.

Reviewing:

The *First Stage* is "theological and fictitious." In Comte's view the First Stage developed from the idea of multiple gods or other supernatural agencies to that of a single supreme being such as Christianity's God. According to First Stage thought, *ultimate* knowledge is revealed by this God and has *no* other reliable source.

In First Stage cultures, there is almost no room for intellectual dissent or autonomous economic activity. "God said it; I believe it; that settles it." "Your feudal existence is God's plan for your life, peasant. Accept it."

For centuries the dominant political institution was the monarchy. The king ruled an agrarian order by divine right. We're born in sin. The Church told people how to find salvation from sin's consequences.

The *Second Stage* is "metaphysical and abstract." Philosophy thrives in Second Stage environments. While it need not reject God or revelation, the Second Stage presumption is that Pure Reason can discern truth on its own if we use it well.

Philosophers from Plato and Aristotle through Augustine of Hippo, Aquinas, down through Descartes to Kant and Hegel, all developed variations on this theme. Some tried to prove that God must exist. Aquinas thought God had left us "two books": Scripture and the "revelation" of nature, God's visible works. This opened the possibility of learning about the Creator by studying the Creation. This made the assumption that since God created us in His image, beings of finite and time-bound rationality as opposed to His infinite and eternal *Logos*, the universe is intelligible to us. We'll get some things wrong, but we can use our reason to correct whatever misinterpretations are rooted in direct sense experience.

This notion, percolating through ensuing generations of scholars, seems the most likely impetus for the scientific

revolution. We would not have been motivated to do science if we did not think the world is comprehensible. Nor would we have undergone the process of thought that led to the overthrow of the divine right of kings and the idea of personal liberty based on natural law, which was God-given. But the quest for scientific explanations snowballed, and soon it questioned the necessity of a "God postulate." Materialism appeared.

The *Third Stage*: "scientific and positive." Science jettisons Pure Reason, if conceived as able to discern truth independently of experience, and goes empiricist: knowledge is based on sense experience corrected by fallible reason. Science's unique, self-correcting method becomes the sole arbiter of truth as we test hypotheses about the world, or some part of it, step by step.

Since neither God nor any other transcendent agency could be shown to exist by such means, or the claims of any religion tested, Third Stage thinkers relegated them to history's dustbin. Their philosophical proofs all devastatingly criticized, Christian thinkers seemed left with weak and unconvincing arguments like Pascal's Wager, or oddities such as Kierkegaard's "leap."

Or just blind, subjective faith.

Naturalistic materialism denies the existence of any transcendent reality, be it God or any other such agency. There is nothing outside *this* world of space and time, or *this* life which ends with inevitable death seen as the extinction of one's personality.

The intellectual world then divided into two loose camps.

The first saw rising *modernity* as *liberating*. It drew impetus from essays like Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" (early 1800s). Its counsel: focus on *this* world, not some other, and how we can use scientific discoveries, emerging technologies,

and improved societal arrangements, so that as many people as possible may live materially better. Freed from the sense of divine wrath awaiting us as punishment for sin, modernized humans could take charge of their lives and societies.

Classical liberals clearly felt at home in this kind of intellectual environment.

The second camp sensed profound loss and grew uneasy. Its authors warned of danger in a world *liberated* from the transcendent and a divine source for rightness. Think of Dostoevsky's Ivan in *Brothers* observing that "If God is dead, everything is permitted."

These became the earliest forebears of Fourth Stage thinking: "anxious, negative; eventually postmodern and cynical" (my descriptions, to parallel Comte's of earlier Stages). Drawing variously on Darwin, Marx, Wundt, Nietzsche, Freud, and others, Fourth Stage thinking would plant doubt that we ever transcend history, situatedness, class interests, or ethnicity.

In that sense, Fourth Stage thinking challenges the idea of scientific objectivity, since if human consciousness never escapes historicity, then neither does science – "human, all too human," like any other endeavor.

Fourth Stage thinking also challenges classical liberalism, because classical liberalism surely depends on such notions. It depends on the idea that we make free choices whether in morality, markets, or both at once.

We need a deeper look at what classical liberalism presupposed, where it was vulnerable, and what the amalgamation of Third and Fourth Stage thought that emerged largely spontaneously in Western industrial civilization presaged, implicitly if not explicitly. We'll get that in Part 2. And then: what came along to replace it. We'll consider this in Part 3. Not to worry, we'll also get to where Trump

and Musk fit in here.

Part 1, Part 2,

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Steven Yates is a (recovering) ex-academic with a PhD in Philosophy. He taught for more than 15 years total at several universities in the Southeastern U.S. He authored three books, more than 20 articles, numerous book reviews, and review essays in academic journals and anthologies. Refused tenure and unable to obtain full-time academic employment (and with an increasing number of very fundamental philosophical essays refused publication in journals), he turned to alternative platforms and heretical notions, including about academia itself.

In 2012 he moved to Chile. He married a Chilean national in 2014. Among his discoveries in South America: the problems of the U.S. are problems everywhere, because human nature is the same everywhere. The problems are problems of Western civilization as a whole.

As to whether he'll *stay* in Chile … stay tuned!

He has a Patreon.com page. Donate here and become a Patron if you benefit from his work and believe it merits being sustained financially.

Steven Yates's book *Four Cardinal Errors: Reasons for the Decline of the American Republic* (2011) can be ordered here.

His philosophical work *What Should Philosophy Do? A Theory* (2021) can be obtained here or here.

His paranormal horror novel *The Shadow Over Sarnath* (2023) can be gotten here.

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