

A More Perfect Union

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (April 2025)



View of Old London Bridge from the West (Claude de Jongh, 1650)

There are probably no words in the contemporary lexicon of political philosophy more used and abused than 'liberal' and 'liberalism.' They mean different things to different people, who nevertheless speak as if their meaning were evident, fixed, and universally shared. The moral weight attached to them too varies enormously: in the mouths of some they are terms of praise or approval, in those of others of reprehension and even of insult.

It is probably in vain that anyone tries to bring order to the lexicon, by which I mean agreed definitions such that people will not forever be talking at cross-purposes and comparing oranges with lemons or even with pineapples and bananas. But though most endeavour ends in failure, yet endeavour remains

necessary, I will try to bring a little order to the words we so commonly use without considering what other people will take them to mean.

Before I begin, I should mention that I have been stimulated to the effort by a book sent to me by a publisher in the hope that I might be interested in it, at least sufficiently to write about it, even if only to disagree with it. There is, after all, no such thing as bad publicity, because no publicity, at least in the context of selling books, is far worse. As I have learned to my cost, complete silence is by far the worst and most effective criticism from the point of view of sales.

THE COLLAPSE OF GLOBAL LIBERALISM

And the Emergence of
the Post Liberal World Order



PHILIP PILKINGTON

The book in question is *The Collapse of Global Liberalism and the Emergence of the Post Liberal World Order* by Philip Pilkington, published by Polity. I started out with no disposition either in favour or against this book and its author, having as open a mind towards both it and him as is possible for someone whose mind is not completely empty in the first place. I found the book easy to read but highly stimulating, scoring more than a few palpable hits, but also deficient in certain important respects. At the end of it, though, I felt that to sit down to discuss matters further with the author would be enlightening and pleasurable. A real discussion with him (without foregone conclusions) would be possible: he would be capable of pointing out the deficiencies of my own positions without destroying my *amour propre*.

Let me now return to the problem of the definition of liberalism. I am no expert, but it seems to me that we use the word in two fundamental senses that perhaps are somewhat related, but very far from being identical. We often switch between them without realising it; but such is the hold of nominalism, that we are inclined to suppose that if we give two different phenomena the same name, they thereby become identical.

The first sense is that of economic liberalism: that is to say, of an economy that is free from governmental or any other overall control, and that operates solely according to market relations. The second sense is that of social liberalism: that is to say, of a society in which people choose how they want to live without interference from any outside authority.

Now it is perfectly obvious that, in these senses, no perfectly liberal economy or society could exist or has ever existed. It is always, and must always be, a question of degree. No society can permit the production and sale of anything whatever, or the choice of any way to behave whatever. Thus, how far there should be any intervention is always a matter of judgment. If you don't want outer constraint, you must be prepared for inner restraint; but for inner restraint not to be experienced as a straitjacket, there must be some moral philosophy to justify it. As Edmund Burke put it, without such restraint, appetites serve to forge chains.

The excesses of social liberalism are the result of a loss of awareness that liberty is not the same as license, and that without the exercise of virtue there can be no general freedom. I do not mean by this that in a free society everyone must be virtuous at all times. This is clearly impossible, given human nature—besides which it would be very boring. I mean that virtue must be sufficiently widespread for it to be the default position, so to speak, and that there should be general agreement as to what constitutes virtue. That

agreement cannot be only by legislative enforcement, though legislation can serve to uphold it (or, of course, destroy it). Trust is necessary to commerce, and honesty to trust. A nation of swindlers will not long remain prosperous, but law alone cannot make everyone honest. Moreover, to be constantly on the outlook for those who would cheat you is a recipe for malcontentment, even misery. As Doctor Johnson said, it is better sometimes to be deceived than never to trust.

Extreme social liberals are ever on the lookout for new taboos to break, new norms to transgress. They do not understand, or do not care, that their mania for pushing for radical change, always ahead of general opinion, acts as acid on the social fabric and produces perpetual and bitter conflict and disunion. Their impatience for change is essential to them, not merely incidental, for their violation of the feelings of the majority is their guarantee of moral superiority and sense of purpose. For them, reform is a religion—or rather a substitute for religion. Transcendence descends for them from the spiritual sphere to the political.

Before I continue, I do not hold to the view, held I think by the Duke of Cambridge, that all change is undesirable, even change for the better. This is not quite as absurd as it sounds, because all change has unanticipated effects, more often deleterious than beneficial, though the overall effect may still be beneficial. No; the reason that it is wrong is that to rail against change as such is like protesting against the tide or the existence of gravity. I prefer the dictum of Tomasi di Lampedusa, that for everything to remain the same, everything must change. One should make neither the prevention nor the promotion of change as such the focus of one's existence.

I think that Mr Pilkington is good on the pathology of extreme social liberalism, but he surely goes too far in suggesting that every liberal slippery slope must be slid down, as if there were a fatality to it, as if Sodom and Gomorrah were the

inevitable final destination of all liberal polities. He does not mention either that not many people choose to live in authoritarian states and, if offered the choice, generally prefer liberal ones, for all their social pathology.

He takes the decanting of psychiatric patients out of the mental hospitals as a typical example of baleful liberal ideology in action. He is partially right: the reformers were driven by a kind of Millian fervour, such that even the psychotic should be left to their own devices in the name of their experiments in living in doorways, underground stations, derelict buildings, etc.

But his version of events is very incomplete. The old psychiatric hospitals were often appalling, with patients living for decades cheek-by-jowl without any personal dignity, possessions or privacy whatever, shuffling endlessly round corridors, searching for cigarette ends, muttering to themselves, waiting for death. When the conditions were revealed to the public, there was understandable shock and revulsion: something had to be done. And, as one has come to expect of our government bureaucracies, the baby was promptly thrown out with the bathwater.

When it comes to examination of our current economic predicament, I think the word liberalism should be abandoned altogether because it is so inaccurate and misleading. Even though a pure liberal economy is impossible, almost unthinkable, and therefore liberalism is always a matter of degree rather than of category, we have moved so far from the abstract liberal ideal that in no sense is our economy liberal: corporatist would be a far better designation.

Indeed, Mr Pilkington is so blinded by his dislike of liberalism, which for him is a kind of *omnium gatherum* of human woes, that he fails to notice that on his own account, China, which he takes to be a successful illiberal state, is, in one vital respect, actually far more liberal in the

economic sense than the United States or any country in Europe. The explanation of its high rate of savings is that it provides no social safety net. Its people have to make their own provisions for their old age, for example, and likewise for other exigencies that are taken care of, either wholly or partly, by the state in those countries that the author designates as liberal.

This is no small or marginal matter, since those countries that run large government deficits do so mainly because of their social expenditures. These in turn lead, at least in improvident countries, to the kind of indebtedness usually seen only after catastrophic wars. Indeed, in Britain it could be said that its welfare state has caused more invalidity (perhaps I should say, alleged or claimed invalidity) than the First World War. If you pay people almost as much to be ill as to work, they will be ill.

The increasing indebtedness has had knock-on effects. Even at low interest rates, to service the debt consequent upon social expenditure was enormously expensive and consumed more of the economic product of the country than defence of the realm. It was necessary to keep interest rates low, so the money supply had to be expanded. This led to asset inflation, which increased the social distance between those who already had assets and those who didn't, turning a class society, in effect, into a caste society. Whether justifiably or not, this has increased a generalised feeling of social injustice.

At any rate, China has none of these problems, at least as yet. Perhaps the temptation will grow for it to go down the same path, but for now China is, in one important sense of the word, a greatly more liberal society than the United States. This is not the same as saying that it is a more attractive, let alone a better society; but we should follow the Confucian injunction to call things by their right names. If we do not, confusion must follow.

It is perhaps wrong to complain of what a book does not contain, since no book can contain everything, but still I thought that the author might have mentioned the profound effects of inflation, whether of asset price or in the cost of daily living, upon people's conduct and mentality. Wherever there is inflation – I might almost say, wherever there has been inflation above a certain level—the notion of enough is destroyed. While I have no desire to be enormously rich, I have a strong desire to avoid poverty, but where (to quote Marx in another context) all that is solid melts into air, particularly the value of money, I have no idea how much I need to accumulate in order to do so. Therefore, I must behave as if I wanted to grow rich; I must speculate, admittedly indirectly through financial advisers, fund managers, and other members of that parasitic tribe, or face the prospect, or possibility, of future impoverishment. I must accumulate more than I appear to need at any given moment.

Mr Pilkington is very loose in his definition of liberalism. For him, Marxian communism is just a form of liberalism carried to its logical conclusion, but I do not see this myself. Any term that lumps, say, Switzerland and North Korea together cannot be very useful or illuminating—I say this as someone who has been to both.

Still, I valued this book. Among other things, it corrected the misleading impression of relative military might by comparison of expenditure on weaponry in nominal US dollars. This is a perfectly obvious point, but one which I suspect the great majority of the American population have not thought about, though it is of vital importance. As every doctor knows, swelling is not an indication of strength. Oedema is not the same as muscle.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [*Neither Trumpets nor Violins*](#) (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and [*Ramses: A Memoir*](#) from New English Review Press.

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