

Part I ∞ Liberalism and Modernity

A central characteristic of new liberalism is its grounding in secular modernity. New liberal authors self-consciously aligned themselves with the enlightenment, shunned reliance on transcendental instances, and rejected such appeals to medieval, religion-based solidarity, as characterized adjacent movements like guild socialism and ethical socialism. I therefore first examine the link between the enlightenment tradition to which new liberalism affiliated on the one hand, and the currents of thought that challenged the premises of the enlightenment at the beginning of the twentieth century, on the other hand.

Both liberalism and enlightenment are elusive entities. There is no continuous succession of liberal theorists from John Locke to John Rawls. The meanings attached to liberalism changed across time and between exponents.¹ A similar warning can be issued as to the unqualified use of “enlightenment”: there were several enlightenments, each of them bound by temporal and geographical factors. Giambattista Vico cannot automatically be linked to David Hume. However, the Edwardian new liberals did see themselves as part of a cross-cultural enlightenment tradition. Liberalism, for them, was “no longer mere middle-class and Manchester.”² Boasting such cosmopolitan credentials was not an Edwardian invention. As John Burrow notes, J.S. Mill had imported as a Continental novelty notions of empiricism and positivism that existed in the Scottish enlightenment’s canon.³ Born at the time when Mill’s activity was at its apex and formed intellectually after his death, the new liberals matured into a world where even Mill’s revised utilitarianism had been historicized and distanced. They endorsed Mill’s oeuvre in its decontextualized form, complete with his self-invented roots in German and French thought, as part of a larger, flattened-out and supranational liberal legacy. Their chosen ideological ancestors included the French revolutionaries alongside the more obvious Bentham and Richard Cobden. Their reverence could go equally to Edward Burke, Thomas Paine, and Jean-Jacques

Rousseau.⁴ Even when commenting on the most intricate details of quotidian British affairs, they would insert references to European philosophy and culture.⁵

New liberalism's image of itself as a constituent of a European modernity wider than the national-political framework is vindicated by later research. Though new liberalism is usually examined within the context of a specifically British history, it has also been featured in broader accounts of Western intellectual debates. Aligned with names ranging from Vladimir Lenin and John Dewey to Eduard Bernstein and Guido de Ruggiero, Edwardian authors such as Hobson and Hobhouse have been shown to be responsive to, and influential with, wide and long-term developments in social thought.⁶

The core of these developments is the attempt to render the enlightenment project more suitable to the beliefs and the social organization of the twentieth century. To make new liberalism's position on modernity clearer, I define the scope and limitations of the term "enlightenment" and the specific problems that new liberals faced in their effort to uphold it.

1 ∞ Liberalism: Fin de Siècle

Enlightenment may be characterized by its assumption that knowledge is immanent and not transcendental, continuous and not fragmented.¹ The relationship between these two attributes is tense: without a transcendental anchor, how was the comprehensiveness of knowledge to be maintained? What external vantage point existed to view and confirm its completion? To overcome this difficulty, the enlightenment had to view knowledge as a compound of mutually supporting parts. The various realms of knowledge were released from the control of theology and allowed to develop on their own premises. Ethics, aesthetics, and science could now proceed according to their own internal rules. Although freed from religious authority, these regions of knowledge were interlinked. Each of them corresponded to a capacity of the mind, which the enlightenment assumed to have a universal taxonomy. This vision of interconnected but autonomous realms is reflected in several enlightenment schemes. It appears in Immanuel Kant's idea of liberty as relying on the internal choice of each mind—which in its turn corresponds to a universal division of categories of perception—as well as in the organization of the French Encyclopedia, where imagination and memory take their place beside reason as universal modes of perception.

The enlightenment aimed at the advance of a single texture of human life by the free procession of several independent divisions of knowledge. When conforming to the universal division of human capacities, knowledge was both internally compartmentalized and ultimately unified. This unity sprang from the relation of all specialized vocabularies to reason, which was “humanist” in the sense of applying to all humanity, as it was based on its shared attributes.

Liberalism translated this structure into politics. Separate governmental powers, economic activity, and political participation, personal expression and public debate were all allotted distinct spheres, each

autonomous and conducted according to its own rules. Individuals were expected to pursue an ultimately knowable and objective good, while following their own internal imperatives. Subjectivity was valued, but was limited by an objective grid that identified universal attributes and institutionalized them by law and procedure. The concept of rights—these legal spaces that encapsulate specific and well-defined areas around the human individual—exemplifies this attribute of limited subjectivity.²

The idea of objectivity sets limits to what may be discussed or done. Specific aims and actions were understood as appropriate to the public sphere, and as what constituted the parameters for the discussion of politics. This made possible the separation of political knowledge from the languages of art, physical science, and religion. Liberalism therefore perceives political processes as both structured and open-ended. The universal and equal legislation of the state accommodates the shifting needs of society by constant revision and by the notion of binding legal precedent. It is thus both dynamic and constrained. Precedent makes the state temporally continuous. The state's subjects are coherent individuals who are responsible for past conduct and should expect reward for it in the future.³ The everyday work of liberalism, therefore, assumes a timescale in which the present is conditioned by memories of the past and anticipations of the future. This is different from, for example, the absolutist justice carried out immediately, personally, and without regard to precedent and responsibility, by means of the *lettre de cachet*. The constraints of universality are the conditions of liberal freedom: objectivity makes subjectivity possible, the global grid lends meaning to the particular expression.

The innovation of Edwardian progressive liberalism lay in its attempt to widen the scope of both liberty *and* the restrictions that necessarily accompanied it. New liberalism undertook to expand the enlightenment: to show deeper layers of human personality, wider ranges of social interaction, broader valid interpretations of rationality, and, consequently, a more compelling way of making all these elements cohere. This attribute of expanded knowledge made new liberalism vulnerable to the suggestion, that the multiple and dynamic needs, rights and goods could not be comprehended universally. It rendered this reforming liberalism open to the accusation that no objective grid existed against which to measure heterogeneous standpoints. Such a suggestion was implied in the appearance in the latter half of the nineteenth century of the cluster of ideas that amounted to a critique of enlightenment and modernity.

Critiques had, of course, existed during the enlightened eighteenth century itself in the form of the romantic, conservative, and religious resistance to enlightenment. However, the late-nineteenth-century intel-

lectual reaction that composed Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Emile Durkheim, Henri Bergson, the new genetics, crowd sociology and related developments, possessed its own distinct color. It went a step beyond romanticism: whereas the late eighteenth century challenged the enlightenment on its own terms, the late nineteenth century refused these very terms. In the eighteenth century, romantics such as William Blake had contrasted “reason” to “energy,” and rationalists like Jane Austen had responded in kind by distinguishing “sense” from “sensibility.” Their worlds were governed by certainty about the identity of the opposing terms. Within that turn of mind, even when Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* creates an uncontrollable monster, the two are sharply differentiated: The monster is an incarnation of alterity and revolt, alienated from its creator and unrelated to his purposes.

In the intellectual atmosphere of the decades around 1900, on the other hand, divisions became more ambivalent. Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*, may illustrate the point. Kurtz, the European protagonist in the novel, is transformed by his African experience, to such an extent that he begins to participate in indigenous rites and allows himself to be worshiped by the population of the enclave he brutally dominates. This apparently insane going-native is *not* a break with Kurtz’s instrumentally rational mission of supplying his employers with ivory, but the *condition for its completion*. Kurtz’s madness is a tool at the hands of commercial reason, while it simultaneously undermines that reason.

Similarly, while romantics such as Heinrich von Kleist had perceived suicide as the ultimate assertion of individuality, Durkheim defined suicide itself as conditioned by the surrounding society: The rush to the exit is itself a function of the space one exits.⁴ Clear oppositions between individual and society, means and ends, reason and madness, were all gone, but so was the confidence in their concurrence. The new world was fragmented, ambivalent, its landscape a constant play of lights and shadows instead of an outright division between the light of reason and medieval darkness.

This landscape may be surveyed more systematically, by dividing the cultural phenomena of the revolt against reason into several classes.⁵ First, modernity as a whole could be dismantled by the procedures of inquiry that it had itself initiated. Starting from the premises of utilitarianism, Nietzsche asked what function morality had, and concluded that it had none. Morality was a system that had outlived its utility. The *Genealogy of Morality* objectified modernity’s order of moral priorities in the same way that the enlightenment subjected theology to scrutiny.⁶

Second, the structure of modernity could be challenged by the expansion of any of its previously subservient fields of autonomous

knowledge. Although originally contingent on modernity's premises of independence from metaphysics and on its promise of control over the physical world, the terminologies of industrial and financial management increasingly viewed themselves as purposes and not as instruments. They thus deposed the reflective reason that had been seen as the guiding principle of modernity. Biologists of several schools perceived themselves as authorized by their specific knowledge to comment on social and political decisions. Starting from a set of medical questions, Freud developed the language of psychoanalysis, in the terms of which he attempted to interpret wider aspects of social life: instead of educated men of letters writing on nature, naturalist experts were now using their particular perspective to interpret society.

Third, autonomous fields of knowledge could develop their own languages and procedural rules to an extent that rendered them incommensurable to each other. Instead of being universal and shared, values and truth were localized, as each discipline and every group developed its own terminologies, criteria and institutional authorities. By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, artistic schools such as impressionism and expressionism considered themselves answerable to their own rather than to any external judgement. They ceased to rely on accepted iconographies and existing canons of taste. Their claim was limited, as it did not engulf anything outside art, but it posed a threat to the enlightenment by leaving no ground common to the specialist and the lay observer. Truth in one field could not be communicated elsewhere.

As encyclopedic reason was undermining itself by self-interrogation and specialization, it could not be turned to in order to carry out the integrative role previously held by religion. Without a whole, every particular became meaningful in its own right. Meaning migrated from universal humanity to specific societies, from social wholes to the individual, from teleological history to the passing moment, and then to the multiple urges and sensations constituting individualities and moments. Hence the existentialist legitimation of self-referring individuality and its corresponding devaluation of the search for meaning outside it.⁷

Politically, these shifts accompanied the weakening of the enlightenment's authority, which was often identified with the authority of specific powers. Nationalist particularisms took their key from this trend. The Irish scholar and poet Thomas MacDonagh based his rejection of British domination on a rejection of empiricism and rationalism, to which he opposed ideas derived from the works of Walt Whitman and Filippo Marinetti. If inward individuality could be held against social pressures and the volatile present relieved from the dead weight of the past, so

could an esoteric Gaelic culture be protected from the universalist logic espoused by Britain.⁸

Apart from supporting localization passively, the fragmentation undergone by the sciences could promote it actively. Turn-of-the-century social studies began to doubt the existence of a universal set of standards for the social good, and the possibility of perceiving such good even if it existed. Max Weber saw rationality itself as a historical and local phenomenon. Weber, as well as other sociologists such as Durkheim, Gaetano Mosca, and Vilfredo Pareto, developed an issue-specific terminology, and so distanced sociology from the humanist notion out of which it had developed.

Sociologists could discuss the succession of the elites, the rise of ethical systems and the function of religion without referring to any truth-value or moral function inherent in these systems. Their arguments legitimized the use of power for its own sake: The strength of an elite and the cohesion generated by a religion were their own justification.⁹

The revolt against reason introduced possibilities of existence without ultimate or shared meaning, in which individuals and groups were mutually incommensurable. Actions and areas of knowledge became self-relating. In the absence of an organizing principle such as religion or reason, what remained were purposeless cravings and physical sensations. The cults of youth, invention, and the passing moment, whether in their German nationalist, Italian futurist, or English vorticist variant, expressed this reverence for immediacy.¹⁰

In this fragmented world, the “common sense” on which enlightenment radicals had depended was lost. In its absence, isolated experts could claim to hold a key to deciphering reality, and their terminologies were often deliberately formulated to contrast what they perceived as popular notions. A hiatus opened up between the expert’s vision and the quotidian reality of the layperson. The new genetics synthesized in the first decade of the twentieth century separated the organism’s set of outward characteristics, which it called the phenotype, from its assorted transmitted characteristics, which it called the genotype.¹¹ Similarly, the structuralist linguistics initiated by de Saussure distinguished between the overall possibilities in any language, the *langue*, and the realization of one of these possibilities, the *parole*, through which the ordinary user encounters the language.¹² The forensic method of the period substituted fingerprinting for the measurement of more visible bodily features as a means for identifying individuals, while psychoanalysis detected the vestiges of infantile consciousness in the externally mature patient.

The appearance of professional idioms with claims on all aspects of reality, the mutual isolation of such languages, the waning of moral

consensus and objective standards for thought and behavior, the questioning of European superiority, the doubt cast on appearance and reality, and the legitimation of the ecstatic—these acted as mutually supportive elements of the period's reaction against the enlightenment.