Introduction

PRINCIPLES, PROCEDURES, PREDECESSORS

Principles

This book is not a disinterested academic investigation. Though nobody familiar with what I have written elsewhere will be surprised to find me once again in the missionary position, candor requires that I explain why this topic – the origins of liberalism – deserves reconsideration at the end of the twentieth century. By "liberalism" I mean primarily the political thoughts that flow from the claim that all human beings are naturally equal, and have therefore equal rights, within their own political community, to a broad range of shared advantages: ownership of one's own body, in the sense of freedom from arbitrary imprisonment, torture or slavery; the right to own property; the right to some voice, be it only through the ballot box, as to how one shall be governed and taxed; the right to equal treatment before the law; the right to express one's opinions in public; the right to practice the religion of one's choice, or to practice none; the right to education and to information.

By "origins," I imply an arbitrary decision to start somewhere, in what is now referred to as early modern England – a period generously interpreted here as beginning with the Reformation and continuing through much of the eighteenth century. It is always possible, of course, to trace the genes of political ideas as far back as classical antiquity, and particularly tempting to do so for liberalism, since one of its more important branches was classical republicanism, as derived from Cicero, Livy, Tacitus and some remarks by Aristotle. But in this project I am particularly concerned with the original transmission of liberalism from England to the United

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States of America, which narrows the evolutionary period to two
rather than twenty centuries.

All of the above-listed "rights," which have come to be known as
"human rights," were explicitly defined in England in the seven-
teenth century and even earlier, in an environment in which few, if
any, of such now commonplace ideas were publicly discussed or
remotely possible of acceptance. Their conception was therefore
extraordinary and perilous. All of them travelled to the American
colonies, either in the heads of the earliest colonists or between the
covers of books acquired by the later ones. All of them reappeared
during the American Revolution, to be rearticulated in the Declara-
tion of Independence and the Bill of Rights. Thanks to American
dominance of the world economy during the early twentieth century,
all have subsequently spread abroad to the point where, as Ruth
Grant put it in introducing John Locke's liberalism, "the basic
principle of human freedom and equality is now part of the universal
ideology of our times; even the worst of modern tyrannies pays lip
service to it."[1]

Why, then, should the story of liberalism's origins need telling
again? In part because of the gap between ideology and experience,
which responsible scholars and citizens should constantly report. All
of these principles continue to be given lip service, while in practice
they are undermined by intransigent poverty, greed, religious en-
thusiasm, expedience, ignorance, ennui. In the United States itself
conservative politicians have threatened to make "liberalism"
barren as a term not only by attacking its legacy in political, social
and educational life, but also by ignorantly or deliberately miscon-
struing the term itself and divorcing it from its roots in the
revolutionary and constitutionalist periods. Liberalism was *not* in-
vented during the New Deal or the 1960s. Nor is "invented" a
helpful term, since its principles were wrung out of bitter experience
that none of us, if we could really understand what it was like *before*
liberalism became accepted as more or less synonymous with
enlightened government, would wish to return to. But the correction
this book offers is not intended only for American readers. We can
everywhere benefit from reminders of what it was like in supposedly
civilized countries before liberal principles were anything more than
minority opinion; and such reminders are particularly necessary in

[1] Ruth Grant, *John Locke's Liberalism* (Chicago and London, 1987), p. 1.

the academy, where it is customary to build new reputations by sneering at earlier idealisms and accomplishments as philosophically blinkered or politically oversimplified.

Terminology

In the 1990s "republicanism" has begun to appear as the umbrella term of choice, especially for British historians, for the range of ideas that in this book are gathered instead under "liberalism." In David Wootton's *Republicanism, Liberty and Commercial Society, 1649–1776*, for example, four magnificent essays by Blair Worden resurrect the political thought of Marchamont Nedham, James Harrington, Algernon Sidney and Henry Neville, and present it as a coherent tradition, *despite* their considerable disagreements.[2] For Worden, these four were practically the only republican thinkers of their era. But for an attempt to expand republican thought considerably (and to backdate it), one can turn in contrast to Markku Peltonen, who argues for an unbroken tradition of civic responsibility carried by humanist thought from the mid-sixteenth century through to the civil war period.[3] The Wootton volume opens with the problem of terminology, citing John Adams, second president of the United States, to the effect that "there is not a more unintelligible word in the English language than republicanism", (p. 1). Today's political historians and philosophers evidently disagree as to how loosely or precisely the term "republicanism" can most fruitfully be applied; whether it must refer only to political theorists of or agitators for a headless commonwealth, or whether it can serve as a grab-bag for ideas of civic virtue and disinterestedness.

"Whig," on the other hand, often used as a synonym for either "liberal" or "republican," has the disadvantage, in addition to archaism, of requiring constant qualification. As the party system developed in England at the end of the seventeenth century and during the eighteenth, shifting alignments produced the same ambiguities as today inhere in the names of political parties all over the world. More precisely, under Walpole's ministry in the 1720s the Whigs not only became a corrupt oligarchy, they could legitimately

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[2] See *Republicanism, Liberty, and Commercial Society, 1649–1776*, ed. David Wootton (Stanford, 1994), pp. 45–193.

[3] Markku Peltonen, *Classical Humanism and Republicanism in English Political Thought 1570–1640* (Cambridge, 1995).

be accused (and were) of betraying the principles of the Revolution in order to remain in power.[4] In certain argumentative contexts, therefore, to make "Whig" a useful term calls for the addition of "Real," "Old," "Calves Head," "Roman," "Court," "Common-wealth," "Rockingham," or some such modifier.[5] This expedient tends to subdivide people into ever smaller and sadder clubs and cells; while the weird etymology of the word "Whig" (from the Scottish "whiggamore") appropriately inhibits its transfer to any modern political vocabulary.

The advantages of "liberalism" as a term are precisely its non-existence as a party label in England until the nineteenth century; its obvious etymological connections with the term "liberty," which was then ubiquitous; and its subsequent emergence, in contradistinction to "republicanism," as a term *not* restricted to political theory or systems of government, headless, bicameral, or otherwise, but more broadly conceived so as to include religious, legal and economic issues, past and present.

It is, I should add, misleading to cry "anachronism" – on the grounds either that liberalism as a *term* did not exist in the seventeenth century, or that it did not exist as a mental construct prior to the nineteenth century. In their excellent introduction to *The Liberal Tradition from Fox to Keynes*, Alan Bullock and Maurice Schock insisted, first, on the intellectual incoherence of the tradition they saw nevertheless embracing Fox and Bentham, Richard Cobden and Lord John Russell, John Stuart Mill and Maynard Keynes; and secondly on the origins of this tradition in the "17th-century struggle for freedom of conscience and the resistance of Parliament to the arbitrary authority of the King." They emphasized the necessity of understanding liberalism historically, and of joining as well as distinguishing its different roots and branches:

It owes much to the Dissenters with their strong belief in individualism, the place of the conscience in politics and their democratic tradition of self-government, but something also to the Whigs with their aristocratic tradition of civil and religious liberty and their dislike of arbitrary

[4] For a detailed account of how Whig corruption and reactionary legislation – the Riot Act, the Septennial Act, the Black Act, etc. – led to a reconfiguration of loyalties and political language during Walpole's ministry, see Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 84–136.

[5] "Whig" is unfortunate as a term not only because it is archaic, but because of the internecine struggles within modern history as a discipline, in which Herbert Butterfield's anachronistic *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) has served as dogma.

government. It inherits a belief in natural law and natural rights only to see these scornfully repudiated by Bentham and the Philosophical Radicals in favour of the principle of utility. From the Classical Economists and the Manchester School it derives the orthodoxy of free trade and *laissez-faire*, yet at the end of the 19th century embraces the heretical view of working-class radicalism that something ought to be done for the poor.[6]

My book will end, more or less, where their anthology began, and will have, as theirs did not, a transatlantic focus. But of mine it could equally be said, I trust, that "it establishes the continuity between 19th-century Liberalism and that older tradition which reaches back to Milton and Locke" (p. xxi).

In fact, if one wants to see how early modern liberalism was conceived by one of its pioneers (at one of the most inventive because desperate stages of his thinking), one can hardly do better than turn to the final pages of John Milton's appeal, in the spring of 1660, to the English nation to remain a republic of sorts, by refusing to accept the house of Stuart back at the head of their government. Although Milton's alternative proposal for a permanent unicameral senate has subsequently been perceived, including by John Adams, as wildly illiberal, his concluding definition of what most needed to be preserved of the ideals of the revolution is instructively broad and importantly bifurcated, the "whole freedom of man" consisting, as he insists, "either in spiritual or civil libertie." His first priority is "this liberty of conscience which above all other things ought to be to all men dearest and most precious." Then "the other part of our freedom consists in the civil rights and advancements of every person according to his merit." For fulfilling the second priority what is required is a massive decentralization of the law and the fiscal apparatus:

so they shall have justice in their own hands, law executed fully and finally in thir own counties and precincts, long wishd, and spoken of, but never yet obtaind; . . . publick accounts under our own inspection, general laws and taxes with thir causes in our own domestic suffrages . . . all distinction of lords and commoners, that may any way divide or sever the publick interest, remov'd.[7]

And, as another of liberalism's central concerns, Milton fastens on

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[6] *The Liberal Tradition from Fox to Keynes*, ed. Alan Bullock and Maurice Schock (New York, 1957), pp. xix–xx.
[7] Milton, *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (London, 1660), in *Complete Prose Works*, ed. D. M. Wolfe *et al*, 8 vols. (New Haven, 1953–82), 7:456–61.

education, in a way that, as we shall later see, would have pleased John Adams in his young and ferociously liberal stage:

> They should have heer also schools and academies at thir own choice, wherin thir children may be bred up in thir own sight to all learning and noble education not in grammar only, but in all *liberal* arts and exercises . . . communicating the natural heat of government and culture more distributively to all extreme parts, which now lie numm and neglected. (7:460; italics added)

Despite the remarkable fit between these recommendations and much liberal thought today, the term Milton himself chooses to govern this linked set of goals is not "liberalism" but something in 1660 rather more courageous:

> What I have spoken, is the language of that which is not call'd amiss *the good Old Cause*: if it seem strange to any, it will not seem more strange, I hope, then convincing to backsliders. (7:462; italics original)

Milton's "Good old cause" was also a good umbrella for the advanced ideas he was attempting to rescue from the forces of reaction in 1659; but unlike "liberalism" it was even then nostalgic, and is now merely archaic. In his time it could embrace, without obscuring, the differences between himself and Andrew Marvell, Edmund Ludlow and Algernon Sidney – differences that were then crystallized in their attitudes to Oliver Cromwell. Subsequently it fails by its incapacity to address more complicated variants: the differences of opinion and allegiance between Fox and Burke, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, Lord John Russell and his friend Thomas Moore.

"A moment of distress produces enquiry"

To leap, then, from almost the beginning of my chronological period to its end – the moment when "liberalism" as a term entered both the language and the political landscape – it will be instructive to look briefly at why both Russell and Moore could and did claim that label, despite significant ideological and intellectual disagreements. The English peer and the Irish poet contradicted each other, for a start, on the value of the Revolution of 1688: Russell seeing it, in his *Essay on the History of the English Government and Constitution,* as both the definitive turning-point from arbitrary to constitutional government and the sea-mark against which to measure his own political

environment; Moore attacking it (in *Corruption and Intolerance*) as a set of empty formulae.[8] They held virtually opposite opinions also on the value of party politics, on the merits of the Whigs, on the Napoleonic wars, on the achievements of the Reform Bill, and (reversing their natural class alliances) on the character of the aristocracy. These disagreements can readily be discovered by comparing Russell's *Essay* with his edition of Moore's *Memoirs, Journal, and Correspondence*, not least because Russell occasionally marks them in its footnotes. We will return to them in more detail at the conclusion of chapter 7, in relation to the *Secret History* in which both may have been involved as a joint project supported by liberals of different kidney.

Yet both Russell and Moore cut their teeth and nourished their liberalism on its early modern canonical expressions. Moore mockingly described his personal library, before his successes as a writer, as consisting of Milton, Shakespeare, one volume of the *Iliad*, one of Blair's poems, "One, somewhat damag'd, of Voltaire;/A part of Locke, and of Rousseau."[9] His satirical essay on Irish history, *Memoirs of Captain Rock*, published in 1824, cites Milton's late and obscure pamphlet, *Considerations touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church*, in support of the Irish agitation against tithes! And his early squib, *Corruption and Intolerance*, had invoked the authority of Locke's first *Letter concerning Toleration* for an argument for the separation of church and state: "The boundaries on both sides are fixed and immutable. He jumbles heaven and earth together, the things most remote and opposite, who mixes these two societies" (p. 51). It had also, significantly, called aloud, in a society riddled still with corruption and intolerance, for a writer as tough and versatile as Andrew Marvell: "Can *no* light be found, no genuine spark/Of former fire to warm us? Is there none/To act a Marvell's part? I fear, not one." And Moore's footnote explains, for those less well-read than he:

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[8] Moore, *Corruption and Intolerance . . . Addressed to an Englishman by an Irishman* (London, 1809, 2nd edn), pp. 4–5: "It never seems to occur to those orators and adressers who round off so many sentences and paragraphs with the Bill of Rights, the Act of Settlement, &c. that all the provisions which these Acts contained for the preservation of parliamentary independence have been long laid aside as romantic and troublesome. The Revolution, as its greatest admirers acknowledge, was little more than a recognition of ancient privileges, a restoration of that old Gothic structure . . . "

[9] Moore, *Replies to the Letters of the Fudge Family in Paris* (London, 1818), p. 143.

Andrew Marvell, the honest opposer of the court during the reign of Charles the second, and the last Member of Parliament who, according to the ancient mode, took wages from his constituents. How very much the Commons have changed their pay-masters! See the State-Poems for some rude but spirited effusions of Andrew Marvell. (p. 27)

Russell's *Essay* will seem more familiar territory to historians of political thought than the squibs (Moore's word) of an angry young Irish poet. It was originally published in 1825 as the intellectual context for his reform agendas, and in the belief that England had lost much of what had been gained at the Revolution and was in danger of losing more. It was republished in 1865 from the perspective of what had since been achieved. It constitutes the early nineteenth-century equivalent, in genre and principle, of Sidney's *Discourses* or Locke's *Two Treatises*; and Russell evidently saw its original historical and motivational context as almost as dark as that of the 1680s. He enunciates both a canny theory of progress – the idea that reactionary government can, by generating critique, lead to further advances (one step backward leads to two steps forward) only to dismiss it as likely in the 1820s:

Thus we read in history, that after the means of patronage have enabled the ministry to trench one by one upon the best privileges of freedom, a moment of distress produces enquiry, and, by an unexpected blow, the nation wins a triumph which is equivalent to all that has been gained by the Court. But this advantage is at present entirely lost. Our enquiry on the subject of the influence of the Crown [by which Russell meant the entire system of government ministry and its financial costs] leads us to the conclusion that it is increasing rapidly and continually, and that the murmurs which it excites from time to time serve only to produce new restrictions upon liberty.[10]

The 1865 edition appeared, however, with a long and optimistic quotation from Milton on its title-page:[11]

Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks; methinks I see her as an eagle renewing her mighty youth, and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full midday beam . . .

[10] Russell, *An Essay on the History of the English Government and Constitution* (London, 1865), p. 334.
[11] In 1823 the title-page epigram had been taken instead from Lucan's *Pharsalia*, 1:137–41. This famous passage describing Pompey as an aged oak, decayed but still firm-standing and venerated, subsequently deployed by Andrew Marvell in his elegy for Oliver Cromwell, was no longer, Russell acknowledged, an appropriate metaphor for the Victorian state. For Lucan's simile and Marvell's application of it to the Protectorate, see my *Marvell and the Civic Crown* (Princeton, 1978), pp. 91–93.

A well-read Victorian would have been able to identify the quotation as derived from Milton's most inarguably liberal pamphlet, *Areopagitica: A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicens'd Printing*,[12] now to be understood, by deliberate anachronism, in relation to Victorian theories of nation and empire. Milton's narrowly conceived, mid-seventeenth-century idea of reform as the removal of pre-publication licensing (for Protestants only) has expanded in Russell's secular program to cover a huge list of "improvements" in domestic and foreign affairs, from "Slavery abolished" and "Unity of Italy recognized" to "Roman Catholic disabilities repealed" and "Taxes on glass, soap, coals, candles, paper, newspaper stamps and many other articles, repealed" (p. xciii). We do not have to share Russell's Victorian complacency[13] to grasp the fact that he saw Milton's principles as capable of almost indefinite extension.

Russell's epigrams to individual chapters continue this message of continuity with the past as that which enables progress or reverses once again the reverses of reaction. His chapter on Stuart history from Cromwell through the Restoration opens with a citation from Edmund Ludlow's *Memoirs*: "But certainly it can never be worth the scratch of a finger to remove a single person, acting by an arbitrary power, in order to set up another with the same unlimited authority" (p. 80). His chapter on "Definitions of Liberty" opens with a quotation from Algernon Sidney's *Discourses*: "The liberties of nations are from God and nature, not from kings" (p. 91). That on "Personal Liberty," which had originally prepared for Russell's assaults on the Test and Corporation Acts and the Catholic Relief Bill, repeats the Miltonic quotation from *Areopagitica* (p. 105). The late chapter on "Influence of the Crown," towards which warning the rest of the *Essay* was geared, returned to Sidney's *Discourses* for the dark premise that "Men are naturally propense to corruption; and if he, whose will and interest it is to corrupt them, be furnisht with the means, he will never fail to do it . . . It is hard to find a tyranny in the world that has not been introduced in this way." And the final chapter, on the liberty of the press as a security to the English constitution, introduces, in the context of proposed new censorship legislation, another superb passage from *Areopagitica*,

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[12] See Milton, *Complete Prose*, 2:557–58,
[13] The term "complacency" may seem unkind to Russell, who was a liberal all his life; but in 1865 he expressed the doubt that "there are models of government, still untried, promising a cup of felicity and of freedom which England has not yet tasted" (p. lii).

converting Milton's reproach to the parliament of 1643 to Russell's to the parliament of 1825:

> If it be desired to know the immediate cause of all this free writing and free speaking, there cannot be assigned a truer than your own mild, free, and humane government . . .We can grow ignorant again, brutish, formal, and slavish, as ye found us; but you then must first become that which ye cannot be, oppressive, arbitrary, and tyrannous as they were from whom ye have freed us. That our hearts are now more capacious, our thoughts now more excited to the search and expectation of greatest and exactest things, is the issue of your own virtue propagated in us. Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and argue freely, according to conscience, above all liberties. (p. 336)

"I would fain believe," wrote Russell in 1825 as the last sentence of his *Essay*, and allowed it to stand in 1865, "that all ranks and classes of this country have still impressed upon their minds the sentiment of her immortal Milton – 'Let not England forget her precedence of teaching nations how to live' " (p. 350). In this, remarkably, Russell was quoting from the address to parliament that preceded Milton's *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* in 1644,[14] a pamphlet that appealed to parliament to listen to proposals for reform of the laws on marriage coming from men "of what liberall profession soever" (2:230).

Predecessors

This book has many predecessors, some quite recent, most of which will be acknowledged later in this Introduction, as I record both my debts to and my procedural differences from them. But one of the oldest will help to set the tone and delimit the project. In 1860 the New England historian John Wingate Thornton published an anthology of the political sermons delivered in the American colonies prior to the Revolution, in order to explain to mid-nineteenth-century readers the role that the church had played in developing the principles which fuelled the colonists' resistance to English control of both church and state. Entitled *The Pulpit of the American Revolution*, Thornton's collection opened with Jonathan Mayhew's famous "Discourse concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers," which was defiantly preached in Boston on January 30, 1750, the official day of remembrance of the execution of Charles I; and it ends with the election

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[14] Milton, *Complete Prose*, 2:232.