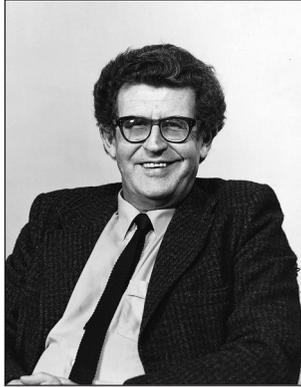


The Liberal Mind



Kenneth Minogue

THE LIBERAL MIND

Kenneth Minogue



LIBERTY FUND

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PREFACE TO THE
LIBERTY FUND EDITION

THE LIBERAL MIND, FOUR DECADES ON

THE FRENCH THINKER Charles Péguy tells us that everything begins in mysticism and ends as politics. This was a way of describing the corruption of power, since by *mystique* he meant something idealistic which politics vulgarizes. Looking at the evolution of the liberal mind in the twentieth century, I am inclined to turn this idea on its head, but not to challenge its pessimism. Liberalism certainly began as a political doctrine seeking reform of entrenched traditions, but then commencing with T. H. Green and others in the late nineteenth century, a “new liberalism” began to advance its claim to moral superiority over other political doctrines. By the middle of the twentieth century, this liberal mind had become a network of thoughtful people beating their breasts over the purported iniquities of capitalism and Western imperialism. Their remorse was anything but personal, however. Rather, these liberals were thinking of themselves as the innocent part of a guilty whole. The prosperity of the West, they claimed to discover, rested upon the oppression of others.

As the liberal mind came to dominate Western culture, it turned out to be marvelously fertile in discovering more and more abstract classes of people constituted by their pain, people whom “we” had treated badly. These included not only the poor, but also indigenous peoples, women, victims of child abuse, gays, the disabled—indeed, potentially just about everybody except healthy heterosexual white males. The first point I should make, then, is that in criticizing the liberal mind, I am in no way implying that suffering is unreal, nor that it is not a problem. Understanding begins with considering

the generation of the basic premise of the liberal mind: that suffering can be understood wholesale, as it were, as the fixed experience of abstract classes of people.

In 1963, when *The Liberal Mind* appeared, the young and the radical in the Western world were in a restive condition. The restiveness had two sides, one cynical, the other sentimental. The cynical side was irresistibly seductive. It was immediately conspicuous in the satire boom, in which hilarious parodists such as Tom Lehrer, Mort Sahl, and Lenny Bruce mocked censorship, respectability, prudery, the rule of old men, and the burdens laid upon us by the past. In Britain, the success of *Beyond the Fringe* had made Jonathan Miller and Dudley Moore famous figures, and the journal *Private Eye* was extending the range of political consciousness by turning gossip, preferably malicious, into an art form. A kind of Bohemian swagger was spreading as the rising numbers going on to universities conceived the notion that to think was to engage in an activity called “questioning” or “criticism.” A new mood was rising everywhere in the volatile Western world. In the United States John F. Kennedy was president and Betty Friedan had set herself up as the spokeswoman of bored suburban housewives with college degrees. Many liberations had previously happened—among the flappers of the 1920s, for example, and in the moral relaxations of wartime in the 1940s—but they had led less to a propensity to enjoy the freedoms acquired than to a lust for acquiring more. In 1963, you might say, the Sixties were about to begin.

Such is the background for a mea culpa: I loved all this, not wisely but too well. And in my defense, it can be said that mockery and derision have their place in political wisdom. What I did not immediately realize was that a political program which consisted simply of thumbing one’s nose at the pomposities of the Establishment would devastate what we may, as a shorthand, call culture and morality. This is a realization that seldom comes young, or indeed cheap. Bertrand Russell spent most of his life exploiting—and thereby destroying—the pleasures of debunking what was coming to be sneered at as “conventional wisdom.” It was only late in life that he remarked that human beings need piety and, he might have added, authority and reverence. All three attitudes are, to put the matter at its lowest, important elements in the repertoire of a fully human life. All can be destroyed when derision becomes formularized and, to compound matters, is further mechanized by the media and the entertainment industry.

Sentimentality was cynicism's other side. Both attitudes dehumanize people by turning them into caricatures, but whereas the caricatures of the cynic generate hatred and contempt, the caricatures of the sentimentalist provoke tears. Both attributes are equally distant from the real world, and both are corruptly self-conscious. The cynic is proud of his acumen in not being taken in by the world, while the sentimentalist regards his tears as proof of a compassionate sensibility. Put the two attitudes together and you have melodrama: quite a distance from reality, indeed, but better perhaps than either attitude by itself. The politics of the liberal mind is a melodrama of oppressors and victims.

It is said that Buddhist monks must learn to meditate on a skull in order to absorb fully into their souls the illusory character of human hopes and fears. Liberals engage the right mood by contemplating the experiences of those they take to be oppressed, in what I have called "suffering situations." You might think this an admirable altruism amid the selfish indifference of the mass of mankind, and there is no doubt that it has often been sincere and that it could at times mitigate some real evils. But the crucial word here is "abstract." The emotions are elicited by an image, as in the craft of advertising. The people who cultivate these feelings are usually not those who actually devote their time and energies to helping the needy around them, but rather a class of person—liberal journalists, politicians, social workers, academics, charity bureaucrats, administrators, etc.—who focus on the global picture. For some, compassion is, one might say, "all talk," while the feelings of those in the burgeoning army of so-called "non-governmental organizations" are closely related to a career path. As a cynic might say, there's money in poverty.

The liberal mind turned the actual sufferings of the human race into the materials of cliché and stereotype, but that was the least of it. The "suffering situations" invoked by the literature played down the active character of the objects of their indignation and saw in them little but pain. Terms such as "aid" or "help" logically entail the idea that the helper is seconding some independent endeavor of the person being helped. Aid to the Third World was thus often a misnomer, since it commonly took no account of what its supposed beneficiaries were actually doing or wanting, and merely *provided* materials which might help in making these people more like us. This is the main reason why much of it has been not merely futile but actually self-defeating. Corrupt dictators in the early days of withdrawal from empire by Europeans

demanded aid and loans “without strings” and they often got it—a process brilliantly analyzed by Peter Bauer in *Dissent on Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976). Today, the successors of those generous souls who agitated for giving money to the Third World are agitating for the “forgiveness” of the resulting debts that now hang heavily around the necks of the peoples of those countries. This is a campaign which suggests one more possible definition of the liberal mind—as a boundless enthusiasm for spending other people’s money. But the logical point comes back to the basic unreality of the liberal mind: namely, a refusal to think in terms of real human beings. Instead, the generic man of liberal thought is like a window dresser’s dummy—merely a vehicle for provoking hatred or tears.

As the liberal mind has diffused itself through modern society, our understanding of real people engaged in real politics has weakened. Whole classes of people have been lost to an image of martyrdom. Yet the reality is that no societies in the history of the world have been as generous and compassionate, both to their own poor and to the unfortunate abroad, as those of the modern West. In order to sustain liberal sentiments, the poor had to be understood as merely fortune’s playthings. Misfortune does indeed play a part in the complex thing we call “poverty.” So, too, do the acts and omissions of the people themselves. In order to lock this partial account into place, poverty has had to undergo a variety of redefinitions. For one thing, it has been transmogrified into “relative deprivation,” which assumes that happiness and well-being depend on having most of the things other people have. For another, it has been defined as living on half the average national income. This might be regarded as an a priori guarantee of the Christian contention that the poor are always with us, yet the object of liberal endeavor is to do something called “abolish” poverty, which on this definition would require something indeed miraculous: namely a complete equalization of incomes. This remarkable definition has the perverse effect of showing poverty on the increase in times of prosperity and on the decrease in times of depression when the average goes down. The sentiment of compassion for the poor has become an undercover device for equalizing social conditions, and millions have been taught that self-pity is a way of extracting wealth from other people.

Sentimentality and cynicism are not only logically similar distortions of reality, but they also feed off each other. The sentimental response to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1998 found its cynical counterpart in the deni-

gration of the rest of the Windsor family. Again, it has been one of the virtues of liberalism to defend what we might call its ideological clients against prejudice and denigration. Unfortunately, this virtue has not been a concern with good manners which deplore causing hurt to others as individuals. It has, rather, been an ideological program for saving some from prejudice by setting up a new class of abstract hate objects, such as racists, sexists, homophobes, and the like. It is strange that liberals who deplore the punishment of criminals coming from the "victim classes" will advocate specially enhanced punishment for those who commit "hate crimes," forgetting that a crime is an act, not a thought. One problem is thus that every advance by the liberal mind tends to leave us back where we started.

Part of the explanation of this phenomenon is, no doubt, that the liberalism that has crystallized into the liberal mind exhibited a massive misunderstanding of the conditions of human happiness. It assumed that happiness depends on distributing benefits. The overprivileged have too many, the underprivileged too few. In the twentieth century, benefits have multiplied vastly for all, and no doubt removing them would cause great misery, but it is also true that this rise in prosperity has failed to deliver a proportional increase in happiness. Perhaps abundance resembles addiction: increase is needed just to sustain the level of pleasure.

The idea that happiness depends on benefits is among the more influential illusions of the liberal mind. It can generate the further illusion that a better life is in the gift of the civil power. In the late twentieth century, a vocabulary of rights facilitated a ceaseless raid by democracy on the economy. Political philosophers have always recognized that human beings are creatures of desire, and that life was the pursuit of happiness. The desires they theorized led to choices, but the choices carried responsibility along with them; they were not mere "choices." Philosophers took for granted a conception of the point of human life which the liberal mind may well be destroying. The pursuit of happiness is not, on this view, the search for a shower of benefits. Rather, it involves the recognition that life itself is a mixed blessing, that its point is not the satisfaction of desire so much as an adventure in testing wherein what we most fear is sinking below our best, that truth comes by blows, and that failure and disappointment are as necessary to us as exhilaration and success.

In the modern world, we know better how to control than how to endure. Technology increasingly takes the place of fortitude, and the liberal mind dis-

tances us from those from whom we have inherited our tamed pushbutton world. Worse yet, liberalism replaces history itself by a saga of oppression, a saga that makes its own sentimentalities even more mysterious than they are already. How could such a sensibility as the liberal mind have come out of such brutishness? Countries sometimes become disoriented and mistake their own real identity—as Italy did in the 1920s and 1930s when persuaded by Mussolini that it was a conquering imperialist power. National disorientation can be a fatal affliction, but with the liberal mind, we encounter something even more portentous: namely, a civilization busy cutting its links with the past and falling into a sentimental daydream.

To revisit *The Liberal Mind* turns out to be something that provokes me to pessimism. In those optimistic days of yore I had confidence in the broad commonsense of my world. I wrote that the ideas of the liberal mind could never really dominate the thinking of any society, because “such institutions as armed services, universities, churches and cultural academies . . . have nonetheless a powerful impulse to generate non-liberal ways of thought” (pp. 43–44). So far as the armed services are concerned, it has been said, not entirely facetiously, that we shall soon need wheelchair access to tanks. In universities, the fact that the academic life requires active ability in students has been strongly qualified by a concern for irrelevancies such as sex or race. It is no longer just a matter of being intelligent. And the churches have largely given up any decent dogma in favor of finding a new role counseling and communalizing their diminishing flocks. What future then for saints, soldiers, and scholars? They have all been boiled down into the soup of “generic man.”

Fortunately, there is an awful lot of ruin in a nation, and the West is nothing if not a resilient civilization. So far we have been lucky, and our declinists wrong. I hope we shall be lucky again.

Kenneth Minogue
Indianapolis, October 1999

P R E F A C E

POLITICAL ISSUES ARE like discarded loves; once out of love with them we can hardly understand what made us so excited. Not so long ago, we were arguing over the issue of a planned economy or free enterprise, and liberals confronted socialists with identities fixed. But the life has gone out of such issues, and political parties find themselves nestling together around the same set of political principles. Some have greeted this development with joy. Some have accepted it as the “end of ideology.” Others have responded with boredom.

The aim of this book is to analyze the long tradition of liberalism. It regards the current fluidity of political boundaries as due to the fact that an enlarged and somewhat refurbished liberalism has now succeeded the ideologies of the past. It maintains that this liberalism provides a moral and political consensus which unites virtually all of us, excepting only a few palpable eccentrics on the right and communists on the left. Liberalism is a vague term. One of its difficulties has been crisply stated by Professor Knight: “It used to signify individual liberty, and now means rather state paternalism.” But this is not quite accurate. It now means both. It is an intellectual compromise so extensive that it includes most of the guiding beliefs of modern western opinion. It has even, in the form of Humanism, begun to work out an appropriate set of religious beliefs. *The Liberal Mind* is an attempt to state and analyze it.

I should like to acknowledge here the enormous debt I owe to my educators, both in Sydney and in London. My colleagues Hedley Bull and Bernard Crick both read parts of an early draft of the book and made many critical and helpful suggestions. I am sure no one will wish to saddle them with the prejudices expressed in it. Some of this material has earlier appeared in the *American Scholar* and the *Twentieth Century*. My greatest debt is to my wife, whose

Preface

constant help, encouragement and criticism have profoundly affected both the style and the argument of the book.

London School of Economics
and Political Science
September 1962

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The Liberal Mind

Introduction

I. SUFFERING SITUATIONS

THE STORY OF LIBERALISM, as liberals tell it, is rather like the legend of St. George and the dragon. After many centuries of hopelessness and superstition, St. George, in the guise of Rationality, appeared in the world somewhere about the sixteenth century. The first dragons upon whom he turned his lance were those of despotic kingship and religious intolerance. These battles won, he rested a time, until such questions as slavery, or prison conditions, or the state of the poor, began to command his attention. During the nineteenth century, his lance was never still, prodding this way and that against the inert scaliness of privilege, vested interest, or patrician insolence. But, unlike St. George, he did not know when to retire. The more he succeeded, the more he became bewitched with the thought of a world free of dragons, and the less capable he became of ever returning to private life. He *needed* his dragons. He could only live by fighting for causes—the people, the poor, the exploited, the colonially oppressed, the underprivileged and the underdeveloped. As an ageing warrior, he grew breathless in his pursuit of smaller and smaller dragons—for the big dragons were now harder to come by.

Liberalism is a political theory closely linked these days with such democratic machinery as checks and balances in government, an uncontrolled press, responsible opposition parties, and a population which does not live in

fear of arbitrary arrest by the government. A liberal state is one where most actions of the government are taken with the consent of at least a majority of the population. A liberal political philosophy is a description of this kind of state, combined with the attempt to work out the general principles which can best rationalize it. A fair case could be made for John Locke as its founding father, even though the actual term “liberalism” was only imported from Spain early in the nineteenth century. In their early formulations, liberal philosophers built an edifice of doctrine upon the natural rights of man. Their successors, blooded by idealist criticism and Marxist social theory, admitted that the “individual” was an abstract and implausible hero for a political doctrine. Men, liberals came to agree, were largely moulded by the social environment in which they grew, and to talk of “natural rights” bordered on metaphysical dogmatism. Indeed, as time went on, they did not merely admit their error; they positively rushed to embrace the corrections which Marxists and Idealists forced upon them—for reasons which should become clear. Out of this intellectual foray emerged modern liberal doctrine, representing political life as the struggle by which men make their society rational, just, and capable of affording opportunities for everyone to develop his own potentialities.

Liberals sustain not only a political movement, and a political philosophy, but also a moral character. Liberals are tolerant. They dislike recourse to violent solutions. They deplore stern penal methods for keeping a population in order, and they disapprove strongly of the death penalty. They have rejected the patriarchal order which Europe has inherited, and they are critical of puritanism in sexual matters. They also deplore the heritage which has organized men into competing gangs called nation states which periodically rupture human brotherhood by savagely falling upon each other in warfare. Liberals are prepared to sacrifice much for a peaceful and co-operative world order, which can only come about by the exercise of great self-control and a talent for compromise. These are moral characteristics recommended to all men. Liberal social theory is frequently an attempt to discover the social arrangements which most encourage this kind of behavior.

We have still not exhausted the content of liberalism. For it is not only the habit of campaigning for reforms, nor a political doctrine and a moral character, it is also a special kind of hope. It not only recommends to us a political system of democratic liberty; it also tells us what will result from such a system. One result will be prosperity, for the energies of the people will be re-

leased from the varied oppressions of the past. Another result will be political stability, for when a responsible opposition is allowed, discontent is not forced underground, where it may turn nasty and foment rebellion. Parliamentary government based on popular consent will, by definition, produce what the people want, and people are happy who get what they want. Many of these fruits have indeed been plucked in the centers where liberalism originated—in the English-speaking world and parts of the continent of Europe. To others, however, liberalism seems to represent both the aspiration and the promise of these things—and one thing more: that industrialized prosperity and power which has now enchanted most of the world.

This side of liberalism can be seen in its keen sensitivity to time, the character which disposes it to serious use of such political terms as reactionary and progressive. Even sophisticated liberals, who are aware of the crippling arguments against historicism, are nonetheless prone to believe in progress, because they have domesticated Victorian optimism into a general belief that progress means getting more of what one wants. Thus for liberals “the present” means not only everything that is happening now; it also carries a further meaning that the present is only what *ought* to be happening now. On the basis of this ambiguity, traditional societies like the Yemen are described as “advancing headlong into the thirteenth century.” Time, like everything else in this social world, is simultaneously a fact and an aspiration.

Liberalism depends upon a consciousness of being modern, and such a consciousness began to gain ground as the controversialists of the seventeenth century worked out their rejection of Scholasticism. They began to construct a picture of the middle ages which has held its ground ever since. At the center of this picture was a static and intricately structured society. Individual men held merely a subordinate place in this medieval scheme; each was but a minor participant in a drama of propitiation. The middle ages were seen as a time of mysteries. God’s will and the nature of the cosmos were mysteries whose character men could only dimly penetrate; so too was skill, as preserved in ritual-ridden guilds. In a similar way, ruling was a mystery whose success depended upon the birth of its practitioners. Men of the seventeenth century thought of their medieval ancestors as victims of superstition and ignorance. For truth, in the middle ages, was thought to have been at the mercy of feudal intermediaries: the nobility, which mediated between Subjects and King, and the Church, which mediated between Man and God. Such inter-

mediaries were regarded as parasitic middlemen extracting a vast and illicit profit of privilege.

The decline of the middle ages had come about because men had thrown off their chains. A long series of social and political struggles had overthrown feudal privilege and led to the establishment of sovereign monarchs. Religious dissension had culminated in Protestantism, which rejected or at least diminished the power of spiritual intermediaries, just as it simultaneously rejected one of the more prominent mysteries—the clerical mystery of priestly power. Aristocratic birth, which had been the basis of so much social and political power, had also come under criticism. Intelligent men of the seventeenth century had the sense that a great structure had, like Humpty Dumpty, had a great fall. They experienced two dominant emotions. One was exhilaration as they glimpsed the new possibilities which lay before them; the other was fear and confusion, due to the apprehension that society itself might gradually be involved in the fall, and that all the benefits of social cohesion, of settled law and order, might be lost.

What is distinctive of modern liberalism, in which the visionary and hopeful element has in this century grown stronger, is a new understanding of politics. We may contrast this new understanding with politics in earlier centuries when rulers did little more than maintain a traditional structure. Occasionally some blinding vision, such as the recapture of Jerusalem from the infidel, might captivate rulers and even provoke widespread enthusiasm. But no ruler could commit his state to any long-term objective, and the possibilities of social mobilization, even for war, were severely limited by the independence and varied preoccupations of a most unservile nobility.

Politics was seen as something apart from particular visions, but constantly bombarded by them—pressed by those who envisaged a tidy hierarchical system, or by those who dreamed of a population contentedly obedient to the Church; for all important social activities generate visions of a society most suited to their demands. The general features of medieval society were determined by the relations between the activities of worshipping, fighting and food-producing; within a complex system, poets and craftsmen, shoemakers and beggars, could all find some room to work. As time went on, more and more people were drawn into the cities; here they produced goods and exchanged them. Some men became more interested in explaining the physical world, whilst others began thinking independently and heretically about reli-