

A Global EU? International Affairs and Contemporary Liberalism

James Kalb

October 31, 2009

The other speakers have discussed foreign policy by reference to specifically American tendencies. I will discuss something that I think is more general, advanced liberalism—the dominant political, social, and moral outlook on both sides of the Atlantic—and its effect on international relations. My discussion will follow the analysis presented in my recent book, *The Tyranny of Liberalism: Understanding and Overcoming Administered Freedom, Inquisitorial Tolerance, and Equality by Command*.

1 Advanced liberalism

In several of his recent books, Paul Gottfried has demonstrated that the major traditions that now dominate the West, whether liberal, Christian, or Marxist, have all ended in the same outlook, which is represented most clearly in America by the politically-correct managerial liberalism of the left wing of the Democratic Party. For the sake of convenience I will call that outlook advanced liberalism, or just plain liberalism.

1.1 Basic nature

Whatever it's called, that outlook tells us—among other things—that the local and particular are dissolving, and should dissolve,

into the individual, universal, and purely rational.

That's extremely abstract, but the European Union shows how it works. The basic principles of the EU are human rights and social management. Those principles are integrated: human rights dissolve traditional social connections, and social management organizes the resulting aggregate of individuals into a universal rational system of production, protection, and consumption. Everything gets pulled into a sort of universal social machine, or that's the ideal.

That's why liberalism insists on doing away with distinctions of sex, family, religion, nation, and inherited community and culture as material factors in social life. A big machine demands interchangeable parts that don't bring in extraneous complications. From a functional rather than emotional or propagandistic standpoint, that's what liberal tolerance and inclusiveness are all about.

As the advanced liberal system develops, it necessarily comes to apply to relations among states. So the basic outlook that Western governing classes all agree on commits them, at least in principle, to a sort of global managerial regime, with foreign policy as one means of bringing that goal about. Liberal messianic globalism is no longer just an American thing.

1.2 Obstacles

Transforming the world is a lot to bite off, and advanced liberalism has not yet recreated the world in its own image. I'll mention four obstacles to the project:

1. First, even today many influential people remain somewhat skeptical. Does it make sense to try to reform gender relations among the Afghans? At some level many people have their doubts.

However, such doubts go against the grain of public discussion. Arguments that reflect them appeal to particular constituencies and schools of thought, and they win particular victories, but the dream of a universal system of peace, prosperity, and rational administration keeps coming back to influence events.

2. Second, liberalism is a specifically Western outlook. Nonwestern countries talk about democracy and sign human rights treaties, but if the rule of law is not taken seriously such things don't matter much. Also, outside the West there are still competitors to liberalism. Some (like Islam) are based on universal principles, others (like East Asian authoritarianism) on cultural tradition and practicality.

On the other hand, there does seem to be a general worldwide trend toward liberal institutions and practices. Even Russia and China are more like the West than they used to be. Also, non-Western countries are divided, and their political systems don't fit the needs of international organization as well as liberalism does. Liberalism claims to be a neutral default position that applies equally well to diverse cultures. That claim enables it to divide and rule: "You people can't agree and you'll always be fighting so why not achieve peace by doing what we tell you."

3. Third, there are weak, failing, and failed states where the institutions on which liberalism relies work poorly or not at all. What will the emerging liberal world order do with them? Can Afghanistan be turned into Minnesota?
4. And fourth, there are divisions even in the West. Americans, for example, have their own version of liberalism, one that emphasizes freedom more and equality less. They also tend to identify those ideals with their own history and institutions. The question among us has been whether we should preserve and promote freedom and equality by avoiding foreign entanglements or by remaking the world in our own image.

Those divisions may be moderating. Our governing classes find the so-called "isolationist" position unacceptable, so it's lost influence. And the idea that America should remake the world in its own image, by force if need be, may be falling out of favor. It has led to unproductive wars, and in any case it's not clear why America is so special from a liberal standpoint when other countries also favor global freedom and equality. If political order is to be based on universal principles like

equal freedom, national sovereignty makes no sense. It ought to be replaced by an ever more extensive system of world governance, a sort of European Union writ large.

1.3 General position

At present, then, advanced liberalism seems to have won in principle. It faces opposition, but the opposition seems mostly manageable. The point of liberal statecraft is to mitigate or overcome that opposition, and otherwise solidify and extend liberal victories.

That's what EU expansion and intensification is about, that's what foreign assistance is about, that's what international organizations and human rights treaties are about, that's what recent military interventions have been about to some degree, and that's what the Nobel Peace Prize is always about.

The farther the process goes, the more entrenched liberalism becomes, and the harder it is for anyone to resist or escape from it. That's why wild-eyed people talk about the New World Order in apocalyptic terms. They're on to something.

2 Causes

The reason we're here is to discuss what can be done to resist the trend. Things seem bad. In the West all that seems to remain is mopping up. And even the difficulties the liberal order faces elsewhere—failed states, radical Islam, East Asian authoritarianism—don't offer us much hope. We need something that doesn't exist right now.

When things are bad you go to the basics. Even if we're doomed there's some satisfaction knowing why. But what are the basics? Why is all this happening?

2.1 Technology

The reasons for the present state of affairs are partly technological. Technology gives us one world. It destroys settled customs and

connections. It contributes to the idea that there should be a single global order, governed by markets and administrators, to which everything else should be subordinate.

Nonetheless, ways of thought and how men live are not just responses to material and technical conditions. The latter can accommodate very different civilizations. The reasons for the absolute dominance of liberalism today are conceptual as well as physical.

2.2 Basic concepts

To understand political life, we have to understand the principles on which influential people make sense of the world. Those principles define the basis on which they cooperate and so make common action possible. Social order and government depend on them.

I've noted that today those principles are liberal, and there really aren't any alternatives in public life. Even our conservatives are liberal. From the point of view now dominant if you're not a liberal or leftist you're not just wrong, you're ignorant, crazy, or evil. You don't really exist. In any case, you have ideas that don't make sense.

2.2.1 Rationality

What that situation shows is that liberals view liberalism as part of rationality. It's not just a collection of institutions and policies to be evaluated this way or that. It defines and orders the world in a very basic way. Questioning it is like questioning the law of non-contradiction.

Rationality involves the workings of simple principles in all possible connections. If liberalism is treated as part of rationality, then, it should be simple in its principles, it should influence all of social life, and it should be integrated with other aspects of the present-day understanding of what makes sense. If all that is so, it will be easy to understand its hold on public life.

2.2.2 Equal freedom

What then is liberalism? Liberals tell us their basic principle is equal freedom. There is no reason to think they're lying, so we should accept that claim, and look at its implications.

The first thing to notice is that it's a very odd claim. We're used to it, so it's hard for us to see that freedom and equality can't possibly function as ultimate standards. Politics involve some people telling other people what to do. How can it be based on freedom and equality?

An even more basic problem is that freedom and equality aren't self-sufficient ends. They depend on an understanding of the good—of what goals are worth pursuing. Freedom is freedom to do something, and equality is equality with regard to some concern. Freedom to marry requires constraints that create and define marriage. Without those constraints, you can't be free to marry.

If people wanted freedom simply as such they'd go crazy, because freedoms conflict and they wouldn't know which to choose. The same applies to equality. If you want people to be equal in some way, some people must decide and enforce what that requires. Those people won't be equal to the rest of us.

2.2.3 Abolition of transcendence

So why then do people feel compelled to claim that freedom and equality and not the good—that is, what goals make most sense—are the highest principles?

It seems to me that it's a result of a basic modern tendency, the abolition of transcendent standards and reduction of knowledge and reason to sense perception, formal logic, and means-ends reasoning.

Those tendencies make it impossible to think coherently about the good. The good is a standard that transcends desire. If there is no higher authority that tells us what to choose—no God or Form of the Good or implicit *telos* of human nature—then what we have is subjective experience, formal logic, and will. None of those transcends desire, so none can tell us what the good is.

2.2.4 Egalitarian technocracy

People use what they have. Subjective experience, formal logic, and will—in the form of observation, mathematics, and experiment—seem to give us modern natural science. The use of science to attain our goals gives us technology. And the application of technology to social life gives us contemporary liberalism, at least if we accept equality as a default principle of justice.

Liberalism, then, is egalitarian technocracy. It constructs—or tries to reconstruct—social order as a rational system for giving everybody what he wants, as much and as equally as possible. As such it claims unique rationality. The result is that it functions as a religion—as an understanding of ultimate realities that tells us what things are and what it makes sense to do about them.

The joker is that it's not only a religion, it's a compulsory universal religion. Since it's thought part of reason, to reject it is insanity. Since it orders our relations to others, to reject it is also an abusive act. Like Islam, it points toward an integrated scheme of life determined by absolutely binding standards, whether those of Shariah or those of what now count as human rights. Within that scheme of life there is peace and justice while outside there is only institutional violence—what the Muslims call the Dar-ul-Harb.

3 Outlook for future

So if I'm right that advanced liberalism is absolutely dominant today, and that it necessarily aims at universal dominion, in part through vehicles like the EU, what do we do about it?

3.1 Depth of problem

In a couple of minutes I can't give a full solution. The first thing to notice though is that the problems go very deep. If the established understanding of reason and reality is against us, we have to deal with ultimate matters, and thus with religious issues—with what is ultimately real and right. A purely secular, problem-solving kind of conservatism will go nowhere today. Even if it wins on this or

that issue the victory will be localized and temporary unless the basic tendency of events changes. And that will require a change in basic understandings.

3.2 Liberal weaknesses

The second thing to notice is that our situation is not hopeless.

3.2.1 Self-contradiction

For one thing, advanced liberalism contradicts its stated goals.

Egalitarian technocracy means an industrial approach to social life. Everything is a resource to be used in a rational scheme to deliver satisfactions to everyone, as much and as equally as possible.

That process replaces society and politics as complex networks of human relations with the individual on the one hand and a universal rational process on the other. It's evident that the two will be in constant conflict, since an industrial process makes rigorous demands and people want to go their own way. It's also evident that the overall process will insist on winning that conflict in every case. It's single-minded, it makes the rules, and it's a lot bigger.

So liberalism talks about individual autonomy, but it insists on fitting individual qualities, habits, attitudes, and preferred satisfactions to itself in the same way employees, machinery, and raw materials are fitted to the needs of a factory. In the name of freedom it creates slavery.

3.2.2 Philosophical inadequacy

That contradiction reflects basic theoretical deficiencies. Liberalism has enormous power because the outlook on which it is based narrowly restricts what can be taken into account—once again, subjective experience, logic, and will.

Those restrictions enable liberalism to constrain legitimate discussion in such a way that it always wins.

If you can't discuss the good then all lifestyles have equal standing. If you can't talk about essential natures then marriage is whatever you make it. If human differences can't be discussed, because

an outlook that rejects the transcendent makes it impossible to see them in perspective and so makes them too absolute and too frightening, then discrimination can't be anything but mindless injustice with no possible right to exist.

That strength is also its weakness. If you insist on leaving too much out of the discussion, you're not going to be able to deal with the world as it is. If you can't deal with human differences, for example, you've got problems.

3.2.3 Denial of man

Most basically, man is a rational animal that insists that his life make sense. It can't make sense without a standard of the good that transcends desire. Getting what we want simply as such is not what we want. It just doesn't satisfy us.

That reality in itself is enough to doom liberalism. Telling people that getting what they want is the highest standard, for example, means there can't be a reliable motive for social cooperation. For confirmation, look at official corruption and fecklessness in the EU, UN, and recent Democratic administrations.

Liberalism seems to have won completely in principle, but that won't help it if its principles make it unable to function effectively. In the long run, I think, it will turn out much weaker than we expect. For now it can do a lot of damage, but it does not, as the notion of progress would suggest, stand for an irreversible transition in human life.

So if you don't like it, you should feel free to oppose it. It's not a law of nature that you lose. In fact, in the long run, it's a law of nature that *they* lose.