The Lost History of Liberalism
FROM ANCIENT ROME TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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CHAPTER ONE

What It Meant to Be Liberal from Cicero to Lafayette

—A DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, 1768

ASK ANYONE TODAY what liberalism means and you’ll get a variety of responses. It’s a tradition of thought, a form of government, a value system, an attitude, or a frame of mind. Inevitably, however, people will agree that liberalism is centrally concerned with the protection of individual rights and interests and that governments are there to protect these. Individuals should have the maximum amount of freedom to make their own life choices and do as they wish.

The truth is, however, that this focus on the individual and his or her interests is very recent. The word “liberalism” did not even exist until the early nineteenth century, and for hundreds of years prior to its birth, being liberal meant something very different. For almost two thousand years, it meant demonstrating the virtues of a citizen, showing devotion to the common good, and respecting the importance of mutual connectedness.

Republican Beginnings: A Moral and Civic Ideal

We could begin with the Roman statesman and author Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC). One of the most widely read and cited authors in the history of Western thought, Cicero wrote eloquently about the importance of being liberal. The word stems from the Latin terms liber, meaning both “free” and “generous,” and liberalis, “befitting a free-born person.” The noun form corresponding to these two words was liberalitas, or “liberality.”

First and foremost, being free in ancient Rome meant being a citizen and not a slave. It meant being free of the arbitrary will of a master or the domination of any man. The Romans thought that such a state of freedom was possible only under the rule of law and a republican constitution. Legal and political arrangements were necessary to ensure that the government focused on the common good, the res publica. Only under such conditions could an individual hope to be free.

But to the ancient Romans, being free required more than a republican constitution; it also required citizens who practiced liberalitas, which referred to a noble and generous way of thinking and acting toward one’s fellow citizens. Its opposite was selfishness, or what the Romans called “slavishness”—a way of thinking or acting that regarded only oneself, one’s profits, and one’s pleasures. In its broadest sense, liberalitas signified the moral and magnanimous attitude that the ancients believed was essential to the cohesion and smooth functioning of a free society. The English translation of the word is “liberality.”

In On Duties (44 BC), Cicero described liberalitas in a way that would resonate over the centuries. Liberalitas, Cicero
wrote, was the very “bond of human society.” Selfishness was not only morally repugnant, but socially destructive. “Mutual helpfulness” was the key to civilization. It was the moral duty of free men to behave in a liberal way toward each other. And being liberal meant “giving and receiving” in a way that contributed to the common good.

Men are not born for themselves alone, Cicero asserted; they are brought into being for the sake of others:

Since we are not born for ourselves alone; since . . . men were brought into being for the sake of men, that they might do good to one another, we ought to contribute our part to the common good, and by the interchange of kind offices, both in giving and receiving, alike by skill, by labor and by the resources at our command, strengthen the social union of men among men.¹

A century after Cicero, another famous and influential Roman philosopher, Lucius Annaeus Seneca (ca. 4 BC–AD 65), elaborated on the principle of liberalitas in his book-length treatise On Benefits (AD 63). Seneca took pains to explain how to give, receive, and return gifts, favors, and services in a way that was moral and thus constitutive of the social bond. Like Cicero, he believed that for a system based on exchange to work properly, a liberal attitude was needed in both givers and receivers, in other words, a selfless, generous, and grateful disposition. Borrowing from the Greek stoic Chryssippus (ca. 280–207 BC), Seneca offered an allegory for the virtue of liberality: the circular dance of the Three Graces, giving, receiving, and returning benefits. To ancient thinkers like Cicero and Seneca, liberality quite literally made the world go around—and held it together.

Being liberal was not easy. Cicero and Seneca expounded at length upon the principles that should inform giving and receiving. Like freedom itself, liberality required correct reasoning and moral fortitude, self-discipline and command. It was clearly also an aristocratic ethos. It was designed by and for the free, wealthy, and well-connected men who were in a position to give and receive benefits in ancient Rome. It was regarded as a particularly praiseworthy quality in the patrician class and among rulers, as is shown by many ancient inscriptions, official dedications, and texts.

If liberalitas was a virtue appropriate to aristocrats and rulers, so was the liberal arts education that trained them for it and required considerable wealth and leisure time with which to study. Its primary purpose was not to teach students how to acquire wealth or to prepare them for a vocation but to ready them for active and virtuous membership in society. It was meant to teach society’s future leaders how to think properly and speak clearly in public, thus enabling them to participate effectively in civic life. Citizens were made, not born. Cicero often asserted that the liberal arts should teach humanitas, a humane attitude toward fellow citizens. The Greek historian and Roman citizen Plutarch (AD 46–120) wrote that a liberal education gave sustenance to a noble mind and led to moral improvement, disinterestedness, and public spirit in rulers.² It was essential, in other words, to the inculcation of liberality.

**Medieval Rearticulations: Liberality Christianized**

As antiquity gave way to the Middle Ages, this ancient view of liberality was not entirely lost but Christianized and further disseminated by early Church fathers like Saint Ambrose.³ Saint Ambrose, who wrote a treatise modeled expressly on Cicero’s On Duties, rearticulated Cicero’s main ideas and principles. Any true community rested upon justice and goodwill,
wrote Ambrose, and liberality and kindness were what held society together.⁴

Liberality during the Middle Ages was thus overlaid with Christian values such as love, compassion, and especially charity, values regarded as necessary not only in republics, but in monarchies as well. God, Christians were told, was liberal in his mercy, just as Jesus was with his love. Christians should imitate God by loving and giving in return. Dictionaries from the Middle Ages on, whether French, German, or English, defined “liberal” as the quality of someone “who likes to give,” and “liberality” as “the quality of giving or spending freely.” Great medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas spread such notions in their writings.⁵

The medieval Church continued to regard the liberal arts as the ideal educational program for society’s leaders. Frequently contrasted with the “servile” or “mechanical arts” that ministered to the baser needs of humankind, such as, for example, tailoring, weaving, and blacksmithing, the liberal arts were seen to develop intellectual and moral excellence. They prepared young men for active roles in the public sector and for service to the state. As in the ancient world, a liberal arts education was also a marker of status, setting the elite apart from the rest. Every Christian, rich or poor, was urged to be liberal, but liberality continued to be regarded as especially important in persons “of a superior social station.”

Renaissance Liberal Arts

Liberality during the Renaissance continued to be an aristocratic, or “princely,” virtue. As one of many Renaissance texts explained, avarice was the “sure sign of an ignoble and villainous spirit,” while liberality was the proper virtue of the aristocrat.⁶ The scope of a liberal arts education was now broadened and its prestige grew. The Italian humanist Pietro Paolo Vergerio (1370–1445), an admirer of Cicero, rearticulated many classical ideas about education in his treatise “On the Noble Character and Liberal Studies of Youth.” First published in 1402, it passed through forty editions before 1600, becoming the most frequently copied and reprinted Renaissance pedagogical treatise. A liberal arts education, Vergerio explained, elevated those who received it above the “unthinking crowd.”⁷ It prepared them for positions of leadership and legitimized their claim to such positions. In the company of books, there was no greed; young boys learned virtue and wisdom, the duties of citizenship.

The focus on men in Vergerio’s essay was certainly not accidental, since from its inception a liberal education was conceived with young men and not women in mind. Its association with independence, public speaking, and leadership made it very hard to imagine its relevance and value to women. According to Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives (1493–1540), who wrote the major Renaissance work on female education, The Education of a Christian Woman (1524), a book that was translated into English, Dutch, French, German, Spanish, and Italian, the learning of women should focus on their domestic functions and, most importantly, on keeping them chaste. While it was reasonable for a man to “be equipped with the knowledge of many and varied subjects which will be of profit to himself and to the state,” a woman was sufficiently instructed when she had been taught “chastity, silence and obedience.”⁸ For this purpose, religious texts were deemed especially effective.

This, however, does not mean that no Renaissance women received a liberal arts education. Evidence shows that some aristocratic women became highly educated.⁹ Several even wrote treatises defending the liberal arts. But the prejudice
against liberal women helps to explain why, in those rare instances when it was granted, a woman’s education was normally said to reflect her father’s liberality rather than her own. It conferred honor and prestige on a Renaissance *paterfamilias* because it showed that he could afford such a luxury and need not worry about marrying off an overeducated daughter. The educated woman herself, however, was often ridiculed and vilified. That an advanced education rendered a woman masculine was a common refrain. That it made her a sexual predator was another. Even the word “liberal” was problematic when used to describe a woman because it often took on a sexual connotation. A liberal woman became sexually promiscuous. Reflecting long-held prejudices about women’s supposed deviousness, sinfulness, and lasciviousness, a ballad from around 1500 warns that women are often “liberal . . . in secret.”

Regarding Renaissance boys, however, and especially those destined for positions of power and influence, both liberality and the liberal arts education that prepared them for it were held to be essential. The Dutch humanist, priest, and theologian Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) referred to such well-educated boys as the “seed-beds from which will appear senators, magistrates, doctors, abbots, bishops, popes, and emperors.” His two treatises on education, *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1516) and *The Education of Children* (1529), recommended the liberal arts as second in importance only to Christian piety in the formation of (wealthy and male) individuals. “Liberality,” he made sure to clarify, meant more than just “handing out gifts”; it meant “using [your] power for good.” Among Renaissance artists, liberality continued to be symbolized by the ancient allegory of the Three Graces. The humanist polymath Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) referenced Seneca when he explained that “one of the sisters gives, another receives, and the third returns the favor, all of which degrees should be present in every act of perfect liberality.” For Alberti, as for so many other Renaissance thinkers, the virtue of liberality was essential to any free and generous society.

**The Politics of Giving**

Renaissance texts frequently exhorted elites to give careful thought to how they acquired and dispensed their wealth. Conduct books explained that liberality was a moral virtue that moderated men’s “desire and greed for money.” Liberality was also about spending money “usefully and not excessively.” A liberal man used his wealth to support his household, friends, and relatives; he also helped those who had, due to no fault of their own, fallen into poverty. He did not spend money to show off. Indeed, knowing how to spend was proof of a person’s value.

Such a regard for appropriate spending was considered as an especially important quality in rulers. Baldassare Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* (1528), the period’s principal handbook of aristocratic values, stated that “the good and wise prince . . . ought to be full of liberality,” and that God would reward him for this. But rulers were also advised not to be prodigal. Erasmus advised princes to practice moderation and discernment in their spending and, especially, never to take from the deserving to give to the unworthy. With that particular blend of realism and idealism for which he became famous, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) warned that a liberal prince should not spend beyond his means because that would only drain his resources and force him to raise taxes, which would oppress his people and provoke their hatred. Similarly, the French writer Michel Montaigne (1533–92), often regarded as
the founder of modern skepticism, cautioned rulers that they should use justice and deliberation in their liberality lest they “pour the seed out of the bag.”

Well into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, elites and rulers were exhorted to be liberal but not indiscriminate in their giving. The French statesman and author Nicolas Faret (1596–1646) made sure to differentiate liberality from promiscuous giving. A prince’s generosity should always be guided by reason, prudence, and moderation. It should be extended in an orderly way to “decent people” and with due consideration to rank, birth, age, means, and reputation. Most importantly, a prince should never be “perniciously liberal”; that is, he should never give in a way that might exhaust his own funds. Other manuals show a similar concern to differentiate the lavish spending of the newly rich from the long-recognized virtue of liberality. The first edition of the Dictionary of the Académie française (1694) defined “liberal” as “he who likes to give ... to people of merit”; by its fourth edition it had added “there is a big difference between a prodigal man and a liberal man.”

Protestant Developments

The Protestant Reformation altered the Catholic meaning of liberality, but subtly, at least initially. Protestant Bibles helped spread the notion that liberality was not just a princely or aristocratic value, but a universal Christian imperative. Where earlier translations of the Bible rendered the word “generous” as “noble” or “worthy to a prince,” the new English and Puritan versions dropped the association with high status and substituted the word “liberal.” In the King James version (1604–11), the word appears several times, each time referring to generous giving, especially to the poor. Moreover, Proverbs 11:25 suggests that God rewards liberal behavior: “The liberal soul shall be made fat; and he that watereth shall be watered also himself.”

A sermon delivered before the English King Charles I at Whitehall on April 15, 1628, suggests a subtle change of emphasis. John Donne (1572–1631), a poet, lawyer, and cleric, began by reiterating the well-known principle that liberality was essential to kings, princes, and “great persons.” But then he added that even the population at large, that is, the people, should be liberal. Reminding his congregation that “Christ is a liberal God,” Donne declared that it was important for all Christians to give freely. And being liberal, Donne added, was not only about sharing one’s wealth. It was important to continuously find “new ways to be liberal.” Following Isaiah 32, “But the liberal deviseth liberal things, and by liberal things he shall stand,” they should “believe liberal purposes,” “accept liberal propositions,” and “apply them liberally.” Donne exhorted his congregation to show their liberality by divesting themselves of all ill feelings toward others. Being liberal was about sharing not simply one’s gold, but also one’s knowledge and wisdom. These, Donne urged, should be communicated to others, even to the general public. And yet Donne offered an important caveat: it was important to be liberal only to Christians or one would be guilty of “spiritual prodigality,” a transgression.

The purpose behind the much-vaunted liberality, endlessly encouraged in moral treatises and sermons, was certainly not to redistribute property in any significant way or to disturb the religiopolitical order. Most Christian preachers, whether Catholic or Protestant, taught that one should give according to one’s rank in society and not in ways that might endanger it. Matthew 26:11 states that “ye have the poor always with you,” and this was generally interpreted to mean that poverty was an unavoidable part of the social and political order. As one
typical English courtesy book explained, “God, in his wisdom, discerning that Equality of Conditions would breed Confusion in the World, has ordered several states, design’d some to Poverty, others to Riches.” But liberality spread a sense of goodwill, benevolence, and Christian brotherhood; it sustained society and held it together.26

In some important ways, then, liberality in early modern Europe was meant to preserve the existing sociopolitical and religious order. As Cicero, Seneca, and their many disciples knew, gift giving was a kind of social cement. Society functioned and cohered through the giving and receiving of “benefits,” in Seneca’s terminology, that is, favors, honors, privileges, and services of various kinds. Christian charity and almsgiving also spread a sense of community and goodwill. Finally, the display of liberality enhanced a person’s dignity and standing in society.

American Exceptionalism and the Liberal Tradition

And yet Christian liberality, especially in its Puritan manifestations, could and did lead to potentially disruptive positions. This can be seen in the famous “City upon a Hill” sermon delivered by Puritan preacher John Winthrop (1587–1649) upon his arrival at the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. Still on board the ship Arabella, Winthrop declared that the very unusual times through which his Puritan community was living demanded “extraordinary liberality” from them. Under the very difficult circumstances they were facing, there was no such thing, he made a point of saying, as being “over liberal.” Extraordinary liberality was their only recipe for survival. Liberality was now demanded of the whole community toward each other. They must think of the public good before themselves. In the years to come, this sermon would often be invoked to support the idea of American exceptionalism, whose liberal founding principles were a beacon to the world. The colonists should “bear one another’s burdens” and view themselves as a “company of Christ, bound together by love.”27

Winthrop’s advocacy of extraordinary liberality was certainly unusual in the seventeenth century. More common were exhortations to a moderate, discriminating, and aristocratic liberality less threatening to the aristocratic and monarchical status quo. Humans were, in the words of the Dutch natural law theorist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), sociable and reasonable creatures by nature. They were both able and morally obligated to act in a liberal way toward one another. Cicero’s On Duties was published in fourteen English and many more Latin editions between 1534 and 1699. It was a basic text at schools like Westminster and Eton and at various Cambridge and Oxford colleges. Between 1678 and 1700, a shortened version of Seneca’s On Benefits was also edited.28 Young boys in elite institutions across Europe were taught that society depended on their liberality—that is, on their generosity, moral probity, and civic values.

Thus, by the mid-seventeenth century Europeans had been calling liberality a necessary virtue for more than two thousand years. If ever there was a liberal tradition this was it.

Thomas Hobbes and John Locke on Liberality

Today, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Locke (1632–1704) are often regarded as founding fathers of liberalism. This is curious, however, because they never used the word and had radically different perspectives on liberality.

Hobbes rejected the liberal tradition described above root and branch. Men, he declared, were naturally violent and
selfish. “Poore,” “nasty,” and “brutish,” they were driven by mutual fear. War was their natural condition. Human beings, Hobbes claimed, were unable to govern themselves or live peacefully together without a powerful leader “to keep them all in awe, and to direct their actions to the common benefit.” A “perpetual war, of every man against his neighbor” could be avoided only by a strong and undivided government in the hands of an absolute monarch.\textsuperscript{29} Liberality played no discernible role in Hobbes’ narrative.

Natural law philosophers, moralists, and religious thinkers across Europe reacted in horror to Hobbes’ propositions, accusing him of atheism and immorality. Tract after tract presented a more optimistic view of man and reaffirmed the reality and central importance to society of liberal- ality, often calling on the authority of Cicero to do so. Men were both capable and duty bound to practice liberal- ality. Human beings had been endowed by God to express goodness toward others. Despite Hobbes’ animadversions, the belief in the power of liberal- ality survived and even prospered.

In France, however, an influential group of Catholic moralists heavily influenced by Jansenism developed views very similar to those of Hobbes.\textsuperscript{30} Blaise Pascal, François de la Rochefoucauld, Pierre Nicole, and Jacques Esprit all subscribed to a very pessimistic view of human nature. Man was, in the words of Pascal, a vile and abject creature, whose overriding drive was always self-love.\textsuperscript{31} Pierre Nicole, another eminent French moralist in the Jansenist tradition, asserted that man loved himself “without limits or measure,” and that this rendered him violent, unjust, and cruel. Without an absolute monarchy to contain them, men would be in a perpetual state of war with each other. Fear and cupid- ity were what held society together.\textsuperscript{32} For the French Jansenists as for Hobbes, when men traded services and civilities with one another, it was not due to any innate capacity to practice liberal- ality, but always out of self-interest.

Curiously, however, the Jansenists did not deny the importance of liberal- ality. What they did instead was to describe liberal- ality as a false but nevertheless necessary virtue. In their minds, it was something akin to politeness, a way that men hid their natural sinfulness. In his Falsity of Human Virtues of 1678, Jacques Esprit summed up the Jansenists’ way of thinking when he said that the most human beings could ever do was to “pass themselves off as liberal.”\textsuperscript{33} It is noteworthy, however, that several of these Jansenist thinkers, and Nicole in particular, came to the conclusion that even such hypocrisy was necessary for human society to function. Liberality need not be sincere for society to cohere.

Other philosophers, theologians, and writers either ignored or rejected this pessimism about human nature and its obsession with sinful motives and hypocrisy. One such philosopher was John Locke. Locke translated some of Nicole’s essays and, in the process, accentuated the positive: “love and respect are the bonds of society,” he wrote, “and necessary to its preservation.” Society depended on “the traffic of kindness.” Without it, society could “hardly hold together.”\textsuperscript{34}

The idea that human beings were naturally capable and duty bound to behave liberally toward each other was reiterated in almost everything Locke wrote. In his most influential Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689), he argued against orthodox notions of original sin and reigning epistemological theories by claiming that moral ideas were learned, not inborn; therefore, all human beings could and should be taught the moral principles by which to lead their lives. In The Reasonableness of Christianity (1695), Locke stressed the importance for Christians to engage in good works. Jesus commanded, “Loving our enemies, doing good to those that hate
necessary to teach them “self-mastership” and what Turnbull called “inward liberty,” by which he meant the overcoming of selfishness and vice. Young men had to be trained to love the right things: justice, truth, and the greater good of mankind. This is what it meant to “humanize the mind” and “wake the generous affections.”

Enlightenment Liberality

Today some say that liberalism owes its origins to the Enlightenment, but once again it is important to know that no one spoke of liberalism during the eighteenth century. The word and concept had not yet been conceived. However, liberalty continued to be championed and, thanks to new forms of communication, disseminated like never before.

Enlightenment liberalism remained a virtue mainly associated with noble birth and aristocratic elites. Dr. Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language defined the word “liberal” as “not mean; not low in birth” and “becoming a gentleman.” As before, it was widely assumed that only a select few would have access to the education that would form the “generous, kindly temper” of such a liberal man. John Locke wrote his educational treatise with the sons of gentlemen in mind and the moral ethos he promoted was aristocratic. He delivered lectures on morality for the sons of gentlemen, organized a social club for gentlemen, and signed his works “John Locke, Gent.” According to Shaftesbury, an appropriate education for gentlemen should form a “genteel and liberal Character,” suitable to the natural leaders of society, but not the “vulgar.” Turnbull addressed his widely read Observations to the young sons of the “nobility and gentry.” The purpose of a liberal education was to instill in the minds of young boys of “good breeding” “a truly liberal and manly temper.”
References to gentlemen and manliness are common in eighteenth-century texts on the virtues of a liberal education. Hardly anyone at the time thought it a good idea to enlarge the minds of girls. François Fénelon’s *On the Education of Girls* (1687) succinctly summarized the reigning consensus. Written at the invitation of the Duke and Duchess de Beavilliers, who had nine daughters, it was quickly translated into English and German and was frequently reissued during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, making it one of the most popular education manuals of the time. The learning of girls, Fénelon wrote, should be kept within narrow bounds. It was important to “restrain their minds as much as possible,” keeping them focused on their domestic duties, that is, “managing a household, making a husband happy and raising children.” Humanistic study should explicitly be withheld from women because it might “turn [their] head[s].”

One hundred years later, an enlightened reformer like Adam Smith (1723–90) still thought it commendable that the girls of his time were taught only what was *useful* for them to know, and “nothing else.” Every element of their education should prepare them for their predestined domestic roles: “either to improve the natural attractions of their person, or to form their mind to reserve, to modesty, to chastity, and to economy; to render them both likely to become the mistresses of a family, and to behave properly when they have become such.” By Smith’s time, biomedical theories about women’s “nature” were reinforcing traditional notions about what constituted a suitable education for women by suggesting that sustained intellectual labor was harmful to their health.

Meanwhile, however, the shaping of liberal male minds was ever more prized during the Enlightenment. Smith himself benefited from a liberal arts education, which prepared him well for university studies and eventually his position as professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow. There Smith studied moral philosophy under Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), whose teachings stressed the importance of liberality, that is, of engaging in “acts of kindness to others.” Hutcheson’s inaugural lecture at Glasgow was on “The Natural Fellowship of Mankind.” Explicitly refuting the egoistic philosophy of Hobbes, Hutcheson asserted that human beings were endowed with a moral sense, which made them capable of seeing the virtue of compassionate, generous, and benevolent affections and encouraged them to behave accordingly. The “culture of our minds,” he taught, “principally consists in forming just opinions about our duty” and constantly keeping in mind the common interest was one of the most important duties of all. To learn about these duties, Hutcheson recommended that students read Cicero, Locke, and Shaftesbury.

A liberal disposition was often comingled with condescension, if not outright disdain, for the poor. Certainly this was the case in France, where well into the eighteenth century liberality remained closely identified with noble status. As the Catholic bishop and preacher Jean-Baptiste Massillon (1663–1742) explained in one of his famous sermons, the lower classes were less capable of liberality, while generosity, elevated sentiments, and sensitivity to the unfortunate were marks of nobility. John Locke made similar observations. A liberal arts education, he said, was not intended for “the greatest part of Mankind, who are given up to Labour, and enslaved to the necessity of their mean condition.” He wrote that poor children from the age of three could be sent out to work. As an agent of English colonialism, Locke also helped author texts that supported slavery. Magazines, treatises, and dictionaries well into the nineteenth century disseminated such ideas. They
described a liberal arts education as “fit for Gentlemen and Scholars,” while an education in the “Mechanick Trades and Handicrafts” was appropriate for “meaner People” destined for “servile” occupations.51

In America, too, the more established gentry tended to regard the common people as naturally narrow-minded and bigoted. To Nathanael Greene (1742–86), one of George Washington’s generals, “the great body of the People” was always “contracted, selfish and illiberal.” They should never be confused with gentlemen, who had more noble natures.52 Washington himself is known to have spoken of “the grazing multitude,” and John Adams of “the common Herd of Mankind.” “Common Persons,” he wrote, “have no idea [of] Learning, Eloquence and Genius.” Their “vulgar, rustic Imaginations” were easily led astray.

Enlightenment Transformations

Although the Enlightenment carried forward the importance of liberality, it also introduced new uses of the term. Its scope was expanded and, in some senses, democratized. It now became possible to speak not only of liberal individuals but of liberal sentiments, ideas, and ways of thinking. Such sentiments, ideas, and ways of thinking could manifest themselves in larger circles of people: writers and scholars, preachers and officials, the educated public, and even an entire generation.

While a liberal arts education was still regarded as an important way to inculcate liberality in boys of the elite, Enlightenment philosophes began thinking that one could learn to be liberal in other settings too. A person might acquire liberality in any number of social venues, such as gentlemen’s clubs, Masonic lodges, salons, and art exhibitions, all of which were proliferating at the time.53 Thus, an eighteenth-century gentleman’s club in London described its purpose as being the “mutual improvement by liberal conversation and rational enquiry.” The club saw itself as disseminating throughout the country a “liberality of spirit” that its members believed was conducive to progress.54 Apparently, one could now become liberal by thinking and speaking freely to others. And such liberality would lead to the improvement of all of society.

The Scottish historian William Robertson (1721–93) took obvious pleasure in reporting the diffusion of liberality. Over the course of history, he wrote, liberal sentiments were growing and being disseminated throughout Europe. They were causing the manners of Europeans to become more gentle, refined, and civilized.55 Liberal tenets, an eighteenth-century German thinker proffered, were principles in sync with the reasonable, moral, and progressive forces in history.56 Many others agreed. George Washington celebrated the “growing liberality of sentiment” of his age, certain that it was having a “meliorating influence on mankind.”57

One of the most important ways that liberality was improving mankind was by fostering religious toleration. This was something new. Christian arguments going back at least as far as Saint Augustine (354–430) held that the punishment of heretics was an act of charity since it helped to save them in the eyes of God and prevented society from descending into chaos. While the French court preacher Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704) urged his king to be liberal and “think great thoughts” for the “good of mankind,”58 he saw no contradiction in also commending the king for his escalating persecution of French Protestants, which included the forcible conversion, imprisonment, and exile of hundreds of thousands of French men and women. There is no evidence that he—nor
anyone else at the time—made a connection between the virtue of liberality and the idea of religious toleration.

John Locke appears to have been the first to make that connection. Alarmed by Louis XIV’s mounting persecution of Protestants in France, and worried also about continuing dissensions among Protestants at home, Locke drew the concepts of liberality and toleration together in his Letter Concerning Toleration (1685). Tolerance, Locke proposed, was not only “agreeable to the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” but the “chief identifying mark of the True Church.” In this way, Locke made religious toleration a Christian duty. But merely tolerating one another was not good enough, he said. Christians were enjoined to be liberal to each other. “Nay,” Locke said, “we must not content our selves with the narrow Measures of bare Justice. . . . Charity, Bounty, and Liberality must be added to it. This the Gospel enjoyns; this Reason directs; and this that natural Fellowship we are born into requires of us.”

Locke extended the injunction to be liberal very broadly, at least for his time. It applied to all Protestant sects, and even pagans, Muslims, and Jews. But liberality for Locke still had limits; he did not include most Catholics or atheists. Others after him would extend it more broadly.

Indeed, over the course of the eighteenth century, religious toleration became a core liberal value. Protestant Dissenters—Protestants who did not belong to the established Church of England—were especially important in its dissemination. Subject to a number of legal disabilities, they campaigned for the repeal of these restrictive laws under the banner of liberalty. For example, in a sermon on “liberal things,” the Dissenting minister Samuel Wright (1683–1746) declared that being liberal meant standing up to bigots. Liberality enjoined all Christians to support “Principles of Liberty both in civil and religious Matters.” In this way, liberality became linked not only with religious toleration, but also with the demand for political and legal reform.

Richard Price (1723–91) was a leader of the Dissenting community and a friend of both Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Price asserted the following about “liberal sentiments”: “They extirpate the wretched prejudices which make us shy of one another; and enable us to regard, with equal satisfaction and pleasure, our neighbours, friends, and acquaintances, be their modes of worship or their systems of faith what they will.” The Oxford English Dictionary records that by 1772 the word “liberal” had come to mean “free from bias, prejudice, or bigotry; open-minded, tolerant.” And by the very end of the century, a growing number of liberal-minded gentlemen advocated increasingly expansive notions of religious toleration, calling it the most “just and liberal” policy for governments to adopt.

One such gentleman was George Washington, who, as president of the United States, advocated what he called a liberal religious policy. By this he meant a generous and tolerant policy that accorded freedom of worship not just to the various Protestant sects but also to Catholics and Jews. In a now famous “Letter to the Roman Catholics in the United States of America,” Washington wrote on March 15, 1790, “As mankind become more liberal they will be more apt to allow that all those who conduct themselves as worthy members of the community are equally entitled to the protection of civil government. I hope ever to see America among the foremost nations in example of justice and liberality.” To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport (1790), he wrote a few months later: “The citizens of the USA have a right to applaud themselves for having given mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy—a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.” Soon America
would become famous for its liberal laws regarding religion and the separation of church and state seen as a quintessentially American principle.

_Liberal Theology and Liberal Christianity_

The Enlightenment made another critical contribution to the history of liberalism: it invented the notions “liberal theology” and “liberal Christianity,” which would have a much-neglected influence on the history of liberalism. “Liberal theology” was coined by German and Protestant scholars like Johann Salomo Semler (1725–91), who first used it in 1774.66 By this term Semler meant a religious perspective and way of reading the Bible that was enlightened and scholarly, and therefore suited to liberal men of an enlightened century.67 It was a theology free from dogmatic constraints and open to critical inquiry. Semler’s “liberal” approach to the Bible led him to conclude that the essence of Christianity was not dogmatic, but moral.

Semler’s ideas inaugurated a long and heated debate about religious liberalism’s relationship to orthodoxy. His liberal theology quickly gained ground in Germany, becoming the dominant theological current by the end of the century. Its influence spread even beyond Germany. In 1812, the American Unitarian journal _General Repository and Review_ praised Semler effusively, calling him “the most learned [and] most enlightened” theologian because he “opened a free range for liberal minds” and advocated “bold and liberal notions.”68

The term “liberal Christianity” (as opposed to “liberal theology”) may have been invented in America, where it was advanced by a small but vocal group of Protestant clergymen clustered in the Boston area. Called “liberal Christians,” and sometimes the “liberal party,” they eventually adopted the label “Unitarian.” Their most famous proponent was William Ellery Channing (1780–1842),69 whose writings were translated and disseminated broadly beyond the United States. Both liberal Christianity and liberal theology sparked a heated and enduring controversy that would greatly impact the history of liberalism and tarnish it in the eyes of many.

Liberal Christians tended to be well-to-do and educated gentlemen. Their religion, they said, was appropriate for the polite and learned, men of liberal education and good taste. Such men abhorred the “deplorable illiberality” of the uneducated,70 those who were susceptible to “enthusiasm” and prone to bigotry. A liberal gentleman’s religion was “a calm and rational thing, the result of thought and consideration.”71 It was the very antithesis of the “religious Phrenzy,” “bitter Shriekings and Screamings; Convulsion-like Tremblings and Agitations” that characterized various forms of popular revivalism.72

To its advocates, liberal Christianity was an updated and much-needed version of Christianity, more compatible with the enlightened values of the age in which they lived. It did not dwell on gloomy doctrines about man’s sinfulness, nor stress dogmas and the supernatural. Instead it emphasized the importance of moral comportment and belief in man’s ability to improve himself. Liberal Christians prided themselves on their toleration of other Protestant sects and on being sociable and reasonable. They subscribed to a religion that cultivated what one of Locke’s favorite preachers called the “free and liberal dispositions.”73

_Liberality Politicized_

Not all Enlightenment thinkers were convinced that society was improving under the influence of liberality. As economies grew, changed, and generated unprecedented wealth, some began to worry about the growing inequality, vanity, and
selfishness that seemed to be accompanying it. In an essay that caused a sensation at midcentury, the Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–88) rejected the idea that the liberal arts were ameliorating society. Sounding much like the Jansenists who came before him, he claimed that they were just masking a deeply corrupt society.74 Men were becoming more learned and polite but were also losing their civic values, their devotion to the public good. Modern men did not measure up to the ancient Roman ideal of citizenship, described, among others, by Cicero.

Scottish thinkers were particularly troubled by the effects of economic change. Adam Ferguson (1723–1816), a close reader of both Cicero and Rousseau, deplored the mercenary values that he felt were spreading. Selfishness was threatening the very bonds of society, turning Scotland into a “servile nation of helots.”75 The obsession with commerce and wealth was leading to the abandonment of civic duties, creating what his more famous compatriot Adam Smith (1723–90) would call a society of strangers.

Rousseau, Ferguson, and Smith were joined by many other Enlightenment thinkers who thought deeply about how to teach citizens to concern themselves more with the general welfare. It seemed to these philosophers that the liberal arts, as they were being taught, were not working. Even a scientist like Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) complained that the liberal arts education of his time had become too technical—there was nothing truly liberal about it. A useful liberal arts education should pay more attention to civics, he said. Students should learn patriotism, wrote one Scottish reformer, while another argued that young boys should learn the love of liberty and public spirit and even zeal for the constitution. Liberality, Adam Ferguson reminded people, was not a synonym for mere refinement or cosmopolitan sociability but meant “that habit of the soul by which we consider ourselves as but a part of some beloved community . . . whose general welfare is to us the supreme object of zeal and the great rule of our conduct.” Truly liberal sentiments concerned themselves with the maintenance of a free constitution.76 They encouraged civic engagement.

From Liberal Charters to Liberal Constitutions

Since medieval times, kings and emperors had granted charters conferring rights or privileges to towns, companies, or individuals. The sovereigns granting them, or the charters themselves, were called liberal when the rights they conferred were regarded as robust and, for example, involved generous economic concessions and considerable self-government.77 When Englishmen left their homeland for the New World, they brought with them what they often called liberal charters establishing the colonies,78 and when tensions arose between England and America in the mid-eighteenth century, much discussion revolved around whether the British government had the right to change the terms of these charters and impose new regulations and taxes on the colonies. Americans insisted that such impositions violated the charters as well as the protections accorded to them by the British constitution. They were no longer generous, not based on the principle of reciprocity; they were no longer liberal.

It was in this highly politicized environment that Adam Smith published his famous book, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1776). Today regarded as a foundational text of classical liberalism, it spoke directly to American concerns. Smith himself called it a “very violent attack . . . upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain.”79 Not only did he denounce English trade policies and advocate
instead what he called a “liberal system of free exportation and free importation,” but he used the economy of North America to highlight the flaws of that of England. America illustrated the advantages of a system of natural liberty, in which the unimpeded investment in agriculture was causing rapid progress toward wealth and greatness.\textsuperscript{80} By contrast, Britain’s complicated and corrupt system of tariffs, bounties, monopolies, and other legal devices was just enriching the already wealthy while leaving the rest of the country impoverished.

Smith’s use of the word “liberal” in his Wealth of Nations conjured up a centuries-old meaning with which we are now familiar. It was a word whose moral meaning every educated gentleman of his time would have understood. In book IV, chapter 9, Smith favored “allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way upon the liberal plan of equality, liberty and justice.” Smith’s “liberal plan,” his readers would immediately have recognized, was about not only freedom but also generosity and reciprocity.

It is often forgotten that Smith’s first major and possibly most influential work was on ethics. In his Theory of Moral Sentiments (1749), Smith wrote that “he is not a citizen who does not wish to promote, by every means in his power, the welfare of the whole society of his fellow-citizens.” “The wise and virtuous man,” he continued, “is at all times willing that his own private interest should be sacrificed to the public interest of his own particular order or society. He is at all times willing, too, that the interest of this order or society should be sacrificed to the greater interest of the state or sovereignty of which it is only a subordinate part.”\textsuperscript{81} Moreover, Smith endorsed “liberality” as one of the cardinal virtues and the treatise contains a long discussion of gratitude and benevolence.\textsuperscript{82}

The liberal principles Smith advocated in the Wealth of Nations were “in the interest of the public,” while mercantile ones favored the “mean rapacity” of British merchants and manufacturers who, in league with the landowning aristocracy, conspired against the public good.\textsuperscript{83} Smith defended free trade on the grounds that it would increase the welfare of “the lowest ranks of the people” and work “for the benefit of the poor and the indigent.”\textsuperscript{84}

Unsurprisingly, Americans read the Wealth of Nations as a vindication of their policy of separation from England. Within a few months of its publication, the Continental Congress opened American ports to all foreign vessels and American calls for free trade grew louder. The new country’s very survival depended on it. Through the negotiation of new and liberal trade agreements with the nations of the world, Americans hoped for the advent of a new era of prosperity and peace. And on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence by which the United States announced its secession from the British Empire and its reasons for doing so.

Governments, the Americans argued, derived their authority from the consent of the governed. They were instituted to secure the unalienable rights of men. Whenever a government became destructive toward those ends, it was the right of the people to resist and even overthrow it. Men, moreover, were created equal and possessed the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. All thirteen new states soon provided themselves with written constitutions establishing virtually the same principle: it was to secure the unalienable rights of men that governments were instituted.

Of course, the concern for rights and their protections was not new in 1776. The British government itself recognized that it had granted charters conferring rights and privileges to the colonies. A major difference in the Declaration of Independence was that rights were now seen as natural, equal,
and binding. They were no longer understood to be privileges granted by a liberal sovereign and thus subject to revocation by him.

This inflection in the concept of rights involved a corresponding change in the use of the word “liberal.” While it had previously been employed to designate the generous and freedom-loving concessions of a sovereign to his subjects, or the magnanimous and tolerant behavior of an aristocratic elite, it was now used to describe the generous and free constitution of a people who legislated themselves.

**America, the Most Liberal Country in the World**

In the years that followed, and as Europeans heard about America’s constitutions, a debate took place about which was the more liberal form of government, the British or the American. Americans often boasted that their own constitutions were the most liberal in the world. Patriotic sermons spread the message. American pastors combined Christian, republican, and liberal language to make this point. In a sermon commemorating the constitution of Massachusetts delivered in 1780, Samuel Cooper (1725–83), a Harvard-trained congregational minister in Boston, expressed certainty that America’s “most liberal governments [and] wise political institutions” would attract immigrants from far and wide.  

Ezra Stiles (1727–95), a Yale-trained Congregationalist minister who served as president of Yale College, similarly hailed America’s republican system as the “most equitable, liberal, and perfect” imaginable. Reverend Joseph Lathrop (1731–1820) noted that the British constitution had at one point been “more liberal . . . than most other forms of government in Europe”; but now the American Constitution was “still more liberal.” Such references could be multiplied indefinitely. David Ramsay’s *History of the American Revolution* (1789) laid down the fundamental reason why America’s Constitution was more liberal than European ones: “The freedom of modern European governments,” he wrote, was “for the most part, obtained by the concessions, or the liberality of monarchs or military leaders. In America alone, reason and liberty concurred in the formation of constitutions.”

In Europe, too, people discussed which form of government was more liberal. Richard Price concluded that it was the American. His “Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution” was published in 1784 and quickly translated into French. America, he wrote, now possessed governments “more liberal than any that the world has yet known.” Many Europeans agreed. America’s constitutions made it the land of liberty, the most liberal country in the world.

A liberal country was not a democratic one. By any measure, the United States was not a democracy in the eighteenth century. And, in any case, to most people at the time, “democracy” was synonymous with anarchy or mob rule. But neither did the United States recognize hereditary privilege. And thus it demanded that *each citizen* display a “truly noble liberality of sentiment and affection,” a civic commitment by each individual “to embrace the good of all.”

Their admiration for the US Constitution does not mean that Europeans approved of every aspect. Many deplored the institution of slavery and denounced it in their writings. In 1778, Scottish professor of law John Millar (1735–1801), a student of Adam Smith, had already written the following: “It affords a curious spectacle to observe, that the same people who talk in a high strain of political liberty, and who consider the privilege of imposing their own taxes as one of the inalienable rights of mankind, should make no scruple of reducing a great proportion of their fellow-creatures into circumstances
by which they are not only deprived of property, but almost of every species of right. Fortune perhaps never produced a situation more calculated to ridicule a liberal hypothesis, or to show how little the conduct of men is at the bottom directed by any philosophical principles."92

In the former colonies, too, it became ever harder to reconcile “liberal sentiments” with the support for slavery.93 Signing himself “A Liberal”—perhaps the first ever use of the word as a noun—the author of an article in the Pennsylvania Packet of March 25, 1780, came out for the abolition of slavery.94 Another writer, under the name “Liberalis,” wrote to the Pennsylvania Journal in 1781: “A good whig should consider how inconsistent to the people of Europe the citizens of these states must appear, who, tho’enlightened to their own rights, are still blind to the case of the poor Africans.” Naturally, he declared, “all men [are] alike free and equal.”95 And yet, as is well known, the federal constitution did not abolish slavery, but protected it.

Moreover, anti-abolitionists argued that slavery was not at all inconsistent with liberal principles. The nation’s liberal and founding principles, wrote one, were not antagonistic to the institution of slavery. The British statesman Edmund Burke (1729–97), today regarded as a founder of conservatism, also did not think slavery impaired the “spirit of freedom” in the South. On the contrary, he proffered that it was precisely in the South that freedom was “more noble and liberal.”96

Some suggested that liberal principles should apply to women. While John Adams was attending the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, his wife, Abigail, famously wrote to him, “In the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could.”97 When she was brushed off by her husband, Abigail Adams (1744–1818) wrote to the political writer Mercy Otis Warren (1728–1814) voicing frustration that there had not yet been established “some laws in our favor upon just and Liberal principals” so that “the Arbitrary and tyrannick would be unable to ‘injure us with impunity.’”98

The establishment of a liberal system of government in America did indeed prompt a renewed thinking about the purposes of a liberal education and to whom it should be granted. Noah Webster (1758–1843), famous for his dictionary, spellers, and readers, wanted America to distinguish itself from Europe by means of a new system of public education. Citing the French philosophe Montesquieu, he argued that a country’s system of education should be “relative to its principles of government.” In despotic governments, people should have little or no education; and in monarchies, education should be adapted to the rank of each class of citizens. But in republics, “where [government] is in the hands of the people,” knowledge should be disseminated more broadly, even to “the poorer rank of people.” And “when I speak of a diffusion of knowledge,” he explained, “I do not mean merely a knowledge of spelling books, and the New Testament.” Nor should education merely be about science. It was extremely important to Webster “that systems of education should . . . implant in the minds of the American youth the principles of virtue and of liberty and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government.”99

The years immediately following the American Revolution witnessed a considerable expansion of educational opportunities. Some even believed that women’s education should be expanded. “Thoughts upon Female Education” (1787) by Benjamin Rush (1746–1813), army surgeon-general and signer of the Declaration of Independence, expressed regret that many men held such “illiberal” ideas about the education of women.
They worried that a liberal education would make their wives inattentive to their domestic duties and harder to govern. Rush thought all of this was wrongheaded. A better education would make American mothers better wives and companions, and better educators of their sons. America’s republican form of government made it necessary for American women to be given a suitable education. In this way, they could better instruct their citizens in the principles of their government.

As we can see, by the eve of the French Revolution, and before the invention of “liberalism,” there existed in Europe a centuries-old tradition of exhorting men to be liberal. A term originally used to designate the ideal qualities of a Roman citizen, his love of freedom, generosity, and civic-mindedness, it had been Christianized, democratized, and politicized, such that by the eighteenth century it could be used to describe the American Constitution. A liberal constitution, it was said, required liberal citizens—in other words, men who were freedom-loving, generous, and civic-minded, and who understood their connectedness to others and their duties to the common good. To learn such values required a liberal arts education. Some also believed that it required a liberal form of Christianity, tolerant, reasonable, and open to free inquiry and science.

ON AUGUST 3, 1787, the Marquis de Lafayette wrote to his friend George Washington with some excellent news: “The spirit of liberty is spreading in this country at a great rate,” he said, “liberal ideas are cantering about from one end of the kingdom to the other.” Lafayette had served under Washington in the American Revolutionary War and was a great admirer of the American Constitution. He was happy to report that the French, who had lived for centuries under an oppressive absolute monarchy, were ready for a liberal system of government similar to America’s.

When Lafayette wrote this letter, he was serving on the Assembly of Notables, a council called by the French king,