



Liberalism as a ‘Project to be Realized’

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CONTENTS

Abstract	6
Introduction	7
What is Liberalism? (Again)	9
The Liberal Project and Liberal Theory	10
Individualism and Universalism	10
Sociology and the Liberal Project	12
Liberal Tactics and the Liberal Project	14
The Liberal Project and Liberal Agency	16
The World Bank and Liberal agency	17
Conclusion	20
References	21

ABSTRACT

This paper has been inspired by a suggestion made by Margaret Canovan that liberalism should be understood as a ‘project to be realized’. It argues that we should follow Canovan by having an expanded account of what ‘liberalism’ might be that focuses on the connections between liberal theory and the practices of liberal agency. In this view liberal theorising is an extended reflection on the desirability and possibility of social transformation, and the practice of liberal agency both reflects and enacts this concern. The paper fleshes out these arguments by focusing on one aspect of liberal thought – the ambiguities surrounding the nature of persons – and examines how these are reflected in the policies and practices of one liberal agent – the World Bank.

INTRODUCTION

In 1990 Margaret Canovan said this about liberalism:

... [L]iberalism has never been an account of the world but a project to be realized. The “nature” of early liberalism, the “humanity” of our own day, may be talked about as if they already exist but the point of talking about them is that they are still to be created ... Liberalism is not a matter of clearing away a few accidental obstacles and allowing humanity to unfold its natural essence. It is more like making a garden in a jungle that is continually encroaching ...

(Canovan, 1990, p. 16)

These remarks were made in the context of reflecting on a political thought conference held in 1988 at New College, Oxford. At that conference the conservative political philosopher, Roger Scruton, had argued (according to Canovan) that all political communities, even ‘liberal’ ones, were constituted by, and relied upon, distinctly un-liberal preferences for ‘kith and kin’ – restricted loyalties to the national community at the expense of commitments to ‘universal’ human rights. As Canovan says, ‘this caused quite a stir’. Not because participants at the conference thought this was wrong; they thought it might be right, but that it was ‘dangerous to speak publicly and seriously about such things’ (Canovan, 1990, p. 7) What Canovan did for the rest of her article was dissect what she called liberal ‘myths’, the most important of which was the ‘myth of nature’; that attempt by liberal thinkers to justify liberal principles on some pre-social grounds, notably the state of nature, a belief in ‘natural reason’, or the idea of natural rights. These were ‘myths’ be-

cause, as Canovan put it, ‘human beings as we encounter them in the world are very unlike the traditional liberal picture of them. They are not equal, not free, and far from being distinct individuals in control of their destinies, they are deeply immersed in the particular societies and cultures to which they belong’ (Canovan, 1990, p. 13).

Few people have followed-up Canovan’s idea that liberalism can be understood as a ‘project to be realized’ (Young, 1995; Shani, 2003; Ayers, 2006 and 2009.) In some ways this is surprising given that such a conceptualization might seem to open up a potentially new line of investigation into liberal theory and liberal practice. This paper is an attempt to flesh out a conception of liberalism that takes Canovan’s characterization seriously.¹ In so doing it makes a number of claims. First, it argues that seeing liberalism as a project to be realized requires moving away from the traditional answers to the often posed question: ‘what is liberalism?’ Answers to this question have usually revolved around the possibility or otherwise of detecting some unifying concept or argument within the canon of liberal political thought which can be thought to ‘define’ liberalism or somehow reveal its ‘essence’. Instead, this article argues that we can and should have an expanded understanding of ‘liberalism’ that places the connections between liberal theory and liberal practice – or the actual political practices of liberal agency – at the heart of our understanding of what liberalism is.

Second, this article claims that as a ‘project’, liberalism can be thought of as composed of three elements. First, liberal theorising – that body of arguments, concepts and categories that make up liberal theory. It is

¹ Although it makes no claim that Canovan herself would agree with what follows.

this that is usually understood to represent what 'liberalism' is, but on the understanding of liberalism as a project, these arguments are understood to be an extended reflection on the desirability of the liberal project. Second, liberal theorising often holds within it a series of often overlooked accounts of what it is in the world that stands in the way of the achievement of liberal ideals. These take the form of 'sociological' or 'anthropological' observations about the world that liberals see around them. These observations provide the basis for the liberal project, for it is only by knowing what needs to be changed that liberal agency can work to achieve these changes. Third, as a project, liberalism requires concrete political agency. That is it requires political agents committed to the achievement of liberal ideals in the world. Seeing liberalism in this way then transcends the division between 'theory' and, as it were, the 'real world' of politics. It suggests that liberal theory is driven by a desire to change the world, and that it holds within a series of recommendations about how to do this, and it sees liberal agency as manifesting liberal theory. It refuses the idea that liberal theorizing can and should be divorced from the actual activities of liberal agents. Liberal agents are the carriers of more or less explicit liberal theorising, and all liberal theorising has significant implications for political practice.

Third, this article claims that the view of liberalism as a 'project to be realized' can be justified on three grounds. First, this view makes 'more sense' of many of the historical figures in the liberal canon. It re-locates these thinkers in the context of the political and ideological disputes of their time and gives back to their theorising an explicitly political edge. In other words, it understands these thinkers as being concerned about transforming the societies around them,

and so sees their theories not as primarily normative political philosophy, but as reflections on the desirability and possibility of social transformation. Second, it argues, much like Canovan, that seeing liberalism in this way helps to make sense of some of the recurring features and tensions within liberal thought, in particular devices such as the state of nature and the perennial ambivalence about the 'nature' of persons or the role of the state. In other words seeing liberalism as a project helps us to explain why liberal theorising takes the form that it so often does, and seeming tensions or contradictions within liberal thought are understood as produced by the character of liberalism as a political project. Third, understanding liberalism as a project to be realized helps illuminate the actual practices of liberal agency both historically and in the contemporary period. It sees these agents as pursuing a liberal project and in so doing helps to grasp why these agencies act as they do; the kinds of ideals that animate them, the kinds of arguments they produce and kinds of practices they engage in. In other words seeing liberalism as a project to be realized provides a fruitful basis for empirical investigations into important forms of political agency.

These are obviously ambitious claims that cannot be substantiated here. Instead, this paper aims to show the initial plausibility of these claims by focusing primarily on certain elements of liberal thought and then showing how these are replicated in the arguments and practices of one particular liberal agent – the World Bank. The focus of the discussion will be on the tensions evident within liberal thought about the nature of persons. The most basic aim of this paper is to provoke a discussion about what liberalism might be, but to do so by moving debates about liberal-

ism away from the rather sterile arena of professional political theory and back into the messy world of politics.

WHAT IS LIBERALISM? (AGAIN)

The traditional approach to the question, ‘what is liberalism?’ has been to concentrate on the concepts and arguments found in the classical texts of liberal thought. Some thinkers have attempted to identify a ‘core’ idea which characterizes liberalism in general. Jeremy Waldron, for example, has argued that all liberal thinking is characterised by a commitment ‘to a conception of freedom and of respect for the capacities and the agency of individual men and women, and that these commitments generate a requirement that all aspects of the social world either be made acceptable, or be capable of being made acceptable to every last individual’ (Waldron, 1987, p. 128, p. 135). In a similar vein Stanley Hoffman, in his famous article ‘Liberalism and International Affairs’, defined liberalism as ‘the doctrine whose central concern is the liberty of the individual’ (Hoffman, 1986, p. 395). Richard Dworkin, by contrast, has argued that a certain conception of *equality* ... is the nerve of liberalism’. This conception of equality, he argues, is that the government must treat all its citizens equally in regard to their own conceptions of the good (Dworkin, 1985, p. 193 emphasis added, pp. 190-91). The disagreement between these accounts of liberalism (one stressing liberty, the other a certain kind of equality) suggests that defining liberalism through its core concepts is very difficult. John Dunn has said that, ‘liberalism’ is a term of extreme imprecision of reference’, and John Gray that liberalism has ‘no unchanging nature or essence’ (Dunn, 1979, p. 29; Gray, 1986, p. ix).

Participants in this debate, however, remain committed to the view that arguments about what liberalism is are arguments about the content of liberal theory. But it is not clear that we should feel bound by this account of what liberalism might be. In the first place, as just noted, it is very difficult to see how this approach could lead to any simple or clear definition of liberalism. Beyond that there may be ways of thinking about liberalism that open up new areas of investigation or that pose new kinds of questions that might illuminate elements of liberal thought and practice.

One attempt to conceptualise liberalism as more than just a series of theoretical debates has been proposed by Barry Hindess (Hindess, 2002a, 2002b, 2004). He argues that liberalism can be understood as a ‘project of government’. Hindess uses the term ‘government’ here in ways derived from the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 2001a and 2001b). Foucault drew attention to the emergence of a new concern with governing populations that emerged in 18th century thought. This concern arose, so Foucault suggested, as a result of the discovery of the ‘social’ and the ‘market’ as autonomous realms with their own internal dynamics. The problem of government was then the problem of how to govern (regulate, order, and control) without disturbing the dynamics of these realms – particularly that of the market. What distinguished liberalism, was its commitment to governing as far as possible through the promotion of certain kinds of free activity, and the cultivation among the governed of suitable habits of self-regulation (Hindess, 2004). Hindess expands and develops Foucault’s account of liberalism as a ‘rationality of government’ in two important ways. First, Hindess is concerned to balance the books as it were, by drawing attention to the myriad ways in which liberal thinkers have advocated the use of coercion (rather than

just regulated freedom) to govern. Second, Hindess locates the liberal desire to govern within the distinctions liberal thinkers have always made between the ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ or ‘developed’ and ‘less developed’ (Hindess, 2002b). Thus for Hindess, a central part of liberalism has been its international or cosmopolitan vision, but this vision has been guided by a set of concepts that locate people and peoples on a spectrum – from uncivilized to civilized, less-developed to developed – that justifies the use of all kinds of coercive governmental techniques on those who cannot govern themselves. Hindess suggests that these themes can be found in the work of Locke, Smith, Hume, Kant and Mill (see also Tully, 1988; Jahn, 2005).

Hindess’s arguments show the possibility of moving beyond conceiving of liberalism in narrow terms. By showing how liberal thought has been connected to political practice, Hindess points the way towards a more historically and politically aware understanding of what ‘liberalism’ might be. While we agree with the attempt to conceive of liberalism in broader terms, we part company from Hindess in the stress placed on the idea of social transformation rather than government. To be sure these are not contradictory views; the exercise of government is an essential part of the project of social transformation. Yet we place more emphasis on the ‘kinetic’ elements of liberalism; its restless and relentless desire to remake the world in its own image.

THE LIBERAL PROJECT AND LIBERAL THEORY

Despite the desirability of seeing liberalism as more than simply or largely a body of theory, it is obvious that theorising of various kinds is a central part of anything we might call ‘lib-

eralism’. What conceiving of liberalism as a ‘project to be realized’ does is change how we understand that theorising. In this view liberal theory is an extended investigation into the desirability and possibility of social transformation (rather than simply a more or less abstract discussion of normative theory). That is, and at its most basic, liberal theory is about how the world should be and why it is desirable to make it that way. It is this basic drive that generates some of the characteristic features and tensions within liberal theory – and it was this that Canovan identified as one of the defining features of liberalism. For liberal theory is often caught between grounding liberal principles in some aspect of the nature of persons (reason, natural rights, natural inclinations) while at the same time arguing that these are not in fact adequately expressed in the institutions and practices in actual social, economic and political life. The identification of these natural grounds provides the justification for the attempt to make them real in the world, but, as they are very often not manifest in the actual world, appeal must be made to a variety of abstract arguments that mediate this tension: reason, for example, is both there (‘natural’, ‘innate’) and not there (not actually manifest in the institutions and practices of society).

Individualism and Universalism

The individual lies at the heart of liberal theory. First, liberals have wanted to argue that liberal ends and arrangements are ‘good’ for the individuals who live within them. Liberalism is justified on the basis of what it will do for individuals. It is not that liberals have been unconcerned with ‘society’ or ‘culture’, but they have typically taken the ethical demands of these realms as being secondary to the claims of individuals (Kymlicka, 1991).

Second, liberal theorizing is individualist in the sense that it has typically proceeded ‘bottom up’ as it were; by delineating certain characteristics of individuals and then showing the desirability of certain institutional arrangements for those individuals. Third, the ‘liberation’ of the individual from the oppressions of ‘tradition’, culture and religion is at the heart of the traditional account of liberalism as a historical force. The centrality of the individual, however, generates a profound tension within liberal thought.

Much of liberal theory rests on the idea that once the ‘real’ nature of persons has been identified, it will be possible to generate arguments about desirable political and social arrangements. Within liberal thought, ‘individuals are pictured ... as given, with given interests, wants, purposes, needs, etc.; while society and the state are pictured as sets of actual or possible social arrangements which respond to those individuals’ requirements’ (Lukes, 1973, p. 71). Almost all liberal thinkers have aspired to ground liberal theory in some kind of *universal* claim about the nature of persons: as Kant put it, true morality ‘already dwells in natural sound understanding and needs not so much to be taught as only to be clarified’ (Kant, 1997, p.10). Liberal thinkers have differed on what about the nature of persons, exactly, provides the grounds for liberal social arrangements. But the most common account yokes together liberty or autonomy, with reason. The liberal account of the individual ‘implies the centrality of the value of autonomy in the liberal scheme of things ... that a way of life which is determined by individuals is preferable to a way of life which is externally imposed’ (Mendus, 1989, pp. 87-8). In turn this autonomy is ‘frequently linked with the commitment to sustained rational examination of self, others and social practices’ (Galston, 1995, p. 521). Liberty or auton-

omy provides the necessary space for reason to work; and reason provides the answer to what to do with autonomy. This is why decisions about what to do are cast within liberal thought as choices; they are the result of a reasoned examination of alternatives.

Some contemporary liberal political philosophy has tried to ground itself in various non-universal commitments. This is evident, for example, in the debate over whether John Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* rests on ‘metaphysical’ or ‘political’ commitments (Rawls, 1985). It is also evident in the so-called ‘post-modern’ liberalism of Richard Rorty (Rorty, 1983 and 1993). The difficulty liberal thought has with avowedly non-universal commitments can be seen in the anxieties these suggestions provoke among other liberal thinkers. Brian Barry, Thomas Pogge, and Richard Dworkin among others have wanted to reassert the universalism of (at least some) liberal commitments (Barry, 2001; Pogge, 2000; Dworkin, 1996). Second, even this supposedly non-universal liberalism is ambiguous about the extent to which it is really prepared to abandon at least some kind of universalism. This is evidenced for example by Rawls’ claim that ‘a concern for human rights should be a fixed part of the foreign policy of liberal societies’ (Rawls, 1993, p. 80). The final point to note about this is that certainly historically, liberalism was not afflicted by these kinds of anxieties. It seems safe to say that, in general at least, liberalism’s claims are grounded on an account of individuals, and that the claims about the characteristics of individuals that provide liberalism with its foundations are universal in theoretical scope.

One thing that follows from this general theoretical orientation is what we might call a ‘geographical universalism’. Given that all people, everywhere, are the same (they have the same ‘nature’), all people everywhere would

benefit from liberal social arrangements. Of course the extent to which liberals have been able to pursue liberal ends in different parts of the world has been conditioned by a host of other factors. But that should not cast into doubt liberalism's genuinely universal vision. If liberalism is cosmopolitan, it is also profoundly and abidingly judgmental – how could it not be, given that liberals believe themselves to be in possession of the truth about social and political affairs? People, societies, and cultures are to be judged by the extent to which they live up to the standards of conduct arrived at in liberal theory (Hindess, 2002b). And it is this that ultimately drives the liberal project; for being in possession of a truth for all means liberals cannot rest easy simply in the knowledge that they are right; they must attempt, if they can, to foist this on everyone else. It is in this sense that Beate Jahn is right to say that liberal thought has always been imperialist (Jahn, 2005). The point is not that all colonialism was liberal; it is that (almost) all liberalism is colonial in aspiration. The distinctions liberal thinkers have made between the 'civilized and 'uncivilized', for example, illustrate exactly this kind of geographical universalism (Jahn, 2005; Gong, 1984).

Sociology and the Liberal Project

As we have argued, liberals want to change the world. What makes liberalism a project is that there is within it a consistent concern with *how* to change the world. One part of this is what will be called here the 'sociological' or 'anthropological' aspects of liberal thought. This is the concern with identifying the actual practices and beliefs of people and groups, and of identifying where those practices and beliefs stand in the way of the achievement of liberal ends. This generates perhaps the most fundamental tension with-

in liberal thought: that between nature and culture. For in identifying the reasons why people thought and acted as they did, liberal thinkers called into question the extent to which people exhibited the 'natural' traits (reason, autonomy) that were supposed to ground liberalism.

The examples of John Locke and John Stuart Mill help to illustrate the point. John Locke had a persistent concern with what he saw as a widespread and general failure to see that the kinds of arguments he advocated were correct. He argued that even when arguments were plainly laid before people who did have the ability and time to reason correctly, they often lacked the right criteria of judgment. This was because they were under the influence of a 'prevailing passion', or they yielded assent to the 'common received opinions of either [their] friends, or party; neighbourhood or country' (Tully, 1988, p. 31). As Locke asked in his 'Letter to Tom', 'when did ever any truth settle itself in anyone's mind by the strength and authority of its own evidence?' Rather, 'men live upon trust, and their knowledge is nothing but opinion moulded up between custom and interest' (Locke, 1993a, p. 140). 'Mankind is supported in the ways of virtue or vice by the society he is of, and the conversation he keeps, example and fashion being the great governors of this world' (Locke, 1993c, p. 232). It seems Locke thought that 'assent [was] governed by non-rational factors; by passion, custom, and education' (Tully, 1988, p. 31).

The significance and power of these factors in English political life was evident to Locke because men had accepted the principle of the Divine Right of Kings. This was not only false, but had 'exposed all subjects to the utmost misery of tyranny and oppression' (Locke, 1989, p. 4). Because men desired to avoid the 'pains and trouble of thinking and

examining for themselves', Locke wrote, 'they mix with their religious worship and speculative opinions other doctrines absolutely destructive to the society wherein they live' (Locke, 1996, p. 169; 1993d, p. 197). Locke was acutely aware that people were persuaded by works which were wrong, dangerous, or incomprehensible. Explaining his decision to publish *An Essay on Human Understanding*, Locke says that knowledge would have been 'very much more advanced in the world, if the endeavours of ingenious and industrious men had not been much cumbered with the learned but frivolous use of uncouth, affected or unintelligible terms' (Locke, 1976, p. xliii). This theme is also present in his criticisms of Filmer. There was 'noise' and 'applause' following the publication of *Patriarcha*, despite the fact, that, according to Locke, Filmer 'cross[es] the rule of language' and his 'way of writing [involves] huddling several suppositions together, and that in doubtful and general terms makes such a medley and confusion, that it is impossible to show his mistakes' (Locke, 1989, p. 3, p. 15). Locke's sociology depicted the mass of men as ignorant or under the influence of custom, fashion, and tradition. The political dangers this posed were clear as it led to the acceptance of false and dangerous doctrines which threatened the constancy and moderation of desires which John Dunn has argued Locke thought necessary if the political institutions he advocated were to function successfully (Dunn, 1984).

In attempting to explain how John Stuart Mill, the great champion of freedom and equality, could have ended up justifying British colonialism, Bhikhu Parekh has argued that within his work there was a 'profound tension' between 'what human beings tended to do and what they ought to do' (Parekh, 1995, p. 93). That is, there was tension between Mill's 'so-

ciological' or 'anthropological' observations about actual persons and their actions, both in Britain and India, and his theoretical arguments about the way persons should think and act. Mill described the colonial government of India as 'a government of foreigners, over a people most difficult to understand, and still more difficult to be improved' (Mill, 1990, p. 155). Part of the difficulty in 'improving' India stemmed from the fact that the 'hindoo [sic] state of mind' 'reproduc[ed] in so many respects the mental characteristics of the infancy of the human race' (quoted in Zastoupil, 1994, p. 174). According to Martin Moir, Mill saw the Indian people as 'too passive, and too crushed by centuries of despotism, to take an active stand in defence of their individual legal and political rights' and they 'were too dominated by custom as the "final appeal"' (Moir, 1990, p. xlii). Similar themes are again present in Mill's domestic writings. Here Mill also stressed the power of custom and fashion. He said that the 'rules which obtain among' the 'majority', 'appear to themselves to be self-evident and self-justifying', but this 'universal illusion is one of the examples of the magical influence of custom' (Mill, 1976, p. 64). In discussing the dangers inherent in representative government, Mill identified 'general ignorance and incapacity, or, to speak more moderately, insufficient mental qualifications in the controlling body', and the 'danger of its being under the influence of interests not identical with the general welfare of the community' (Mill, 1972, p. 262).

The examples of Locke John Stuart Mill point to a general tension within liberal thought between 'nature' and 'culture'. We should understand the identification of those features of social life (tradition, religion, elites) that hinder the establishment of liberal ends and arrangements as a key feature of liberalism's political project. This

identification, and the mismatch between what people actually think and do, and what liberals think they should think and do, helps to explain a characteristic feature of liberal thought: the tendency to appeal to almost entirely abstract arguments to justify liberal ends and arrangements. In some instances, where people's actions or preferences seemed to support what these thinkers deemed to be desirable arrangements, they *were* appealed to provide support for these justifications. For example, Locke was prepared to use evidence of the wide variety of customs and beliefs to support his claim that persons had no innate capacity to distinguish right from wrong (Grant, 1988; Batz, 1974). What should be clear, however, is that this appeal to the actual actions and thoughts of people cannot do the theoretical 'work' in the arguments for desirable ends and arrangements. Any appeal to empirical 'facts' has to be limited to illustrative purposes, because the vast body of these thinkers sociological observations showed that people were generally in ignorance of what was good for them. Liberal thinkers have then typically employed theoretical devices to 'strip away' this body of sociological observations in their arguments for desirable ends and arrangements. Appeal is made instead to the actions and preferences of some non-actual person in some highly circumscribed circumstances. The most obvious of these is the 'state of nature' in its various guises, including in modern liberal theory (the 'original position', 'veil of ignorance').

Liberal Tactics and the Liberal Project

Liberalism's identification of the actual habits, actions and practices of persons has taken it far away from the supposedly firm

foundations provided by nature or reason, or whatever. But it is precisely this distance that provides the key to understanding liberalism as a project of social transformation. For arguments grounded on universal human nature provide the justification for closing the gap, and liberalism's sociology provides the resources for thinking about how this is to be done.

Again Locke and John Stuart Mill are illustrative. James Tully has demonstrated how Locke systematically constructed a set of ideas and recommended practices which would govern not only men's beliefs, but also their actions in detailed ways (Tully, 1988). Locke made a distinction between the mass of mankind who would remain in a more or less permanent state of ignorance, and those who did have the time and ability to reason correctly but often failed to do so. The basis of Locke's disciplinary project for the poor was the inculcation habits of thought and action through the calibrated use of rewards and punishment (Tully, 1988, pp. 39-42). This can be seen in his report to the Board of Trade on reform of the poor law system (Locke, 1993e). Locke argued that the 'growth of the poor' was caused by nothing else but the relaxation of discipline and corruption of manners'. To overcome this, the various categories of people receiving parish relief were to be exposed to varying degrees of 'discipline', including hard labour, whipping, being enlisted in the navy, transportation, and spending time in houses of correction, or 'working-schools'. This was a way of making the poor 'useful to the public'. The children of the poor were 'to be inured to work, which is of no small consequence to the making of them sober and industrious all their lives after' (Locke, 1993e, p. 446, p. 543). The aim of Locke's recommendations, according to Tully, was to,

deconstruct old customary ways of life and to produce new ones ... to use the law, the navy, corporal punishment, the threats of divine punishment, economic incentives, and the activity of repetitious labour, from the age of three onwards, to fabricate an individual who is habituated to docility and useful labour.

(Tully, 1988, p. 68)

Locke did not think that 'right assent' would flow directly from a rational demonstration of true principles, even for that portion of the population who did have the time and ability to reason correctly. Thus he argued that it would be necessary to develop in these persons an artificial inclination or passion to suspend, examine, and assent in accordance with the correct grounds. Underlying this project were educational practices that would form these mental inclinations. The most important of these is the notion of habituation which was also central to Locke's disciplinary project for the poor. The significance of habituation is explained by the recognition that force or coercion is ineffective in changing the way men think. 'Compulsion ... cannot alter men's minds', 'punishment and fear may make men dissemble, but, not convincing anybody's reason, cannot possibly make them assent to the opinion' (Locke, 1993d, p. 192, p. 206). It is necessary then to form and govern men's actions through the inculcation of habits: 'practice must settle the habit of doing without reflecting on the rule' (Locke, 1996, p. 175). Another educational practice was to govern men's thoughts by appealing to reputation and fashion (Mehta, 1992, pp. 148-54). 'He ... that would govern the world well, had need consider what fashions he makes than what laws; and to bring anything into use he need only give it reputation' (Locke, 1993b, p.

237). 'Though force cannot master the opinions men have, not plant new ones in their breasts, yet courtesy, friendship, and soft usage may' (Locke, 1993d, p. 206). As Joseph Carrig has argued, Locke's writings illustrate an 'attempt to create a new kind of individual' (Carrig, 2001). Locke was concerned to show how people who were governed by opinion, custom, habit, and fashion, could be made more fitted to the kind of liberal society he advocated. They could be made this way by harnessing precisely those things which had kept them in ignorance of desirable political and social arrangements in the first place.

For John Stuart Mill too 'improvement had to be cultivated, not merely imposed', and this required 'heeding the thoughts, perceptions, feelings and prejudices of those the British wished to change' (Zastoupil, 1994, p. 174, p. 192). Mill sought to fashion this knowledge into useful information for controlling and influencing the thoughts and actions of Indians. In particular, the recognition that Indian society was hierarchical could be used to assist in the eradication of 'barbarous practices'. In discussing infanticide, Mill commends the engagement of 'influential persons of caste to preserve their own children, and to aid in enforcing the same conduct on others' (Mill, 1990, p. 122). Mill certainly thought that traditional caste authority was part of the reason for the persistence of these prejudices, nonetheless he also thought it could also be enlisted in their eradication. Speaking more generally, Mill says that 'the triumph which has been effected over the religious prejudices of the natives ... is a proof that this indirect mode of correcting their superstitions ... is a highly effective one' (Mill, 1990, p. 147). That is, for Mill the correction of India prejudices was not to be accomplished by either coercion or through rational persuasion,

but rather by harnessing some of those social patterns which had kept the Indian people in ignorance in the first place.

Locke and John Stuart Mill were all concerned to provide some account of how actual persons could be brought to see what was right, or at least to act in accordance with what was right. For these thinkers it was the identification of those things which had kept people in ignorance in the first place that provided the resources for this transformation. Public opinion, education, habit, and gullibility could all be harnessed to this project. Viewed in this light, to the extent that liberalism is 'individualistic', this is distinctly double edged. On the one hand liberalism holds out the possibility that both persons and their contexts could be 'improved'; and this is the emancipatory promise of liberalism. On the other hand, as the barriers to progressive transformation were largely to be found in the characteristics and behaviour of actual persons, so these persons would bear the brunt of any transformative project. To be sure liberalism is about liberating people from certain 'oppressive' institutions and practices; but it does so only by creating new forms of discipline.

There is a great deal more one could say about how conceiving of liberalism as a 'project to be realized' illuminates aspects of liberal theory. For example, the ambivalence about the role of the state found in much liberal thought can be seen as a reflection of the central role that the state must play in the construction and maintenance of liberal institutions and practices; yet also the threat that a too powerful state poses to the liberal project itself. Similarly the celebration of 'civil society' is hedged with a variety of anxieties about the possibility that non-liberal forms of associational life might have too much influence

in the 'public sphere' (Williams, 2008, chapter 1). Suffice it to say that, at the very least, conceiving of liberalism as a 'project to be realized' provides a potentially fruitful way of exploring the contours of liberal thought.

THE LIBERAL PROJECT AND LIBERAL AGENCY

Despite the often self-conscious attempt by liberal thinkers to advocate and participate in the liberal project, it seems obvious that more powerful political agency is required in order for the liberal project to be realized. In this section we suggest a number of ways in which this conceptualization of liberalism helps illuminate liberal practice with a focus on one political agency – the World Bank.

The first obvious point to make is that certainly in the contemporary period there are a large number of organisations – both domestic and international – avowedly dedicated to the achievement of liberal ends and arrangements – rights, free trade, democracy, and equality. Using the idea of liberalism as a project to be realized in empirical investigations into these agencies requires paying attention to the arguments and ideals they profess to be working towards; their 'sociological' or 'anthropological' accounts of the barriers to the achievement of these aims; and the tactics and strategies they use to pursue these ends. It should be noted there is unlikely to be any simple replication of liberal political theory in the actions of these agencies. These organisations rarely produce arguments of the sophistication found in liberal theory (they are in that sense carriers of a broader 'ideology') and like all organisations they are shaped by bureaucratic and political impera-

tives too. Nonetheless seeing liberalism as a project to be realized does entail taking what these organisations say and do seriously and it also entails making the social-theoretical commitment that what we find expressed in their agency are 'ideas' in the broadest sense of that term. The example of the World Bank and its pursuit of 'good governance' in its borrower countries may help illustrate the point.

The World Bank and Liberal agency

The World Bank is certainly a liberal agent in the sense that it is pursuing ends and arrangements that are recognizably liberal.

Good governance is epitomized by predictable, open, and enlightened policy-making (that is a transparent process); a bureaucracy imbued with a professional ethos; an executive arm of government accountable for its actions; a strong civil society participating in public affairs; and all behaving under the rule of law.

(World Bank, 1994, p. vii)

The World Bank has given a number justifications for the pursuit good governance – also recognizably liberal. The World Bank's General Legal Counsel has said that some of the Bank's work can be understood as promoting certain human rights, such as a right to education, a right to health, freedom from poverty and the rights of women (Shihata, 1991). The Bank has argued that its legal reform efforts can make an important contribution to the development of an 'equitable and just society' (World Bank, 1994, p. 23). It is particularly striking how these other justifications are also tied to utilitarian arguments. The Bank's General Legal Counsel has drawn an explicit connection

between human rights and economic development: 'pervasive human rights violations may ... have broader implications related to the country's stability and prospective creditworthiness' (Shihata, 1991, p. 133).

Where the actions of persons are seen to accord with the Banks' understanding of desirable ends and arrangements these actions are appealed to in the justifications for them. The Bank has argued that market-based economic arrangements are desirable because they accord with the actions of economic agents who respond to price incentives (World Bank, 1989, pp. 91-93; World Bank, 1981, p. 55). The Bank is willing to build on 'indigenous' institutions and practices when they can be shown to support its understanding of what is desirable for persons in developing countries. The Bank has argued that 'many African values and institutions can support' the development process. These include the communal culture, respect for nature, informal credit systems which successfully draw on customary values and patterns of social organization, and indigenous cultivation practices (World Bank, 1989, p. 60). A Bank staff member has argued that it is possible to use 'formalism and ritual' to reinforce contractual bonds, that African 'cultural values and traditions' can be used to 'stimulate productivity as well as alleviate internal conflicts and labour problems', and that it should be possible to 'expand extended family solidarity to the wider context of the enterprise and administration in Africa' (Dia, 1994, pp. 190-91).

Where the actions of persons do not seem to support the Bank's understanding of what is desirable, however, the Bank is more than prepared to ignore this and argue that such an arrangement really is desirable, even if the persons concerned do not know it. So for example, the Bank argues that tribal and other

affective ties are not conducive to the effective functioning of bureaucracies, and so should be taken as a sign of what those agents really should desire: ‘in some spheres ... there can be little compromise. Family and ethnic ties that strengthen communal actions have no place in central government agencies where staff must be selected on merit, and public and private monies must not be confused’ (World Bank, 1989, p. 60). The same is true of other ‘indigenous’ institutions and practices. One Bank staff member has argued that certain African ‘cultural traits’ are not conducive to development. These, include placing a higher value on inter-personal relations than on personal achievements, emphasizing conspicuous consumption over productive investments, and valuing leisure and the ability to engage in rituals, ceremonies, and social activities, over labour: ‘clearly, the six to eight decades of colonialism were simply not long enough for both individuals and governments to develop a new national entity that could transcend ethnicity and the traditional decision-making system’ (Dia, 1991, p. 11-12; 1994, pp. 176-79). As Pierre Landell-Mills has argued, ‘the challenge is to build on the elements that are compatible with modernization and development, [and reject] those that are not’ (Landell-Mills, 1992a).

The World Bank replicates the powerful tendency in liberal thought to ‘strip away’ the actual lived lives and manifest choices of persons, and ground justificatory arguments in the ‘real’ nature of persons, their ‘real’ interests, some account of what persons would choose if they knew what was in their best interests, or in some entirely hypothetical choice situation. ‘The liberal strategy has been to search for *underlying* interests and beliefs shared in common which may be appealed to in the justification of ... institutional arrangements’ (Waldron, 1987, p. 145, emphasis

added). It is clear why this must be. Neither liberal theory nor the World Bank can appeal solely to the actual lived lives and real choices of persons for their justificatory arguments because these people cannot be relied upon to choose or prefer liberal arrangements.

Following from this, the World Bank, like many liberal thinkers, has identified several barriers to the achievement of what it considers to be the right ends and arrangements. These include ignorance, the influence of mistaken ideas and doctrines, the influence of custom and tradition, prevailing opinions, and the operation of insidious interests. In this the World Bank reflects to a quite remarkable degree much of liberal political thought. Kim Jaycox has argued that in many African countries there are only a ‘tiny minority ... who know what they’re doing’ and that ‘in many countries they’re not capable yet of putting together plans which will solve their problems’ (Jaycox, 1995). Here Africans are simply ignorant of certain arguments and practices and so could not be expected to accept them. Again, Kim Jaycox has argued that ‘ethnicity has ... gotten [sic] in the way of professionalism in Africa’ (Jaycox, 1995). Similarly, Pierre Landell-Mills has said that ‘African managers cannot easily set aside their loyalties to their community ... African managers cannot easily escape the heavy social obligations that take up a large proportion of their time’ (Landell-Mills, 1992b). Here, prevailing opinions, and customary patterns of conduct have prevented people from pursuing the right ends and arrangements. The Bank also argues that agents have been duped into accepting wrong arguments; that is, for some reason, people actually believe wrongly. They believed for example that ‘markets would fail’, or that in a market economy, ‘profit margins would be excessive’ (World Bank, 1989, p. 91). Final-

ly, the Bank has identified the operation of powerful interests as a central barrier to the pursuit of what it understands as desirable ends and arrangements.

The final element of an investigation into liberal agency is to investigate the tactics and strategies used in the pursuit of liberal ends and arrangements. The Bank has been attempting to change the behaviour, attitudes, habits, and mores of individuals and groups through its lending for the education sector in Ghana (World Bank, 2004). Despite extensive reform efforts, up to two-thirds of the population remain, in the bank's phrase, 'functionally illiterate', and of those who have received formal education, 40 percent have 'lapsed into illiteracy due to a lack of appropriate reading materials. On the basis of survey data the bank estimated that in the country as a whole only 35 percent of the population could read, only 32 percent could write, and only 48 percent could do simple mathematics. In addition, the rates of functional literacy were much lower in rural areas, and were consistently lower for women in both urban and rural areas. The bank has estimated that no age group achieved a literacy rate of more than 50 percent (World Bank, 1992). The Literacy and Functional Skills Project (LFSP) was a US\$31 million project designed to support the Ghanaian Government's functional literacy program. The project's objectives were to expand the existing literacy program to allow 840 000 adults to participate, to ensure that all 'new literates' have access to an expanded range of reading materials in Ghanaian languages, to expand the coverage of the FM broadcasting system, and to increase the frequency of educational broadcasting in the Ghanaian languages (World Bank, 1992, p. i).

The project is expected to have a number of benefits. Increased literacy is a 'means to economic, social, and political development,

and [is] a first step towards the introduction of a more systematic approach to problem solving'. It can help 'give people the necessary consciousness, attitudes, skills and knowledge so that their creativity can be applied to further national development (World Bank, 1992, p. 1).

Through provision of basic literacy and numeracy skills, and new knowledge and attitudes, the program has the potential to have a positive impact in all areas of development (family planning, health, agricultural productivity, environmental protection, and the discouragement of negative and dangerous social customs). The program is also intended to regenerate popular involvement in community development activities.

(World Bank, 1992, p. 10)

'Without a literate peasantry it is unlikely that significant increases in agricultural yields ... will be possible', and 'any sustainable democratic system based on grass roots participation is only possible with a literate population'. After participating in the program, adult learners will be 'better prepared to address some of the issues central to their lives', including 'protecting themselves in commercial transactions' (World Bank, 1992, pp. 26-7).

As a result of World Bank appraisals, several changes in the literacy program were recommended. First, teaching should move away from 'syllable drills' towards a modified 'Freireian' approach based on key words and slogans. Second, more emphasis should be placed on 'functional messages', and incorporating community development activities into class teaching. Third, the teaching of functional numeracy should be stressed to allow learners to 'calculate in the market

and in other areas of financial transaction'. Fourth, the program should address the 'special needs' of women. A new set of lesson topics for adult learners was drawn up which included family planning, teenage pregnancy, community empowerment, killer diseases (particularly AIDS), income generating activities, traditional and modern farm methods, management practices, fish farming, the marketing of fish, soap making, poultry keeping, energy saving devices, child labour, intestacy law, drug abuse and communal labour (World Bank, 1992, p. 14, p. 35). To help motivate learners, they will each receive a set of materials free of charge, including an exercise book, a slate and a pencil. In addition, 'to help learners see the connection between what they learn and the self-improvement and development activities, each literacy participant will be provided with a few small development inputs' which would be directly related to the lesson topics. Finally, as a way of introducing some competition among learning groups within a district, 'and also of forging links between literacy and income generation', the top two literacy groups in each district will be allowed to access a credit facility to support small-scale income generating activities. The groups would have to prepare proposals, and would receive training on setting up and running a bank account and repaying the loans (World Bank, 1992, pp. 16-17).

As the ex-Chief Economist at the World Bank has said, 'an essential part of the new development strategies involves the creation of institutions and the changing of cultures – the movement to a culture of change and science, where existing practices are questioned and alternatives constantly explored' (Stiglitz, 1997, p. 18): 'In the end, the transformation of society entails a transformation of the way *individuals* think and behave' (Stiglitz, 1997, p. 27, emphasis in original).

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that liberalism can be fruitfully understood as a 'project to be realized'. Seeing liberalism in this way helps illuminate liberal thinkers, liberal theorising, and the practice of liberal agency in the pursuit of this project. In terms of liberal thinkers themselves it provides a way of understanding them advocates of, and indeed sometimes participants, in a political project designed to create and sustain liberal institutions and practices. In terms of liberal theorising, it helps explain certain recurrent features and some of the characteristic tensions and ambiguities within liberal thought. In terms of the study of liberal agency, the idea of liberalism as a project to be realized helps account for the arguments and practices of these institutions. This article has provided only the briefest justifications for these arguments; to properly show the utility of thinking about liberalism in this way would require a much more extensive treatment. Nonetheless, such a view would seem to be a potentially fruitful one that helps push arguments about liberalism away from debates about liberal theory and towards a recognition that liberal thought is intimately involved in the world of politics.

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