Transformation Of Liberalism Essay, Research Paper

Liberalism is a force that has produced change from the birth of this nation to the politics of today. Liberal tenets have been a basis of thought and action in American politics since well before the signing of the Constitution. Certainly, liberalism has had to transform in order to remain a legitimate force throughout the years. When considering this transformation, one may ask whether or not the ideas and goals of classical liberalism have been lost in the conversion into modern liberalism. In order to answer this, the areas of freedom, the role of government, human nature, and the function of law should be addressed. While this may not be a complete register of change in liberalism, research into these subjects can provide strong indications toward the nature of this transition. Objectively, the evidence suggests that many of the ideas of classical liberalism were either abandoned or changed fundamentally when America entered the modern era.

The idea of freedom has been a paramount concern of liberalism throughout history. Consider the classical ideas of religious freedom, the right to resist and the inherent right of every individual to be independent. These were some of the main focuses of classical liberalism in early America. On religious freedom, seventeenth century minister Roger Williams wrote:” All Civil States with their Officers of justice in their respective constitutions and administrations are proved essentially Civil, and therefore not judges, governors or defenders of the spiritual or Christian state and worship.” (Volkomer, 50) This quote is notable because it illustrates the early liberal ideas of religious freedom by stating that government officials have no right to pass judgment on religious practices. In furtherance of his views, Williams founded a colony at Plymouth and contributed to the development of religious tolerance in the new world. Religious tolerance meant that a nation with multiple religions need no longer mean a country with internal strife and civil insurrection due to intolerance (Volkomer, 1969). The notion of religious open-mindedness helped pave the way for individual independence by suggesting that people were able to determine their own fundamental beliefs. The right of individuals to be independent is the cornerstone of liberalism. This combined with the right to resist encroachments on this independence make up the legitimacy behind the revolution. The Declaration of Independence embodied these thoughts precisely and clearly. When Thomas Jefferson wrote about the “inalienable rights… life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” he was speaking of the inherent rights of man and went further to declare that any government that chooses to dispel these rights is subject to overthrow by the governed. In short Jefferson was saying that the right of the government to rule is derived from the people’s ability to utilize and approve of their level of independence.

Modern America embraces and reveres the ideals above. This leaves modern liberalism with the chore of expanding these rights. The focus has now shifted from the attainment of these rights to the perfection of them. In the above statement I mean to show that liberal ideas of freedom and liberty have changed considerably. This can be clarified by the following quote: “A man who was poor, uneducated, ill-housed, and subject to the fluctuations economic cycle could not be considered free though he lived in a nation whose government abided by the tenets of laissez-faire. True liberty, liberals began to contend, required the ability of man to use his talents and energies in a constructive fashion-it meant the positive freedom to achieve and accomplish.” (Volkomer, 4). This quotation suggests that modern liberals now see it as the government’s responsibility to level the playing field for individuals who would otherwise be at a disadvantage. The freedom to achieve one’s own potential is one of the prime objectives of modern liberalism (Merquior, 1991). This has led to the development of affirmative action and other programs such as welfare. The opportunity to reach one’s capacity has joined the other inalienable rights as the desired outcome of a positive government. Ideally, people would derive freedom and happiness from the satisfaction of achievement and inventiveness. True freedom should be unfettered from poverty, oppression and inequality; this liberty was considered the natural state of humanity. Franklin Roosevelt made strides in the attainment of this natural state. The “New Deal” of the thirties was not only a means to economic recovery but also an attempt to move equality and liberty into their proper places in the American system (Dunbar, 1991). Roosevelt’s “New Deal” is an example of an action with two reactions; it prevailed over the great depression and changed the government’s role in freedom. This assisted in the establishment of the government as an aid to liberty instead of a hindrance to it.

The role of government has always been an important issue to the proponents (and detractors of) liberalism. Revolutionary America saw government as an encroachment on liberty whereas most of us now see our government as the guarantor of our liberty. In Thomas Paine’s persuasive pamphlet Common Sense, he wrote the following lines: government, even in it’s best state is but a necessary evil; in it’s worst state, an intolerable one; for when we suffer, or are exposed to the same miseries by a government which we might expect in a country without government. Our calamity is heightened by reflecting that we furnish the means by which we suffer.”(Volkomer, 50)

Paine’s writings exhibit the fear and suspicion that the early Americans felt about government. The early liberals saw the central government’s role in international relations. Domestic legislation, they argued, is best left to the governments closest to the people: the state and local governments (Volkomer, 1969). The goal of a limited government was to allow the people an opportunity to explore and learn in order to improve their character without government restriction. This exploration, liberals maintain, would lead to a higher level of human nature. When liberal methods fell short of attaining these results, defenders of liberalism were compelled to accept the function of government as a mechanism to assist the development of liberal ideals. Human nature had to be nourished by way of a humane economic and social living environment. In furtherance, the public needed some instruction on how to express and enjoy their individuality. From this point the state became a way to reassemble society and educate citizens in the responsibility of leading an intelligent, meaningful life (Gerstle, 1994). At this time the world was facing many changes, among these are the industrial revolution and world war one. John Dewey elaborates on the feeling of the time in the following quotation: “The fact of change has been so continual and so intense that it overwhelms our minds. We are bewildered by the spectacle of its rapidity, scope and intensity.”(Volkomer,303)

Feelings the workers, farmers, and consumers. (Gerstle, 1994). While these advances may seem to be made in the name of fostering freedom unencumbered by economic domination, it also serves a second purpose: the protection of the government. The progressives believed that the government had to be protected from powerful “interests” that could hinder its ability to guard the development of individual liberty.

The conception of human nature had been the basis of classical liberalism. The ideas of generally virtuous and rational human nature were essential to the image of an enlightened public. Liberals adhered to an optimistic view of the nature of man. While man may not have been fully rational and good, he was certainly more rational and virtuous than irrational and bad. These virtues were supposed to be very strong in America’s large rural base. Let us discuss the following passage from Jefferson’s Query 19: ” the chosen people of god [farmers], if ever he had a chosen people who’s breasts he made his particular deposit for substantial and genuine virtue Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.”

Thomas Jefferson believed that the cradle of goodness resided chiefly in an agrarian people. Jefferson states that there is no example of widespread corruption of morals in the society of cultivators. Jefferson accurately shows the view of a morally superior agrarian society that was held at the time. According to this view, the satisfaction of hard work and individual production could lead to a stronger moral character for the American citizen. This in turn could lead to an ongoing escalation of man’s moral constitution. Men who agreed with Jefferson held strong to this tenet for years until a series of occurrences shattered this theory.

The industrial revolution, better communications, and World War I all combined in a synergistic effect that changed this philosophy forever. The industrial revolution made the idea of a predominantly agricultural society in America little more than a dream. World War I showed the world the atrocities that man was capable of and improved means of communications spread this message to more and more Americans. These new and complex problems fostered a new cynicism of human nature. For a time President Woodrow Wilson tried to unite America under the idea that not only was this world war, but it was a moral war fought in benefit of the democratic way (Volkomer, 1969). The liberals asserted that the democracy was the best means of government available to reach a heightened state of morality. This “War to End All Wars” resulted in an end to the sanguine view of human nature that the liberals held. While the more cynical view of man’s character replaced the “unrealistic” optimistic view, human nature has since become less relevant in liberal thought. In an attempt to explain the new “irrational” tendencies of man, liberal thinkers such as John Dewey sought some of the answers in the study of humans from a scientific standpoint (Gerstle,1994). Psychiatry and Psychology offered answers in instinct, habit and other new observations of the human manner of thinking. While liberalism has always been somewhat secular and pragmatic, the advent of psychological study enhanced these properties.

Early legal theorists felt that man’s laws were extensions of a higher and greater set of standards. While Charles Louis Montesquieu is not an American philosopher, his classical theories on law are some of the most indicative of the liberal movement. Montesquieu states that liberty lies in adherence to natural and positive laws. This is supported by Merquior in his paraphrase of Montesquieu’s writings on positive law: Law in general is human reason in as much as it governs all the inhabitants of the earth and that the political and civil laws of each nation ought to be only particular applications of human reason: Diverse as positive laws may be, they are part of a uniform law that existed prior to positive law.” (Merquior, p.66) When Montesquieu speaks of the “uniform law”, he is addressing the concept of the higher set of rules namely natural law, these rules are the driving force behind morality, society, and ultimately the law of man itself. The link between manmade law and an enigmatic higher set of universal dictums was weakened substantially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Oliver Wendell Holmes made a distinct separation between morality and the law. According to Holmes, we fall into “fallacy” when we take terms such as malice, intent, and negligence and apply them in a moral context to legal issues (Holmes, 1896). This separation of the law and morality signaled the centering of the society as the root of law. The thought that law should reflect the emotions and needs of the citizens is important when reflecting upon the evolution of liberal law. Progressing from this point we can consider a quotation from Roscoe Pound regarding the focus of law: “Attention was turned from the nature of law to it’s purpose, and a functional attitude, a tendency to measure legal rules and doctrines and institutions by the extent to which they further or achieve the ends for which the law exists, began to replace the older method of judging law by the criteria drawn from itself.” (Volkomer, 267)

With the emphasis having shifted from the beliefs behind the laws to the effectiveness of the outcome, American legal theory had made a departure from the original “spirit” of the law. A system of laws aimed at being more productive instead of in harmony with natural law and morality testifies to the more contemporary and practical nature of liberalism.

As I stated at the beginning of my paper I felt that the evidence suggested that man of the ideas of classical liberalism had either been abandoned or changed beyond recognition. Further research into four key aspects of liberalism has led me to a final conclusion. Before discussing this conclusion, perhaps a summarization would help clarify and support my deductions. First we explored the liberal concept of freedom. In this section I found that classical liberalism’s conception of freedom was a more fundamental one, freedom from oppression and intolerance. In support of this argument, I quoted early American liberals Roger Williams and Thomas Jefferson. In order to show the nature of freedom to contemporary liberals, I drew from the work of Franklin Roosevelt. The outcome of this section’s research was that freedom itself had taken on a new form to liberal thinking. Freedom came to include the freedom of opportunity and the ability to reach one’s potential.

In the portion of my paper dedicated to freedom, I stated that the government had taken on a new role in the attainment of liberty. From this point, I moved into this new role of the government. I showed the reasoning behind this by borrowing a passage from Common Sense by Thomas Paine. In finding the modern liberal’s views on the role of government I gained a better understanding through expanding on the ideas expressed by Dewey and Gerstle. The transformation of liberalism and the role of government lay in the initial fear and suspicion of government turning into trust and the need of government to aid in and help guide us in the development of our character.

The nature of the character of man was the object of inquiry in the subsequent segment. In this section, I suggested that the classical optimism concerning human nature had given way to a more skeptical viewpoint. In order to uphold this statement, I pointed to the assessments of Thomas Jefferson’s Query XIX and the Volkomer’s writings within the book The Liberal Tradition in American Thought. Finally I looked to the nature of manmade law. The works of Montesquieu, Pound, and Holmes led me to the conclusion that the liberal concept of law had shifted focus from the driving force behind law to the twentieth century outcome oriented vision of the law. In considering all of these factors and through development of my own insights, I have come to the conclusion that American liberalism has not abandoned its classical ideals. Rather than abandonment, study has shown me that American liberalism is a general progression of goals, events, outcomes, and reactive changes. An example of this is the first section (Freedom), on the surface it had originally appeared that liberalism had gone from anti-government to big government, a 180 degree turn. While this statement is not entirely false, it does leave out various particulars. I find that when the original goals such as religious freedom and liberation from oppression had been attained, the liberal school of thought moved to further expand these objectives. I believe the character of this expansion can be explained by the following inference that I reached: As some goals of liberalism came to fruition, the nature of government changed and it became an institution that remained imperfect, but capable of aiding in the “polishing” of these liberties. The end result being a government nothing like anything the classical liberals had experienced and in turn the ideas of classical liberalism were modified to better use this organization to the advantage of man.

In conclusion, let me say that through research and the periodic insertion of personal thought, I reached my findings and found it surprising that I had not confirmed my hypothesis. In addition to this I realized that in a dynamic political ideology such as liberalism is difficult to define because it’s goals are especially reactive to change. It is this reactive nature that provides liberalism with change. The constant endeavor to perfect liberty produces change that liberalism in turn reacts to. This interrelationship helps ensure liberalism’s role in bringing about change in the future.

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