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Approaching Political Philosophy through the Critique of Liberalism[1]

Asger Sørensen[2]

Abstract:

Understanding political philosophy as practical implies reflecting on principles as well as on material matters, on justice as well as on government. Liberalism is the main challenge to political philosophy, since its optimistic laissez faire attitude denies the legitimacy of political government. Even the modern political liberalism reflects these basic traits of liberalism. However, liberalism returns again and again, since it makes sense for human beings, who need to trust and have a capacity to imagine, but find themselves deceived by political authority. The conclusion is that we must overcome liberalism to be able to practice politics and political philosophy in the way presented here.

Key words: *liberalism, government, Rawls, political philosophy, political liberalism*

Introduction

After decades of liberal deregulation and anti-political propaganda, the world is in need of politics. To be legitimate, I will assume that politics cannot be based on mere whims but must be backed up by relevant normative reasons, ideally in the form of political philosophy. As I argue below, this implies that liberalism will be the main challenge to be met, both in politics and in political philosophy. The challenge for philosophy is to conceive of politics in such a way that it can answer to both the necessities of those who have to take decisions on behalf of society, and the critique of those who have to live with these decisions. In other words, political philosophy must be able to back up a political order that is acceptable, or at least tolerable, to everyone affected by that order. To be able to meet such a challenge within the limitations of an article, in the argument presented below I hope to be excused for taking a very general political and philosophical perspective.

My argument is divided into six parts: First, I sketch what I consider to be the implications of understanding political philosophy as practical, namely that it must imply reflecting not just on principles but also on material matters, and that it implies discussing some kind of government. This means, secondly, that liberalism presents the main challenge to politics as well as to political philosophy. Thirdly, the basic problem is the optimistic *laissez faire* attitude of liberalism, which denies the legitimacy of government and thus politics as such. Fourthly, even the so-called 'political liberalism' reflects these basic traits of liberalism. However, in the fifth place, liberalism returns again and again, since it makes sense to human beings, who need to trust and have a capacity to imagine but find themselves deceived

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[2] Asger Sørensen is an associate professor of philosophy of education at University of Aarhus, Denmark. Contact: ASO@dpu.dk.

by political authority. In the sixth place, the conclusion is that we must overcome liberalism to be able to practice politics and political philosophy, at least in the sense presented here.

Political Philosophy Must Be Practical and Consider Material Issues

Today the outset of political philosophy is the discussion of justice. As Will Kymlicka has made clear in his *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, the main reference is John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* from 1971. As he puts it, it constitutes the '*ground zero for our debates*' [Kymlicka 2001: iix] in political philosophy in the late 20th century. Rawls himself, however, clearly was responding to utilitarianism [Rawls 1999: xi], and the discussion in political philosophy is therefore basically about '*human welfare*' [Kymlicka 2002: 12]. According to Rawls, political philosophy should thus provide a normative or prescriptive argument concerning '*social justice*' [1999: 8], not a philosophy of history, an ontology, or a scientific description of empirical facts concerning a society. Furthermore, the political-philosophical argument must not be framed from a merely theoretical perspective. The aim of *Political Liberalism* is for Rawls '*practical*' [1996: 9], and his idea of *Justice as Fairness* [2001: 5] is also presented with a focus on its '*practical aim*'. As Anthony Simon Laden emphasizes [2011: 144-145], Rawls in general regards justification in political philosophy as political and thus '*essentially practical*'.

This is very well in line with the traditional conception of political philosophy as practical, as well as with the equally traditional reference to Aristotle's definition of the Greek word *praxis* as action [*Eth.Nic.*: 1140a]. Speaking of practical in this context means that the success of the philosophical reflections concerning justice should also be measured in relation to their practical success, i.e. whether they are likely to result in an improvement of the political activity necessary to realize a just society. Practical does not mean just technical or instrumentally efficient. Practical means that political philosophy must give politically effective action guidance into doing things in such a way that it is considered just, and that justice can result from it.

Philosophy addresses reason, and the legitimacy of practical philosophy presupposes that both rational argument and rational purposeful action based on reasonable understanding are possible. Being practical in the sense just mentioned, however, means that political philosophy must deal not just with reason, but also with human desire. Justice must be based on what is reasonable to desire both for a society and for an individual; in a just society, what I desire is what is rational and reasonable for myself, for my neighbours, and for all of us in common. This is the way Axel Honneth understands the idea of objective spirit in Hegel's *Philosophy of Law* [Honneth 1999: 15].

The practical aspect of political philosophy means that politics must also be considered in its material aspects, taking into account its effects as well as its material conditions. Political philosophy must thus deal not only with deontological principles or perceived goals, but also with the resources or material conditions necessary for and implied by action. Economy was traditionally considered a practical matter in this sense, namely as political economy. When justice is to be realised politically, then resources must be considered both as goods to be enjoyed and as necessary conditions to act. Social justice must mean that material resources in both senses should be distributed in a just manner.

Considered from this perspective, power is also a resource, a possibility to get things done, or a tool, and as such it can be distributed more or less evenly. Without power we

literally are powerless, we cannot do anything, cannot act and therefore cannot realize justice as a result of rational and reasonable actions. Rainer Forst thus argues that a proper account of distributive justice must address the political question of power. As he puts it, power is '*the most important of all primary goods*' [Forst 2007: 300]. Maybe one can by sheer luck simply be in a position to be able to realize justice in a just way, but typically politics implies the struggle to get the necessary power to realize justice, and that means thinking in terms of strategy, compromises, and temporary alliances with the enemies of your real enemies. Resources are material conditions for doing things; without resources it is very difficult to claim your legal right, just as it is difficult to act morally, and therefore political philosophy needs a positive and constructive conception of desire, economy and power along with the conceptions of justice, rationality and reason.

As was realized already by Aristotle, political philosophy must therefore relate to questions of government and cannot limit itself to merely discussing the idea, or the concept, of justice. This means bringing together the discussions of justice with both the political critique of experienced injustice and the political experience of government as it is spelled out in classical political philosophy and contemporary political science. However, as I have argued [2012f] in a small analysis of the development of Rawls' political liberalism, the important point is that both the political experience, and the experience of politics is very different whether you are part of the government, or you are simply being governed, whether you see the things from above or from below. The same holds for the asymmetry between the affirmative conceptual discussions of justice from the perspective of those being able take important decisions and the critique of injustice from the perspective of those subjected to such decisions. However, as emphasized by Honneth [1994a: 27-29], in the latter case rather than injustice the problem perceived is often alienation and reification.

This dichotomy between perceiving politics from above and from below poses a basic problem for political philosophy trying to conceptualize the possibility of justice for the whole of society. The most radical attempt to solve the problem is a prime example of Ockham's razor, simply cutting away the main obstacle. This solution can be found in various strands of anti-authoritarian liberalism and socialism, where the necessity of political government is simply denied. As Thomas Paine puts is, '*Government is, even in its best state, but a necessary evil*' [Paine in Bramstead and Melhuish 1978: 195]. Although apparently politically viable, since it keeps reappearing in political reality, such an anarchist bias would for political philosophy not leave much room for arguing any conceptual case at all. Denying government means denying giving reasons for societal actions, and ultimately giving up political philosophy. As Dick Howard emphasizes in his analysis of Ingeborg Maus' theory of democracy [Howard 1996: 334-335], in social reality renouncing on formal legality leaves open the political centre of society for not just idealism, but also all kinds of voluntarist decisionism. Generalizing even more, I would claim that renouncing on the reason and rationality of political philosophy also clears the way for both prudential amateurism and cynical opportunism.

Another attempt to solve the problem of the dichotomy between above and below is to mark up the contrast between political philosophy, which according to its nature must be affirmative, and various types of social critique. According to Brian Barry [1990: 9-22], this is how Michael Walzer sees it, and as I have shown elsewhere [2012c], Honneth [1994b: 2004] has made a strong case for thinking of critical theory not as political philosophy, but as social philosophy. It is precisely for this reason that Honneth emphasize the experiences of alienation and reification rather than injustice. As I see it, however, this means leaving

politics and political philosophy to those in power, and just as war is too important to leave to the generals, politics is too important to leave to the government. As Forst [2001: 359] has remarked referring to Walzer, 'the political sphere is not just one among many, it is implicated in all the other spheres'.

Instead of distinguishing between the political and the social, as Forst does [2001: 69-70, 372], I prefer to talk about politics in a wide and a narrow sense. Politics as well as political philosophy must take both the problem of social justice and that of political government seriously, just as they must be able to include both affirmation and critique in relation to these issues. The challenge for political philosophy in a democratic society is that it should be conceived of in such a way that it can answer to both the necessities of those who take decisions on behalf of society and the critique of those who have to live with these decisions. In other words, political philosophy must be able to back up a political order that is acceptable, or at least tolerable, to everybody affected by that order. I am thus inclined to agree with Habermas when he says [1994: 138]: '*Precisely those action norms are valid, to which all possibly affected persons could agree as participant in rational discourse.*'

Liberalism Is Anti-Political

These I consider banal, but nevertheless substantial presuppositions of political philosophy, and they might somehow reflect that my approach to both politics and political philosophy is still shaped by a kind of curiosity. From a left-wing, almost anarchist, critique of capitalism and state socialism, as Habermas I have thus worked myself philosophically through universalist reflections of ethics and epistemology to an arrival into mainstream political philosophy. It is from such a perspective that I take the aim of political philosophy to be normative guidance in our social and political actions. For me, however, the important point is then that primary among such actions is the government of society.

The reason why I find it necessary to emphasize such commonplaces, is what I consider the almost hegemonic status of liberal ideology all over the globe during the last decades in economics as well as in politics. In economy, nobody dares to think of alternatives to the idea of the free market, and liberal democracy is taken for granted as the best way to govern society, both among political scientist and by Kymlicka, who interprets the task of political philosophy as providing the '*best philosophical defence of*' liberal democracy [Kymlicka 2002: x]. In the latter case, however, the problem is – as many good people have emphasized [Bachofen 2008: 18-19; Forst 2001: 346-47; Lundkvist 2001: 208-12; Ryan 1995: 307; Valentin 2008: 228-34; van Parijs 1996: 110] – that liberalism is only loosely connected to democracy, both historically and normatively.

One of the main modern proponents of the free market economic liberalism, Friedrich Hayek, thus thought it reasonable to argue that '*the ideals of democracy would be better served, if, say, all the servants of government or all recipients of public charity were excluded from the vote*' [1960: 105]. He hesitated to argue the point himself though, but still he held, in contrast to the '*doctrinaire democrat*', that democracy was only a '*method of deciding*' [1960: 104], which should be judged by its expediency, not '*an ultimate or absolute value*' [1960: 106]. Today, the idea of limiting the suffrage of those dependent on the state is still brought forward by liberals and libertarians and, as it is well known, economic liberalism and capitalism has had no problems flourishing under authoritarian regimes.

In the present argument, my aim is to take this perceived conflict between liberalism and democracy one step further, namely to claim that liberalism is also in conflict with politics as such. In doing that, I will presuppose the validity of two claims. First, that the above mentioned conflict between liberalism and democracy is also a conceptual conflict. Secondly, as I have argued elsewhere [2013b], that there is a conceptual conflict in political philosophy between the discussion about justice following Rawls and the normative argument for democracy. Accepting these two presuppositions, I will radicalize the argument against liberalism to claim that liberalism is not merely an un-political or a-political ideology; it is actually anti-political in the sense of politics specified in the section above. To be able to do politics and practical political philosophy, it is therefore crucial to find ways of handling liberalism in theory as well as in practice.

At this stage, I am of course obliged to specify a little more closely what I mean by liberalism, and that is not an easy task. One only has to consult a few general introductions and textbooks to see that liberalism is a seriously contested concept. Still, two main tendencies can be traced, and along the way, I will contrast these two conceptions that I take to be typical: on the one hand, liberalism in the sense just indicated by the reference to Hayek, and on the other hand, Rawls' so-called political liberalism. Even though they appear to be very different and I can also recognize them as such, I will nevertheless argue that there is a core, or at least a family resemblance, which can be specified. It thus makes sense to speak of liberalism in a singular determinate sense.

One indication of this sense is given by Barry's remark [1988: 278] that liberal individualists are marked by their peculiar 'distaste' for politics. The point is that a liberal prefers to understand social interaction in such a way that politics, as it was introduced by the philosophical reflections above, is not a necessary constituent of the ideal society. For a liberal, the realization of material harmony in society is ideally due to the free circulation of goods. Ideally an equilibrium will emerge not as a political result achieved by a collective of citizens, but rather as a result of processes at a supra- or infra-political level, best understood by theology, philosophical anthropology, mechanics, mathematics, or a combination of such disciplines. In this sense, liberalism is a-political, and when this becomes the core of a normative program, then it also becomes anti-political.

One of the crucial assumptions from which liberalism has developed can be traced back to Thomas Hobbes. His idea of the contrast between a pre-political state of nature and the human civilization based upon convention has become an ideal-typical and classical way of expressing the confrontation between, on the one hand, life without a state, which is free, but insecure, and, on the other hand, life within a state, which might be safe, but is definitely not free. Under these conditions, the state is regarded at best as a necessary evil, and the assumption is that political power as such is a problem. This is the basic point of departure for classical liberalism. Freedom is idealized as freedom from interference, i.e. negative freedom, and on the basis of such preconditions, one can immediately infer the ideal of free society, i.e. a society, which can keep its social interactions in balance and harmony without any interference of state power.

From Hobbes' point of view, however, such an idea of civilization would have to be rejected. It would demand an inhuman willingness to risk and therefore be utopian. This did not, however, discourage John Locke. He claimed that human beings have natural rights that are inviolable and inalienable both in the state of nature and in human civilization. No political state can ever make void of the basic human rights. For Locke, this means

an idea of a natural state, in which everybody is free and equal, and through his, or her, work acquires not just possession of property, but actually property rights. Unlike Hobbes, Locke believes that people in the natural state typically treat each other with respect and trust. Between humans there is thus a natural sympathy, and therefore one can imagine a free human society in harmony and even a free market in equilibrium.

This is the idea made famous by Adam Smith, namely that if society and thus the market is left in peace, then the market prices will fluctuate freely around the natural price. As I have emphasized elsewhere [2002b], the point of departure is that the market price is the exchange value of a commodity. This value will always be dependent on the efforts used for its production and the perceived attraction of its use-value as a thing, i.e. the demand, and for Smith these two factors determine the natural price. Smith's conclusion is that this economic logic is strong enough to make it best for society to have only a limited government regulation. This is the political ideology behind the famous idea of the '*night-watchman state*', or, as it has been known in Denmark for the last decades thanks to Anders Fogh Rasmussen [1993], '*the minimal state*'. To Rafael del Águlia [1997: 570], it is precisely the distrust of the political power of the state, and the will to control and limit it, that characterize all variants of liberalism, just as it secures its continuous attractiveness.

Liberalism Believes in the Self-Organisation of Society

To me liberalism is characterized above all by this general *laissez-faire* attitude in politics and economics, leaving matters of human interest to be solved by human beings themselves individually. Adam Smith can be thought of as a liberal in this sense, trusting the combined result of the invisible hand and man's moral sense. As Elie Halévy has shown [1960: 116-118, 149], Jeremy Bentham was a follower of Smith in economic policy, when things went well. As I have argued at a different occasion [2003: 90-107], it was only when things went wrong, i.e. in law, that Bentham became the utilitarian we know, and as such an almost totalitarian rationalist. As I have argued elsewhere [2002a; 2007; 2012b: 216-222], for Herbert Spencer the faith in God's providence was combined with a great trust in an evolution favouring the survival of the fittest. As Halévy emphasizes [1960: 325], David Ricardo secularized the Smithian trust into the rational idea of the natural identity of interest. From this it was possible to develop the neoclassical idea of a general equilibrium, which is the result of an infinity of conflicting desires, and which becomes the main political argument for the abstention of government. The shared faith in the mathematics and the mechanics of the general equilibrium theory thus also makes the founders of neo-classical, so-called marginalist economic theory liberals.

This general picture of liberalism is affirmed by Philippe Nemo and Jean Petitot in the introduction to their impressive *Histoire du libéralisme en Europe*. Nemo and Petitot [2006: 13-15] thus praise liberalism for taking society in its complexity to be '*self-organized*'. Liberalism claims that the political idea of social and economic control simply '*rest on a scientific mistake*', and this is the 'meta-political authenticity' of liberalism. It is therefore no wonder that liberalism, especially in its post-modern or neo-new versions, appears to be driven by a sometimes surprisingly explicit belief not just in the evil of the state, but in the possibility of a harmonious society completely without government. Ronald Reagan expressed it very clearly in his first Inaugural Address from January 1981: '*In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.*'

This is where classical liberalism turns into something that is often called libertarianism, ultra-liberalism, or super-liberalism [Ryan 1995: 296-297; Bachofen 2008: 8, 18]. However, as I will argue, I see no reason to add these prefixes. Similarly to Vincent Valentin [2008: 228], I suspect that 'anarcho-liberalism' reveals the essence of liberalism. In the liberal vision of the good life, power and coercion are the worst of all evils and, as del Águila [1997: 582] has emphasized, liberalism can simply be defined by the notion of the state as the greatest evil. For what do you do with evil? You keep it at a distance, shy away from it or simply flee; evil is something one should not get too close to. The state and thus politics are something you as a liberal should not get involved with. As the English industrialist Lord Acton [1907: 504] remarked in the heyday of early liberalism: '*Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority, still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority*.'

For the liberal-minded gentleman, the good life can never imply a voluntary subordination to a hierarchical system of power, as it is required in political life. Politics is simply not something that decent freedom loving people would like to deal with. Individual freedom is the principal good and the ideals of the good life can only be realized outside of the state and without political involvement. For a liberal, the good life consists in the unfolding of one's own talents in the private life together with one's family, in one's economic activities at the market, and in the social life with one's own peers. It is for these reasons that liberals, as Barry noticed, find politics distasteful.

As a liberal you will prefer to have a state that requires as little management as possible. A liberal has confidence that disputes between people in civil society can be solved by themselves, if only you let people look after themselves. This is the core of the idea of *laissez faire*: If each person just looks after his own lively- and neighborhood, then God's providence, the invisible hand, sympathy, nature, and the market mechanisms will see to that the almost harmonic freedom in Locke's state of nature gradually develops into an even more free and peaceful civilization.

Liberalism is therefore not a political position at all. Liberalism is not just un-political; it is anti-political by being a-political, that is, by advocating sovereign individual freedom beyond good and evil, sovereignty of the individual human being beyond attempts to realize societal justice by means of reasonable political practice of a community. As Bramsted and Melhuish emphasize in their history of *Western Liberalism* [1978: 3], liberalism, '*especially in England, often does not go beyond the simple demand for the minimal state.*'

Though different in many other respects, scepticism towards the benefits of employing political power to intervene in civil society is what holds together the classical British liberalism of Smith, Spencer and Ricardo, and the liberalism of, say, modern liberals like Hayek, the economist Milton Friedmann, or a contemporary follower of Locke Robert Nozick. Therefore I think it is more informative and perfectly sufficient simply to continue talking about 'liberalism' in singular without the hyphenated prefixes mentioned above. Still, as I will argue below, it might be appropriate to distinguish between the economic and the political aspects of liberalism, as well as to qualify liberalism with an epochal distinction between classical liberalism, modern liberalism, and maybe even 'postmodern' liberalism. This in turn makes it possible to talk about a specifically modern kind of liberalism, which leaves more room for politics as such. This kind of liberalism can be perceived as different from both the classical and the post-modern kinds that focus mostly on economy.

Political Liberalism Aims at Justice, but It Is Still Liberalism

This is thus the stereotype of liberalism that has emerged as a result of my work for more than a decade on ethics, classical sociological theory and political economy. My particular approach and background might in part explain the depreciatory bias in my analysis. Nevertheless, following Karl-Heinz Brodbeck [2000: 49], I find myself allowed to claim that at least some strands of neo-classical liberalism simply must rest on an 'error of thought'. Neoclassical liberalism thus thinks of the laws of the market in terms of natural laws and mechanics, while at the same time having the abstention of government and the minimal state as a political program. The possible realization of natural mechanics is thus made dependent on state legislation, and that is a rather strange position, both in relation to metaphysics and to political philosophy.

This, however, is not all that can be said of the relation between liberalism and politics. From a political perspective we find something much more attractive, when we turn to what Rawls calls *Political Liberalism*, which was formulated in the same epoch as that of the neoliberal breakthrough into the political mainstream in established democracies. Over the years, I have discussed various aspects of Rawls' political philosophy [2005, 2008 and 2009], and it is clear that there are important differences between Rawls' political liberalism and the liberalism discussed above. When it comes to politics in general, to Rawls *Political Liberalism* is thus a program of conscientious tolerance between different so-called 'comprehensive' views on the world, that is, between potentially conflicting religious or ethical world views. Following the critique of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls expanded his notion of reason to be able to distinguish between rationality and reasonability, emphasizing that reasonability is neither just instrumentally rational, nor fully selfish [Rawls 1996: 81-83]. This distinction would actually allow Rawls to develop his own position, justice as fairness, as an ethical position, but Rawls does not want to return to ethics; he wants to stick with the political doctrine of liberalism [Rawls 1996: 13]. The point is instead that the stability of political liberalism implies an overlapping consensus between reasonable comprehensive doctrines [Rawls 1996: 65].

Politics should thus be based on the fundamental idea of justice as fairness, and the subordinate, but still political ideas of overlapping consensus, public reason etc. According to Rawls, liberalism is open towards not just individual claims about freedom and classical political rights, but also social or economic rights. Rawls' liberal principles of social justice even presuppose a '*social system*' [Rawls 1999: 243] that redistributes societal wealth, '*the government guarantees a social minimum*', and understanding liberalism in this sense seems indeed to call for the qualification '*political*'. Nevertheless, this displacement of liberalism has prompted a critique. Any redistribution of material resources can thus be considered a violation of fundamental human rights, in this case, the right to property. This critique of Rawls was initially waged by Nozick in his *Anarchy, State and Utopia* [Rawls 1974: 169], where he argued that this conception of rights meant that the taxation of personal income necessary for the redistribution of income could be considered on par with forced labor.

As it is obvious from these remarks, there is a difference between my stereotype of liberalism and Rawls' conception. One way to get a hold of the contrast is to employ Alan Ryan's distinction between classical and modern liberalism [Ryan 1995: 293]. Rawls' liberalism is thus modern in the same sense that, for instance, John Stuart Mill's is, and that means precisely not leaving everything to the forces of the market. In this sense Mill waged a modern liberal critique of capitalism, which underlined the almost slave-like living

conditions of the modern wage labourer, a critique, which according to Ryan [1995: 302] resembles the critique of the young Marx.

In the USA, liberalism is typically understood in this modern sense; in the European perspective of Blaise Bachofen [2008: 9], one can even say that in the USA 'liberal' has come to mean 'leftist', and it can be argued that this sense actually may be close to the original Spanish sense from the early 19th century. In terms of economy, Rawls already in *A Theory of Justice* argued that basic goods could and should be redistributed fairly among the members of a society according to principles adopted after due consideration. And when it comes to politics in general, to Rawls liberalism especially means a program of tolerance between different comprehensive views on the world, for instance, between potentially conflicting religious world views. If Rawls' modern political version of liberalism is taken as the core of liberalism, then of course it is sensible and almost crucial to introduce the terms 'neo-liberalism', super-liberalism and ultra-liberalism to characterize the post-modern liberalism of Reagan *et.al.* Nozick acknowledged inspiration from the classical liberalism of Locke, but he has nevertheless been categorized with a term mentioned in passing before, namely as a 'libertarian'. However, if liberalism is understood as I have argued above, then there is no reason to add these prefixes, or to displace Nozick, and, as I will continue arguing, there are good reasons to choose such an interpretation.

In spite of the obvious political implications, it has been noticed that Rawls' political liberalism does not deal very much with the actual political practices and institutions of democracy [Forst 2001]. Cohen [2003: 88] even argues that Rawls subordinates democracy as the value of political autonomy under a substantive conception of justice. The point is that in his major works Rawls himself does not say very much about how the just redistribution of social resources actually could and should be realized. Typically one would think that redistribution would require an institution like state. Still, since Rawls refrains from using the word 'state' positively as referring to a political institution, it might be that he thinks of redistribution through something else than the state, for instance, the voluntary associations governing civil society. That would, I think, presuppose associations based on strong communal commitments and beliefs in comprehensive doctrines, as for instance is the case in religious associations.

Such a structure of a just society might actually be what Rawls has in mind with the expressions of the 'well-ordered society' and the '*social union of social unions*' [Rawls 1999: 462]. But since he does not say anything about politics, state, or government in this context, he might also have something else in mind. In spite of its modern aspects, it must thus be emphasized that Rawls' political liberalism sides with both classical and post-modern liberalism in its negligent distaste of practical politics. Like an almost ideal-typical liberal gentleman, Rawls does not find it appropriate to discuss detailed political matters such as democracy as a form of governance, or the necessary institutions of the state. The basic liberal distrust of the state is thus reflected very strongly in the political liberalism of Rawls. Nevertheless, because of the differences in relation to classical liberalism, it is still fair to call it modern.

Another way to handle the contrast between the various types of liberalism is to distinguish, following Poul Lübcke [2005: 58], between liberalism in economics and in politics, and this also contributes to the clarification of a few points. As mentioned above, this would make it obvious that the utilitarian Bentham also was a liberal, namely in the economic sense. In this perspective one can follow Sibyl A. Schwarzenbach [1991: 561], and claim that Rawls might very well have been preoccupied with discussing seriously liberal

issues within politics, but still he silently accepts many dogmas of the liberalist conception of economy, both in relation to production and reproduction. As it is well-known, Rawls argues that the basic goods can and should be redistributed among the members of a society according to normative principles adopted after fair consideration. Still, it is simply taken for granted that the production of societal goods is organized according to the principles and assumptions of capitalist economy. As Forst [2009: 207] has remarked, referring to Iris Marion Young, Rawls' *Theory of Justice* is the prime example of thinking justice within the paradigm of distribution, ignoring the political significance of production and power. Rawls' liberalism is both modern and political but as a mere variation of classical liberalism, it is still vulnerable to the equally classical Marxist critique of liberalism as an ideology, which materializes in capitalist exploitation and accumulation.

Liberalism Presupposes Trust Just as Political Philosophy Imagination

If one accepts that liberalism has a core more or less as I have argued, then it is interesting how it keeps popping up again and again in political discussions. As I see it, liberalism was born – and still makes sense – as a legitimate critique of the suppression of individuals in authoritarian regimes. However, when this negative position is realized in relation to a political society, liberalism can only become what Hegel would consider an abstract negation, i.e. a position from which nothing positive is implied, which is why the French Revolution had to result in terror [Hegel 1807: 439; cf. Sørensen 2013a; Sørensen 2012d].

The credibility of liberalism as a modern ideology in this sense can be nourished by a growth in eschatological ways of thinking within fundamentalist religions. By saving the real fulfilment for a time to come beyond the possibilities of human life, one can be more categorical about the idea of freedom. When freedom is thought of as something absolute, then the only thing, which can be realized in our world, is the hope for freedom, which then becomes a kind of a hope for redemption in the afterlife.

To me it seems obvious that liberalism cannot be a viable political alternative to the law of the jungle. Actually liberalism is in this sense simply an optimistic version of this law, which is then euphemistically called 'the natural state'. Just think of the change in vocabulary from Hobbes to Locke. And the contemporary secular scientistic liberalism is even worse. The classical liberalism of Smith and Spencer believed in an innate moral sense and in moral sympathy, which were part of human nature just as reason and rationality. This was the reason why everyone could demand freedom and be granted human rights. Contemporary liberalism of Hayek or Friedman is based on the belief in neo-classical economics as scientific, and economics acknowledges greed as the basic drive in human interaction and as such legitimate. '*Greed is Good!*', as it was famously expressed in the film *Wall Street* by the actor Michael Douglas. As I have analysed in detail elsewhere [2012a], postmodern capitalism is based on the recognition of the legitimacy of human desire as such, and desire can be interpreted as greed. If everybody is greedy and the market is free, then the dynamic of the market forces – demand and supply – will in the end secure general human welfare. As Brodbeck has argued [2000: 51-53], in neo-classical economics achieving a harmonious equilibrium is just a question of mechanics.

Liberalism as a normative anti-authoritarian standpoint has thus been part of political reality for centuries, although it has been known to be ideological and contradictory in its full realization almost just as long. One positive conclusion that can be drawn from

the constant return of liberal ideology is that as human beings we not only have a great longing for freedom; we must also have a great need and capacity for trust, both in ourselves, in each other, and in reality as such. Liberalism implies that we believe that we ourselves as individual human beings can do much more than actually is possible, just as we trust our fellow citizen in a remarkable degree. We also, however, believe in authorities, and especially in our governments, even when they can very easily be shown to have vested interest, like most businessmen and at least some politicians. This is probably the normal case. As it has been noticed on many occasions, we have this tendency to trust authorities to a degree, which is not only without empirical foundation, but also outright dangerous. So the liberal trust in people in general might be the second best solution in cases, where the general trust in authorities has proven to be untenable.

The need for trust is so generally met among human beings that it is no wonder that some philosophers have thought of it in ontological terms. Trust, however, is not enough. What is also necessary is imagination, without which trust could not function. The will to imagine things and deceive ourselves is a necessary constituent of our hopes for a better future for ourselves. The power to imagine, fantasize and build consistent system of such imaginations are just as constant a feature in human life as trust, and it has therefore also been thought of in ontological or anthropological terms. In relation to epistemology, Kant thus noticed that it is a natural inclination of reason to carry out its speculation beyond the limits of experience [Kant 1781/1787: A 642 / B 670-71]. This remark was surely based on his experience with the religion and metaphysics of his time, but if one considers the market for religion and superstition today, it seems to confirm that the human ability to believe in all kind of nonsense is almost without any limits.

Trust and imagination are thus constitutive of liberalism as a normative standpoint. Normative ideals need ideas. However, aspiring to realize ideas might also mean being seduced by illusions, and here it seems that desire and instrumental rationality play an important role. The ability to imagine seems to be strengthened by the prospects of even a minor window of opportunity for a better life for the selves in question. Reason and deductive rationality also contribute to the credibility of these illusions, namely by shaping our common beliefs in a certain direction, helping us to construct apparent consistency and purpose in what in reality might just be contingent, meaningless, or plainly false. To me it is such apparent consistency and purposefulness that makes it possible for us to put our trust in the authorities we have, and accept the life we live, imagining that everything is a part of a bigger scheme, which will secure justice and reason in the end. Reason and deductive rationality thus contribute to develop imagination not just into political ideas, but also into illusions that support liberal eschatology and make the life we live appear meaningful.

The challenge for political philosophy is that it cannot be practiced without trust, imagination and speculation. They are its necessary, constitutive elements. Just as liberalism, politics and political philosophy are normative aspirations. Reflecting on what kind of justice, freedom, or government is the best, is precisely a task that deals with something that cannot be experienced in reality. There is no possible empirical experience of the ideal government or the just society. The object of practical philosophy does not exist in empirical reality. Its concepts are not realized and it is an open question whether they will ever be and what importance this question has. One can demand political philosophy to be realistic, but in this case realism must be thought of in another way than for instance in the philosophy of science or in metaphysics. Realism must be a matter of what is desirable

and reasonable to expect with due consideration to the knowledge and experience obtained so far about human and social interaction. This is the field that has been occupied by sciences like sociology and political science, but what can be recognized as well established knowledge about such matters is a matter of great ideological and scholarly controversies.

Political Philosophy Must Overcome the Divisions of Liberalism

Political philosophy thus implies necessarily a negation of political reality and so does liberalism. Both imply as normative standpoints trust, imagination and speculation. The normative hegemony of liberalism, however, has had some implications for the way political philosophy legitimately can be conceived. A lasting ideological consequence of the widespread acceptance of the liberalist preconditions is, I think, the separation of political thought from economical thought.

From its point of departure as political economy, liberalism as an ideology has been supportive of a reinterpretation of politics and economy as subject matters that can be dealt with separately. Economy is considered as something, which is better off when left alone, and therefore politics must deal with other subjects, namely the principles of government as such, principles of forming parliaments and of voting. From a liberal perspective, politics cannot be considered a legitimate area of normative concern. Accepting the undeniable reality of politics, however, means that there are only two acceptable ways to deal with it, one is empirical, the other is critical. The empirical treatment of politics is the task of political science, whereas the critique of political reality becomes a critique of a world dominated by capitalist economy as well as the governments that support it. As such, the critique of political reality has focussed more on material matters, namely the way the material conditions for political participation is undermined by the systematic exploitation and human suffering caused by the realization of capitalist economy.

Here we find the contrast already mentioned between an affirmative and a critical attitude towards the existing political and economic institutions, i.e. between those who can identify with the subjects, who influence the political and economic reality, and those who find themselves part of the majority, who are mainly the objects in this process. Political science takes the place of affirmation by simply investigating into empirical and technical functionality of politics, whereas the critique of political reality radicalises the normative liberal position, often in terms of inalienable human rights. What is left out in the anti-authoritarian perspective is the normative position, where the political critique of social and political reality is thought of in terms of politics, that is, in terms of a democratic government which makes state intervention legitimate. As I have argued elsewhere [2012e], this is the approach chosen in the democratic republicanism of Émile Durkheim, and it was also adopted by the older Bentham. From a liberalist perspective, however, such position would be labelled '*democratic authoritarianism*' [Bramsted; Melhuish 1978: 22].

Governing a society of a typical size – i.e. millions of people – necessarily implies objectifying your subjects. It is not possible for even the most democratic government to treat more than a few of its citizens as real subjects. Political philosophy must be able to give constructive ideological backup for government in this sense, just as it must supply the concepts needed for the critique of a government out of line. Another way to put the contrast is that political philosophy must be able to back up as legitimate the political employment of the strategy to win the power as well as the administration and enforcement

necessary to uphold power and to use it. Even more, politics must be not just acceptable and legitimate but actually desirable, both for those in power and for those without it who are fighting to get it. As mentioned in the introduction, political philosophy must both recognize this conflict and overcome it. Political philosophy is essentially practical, and therefore it must back up politics, which can gain general acceptance. The first obstacle for this challenging endeavour is the current hegemony of liberalism in normative discussions.

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