



We tell ourselves that we live in a 'liberal' society. But our definition of liberal has been corrupted. It has fallen victim to a mindset which says that the individual is paramount, that 'values' are subjective and that there is no such thing as objective right and wrong. Yet surely liberalism does not equate to this new libertinism.

Real liberalism acknowledges a great paradox: that personal freedoms can only be protected within a structure of constraints. But we have lost sight of the need for such constraints – and the results can be seen in the fragmentation of society, the failure of the education system and the breakdown of family life.

The founding fathers of liberalism never envisaged a society of unlimited freedom. They recognised the need to find the balance between the desire for personal autonomy and the importance of social obligations. Melanie Phillips analyses how such beliefs have, since the Enlightenment, become corrupted by the tenets of moral relativism.

Can true liberal values be re-established in society? It remains to be seen. But, argues Melanie Phillips, it is essential that the political parties of both the left and the right should rediscover the importance of liberal constraints.

Price: £6.00

CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES



The Corruption of Liberalism

MELANIE PHILLIPS





THE SPRING LECTURE

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CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES
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1997

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Her book, *All Must Have Prizes* (Little, Brown, 1996) was acclaimed as 'prophetic and provocative' while the Chief Inspector of Schools wrote that 'the squeals of defensive indignation about this book from many in our educational establishment cannot disguise what is happening in our schools'.

Acknowledgements

Support towards research for this Study was given by the Institute for Policy Research.

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ISBN No. 1 897969 64 3

© Centre for Policy Studies, June 1997

Printed by The Chameleon Press, 5 - 25 Burr Road, London SW18

BEING A LIBERAL AT THE MOMENT is a very confusing business. The other day, I took part in a discussion at the Brighton literary festival to promote my book, *All Must Have Prizes*. I suggested that at school, education must mean the teacher transmits a body of knowledge to children, to provide them with a set of maps so they can find their way through the adult world. I also suggested that at home, since children by and large did better if brought up by their married parents, the state should promote marriage as a social good. This produced an apoplectic reaction among part of the audience. I was imposing moral views on the population, they cried. My 'extremist' view of education made them recoil. They attacked me for promoting marriage, because this would stop people like themselves from renouncing marriage in protest against its 'imbalance of gender power'. They were, in short, incredulous that I was permitted to talk at all. These people would say they were liberal and I was some kind of authoritarian fundamentalist. But all I was doing, surely, was spelling out some of the basic premises of a liberal society.

The following morning, I appeared as a witness on Radio Four's *Moral Maze*, that oasis of temperate and tolerant discussion. We were discussing whether politics and morality made comfortable bedfellows. I suggested that politics in a liberal democracy had to uphold certain common values. I was promptly denounced for being no different in my authoritarian tendencies from Mr Tung, the prospective leader of Hong Kong, who apparently wishes to subject the population to the tyranny of Chinese communism. Even Michael Buerk, that pin-up of middle England, appeared incredulous at the idea that a liberal society must have common values and share a belief in the common good. But without a common core of values there can be, as someone once said in another era, no such thing as society.

What is happening to us when even the archetype of Middle England thinks that promoting a set of common values is oppressive? We tell ourselves we live in a liberal society. But our definition of liberal has become corrupted. It has fallen victim to a mindset which says the individual is paramount, personal choice and self-fulfilment trump everything else, all values are subjective and there is no such thing as objective right and wrong. These beliefs aren't liberalism. They are its antithesis. For some time now, I have realised that this mindset was selling short those vulnerable people so-called liberals claimed to care about – poor people, black people, mentally ill people, ill-educated children. How could liberals endorse illiberal results?

MY CONFUSION BEGAN some years ago when senior colleagues would excuse Chairman Mao's cultural revolution or whatever slaughter happened to be taking place in third world countries, on the grounds that according to the traditions of those countries, murdering people wasn't considered as bad as we would consider it in the west, and so therefore we mustn't presume to judge them by our own moral criteria. But how could liberals make excuses for tyranny?

It took me a while to realise that this moral relativism had seeped into the liberal cultural bloodstream. When I started to look closely at what was happening in education and in family life, I found that there was a similar taboo on making judgements. In education, what children were being taught and the way they were taught it had been transformed by the belief that the child's own values and ability to make sense of its own experience were equal to that of the teacher, who was taking a back seat as a result. Yet more and more children were leaving school functionally illiterate as a result. How could this be a liberal education ethic? In family life, it had become impossible to promote marriage in social policy without being accused of savagery towards lone parents. But all the evidence indicates that family dismemberment and reorganisation is a disaster for most children, just as lone parenthood is a distressing burden for most women. How can it be liberal to promote such damage? Yet teachers who resist the harmful education orthodoxy often find themselves penalised by local authority advisers or – even now – Ofsted inspectors. Family researchers who reveal the ill effects upon children of family breakdown find their funding is cut off by liberal research bodies. If liberalism is about freedom of expression, defending truth against oppression, tolerating dissent, above all embodying the rule of reason based on evidence, how can all these developments express liberal values?

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It was the so-called liberal refusal to discriminate between pro-social and anti-social lifestyles which produced Mandy Allwood with her IVF octuplets, all of whom died, by a man with another family to whom she was not married. Or Diane Blood, whose inalienable right to have a child was held to justify administering an electric shock up the backside of an unconscious and dying man to retrieve his sperm without his knowledge or consent. Are we really to consider such events a triumph for a liberal society – or do they indicate instead that it is in a state of decay?

This insistence that the only alternative to a moral free-for-all is authoritarian oppression seems to indicate a high degree of confusion about what liberal values actually are. The hysterical anger behind such claims also suggests that these arguments touch a very raw nerve indeed. I would suggest that these confusions have resulted from a corruption of liberalism into licence and libertinism, whose proponents do not take kindly to their liberal fig-leaf being blown away. This corruption of liberal values is, however, the biggest threat to our democratic way of life and settled social ethic. It's responsible for much of the social fragmentation and disorder which increasingly trouble us. We now have a government committed to restoring a cohesive society and repairing the social fabric. But unless we all understand exactly what has happened, why it has done so and what its effects have been, there's still every danger that these deformations of our liberal values will merely replicate themselves.

One of the most difficult problems is getting people, in government and in society at large, to believe what has happened. In education, for instance, the effects have been so posterous, have created such a Lewis Carroll world in which words have come to mean only what educationists say they mean, that sensible people understandably can't believe the evidence of their own eyes. And there are still a lot of people in key positions who have every interest in bamboozling the public – maybe even bamboozling the Prime Minister – into believing that policies are going to make things better while actually reinforcing these destructive trends. I

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believe at the heart of this new administration, among elected and appointed members and among the bureaucracies which serve them, corrupted liberal values are still heavily entrenched.

So what do I mean by real liberal values? And into what have they mutated? Real liberalism consists of a delicate equilibrium between opposites: between freedom and equality on the one hand, and rules and boundaries on the other. It acknowledges the great paradox, that personal freedom can *only* be protected within a structure of constraints. The disintegration of those constraints and the resulting loss of that crucial equilibrium have created a warped offshoot of liberalism, libertarian values, on both the political left and right. The outcome has been cultural and social degradation. Everyone is now a consumer in the free market of values. The unconstrained individual, freed from all traditions, rules and disciplines is free to pursue his or her own choice. There is equality between good and bad behaviour; judgments are forbidden; freedom of choice trumps everything else, even if there are bad consequences for someone else.

Down this route, liberal values turn into coercion and hedonism. Freedom and equality turn into absolutes, ends rather than means. Thus broadcasters and film-makers can drench our screens with sexual voyeurism or gratuitous violence regardless of the way such influential abandonment of moral constraints helps lower the threshold of unacceptable behaviour. Since their creative freedom is considered an absolute, any plea for self-restraint is condemned as censorship. In education, children need equality of opportunity; which means some will succeed, some will not. But if equality is not the means but the end, then *outcomes* must be equal. Every child must succeed equally. As the Labour party's pre-election education policy document proclaimed, 'excellence for all'. That might mean that prizes, as the Dodo told Alice in Wonderland, are for everyone, since everyone has won; and if that is how it is to be interpreted, then all relevant statistics – exam grades, curriculum test results, numbers getting good university degrees – will doubtless continue to be manipulated to produce that illusion, as they were under the Tory government.

OUR MORAL DISCOURSE HAS COLLAPSED into two concepts into which liberal values have now degenerated: personal autonomy, the right to make choices without having to justify or qualify them, and individual rights, claims made against others, again without having to justify them. This growth of rights-based liberalism has eaten away the integrity of both our personal lives and the fabric of our society. And it's done so courtesy of both the political left and the right, although it's taken different forms: egalitarian individualism on the left in the social sphere, libertarian individualism on the right in the economic and political sphere. Both promote a pick-and-mix consumer lifestyle choice. On the right, libertarian individualism elevated the free market and consumer rights over the integrity of institutions. Hospitals and universities, clinical specialities and academic departments were made to compete against each other. Self interest was promoted as the motor of society. Politicians sloughed off their responsibilities onto quangos. None of them acknowledged blame for their mistakes or took the consequences.

Meanwhile, on the left family instability was promoted as an expression of personal freedom, children became (in the words of one educationist) autonomous meaning-makers in the classroom, and the voluntary sector embraced value-neutrality with a vengeance. As Jonathan Sacks has written, institutions once constructed in terms of moral ideas – rules and virtues, praise and blame, reward and punishment, actions and consequences, now degenerated into a collapse of moral concepts. The idea that punishment was integral to justice was replaced by treatment; schools abandoned the ethic of achievement in favour of an ethic of false self-esteem; welfare abandoned benefits conditional on behaviour and desert; medical practice lost the intrinsic value of life in favour of utilitarian considerations; marriage was abandoned as a social norm and redefined as one lifestyle choice among many.

The worship of the unconstrained individual has not merely done great damage to individuals. To conceal that damage, definitions are being stood on their heads and language is being abused. In the classroom, teaching explicit rules of grammar or correcting mistakes are considered oppressive lest they stifle a child's innate creativity and spontaneity. The result is that thousands of children have no proper command over their own language and can only speak pidgin French or German. But to conceal this, educationists have redefined grammar itself into meaninglessness. Literature put out by language teachers would have us believe that exposing children to a spoken foreign language without teaching them the formal, sequential codes of language is to teach them grammar. One book on language teaching, entitled *What Do You Mean, It's Wrong?* tells us that the new orthodoxy in language teaching 'involves a new concept of error'. The very concept of a mistake, it appears, may be a mistake.

Or take also matters of life and death. The Warnock committee which legitimated embryo research moved the beginning of life to 14 days' gestation by arbitrary fiat and redefined very early embryos as 'pre-embryos', purely to enable scientists to experiment on early embryos without the moral opprobrium of being said to be destroying life. At the other end of the life cycle, we now find back-door euthanasia being brought in by the judiciary. In a series of stunningly confused court rulings from Tony Bland onwards, the judges have redefined the intentional taking of a seriously handicapped life as 'allowing someone to die', thus doing violence with extreme prejudice to an individual's right to life, the fundamental liberal imperative to uphold that right, and to the English language.

The idea that things are intrinsically right or wrong has given way instead to whether they are expedient. Things are judged not for themselves but for their consequences. We appear to have moved into not just a post-modern but a post-moral society. But this cannot therefore be a liberal society. Liberalism was always a moral project. It was about how best to live with other people. It

was never the same as individualism. As the sociologist Robert Pinker comments, liberalism embodied the idea of moral improvement as the cultural dynamic of social progress. It tried to reconcile competitive and co-operative values, on the grounds that both moral and material improvements were complementary and indivisible processes. The founding fathers of liberalism took constraints for granted. They never envisaged freedom without external rules. So how did we get from there to here?

RIGHT FROM THE START, liberalism contained the seeds of its own destruction: those many ambiguities and contradictions within its own tradition which have been reflected in the struggle since the 18th century Enlightenment between personal autonomy and social obligations.

John Stuart Mill, for instance, one of the early architects of liberal philosophy, was certainly no libertarian. He believed in a shared morality and the enforcement of moral constraints. Yet he would be appalled by the way his principles have been pressed into the service of today's moral relativism. Mill said the only justification for constraining someone else was to prevent harm to others. But of course, that begs the question of how harm is to be defined and makes it all too easy to be explained away. Mill defended personal space against the tyranny of the majority. The individual, he said, should be free to do his own thing as long as this didn't stop others doing their own thing too. But context is everything in these matters. Mill wrote his great tract in the suffocating context of Victorian England. The subsequent impact of both the Holocaust and Stalinism wrenched his balanced moral package into the liberal revisionism of Isaiah Berlin's great essay in 1958, *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Berlin said the mass slaughters of the past had been caused by the single belief that thinkers thought they were right. To protect us against any further final solution we therefore had to believe there was no such thing as truth, but one person's truth was as valid as another's.

As Jonathan Sacks has written, even though Berlin himself was not a moral relativist, the relativism of his argument became a moral imperative. The doctrine of no truth became synonymous with liberalism. The result is on display throughout universities today. Students hold there is no such thing as objective truth. Allan Bloom wrote in *The Closing of the American Mind* that the one thing

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every student believed was that truth was relative. Marianne Talbot, a philosophy don at Oxford, has said similarly that her students believe nothing can be said to be false, only different and that there is no truth, only truth-for-me. It follows therefore that all evil has to be seen through the eyes of its perpetrators. That's why my own colleagues excused the crimes of Mao and other dictators. That's why philosophers of education hold that teachers can only tell their pupils that anyone's view is as true as anyone else's, even if it is demonstrably false. And that's why Isaiah Berlin's great liberal imperative sold the pass of truth and freedom.

Relativism undermines freedom by making coherent moral judgements virtually impossible. But relativism is now firmly embedded in cultural and educational circles. And yet it owes its origins to those liberal values designed to protect freedom. How can it have turned into something so destructive? Again, the answer probably lies in the ambiguous legacy of liberalism. This was originally a protest against authoritarianism. So as several thinkers have observed, it was essentially a destructive rather than a constructive creed. It aimed to remove those obstacles blocking human progress rather than to fashion the fabric of civilisation. We had to construct that fabric from other materials constraining individualism – notably religion and morality – while liberalism offered relief from oppression to maintain that crucial equilibrium of order and liberty that underpins a free society. But the destructive nature of the project always threatened to undermine its benefits. T S Eliot, for example, wrote that liberalism might well produce something very different from itself. He wrote:

By destroying traditional social habits of the people, by dissolving their natural collective consciousness into individual constituents, by licensing the opinions of the most foolish, by substituting instruction for education, by encouraging cleverness rather than wisdom, the upstart rather than the qualified...liberalism can prepare the way for that which is

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its own negation: the artificial, mechanised or brutalised control which is a desperate remedy for its chaos.

And so it has proved. We have seen the constant moving of the goalposts of freedom into more and more extreme areas of licence, to no end except to create more and more freedom. It's a nihilistic movement which has created the post modern affliction of the deconstruction of everything, and now threatens our liberal social order.

BUT HOW DID THIS HAPPEN? Liberalism has turned into its antithesis through a very complex route, of which I can only offer the very briefest summary this evening, and which you may think poses more questions than it answers. The long retreat from social bonds into the self can be traced back at least to the Enlightenment, if not before. It certainly didn't materialise out of nowhere in the 1960s and 1970s, as is so often suggested. The patterns of thought which have subverted education were circulating in Britain more than a hundred years ago, when the bohemian fringe acted upon the erosion of external authority by setting up progressive schools such as A S Neill's Summerhill, or by practising the free love philosophy of Havelock Ellis.

But why did the belief systems of these far-out thinkers become the norm when they did, with traditional structures in family and education starting to implode after the Second World War? The so-called 'golden age' of the fifties was in fact a revolutionary time, whose sprouting of individualism was overshadowed by its spectacular flowering in the subsequent two decades under the stimulus of technological advances, the contraceptive pill, the rise of consumerism and the new affluence of the young. Even more puzzling, why did these trends accelerate so sharply during the 1980s under Mrs Thatcher, one of the most ideological Tory Prime Ministers ever? For under her tenure, and masked by her rhetoric, there was a complete collapse in education on three fronts simultaneously: pedagogy, curriculum and structure.

In the family, although marriage was still popular, the rising tide of divorce, adultery, cohabitation, extra marital sex and births out of wedlock shattered previously understood codes of behaviour. The overriding duty of the adult world to transmit a set of values to children and to socialise them into the culture was

replaced by an egalitarian social project which not only transformed the way adults behaved towards each other but changed the way they saw their relationship with their children. Simultaneously, an erosion of respect for institutions such as the police, the church, the civil service, Parliament, the Royal Family and the professions stemmed not so much from their behaviour (which was often reprehensible) but from the same collapse of external authority and its relocation in the individual.

To understand this at all, we surely have to go back quite a long way. This great shift was rooted in the many paradoxes of the Enlightenment, that great movement against religious oppression which gave us freedom of conscience and expression and – in that crucial balancing act with the Judeo-Christian ethic – laid the foundations of the liberal democratic culture of Western civilisation. The Enlightenment gave us freedom, but also the French revolutionary Terror and the Holocaust; it gave us reason and scholarship, but it also paved the way for the flight from knowledge; it gave us individual aspirations and human rights, but it also put a time bomb under the traditional family.

Until the Enlightenment, most Christian writers had seen education in terms of the transmission of truths necessary for salvation. This approach was then demolished. The defining motif of the Enlightenment was the replacement of past authority and tradition with a new emphasis on individual experience. Francis Bacon, for example, opposed the foundation of Charterhouse school on the basis that its curriculum was to be founded on the ancient classics – sentiments which any professor of cultural studies today would no doubt warmly endorse.

All received authority was to be questioned. Kant wrote of 'man's release from his self-imposed tutelage'. Everything was now in doubt. Reason would lead to a better and more just society. Yet many argued that experience and experiment rather than reason were the keys to knowledge. Here lay the roots of that subjectivity which was eventually to undermine the exercise of reason and pursuit of knowledge itself.

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Contradictions were apparent from the start to leading thinkers such as Voltaire, Kant and Nietzsche who recoiled from some of the devastating implications of the revolution in thought they themselves were setting in train. They wanted not to overthrow order but to refine it. Voltaire, for example, who believed no known religion was acceptable and wanted to replace Christianity with 'natural' religion, refused to allow his friends to discuss atheism in front of the servants for fear that morality would then collapse. As he remarked,

I want my lawyer, tailor, valets, even my wife to believe in God', he remarked. 'I think that if they do I shall be robbed less and cheated less.

These thinkers all prized individual freedom. But liberalism as such originated in England with John Locke, who produced a blueprint for English society based on individual rights and natural law, rational Christianity, the sanctity of property, a liberal economic policy, faith in education and an empirical attitude towards progress through experience. He would have been horrified to know how his thinking paved the way in the latter half of this century both for the social egalitarian politics of the British left *and* the economic individualism of the right. His belief in the governing principle of happiness, that things are good only in relation to pleasure or pain and that 'the necessity of pursuing true happiness [is] the foundation of all liberty' paved the way for the view that self interest and the general interest coincide, a view peddled with such disastrous effects by the recently departed Tory government, which through its *laissez-faire* economic policies provided the economic motor for the me-first society of 1980s Britain.

The social individualism of the left derived from the same roots. But it was profoundly influenced by another strand of thought which cut across the Enlightenment. The thinking of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the most paradoxical thinker of all, was to play a critical role in the left's thinking which was to undermine

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education and the family. This influence was all the more remarkable since Rousseau was neither liberal nor a democrat. He argued that reason, civilisation and progress would make mankind less happy and free. He extolled instead the emotions and the uncorrupted feelings of people in their natural, uncivilised state. He was anti-culture and anti-rationalism. But because freedom was apparently at the heart of his creed, despite the fact that he believed people needed to be forced to be free, Rousseau was taken up slavishly by the modern liberal.

His book *Émile*, for example, had a huge impact on education. This promulgated the belief that children's innate goodness and creativity could only be harmed by input from the adult world. Knowledge had to be acquired through the child's own experience. *Émile* was to learn even though he was not to be taught; it didn't matter how little he learnt as long as he understood it and made it his own. One can hear and see this philosophy in action today in primary classrooms up and down the land.

The child-centred theories which developed from this philosophy were considered liberal. But Rousseau, who put his own five illegitimate children into an orphanage, wasn't liberal at all, and the freedom he envisaged for the child was really a kind of anarchy. To this day, anarchic impulses are defended on the mistaken assumption that they offer a defence against oppression. But it is the destruction of order that leads directly to repression. *Émile* himself is freed from books and allowed to roam about in a state of nature, but is increasingly controlled by his 'liberal' tutor who manipulates his actions. So it has proved in the modern 'facilitating' classroom and among the 'liberals' in the universities and media who can countenance no alternative thinking to the prevailing orthodoxy.

The French thinker de Tocqueville warned against precisely this in his great essay about the dangers that American equality posed to freedom. He noticed that America's tendency to reject authority and assert the right of private judgement had produced a paradoxical conformity. He observed,

In no country does there exist less independence of thought.

De Tocqueville's ghost surely haunts the contemporary British university, where a common complaint is that young people taught by child-centred methods which are claimed to encourage freedom of expression, strangely give the impression they have been spoon-fed and cannot think for themselves.

THE INDIVIDUALISM AND SUBJECTIVITY which flowed from the overthrow of external authority were to influence a line of modern thinkers from Nietzsche to Sartre and the thinkers of the British analytical tradition, who held that all moral meanings were manufactured by the individual. Among philosophers, AJ Ayer dismissed moral talk as mere emotion and GE Moore believed that nothing mattered except states of mind. The finest intellects in philosophical inquiry agreed that moral choices were as of little consequence as choosing between tomato and asparagus soup. What mattered was only what-mattered-for-me. There were no moral standards any more, only choices.

The curiosity was that the moral line held for as long as it did. The Victorians, terrified by the long withdrawing roar of the sea of faith, made morality itself into a surrogate religion. But the beachhead was being steadily eroded. The *fin de siècle* bohemians who went in for free love followed their guru Havelock Ellis but their philosophical mentor was Nietzsche, that destroyer of civilised social bonds. This late Victorian counter-culture went hand in hand with the Romantic movement which cultivated the feelings and the imagination. As life became steadily more comfortable, parental and church discipline declined.

Against this background, so-called child-centred educational ideas began to flourish. Helped along by anti-urbanism and a revulsion against Victorian child labour, the education establishment – the teacher training colleges and the school inspectors – developed the strong sense that adults who tried to shape the development of children only corrupted them. In 1911, the then Chief Inspector of Schools Edmond Holmes published his book, *What Is and What Might Be*. Holmes was a bohemian, a Buddhist and deeply hostile to western civilisation. This book denounced conventional teaching and urged what we now know as progressive

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education, allowing children to roam about freely and choose what and how they wanted to learn. But the important point was that Holmes's child-centred approach, apparently proclaiming the primacy of individual freedom, was in fact anti-individual. He believed it would end individualism and materialism, repudiate western values and bring about a collectively run society. This wasn't liberalism. It was its antithesis. But these ideas were taken up with fervour by the education establishment. One historian has said Holmes's book achieved a conversion of attitudes of Pauline proportions. These ideas became the orthodoxy – but only at that time among the education élites. Classroom teachers were far too busy coping with classes of sixty to bother with such nonsense. Yet now these attitudes are embedded in the educational bloodstream. So what happened?

Many things happened. In particular, the Second World War was a watershed. With powerful cultural forces steadily building for more than a century, but constrained by the various emergencies of world wars and the Depression, the final removal of such constraints was like a dam bursting. I've already touched upon the way the Holocaust and Stalinism between them boosted moral relativism. The horror of authoritarianism also left Britain open and vulnerable to a lethal cocktail of ideas that now poured in from America through the close ties of the Special Relationship. This was the America where the ideals of liberty and equality that originated in the European Enlightenment and in the thinking of England's John Locke had caused de Tocqueville to issue his great warning against individualism. So what were these ideas?

The most important in education were the ideas of John Dewey. By the time he died in 1952, Dewey was the most influential philosopher in the United States. The intellectual heir to Rousseau, he believed that children had to be taught to discount their culture and tradition, that values had to be invented afresh by every child from its own experience, that children had to think out solutions for themselves and that the teacher had to become as much of a learner as the child. He rejected the idea that the teacher had to impart

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knowledge; to do so would be to act as a dictator. Subsequently, when he saw the developing chaos in American schools which were implementing his philosophy, he tried to repudiate his own ideas. But the damage was done. Dewey refused to countenance any distinctions between individuals, and believed that any divisions between the educated and the uneducated would lead to a destruction of learning and culture.

To this day, our own education establishment which has absorbed these concepts into its professional bloodstream thinks of them as liberal and therefore good, because these reductionist ideas are clothed in the rhetoric of freedom and equality. In America itself, they were repudiated in horror by Dewey's disciple William Coulson, who saw at first hand the terrible price being paid in American schools with children running wild, or being offered the freedom to choose to take drugs or have sex. Nevertheless, Dewey's ideas were taken up by another key disciple, Carl Rogers, who explicitly promoted the disappearance of the teacher who was expected to abdicate all moral responsibility for what pupils were taught. Every viewpoint had to be treated with equal respect; a child's decision to do drugs, for example, wasn't as important as the fact that such a decision had been arrived at freely. This extreme value-neutrality was imported into Britain via the Schools Council in the sixties and seventies, and is on display today as the norm in countless British schools. Anyone who doubts this would have done well to listen to the way teachers resisted attempts by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority to lay down any statement of educational values beyond the most vague and woolly blandishments which offered hostages to political correctness. There is a horror at asserting any firm values, other than the firm value that there are no values.

I was at dinner the other evening with an American lawyer, whose teenage daughter was a pupil at an exclusive Washington school. Even there, he said, 'liberal' values meant she was simply not being educated properly. Recently she had come home and said 'Dad, aren't there any famous *white* Americans?' We haven't

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quite got to that level of distortion here. But the belief that it is wrong to teach children a common culture or British history on the grounds that this is colonialist, élitist and ethnocentric is promulgated in text after educational text as an expression of 'liberal' education theory. But of course, it's nothing other than ideological propaganda.

These extreme value-neutral doctrines handed down in British and American schools were an expression of the cultural shift in which to be judgmental was to be guilty of limiting the personal freedom to make up the rules for ourselves as we go along. The only certainty is that there can be no certainty; the only judgement is that there can be no judgements. The idea of a common culture, common bonds, a shared story and a network of obligations and duties rather than rights has become synonymous with oppression. The individual stands entirely alone. The me-society has become synonymous with freedom and democracy. Mill, Locke and Adam Smith must all be turning in their graves.

The question is, though, why the great balancing factor in the liberal equilibrium, the influence of the church in promoting firm moral foundations, has been all but destroyed. Having been punched onto the ropes by a series of shattering blows to its authority from the last century, the church finally succumbed in the middle of this century to the knock-out punch of the rise of the therapeutic culture. As morality became subjective, faith in the individual self came to replace faith in the divine. Instead of asking the question, 'Is it right?' people asked instead, 'How does it feel for me?' Morality was thus redefined as a disease, and priests were replaced by psychiatrists and counsellors. But authority took yet a further onslaught; the rise of psychopolitics in America, defined by Theodore Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality*, which vilified bourgeois culture and held that conforming to middle class norms indicated nothing less than a predisposition to fascism. Respect for authority was anti-democratic and submission to the authority of teachers was linked to ethnocentrism. Any objection to the subjective or imaginative

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was seen as a form of incipient fascism. 'Liberal' was redefined as 'compassionate'. Prejudice was defined as a social disease. By defining personality attributes as potentially fascist, it was held that merely to hold certain attitudes constituted actual or potential oppression.

The influence of this thinking is hard to over-estimate. Everyday family life was demonised; the bourgeois family, religious faith and conventional morality were redefined as proto-fascist. And this extremist ideology was taken up by liberals, shocked as they were by Hitler and Stalin into an overreaction against all authority, and who were therefore a soft and uncomprehending target for this profoundly illiberal ideology. As the American commentator Christopher Lasch wrote, Adorno redefined the word liberal not as a defence of justice and freedom but on the grounds that any other position had its roots in personal pathology and neo-fascism. The liberal was thus redefined as the ultimate individualist. The identification of liberalism with the power of reason was junked. One hears frequent echoes of Adorno in political discourse today, in the branding as neo-fascists of those who are rash enough to oppose abortion on demand or the proselytising of homosexuality in schools. Such branding doesn't emanate from liberal values at all. Its intellectual roots are totalitarian, and people oppose them at their peril. Yet they are embedded in our society's definition of liberalism or, as David Selbourne has termed it, our corrupted liberal order.

THE HALLMARK OF A LIBERAL SOCIETY is tolerance. The extreme intolerance of such corrupted liberals reflects the fact that in junking judgementalism, we have also junked tolerance. To be tolerant presupposes there is something of which we disapprove and which we tolerate. If all judgments are subjectively as good as each other, a tolerant society becomes a logical impossibility. It becomes instead an indifferent society, in which we tolerate what should be considered intolerable. As John Gray has written, we are likely to create more intolerance through the development of group rights which make issues non-negotiable and permit only victory or surrender leading to a kind of reverse apartheid. One thinks of the privileging of benefits for lone parents, the refusal to discuss any modification of the abortion law or the tactics used by the gay lobby in which opponents of such proposals as the reduction in the age of consent are branded as homophobes and find themselves the targets of systematic hate campaigns. Is this liberal behaviour? One thinks of the residents of Balsall Heath in Birmingham, who used shame and persuasion to drive prostitution, kerb crawling and drug dealing off their streets and who for their pains were accused of moral fascism. Is this really a liberal response? Or is it a flight from the moral values essential for a liberal society?

The great question now is whether the Blair government will re-establish true liberal values in the face of this cultural slide, or whether it too is fatally compromised by such confusions within its own ranks. Christopher Lasch called the new corrupted liberalism

an unremitting onslaught against bourgeois culture what was far more lasting in its effects, in the West at least and now probably in the East as well, than the attack on capitalism.

Indeed, as the attack on capitalism collapsed, corrupted liberalism became the creed of dispossessed radicals. The long march through the institutions is being carried on now not by Marxists. It is being carried by people who call themselves liberal but who are in fact promoting very different agendas of radical egalitarianism or individualism. These agendas are now the orthodoxy among the fashionable upper-middle class, where freedom has become unconstrained licence in language, popular culture and sexuality.

We see this daily in the degradation of the media and the liberal press. It's hard to fight because no-one wants to be called illiberal or against freedom. No-one wants to be thought – even worse! – boring and out of touch. Experience in America teaches us that while conservatives who criticise these trends are ignored, true liberals who try to uphold reason and openness to ideas and the equilibrium between freedom and constraints are vilified and persecuted. In America, they are hung in effigy on university campuses. Here, no-one's being hung – yet. But people concerned to protect married family life are denounced as being cruel to lone parents. People anxious to ensure children are properly equipped at school to crack the codes of language or maths are denounced as Gradgrinds determined to stifle creativity and free expression.

Blair's administration contains two conflicting strands of thought within the same project. This isn't an argument between Old and New Labour, which is now a virtual irrelevance. This is a profound divide within New Labour itself. It is between hedonism, the absolute supremacy of individual choice in pursuit of happiness and fulfilment, and moralism, where the individual is constrained to some extent by bonds of duty. It's Anthony Giddens versus David Selbourne. Giddens would doubtless deny this, but to me his politics of the self, which extols the free and unconstrained individual making his own set of meanings, is morally little different from the free market philosophy of the political right. There is no sense here of the common good. David

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Selbourne, on the other hand, promotes a civic ethic of mutual duty and responsibility which preserves genuine liberal values of individual freedom and tolerance within a framework of constraints which build a co-operative society. In the New Model Labour government, Jack Straw and Frank Field represent the shift away from what Selbourne calls the culture of dutiless rights. But in the education department, despite David Blunkett's genuine commitment to raising standards, policies and some key personalities still embody the egalitarian individualism at the heart of the educational malaise. The education department's rhetoric about ending educational failure is certainly refreshing, and marks a significant and courageous departure in Labour policy. And yet the stated aim to re-impose equality in education; the hostility to diversity and desire to bring all schools back under the control of the local authorities which have done such terrible damage in the past; the endorsement of the shift from teacher to learner which has abandoned so many children to ignorance and error; these signals and more indicate that in the most important policy area of all, New Labour is alarmingly compromised by those corrupted liberal values which have undermined the transmission of our culture.

Tony Blair has refreshingly declared himself an ideology-free zone. However, he has also said, in effect, that what is right is what works. Pragmatism is commendable up to a point. But this is dangerously close to saying that principle is bunk, and all that matters is what the focus groups tell him will win him the election in 2002. But who defines what works? And for whom? For the strong over the weak, the rich over the poor, the lone parent over the married couple, the individual over society? Liberal principles have to be shored up against their erosion by a settled belief in what's right. What works isn't necessarily what's right at all.

We now know that freedom is at risk not just from totalitarianism but also from that loss of disciplines which collapses the moral order. The eminent jurist Lord Devlin warned in a lecture in 1959:

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Societies disintegrate from within more frequently than they are broken up by external pressures. There is disintegration when no common morality is observed and history shows that the loosening of moral bonds is often the first stage of disintegration, so that society is justified in taking the same steps to preserve its moral code as it does to preserve its government and other essential institutions.

The liberal equilibrium is the famous centre ground of politics. The Blair government has laid noisy claim to this ground. It remains to be seen, though, whether the unresolved argument within its administration between hedonists and moralists makes that claim insecure. It's an argument which must be had openly within its ranks. There's no sign, however, that the hedonists are prepared openly to defend their ground, preferring to shelter – as may be the case in education – behind a facade of initiatives which claim to be repairing what they may inadvertently damage further. But if within New Labour rampant individualism is not reined in by the restoration of true liberal constraints, then the way is open for the Tories to reclaim that centre ground they themselves so irresponsibly vacated. But that rather depends if the Tories can pull themselves together and reformulate a coherent position in time. And that's a mighty big if.

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