

SECOND EDITION

# Authority and the Liberal Tradition

*From Hobbes to Rorty*

Robert Heineman



# **Authority and the Liberal Tradition**

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Robert Heineman



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# Foreword

As the old dictionaries instruct us, *authority* signifies power or admitted right to command; the power derived from opinion, respect, or long-established reputation. Professor Robert Heineman, an amiable and very perceptive scholar at Alfred University in the mountainous country of western New York, tells us in this second and enlarged edition of his book that the intellectual and moral foundation of the liberal state in America is far gone in decay: so the old authority of the American Republic withers away. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold . . ."

The body of political belief that we call liberalism had for its progenitors Thomas Hobbes and John Locke—strange ancestors though they may seem nowadays. Dr. Heineman skillfully analyzes the failings of the doctrines of Locke—who still is accorded a veneration almost superstitious by such writers as John Rawls. Then Heineman proceeds to contrast the social concepts of Jeremy Bentham with those of Edmund Burke—much to the disadvantage of the former. These and the succeeding chapters of intellectual history in this volume are lucid and highly informative.

Heineman's purpose, however, is not antiquarian; rather, he is urgently concerned for the survival of true and honest social authority in these United States. In some sense, this is a companion volume to Robert Nisbet's *Twilight of Authority*. Enfeebled by a deliquescent liberal humanitarianism, government in America frequently or even commonly fails to speak or to act with genuine authority in the public interest. The liberal state at the close of the twentieth century lacks the support of "opinion, respect, or long-established reputation."

What has happened? As Heineman explains in the latter portion of this volume, the liberal ideology now is dominated by the "reform liberals" who mean to use centralized political power to effect great social changes of an egalitarian cast—but alterations ill-defined and disliked by most of the country's population. By and large, federal and state governments yield to one special interest after another, so that continuity of intelligent public policy ceases to exist. Very odd and seemingly insignificant associations find themselves able to change almost overnight the whole course of public policy. Where has authority gone?

This competition for "entitlements," newly conceived "rights," and ethnic domination will lead to violence and large-scale repudiation of all authority. In the few years that have intervened between publication of the first edition of his book and the appearance of this enlarged edition, violent clashes in the streets have demonstrated the truth of his vaticinations: fierce disorders in Los Angeles, Washington, Detroit, and other cities. Late in life, T.S. Eliot was asked what future he foresaw for society. "People killing one another in the streets," he replied. When authority no longer is venerated, and nearly all of life is politicized, that collapse occurs.

Illustrations abound. When Governor John Engler of Michigan announced a plan for reducing welfare expenditures by striking off the rolls a number of able-bodied young men, a television station interviewed folk on the street for their opinions. A vociferous black woman informed the reporter that if this measure should be taken, she and her friends would loot and burn—and she specified the supermarkets to be devoted to the torch and the Molotov cocktail. She was highly righteous in her denunciation of oppressors.

And a professor of history and politics at an Alabama university writes to me that as matters are sliding, "Government's role in providing for medical care, food, and shelter will continue to grow, and all Americans, black, white, and Hispanic, will some day be ripe for racist demagoguery directed at the immigrants who personify savings and future-orientation: East Asians."

The liberals' gradual abandonment of discernible philosophical or moral premises for social order is traced by Heineman from John Dewey to Richard Rorty, painstakingly. Now, liberals' claim to a moral sanction for authority virtually abandoned, why should not every man or woman pursue merely private interest or private pleasure? But that way lies the nation's dissolution.

Professor Heineman's new chapter on "Liberal Ideology in a Conservative Nation," and his examination of Rorty's ideas, strengthen this new edition. His book still concludes with an expression of hope. Let us trust that it is not merely the last creature to flutter out of Pandora's box, "delusory Hope."

*RUSSELL KIRK*

## Preface to the Revised Edition

This revision of *Authority and the Liberal Tradition* has two purposes. First, it seeks to place the analysis of the first edition within the traditional conservative perspective of the author. The reader is entitled to know the orientation from which a critic proceeds. As important, I believe that traditional conservatism, as originally propounded by Edmund Burke, provides a viable basis for democratic public policy and that it is a legitimate and useful position from which to critique the Anglo-American liberal tradition. Second, this edition carries its analysis through the ideas of Richard Rorty. Rorty's thought has clear links with the American liberal tradition and illustrates especially graphically the weaknesses in that tradition.

This revision could not have been completed without help from a number of sources. The Marguerite Eyer Wilbur Foundation and the Alfred University National Endowment for the Humanities Committee provided generous financial support that allowed me time off from teaching. Important individual support in the form of encouragement, technical assistance, and ideas has been provided by Susan Meacham, Rex Olson, Terrence Parker, Russell Kirk, Irving Louis Horowitz, and, of course, my family. Without these people, this effort would have been much more difficult, if not impossible.

ROBERT HEINEMAN  
Alfred University  
March, 1993





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## Preface to the First Edition

Liberal ideas have become so integral to American political thinking that they are simply assumed in most discussions of policy. Just as one does not carefully examine the door one opens daily to one's home or the chair at one's desk, so liberal assumptions have become a part of the cultural landscape that has eluded serious analysis. Unfortunately, unlike a broken chair or an ill-fitting door, the effects of ideas that have outlived their usefulness or are in need of adjustment are often not readily apparent to those who continue to be guided by them. When finally exposed to the light of analysis, unexamined political ideas may display contradictions and weaknesses that help to explain policies that have appeared ill considered or have proven ineffectual. Thus, in addition to the substantial intellectual pleasure that it can provide, examination of the origins and assumptions of a nation's dominant belief system may also have a salutary influence on the methods and goals of public policy.

It is my position that the American liberal ideological system no longer enables democratic government to achieve its full potential because the ideas in that system have become too diffuse and superficial to be useful guides to action. I am suggesting that a fresh look at the Anglo-American liberal intellectual tradition from the perspective of an important need of the current era, that of authoritative democratic government, may produce useful insights for the American public and their leaders in terms of both the formulation and implementation of policy. The conclusions to be drawn from this study will vary depending on the orientation of the reader. The goal is not to provide a particular substantive answer to today's political problems but to persuade the reader that democratic government can be and must be more than it is today and that understanding liberal thinkers from the perspective of the cultural assumptions and social conditions within which they wrote can be helpful in moving in this direction.

I have been encouraged and helped by far more individuals than would be reasonably possible to thank here, but some are especially salient at this time. George C. S. Benson has been throughout a friend and invaluable advisor. Indeed, all of the people from Claremont have been helpful and encouraging, particularly Henry Salvatori, who is a serious student

of ideas and a dedicated benefactor to intellectuals. Steven Peterson and Thomas Leitko performed valuable collegial duty by reading and commenting on the entire manuscript. Roland Warren thoroughly read, critiqued, and discussed the manuscript with me and provided me with the advantage of the ideas of a scholar of a markedly different ideological perspective. All three of these individuals demonstrated how stimulating honest, intellectually rigorous interchange can be. Russell Kirk has been consistently encouraging and helpful and took the initiative to bring to the attention of others a paper of mine that was presented at the Southern Political Science Convention and that contained some of my early ideas on liberalism. Tareq Ismael as always has been a friend and confidant. Mavis Thompson and Ellen Baker have labored diligently both as typists and office managers to move this effort toward fruition, and the staff at Herrick Library have been consistently helpful. I would also like to thank Michael Lakin for helping me to improve my presentation of several important points. My family—Alice, Philip, Karen, and Cheryl—have striven successfully to provide a pleasant environment for thinking and writing. Finally, I thank the Salvatori Center at Claremont McKenna College for their support and hospitality and Alfred University for their cooperation in allowing me time and assistance to complete this work. I thoroughly enjoyed re-examining the liberal tradition and the foregoing people and institutions have been important contributors to this experience. None, however, bears any responsibility for the judgments rendered herein or any accompanying sins of omission or commission.

## Introduction to the Transaction Edition

The motivation for this investigation into Anglo-American liberal thought stems from the concern that contemporary American liberalism is incapable of supporting for any sustained period of time a government that acts with firmness and coherent direction. In light of huge governmental expenditures and the pervasiveness of governmental regulation, it may seem nonsensical to assert that liberal ideology has issued in government lacking in authority and direction. In fact, however, the tremendous expansion of government within the past several decades does not chart a rise in public regard for political authority but instead reflects the degree to which government must turn to coercion and material inducement to achieve its ends. Furthermore, these ends are as diffuse and varied as the opinions coloring the social fabric, for the expansion of governmental activity is a direct consequence of the inability of public officials to withstand the demands made of them. Because the welfare liberal ideology dominant since the New Deal provides no conceptual resources for effective governmental direction, public officials are left hastening to satisfy the immediate wants of their politically articulate publics. Effective government must be able to exercise restraint as well as be able to act firmly and directionally, and to this end its officials must possess sufficient authoritative status in the public mind to allow them the choice of rejecting the demands made of them. But today's government is little more than a dart board on which competing interests record their various scores. The result has been that contemporary American government is seriously limited in its capacity to act for the national good as defined by it.

American government has, of course, in a general fashion always been responsive to the needs of the public as expressed by the citizenry. But in the current era this sensitivity to public whims has led to a diffuseness of policy focus that has bordered on impotence during a period when crises engendered by such objective factors as resource scarcity, technological advance, and population growth have loomed larger and larger. Presently of threatening proportions, these forces will be overwhelming if American governments are not able to act more efficiently and imaginatively. In his *The Zero-Sum Society*, Lester C. Thurow declares that

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“fundamental problems, such as the energy crisis, exist but cannot be solved. We have lost the ability to get things done. . . .”<sup>1</sup> Discussing the problems that Keynesian economic principles pose in American democracy, James M. Buchanan and Richard E. Wagner comment on the inability of American politicians to make hard decisions: “A nation cannot survive with political institutions that do not face up squarely to the essential fact of scarcity. . . . Scarcity is indeed a fact of life, and political institutions that do not confront this fact threaten the existence of a prosperous and free society.”<sup>2</sup> Others have drawn into question the future of democracy in more graphic terms. In his *An Inquiry Into the Human Prospect*, Robert Heilbroner sees the problems posed by technological change, population growth, and the weakening of the human spirit in industrial nations as so serious that “passage through the gauntlet ahead may be possible only under governments capable of rallying obedience far more effectively than would be possible in a democratic setting. If the issue for mankind is survival, such governments may be unavoidable, even necessary. . . .”<sup>3</sup> For Jonathan Schell, the issue is the survival of the human race, and he is clear that in the face of the dangers posed by nuclear weapons a fundamental re-examination of political ideas and institutions is required. In a comparison particularly appropriate to the evolution of liberal ideology, he argues that nations are utilizing “Newtonian politics” in an “Einsteinian world.”<sup>4</sup> Although Schell appears to be pleading for one-world government, one obvious ramification of his position is that governments must be sufficiently powerful to rise above narrow emotionalism in order to be able to act on behalf of mankind. Expressed during an era of two superpowers, his concerns are perhaps even more relevant in an age of increasing nuclear proliferation. Something serious has obviously happened to the government whose Constitution was once described by Gladstone as the “most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man.” Thinkers such as Heilbroner are calling for much more than simple reforms to improve the democratic system. They are questioning its ability to survive.

Intentionally, American government at the national level operated within the confines of the Constitution, which provides for three branches of government and allots power to each of them. Today, however, much of the formalism and many of the powers contained in the Constitution have been undermined by the distinctly American phenomenon of sub-

governments, which have increased in power and number with the proliferation of organized interest groups in society. These sub-governments develop from the policy relationships growing out of the needs of interest groups and their related executive agencies and congressional committees. Thus, for example, the House Agriculture Committee contains mostly congressmen from farming areas who are responsible to agricultural groups and who oversee the funding and activities of the Agriculture Department. It is to the mutual benefit of these three elements to work closely together in the formulation of agricultural policy and to resist efforts from outside forces, such as those represented by the presidency, to intervene in this limited policy area. The multiplication of these sub-government relationships at the national level has made it increasingly difficult for a President or a congressional majority to provide policy direction.

The importance of political interest groups in the policy process was ably chronicled as early as 1908 by Arthur Bentley in his *The Process of Government* and later by David Truman in his *The Governmental Process*.<sup>5</sup> But the applicability of the largely economic focuses of Bentley and Truman has now been brought into question by the appearance of important non-economic political interest groups also intent upon tying into the sub-government game. Where these interests have not yet been able to build close agency-congressional relationships, they have often been successful in using the courts to influence the policy process, and, although they are a fairly recent development, their political effectiveness has contributed significantly toward greater policy divisiveness at the national level.

The decade of the sixties saw the beginnings of the marked increase in groups intent on pursuing intangible, normative goals through sophisticated political techniques. Previous to this time, much of government's activity was in response to demands on its ability to distribute economic rewards and occasionally, as with Prohibition, on its power to prohibit a particular activity. The new reforming spirit is characterized by charismatic leaders who often utilize their followings to try to force government to impose their particular valuational perspective on the rest of society. In this respect, the personal rewards to be derived from leading a cause should not be underestimated. The leitmotif of activist reform has been the emergence throughout the political grassroots of individuals whose dedication to a particular form of social justice has enabled escape

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from lives described by George Steiner as a "gray transit between domestic spasm and oblivion."<sup>6</sup> The influence of even small groups is magnified by elected officials' sensitivity to the incremental nature of the electoral process. They know that, especially in a close election, a dedicated, well-organized minority, whether it be the antivivisectionists or irate vegetarians, can bring them to grief. Unfortunately, many of these interest groups have found it to their advantage to exploit and encourage cynicism toward governmental officials, a tactic that was aided by the actions of many officials from the Vietnam War period through the Nixon resignation. The results of this approach may be liberating to group power, but they have contributed heavily to weakening the status of governmental authority. This has been particularly apparent at the national level.

The effects of those interests questioning and opposing America's involvement in Vietnam, for example, remain important limiting influences on this nation's power in foreign policy. It should be obvious to most informed Americans and to observant foreign leaders that, due to the power of latent domestic interests, this nation, barring direct attack on itself, is incapable of maintaining any sustained military effort anywhere. In fact, this limitation was to an extent formalized shortly after the Vietnamese conflict in the enactment of the 1973 War Powers Act, which specifically forbids the President to commit troops beyond sixty days without congressional approval.<sup>7</sup> But even if Congress were to approve longer commitment of troops, it is inconceivable that the government could for long withstand the antiwar pressures that would be brought to bear by ideological groupings and anti-militarist interests. During the Vietnam conflict, while American troops were dying in the south, important American figures took it upon themselves to defy government policy and visit the homeland of the enemy in a highly publicized fashion. A parallel situation developed in El Salvador, for important public figures were raising funds to aid the insurgents while American troops were acting as advisors to the legal government there. In this instance, public fear of military involvement was so great that when an American advisor was seen carrying a rifle near a war zone, it was an important news story and cause for congressional concern. Whatever one's position on the Vietnam War and the conflict in El Salvador, it should be clear from the events surrounding these conflicts that the national government has been brought to heel by non-economic interests proficient at mobilizing public

support and fear. Moreover, it should be obvious to foreign nations, including America's enemies, that, although this nation has important sanctions that it can apply internationally and has the most powerful military force in the world, in the final analysis it is too weak to be able to commit its troops effectively for a prolonged period of time. The 1991 Gulf War was successful precisely because large numbers of troops were in combat for a very short duration.

On another front, the interest-group politics involved in the Alaska pipeline provide a good example of the ability of the newer forms of group activity to complicate the formulation of coherent domestic policy. In 1968, the oil companies determined that the northern Alaska region had tremendous oil and gas reserves; by 1970, they were in the planning stages for extracting these resources. It should be noted that, in terms of chronology, the oil companies were acting with some foresight before the energy crisis became acute. Nonetheless, they could hardly have been prepared for the onslaught of delaying tactics that environmentalist groups unleashed against them. Turning to the courts and invoking every sort of procedural stalling tactic that they could command, the environmentalists were successful in delaying activity on the needed oil pipeline across Alaska for three years. They might still be obstructing the extraction of Prudhoe Bay oil if it were not for the Arab oil embargo of 1973. At that point, in an exceptionally rare maneuver, Congress cleared the way for the pipeline by simply prohibiting the filing of further environmental suits against it in Federal courts. Finally, in 1977, oil from the new oil fields flowed across Alaska. One can only speculate on the effects that the Alaskan oil might have had on the energy crisis if it could have been obtained earlier, but no one should mistake the political power of non-economic interests as demonstrated by this abbreviated case study. Despite the widespread belief that the nation was on the verge of a national emergency, there is little question that the environmentalists, without the highly unusual action by Congress, would have continued to block the production and shipment of new oil.

Much of government's current impotence can be attributed to the inability of public officials and the general public to adjust to the new political parameters created by the rise of non-economically driven interests. Traditional interest demands of government expected tangible rewards, and public officials could manipulate and redistribute the public largesse until an acceptable compromise was reached. But the recent



arrivals to the political scramble expect something different. They want governmental enforcement of a wide range of values, each set of which is peculiar to a particular grouping. Compromise in terms of material disbursement is very often irrelevant to them and, in terms of ideology, impossible. Liberal thought today is of little assistance to public officials because, as conceived by thinkers such as John Dewey, it assumed the primacy of process and compromise. In Dewey's time, it was relatively simple to explain the political process in terms of economic interests trying to get their share, but it is now apparent that under contemporary conditions such a view is dangerously superficial, for it focuses on the epiphenomena of one era and avoids the question of the position of political authority *qua* political authority. Before American public officials can be expected to resolve, through democratic means, the ideological impasses that are threatening, they must be provided with a conceptual framework that justifies the integrity of political authority within a democratic system. Superficial democratic liberalism was viable as an ideological framework for policy formulation until recently because the focus on economic concerns operated on a base of social stability. The newer forms of interest-group activity have destroyed this social base, however, by articulating valuational positions that are fundamentally incompatible and insisting that these positions be dealt with politically. Thus, on the abortion issue, government is left trying to muddle from one policy problem to another as the pro-life forces and pro-choice forces attempt to interject their causes wherever possible.

The purpose of this examination of the Anglo-American liberal intellectual heritage is to show that these ideas owe a great deal to governmental and non-governmental forms of social control. The causes of the present ideological quagmire can be traced to fundamental misunderstanding on the part of contemporary Americans about the nature of Anglo-American liberalism and its relationship to the social conditions within which it developed. Liberalism has failed to meet the demands on the political system because its spokesmen have refused to acknowledge its debt to forces of social stability and thus have been unwilling to admit that governmental power in and of itself might be a social good. Unfortunately, the politicization of diverse social interests has destroyed the stable framework within which governmental officials could once act with some confidence and coherence and has left them floundering in a sea of aggressive and increasingly irreconcilable

demands. Before it will be possible to persuade liberal thinkers to undertake a fundamental reconceptualization of the sources and importance of political authority, they must first be convinced that liberalism and social control are not antithetical.

Authoritative government need not be authoritarian government. Liberalism, which has done much to advance social improvement, economic prosperity, and individual freedoms, can continue to contribute to American democracy if it renders due accord to political authority. A free and viable society requires, as its basis, a level of order that provides the individual with peace and security in his constructive endeavors and in his possessions. Conservatives have, of course, always recognized this. Commenting on the importance of order, justice, and freedom to the American people, Russell Kirk has argued that, of these, "order has primacy: for justice cannot be enforced until a tolerable civil social order is attained, nor can freedom be anything better than violence until order gives us laws."<sup>8</sup> And Philip Abbott has pointed directly to the liberal failings in this respect with his charge that "the liberal is without a conceptual vocabulary to justify the state. . . ."<sup>9</sup> But in view of the current political malaise, liberals must come to recognize that government can act firmly and directive and yet remain democratically responsible; and, in fact, a number of important, liberally respectable, twentieth-century thinkers have held this view.

Relating directly to the importance of a government capable of acting firmly is the mounting evidence that the social divisions and external crises faced by the American nation are becoming too serious for the "government as usual" approach to be allowed to continue. Anyone familiar with the political catastrophes of the twentieth century is well aware that weak government is an invitation to totalitarianism. Americans must insist that liberals reorder their theoretical priorities if they are to remain politically respectable, for a government without sufficient ideological props to enable it to act is, in the present era, an invitation to social upheaval and chaos. In a very real, although not widely acknowledged, sense, human freedom is at stake. Continued refusal to construct a framework for a viable political order that is at the same time democratic will render Americans prey by default to systems of political order that have wreaked immeasurable human suffering.

Here, the liberal tradition and its relationship to the question of governmental authority will be examined through chronological analysis

of what might be termed "political ideas." These ideas have originated in the systematic considerations of politics produced by the seminal thinkers in the Anglo-American tradition. More important for the purposes of this analysis, however, is the fact that these ideas have continued to live outside of a thinker's work and his close circle of followers. In short, they have become part of the nation's political ideology. The approach to a thinker's ideas will be concerned with what he wrote and with what those words meant within the social and cultural context in which they were written. Injecting today's meanings into the words of the past has no constructive purpose in the study of political thought outside of the subjective pleasures derived from self-constructed fantasies. On the other hand, the beliefs of a culture and the social relationships that exist are often inarticulate assumptions of a thinker and keys to the interpretation of his ideas. Thus, liberal thinkers have at times tacitly accepted the validity of powerful government authority or restrictive social arrangements while writing in what appear today to be highly individualistic terms.

Liberalism as a system of ideas has, of course, been much broader than political theory. Its greatest thinkers have been important philosophers who were as interested in ascertaining the means to "truth" as in providing a rationale for political action. The epistemological element in liberalism has consistently been attracted to the methods and achievements of the physical sciences, and the important liberal thinkers in the philosophical sense have inevitably described their positions as scientific. In this respect, liberalism has successfully obtained public approbation through its ability to associate itself with advances in the physical sciences. At the same time, infatuation with scientific progress has given liberals tremendous confidence in the capacity of human reason, and if there is one element that has characterized liberalism throughout the past three and one-half centuries, it has been a faith in the ability of men to change society for the better. Reinforcing the longevity of liberalism in the Anglo-American world has been its ability to dovetail with economic change. Thus, liberalism has often been seen as the ideology of reform and revolution. Liberal thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, Jeremy Bentham, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty have emphatically rejected the importance of tradition and relied on the power of the human mind in the here and now to construct a more perfect social world.

The philosophical positions taken by liberal thinkers have had important political ramifications. The eclipse of the static Newtonian physics by the evolutionary doctrines of Darwin, especially in American intellectual circles, issued ultimately in a revised estimate of the worth of the pursuit of definitive truth. In this country, truth came to be seen as relative to an individual's perspective, and the importance of science for social policy became its methodology, not its conclusions. With this change in philosophical foundations, liberalism moved from an attachment to relatively static political assumptions to a position justifying continual change, a stance highly congenial to the reform orientation of major American liberal thinkers. Once truth was seen as relative, it was but a short step to asserting that social arrangements and, of course, their values were relative as well. It was with this move that liberal ideological rhetoric initiated the process of social divisiveness that has left government without stable social foundations or legitimacy and society without direction.

The formative influences that have determined the configuration of those liberal ideas that have conditioned the American experience since the Civil War have been primarily English in origin. Although the conditions of seventeenth-century England are far removed from the cognitive horizons of Americans experiencing the 1990s, important ideas first propounded by the major liberal thinkers of that bygone era are still to be found among those values that remain in American liberalism. These include confidence in human rationality, an individualistic conception of society, rejection of the authority of tradition, acceptance of science as an ultimate standard of value, and the concept of constitutional government. Even the egalitarianism that has become such an important part of American liberalism can be traced to the essential equality assigned to individuals by Hobbes. In America, French Enlightenment thought inceptionally had some influence politically, particularly in the construction of formal governmental institutions; however, the philosophical assumptions of the ante-bellum period later paled in comparison to the influence exercised by ideas stemming from Darwin and evolutionary theory generally. Furthermore, the political processes justified by the reform liberalism derived from these newer views have undermined and circumvented the institutional interactions originally anticipated by the formal constitutional structures.

But it would not be accurate, even at this early point in the discussion, to speak entirely in terms of philosophical currents or their political emanations, for liberalism as an ideological force has often been supported by forms of social control that have gone without philosophical or public articulation. Concepts of pervasive social control surfaced briefly in the thought of Bentham but were quickly submerged by the ensuing waves of laissez faire ideas. As with Hegel's owl of Minerva that took flight only with the gathering of dusk, commentators on social development are just now beginning to understand the unarticulated forces of social control that were operative during what has been seen as a period of unrestrained capitalism. Their findings suggest rather strongly what liberals of the past century have been unwilling to admit, namely that liberal ideas have been the beneficiaries of rather powerful forms of social control.

The approach taken here is intended to be one of interpretation not of reinterpretation. The justification for this effort is that it focuses in systematic fashion on an aspect of liberal thought that has not received much examination. Because of this difference in orientation, new insights and an alternative, perhaps more useful, understanding of liberalism's role in western culture should emerge. In constructing this alternative view, I do not, however, intend to stray very far from the words and contexts of the thinkers and ideas examined.

This study assumes that the dominant intellectual forces in America since at least the Civil War have been fundamentally liberal. In their basic assumptions, both the proponents of laissez faire and the advocates of increased state interventionism have been liberals. Both have stressed the value of individual rationality and freedom; their differences have been over the means for achieving the greatest individual development. Focus on this difference in approaches, rather than on the similar basic ideological positions, has sometimes led to the confusion of labeling the laissez faire individualists "conservative" and the state interventionists "liberal." Following this method of classification to its logical conclusion leads to the absurd position that Alexander Hamilton, a proponent of activist government, was a liberal and Thomas Jefferson, an advocate of limited government, a conservative. With the exception of the pre-Civil War South and the Puritans, conservative assumptions, which emphasize tradition, limited human capacity, and the need for controlling human