

# On liberal authoritarianism

**Bowing to the authority of experts saps the lifeblood of democracy.**

If liberal principles seem threatened, it is only because they have been so successful. Look more carefully at American, British or [European Union](#) politics, and it is hard to find any viable alternatives to liberalism even in its supposed moment of peril. [Donald Trump](#) spews forth an endless stream of illiberal invective, but even as the US president, at one point holding majorities in both Houses of Congress, he has been unwilling or unable to roll back the liberal agenda in any meaningful way. Liberalism is, after all, based on the idea that individual liberty is the highest political virtue – and who doesn't love liberty? 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.' These were the words that created the United States of America, and ultimately the global liberal order.

But over time the kinds of liberties demanded by liberals have evolved and expanded. They have shifted from a historical focus on 'negative' freedoms toward a contemporary focus on 'positive' rights. The philosophical construction of the concept of liberty is contentious and convoluted, but there is an obvious and intuitive difference between the simple freedoms enshrined in the First Amendment to the US Constitution (freedom of religion, speech, assembly, and the

press) and the expansive rights promised by Article 25 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights (rights to food, clothing, housing, medical care, social services, unemployment insurance and social security).

Political philosophers may be able to derive one from the other, but ordinary people will understand that there is a basic qualitative difference, even if the line between the two is sometimes blurred. Nothing in philosophy is ever simple, but simply put, the freedom to pursue happiness is something very different from the right to be happy. Political liberalism has evolved over nearly three centuries from a philosophy of safeguarding freedoms into a philosophy of demanding rights.

There have been good reasons for this shift. Liberals have come to realise that freedoms on their own are not always sustainable. People sometimes vote to relinquish their freedoms. Very often people use their freedoms to enslave others. Freedom may be just as likely to be used irresponsibly as it is to be used responsibly. Thus the mainstream of liberal opinion has come to the view that the protection of basic human rights, especially the protection of minority rights, is an indispensable prerequisite for the maintenance of individual freedom.

To some extent this is true. But the principle that some human rights must be ensured prompts the question of which ones. Someone has to decide, and if that decision preempts democratic decision-making, then clearly the decision cannot be left up to the people. In fact, among liberal political scientists, the whole idea that the people should define the scope of basic human rights is now sneeringly referred to as

‘majoritarian’ democracy, qualified as if it were no kind of democracy at all.

Mainstream liberals have reasoned that the delineation of the set of human rights that are necessary for the maintenance of individual freedom can only be properly performed by experts. Those experts, the experts in human rights, are by definition educated professionals like academics, lawyers, judges, journalists, civil servants, social workers, medical doctors and lobbyists. By virtue of dedicated study and professional practice they have made themselves the legitimate authorities on the subject. And they truly are the legitimate authorities on the subject. When you want an authority on chemistry, you consult a chemist. When you want an authority on human rights, you consult a human-rights lawyer.

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The problem is that politics is a unique field of human activity. Authoritarianism in chemistry may be unproblematic, even desirable. Authoritarianism in politics is dangerous, even when the authorities themselves are above reproach. In the contemporary liberal worldview, certain policies are mandatory, others are beyond the pale, and only the experts can tell which is which. Liberal democracy thus

requires the obedience of the voters (or at least the citizens) to expert authority. The people are the passive recipients of those rights the experts deem them to possess. As the domain of rights expands, experts end up making more and more of the decisions – or at least more of the decisions that matter – in an ever-increasing number of the most important aspects of public life: economic policy, criminal justice, what’s taught in schools, who’s allowed to enter the country, what diseases will be cured, even (in many cases) who will have the opportunity to run for elective office. In these areas and more, experts arrogate to themselves the authority to adjudicate competing claims for public resources and private benefits. As society evolves, the areas reserved to expert adjudication seem only to expand. In the course of normal politics, previously depoliticised policy domains rarely return to the realm of democratic determination.

The new authoritarianism of the 21st century has nothing to do with the Trump presidency. It is neither a right-wing authoritarianism, nor a nationalist authoritarianism, nor even a conservative authoritarianism. The new authoritarianism of the 21st century is, paradoxically, a liberal authoritarianism. It is a tyranny of experts.

### **The habit of obedience**

Authoritarianism has always been a dirty word. Liberal political pundits have a habit of labelling any political movement they don’t like as authoritarian, if not also fascist, communist, totalitarian, or worst of all: populist. The problem with this is that although all of these things may be bad (in varying degrees), they are not the same bad thing, nor do they always coalesce in the same political movements. The Nazis may have come closest to ticking all five boxes. But that

doesn't mean that all populists are authoritarians or that all authoritarians are Nazis in the making. Authoritarian governments existed long before the Nazis, fought against the Nazis, and survive in many forms today.

Authoritarianism simply means governance legitimated by demands for deference to authority. The source of that authority can be a confluence of church, monarchy and the military, as it was in Franco's Spain, or the Leninist demand for deference to a single ruling party, as it was in the Soviet Union and still is in the People's Republic of China. The source of authority can even be a single, charismatic person at the head of an organised political movement, as it was in Hitler's Germany. The principle common to all authoritarian systems is that people should not think for themselves. In an authoritarian system, obedience to authority is the highest political virtue.

The word 'authoritarian' began its career in 19th-century America as a derogatory term applied to a teaching style in which the teacher posed as the unquestionable fount of all knowledge. It was contrasted with the more open, child-centered learning styles advocated by philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and, later, John Dewey. These reformers emphasised the role of individual exploration in learning. When students are free to explore, they pursue many dead ends, but they learn as they pursue. This liberal approach to education emphasises the process over the outcome, the journey over the destination. Students develop their minds by asking their own questions and arriving at their own answers.

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In contemporary Western educational systems, this old touchstone of ‘independent thinking’ has been replaced by the new stock term ‘critical-thinking skills’. This is not a mere matter of management-speak. When students think independently, they reason their way toward individual solutions. Those solutions may be wrong, as the independent thinker often is. Societies of amateurs are full of opinionated ignoramuses. But vibrant democracies depend on an overabundance of opinionated ignoramuses, conspiracy theorists, quacks, know-nothings, and other loudmouths. Free thinkers will think what they want. Isaac Newton spent more time on alchemy and the occult than he did on the theory of gravity.

Though it may pain teachers to hear it, critical-thinking skills teach the habit of obedience, not because teachers value obedience, but because of the very criteria on which success in critical thinking must be judged. Critical thinking teaches students to reason toward the correct answer. But what if there is no correct answer? Or what if there is a correct answer but it is impossible to know what it is? Most public-policy questions fall into these two open categories. In such cases, independent thinking won’t necessarily lead people to the right answers. What independent thinking does is give the thinker – in this case, the citizen – a stake in the answer.

For example, consider the question of whether the US should have intervened earlier in the First World War. If it had,

millions of lives might have been saved, Russia might not have fallen to the Bolsheviks, and Germany might have been more comprehensively defeated, changing German attitudes and preventing the rise of Nazism and the coming of the Second World War. Or perhaps the 20th century would have turned out even more horrifically than it did. We will never know. But we do know that the delay in America's entry into the war left time for the issue to be comprehensively discussed, for ordinary Americans to form opinions for and against getting involved, and for them to express those opinions, whatever their merits. As a result, when the US did go to war in 1917, it was with the support of the American people. Those who were initially against intervention, who may even have voted for Woodrow Wilson on the basis of his isolationist slogans ('America first' and 'He kept us out of war'), patriotically joined in the cause.

Contrast that process with the politics behind America's more recent wars waged in south-east Asia and the Middle East, hatched by cabals of experts with little genuine public debate. Despite their (current) unpopularity, it is impossible to say for sure whether these wars were right or wrong, successful or unsuccessful, because the relevant counterfactuals will never be known. What we do know is that there was no consensus among ordinary citizens about America's participation in these wars.

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Free-thinking citizens might have made even worse decisions. History is littered with the stories of democratic countries going to war for all the wrong reasons, from Athens' gratuitous invasion of Sicily in 415 BC to America's avaricious war on Spain in 1898. Independent thinkers are not necessarily better thinkers. But they take responsibility for their decisions in a way that obedient subjects do not. Independent thinking is more important for the health of democracy than is the success or failure of any particular policy decision.

Discretionary wars brightly illustrate the rise of the new authoritarianism because they crystallise decision-making processes into discrete, well-known events. But for the quality of democracy itself, the most important policy questions are those about freedoms and rights: who has them, who can grant them, and who can take them away. These are fundamentally questions about sovereignty and where it is located. The traditional American answer is that sovereignty resides in 'We the People'. The traditional French answer is the state, and the traditional British answer is characteristically something in between: parliament. But these traditional answers are now being challenged. Experts increasingly assert the existence of universal human rights that are beyond the political power of the people or the state to regulate. Whereas universal freedoms may be 'self-evident' (reserved rather than granted), universal rights must be granted by someone. Under the new authoritarianism, that someone is the expert class.

It might be sensationalist to claim that a self-appointed and self-perpetuating human-rights aristocracy is running roughshod over Western democracy. But with less hyperbole, there has been in the West a slow but comprehensive

historical evolution from the broad consensus that governments derive their legitimacy from the people via democratic mandates to an emerging view that governments derive their legitimacy by governing in ways that have been endorsed by expert authorities. And that is a development that should worry democrats everywhere.