



Now more than ever, Americans should defend liberalism

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Liberalism, the most successful political and economic system in history, is under sustained assault on all sides.

As historically understood, liberalism is a political philosophy based on a commitment to individual liberty, constitutional government, the rule of law, toleration, civil liberties, private property, and a market economy. Any movement that is not a cult has its disagreements, and some people who call themselves liberals may emphasize some items on that list over others. But liberalism is defined by general acceptance of those principles.

Those principles are so fundamental to the United States and most of the Western world that we may not think of them as a particular political philosophy. But, in fact, liberalism represented a break from the pre-liberal world. Liberal thinking and movements challenged the world of absolute monarchs and privileged aristocrats, established religions, persecution, colonialism, empire, mercantilism, and war. In the name of liberty and dignity, liberalism supported “careers open to talent,” the rule of law, free exchange, and peace.

Liberalism changed the world. We’re all so much richer than our grandparents, even if we had rich grandparents. The economic historian Deirdre McCloskey describes the process as “technological and institutional betterment at a frenetic pace, tested by unforced exchange among the parties involved.” Otherwise known as “market-tested betterment,” it set in motion something previously unknown: sustained and compounding economic growth. We live longer, better, healthier and more comfortable lives than our ancestors.

McCloskey estimates people in the West are at least 30 times richer than their ancestors in 1800—or, considering quality improvements, as much as 100 times richer. Standards of living rose faster in countries that adopted liberal policies than in those that didn’t. But everywhere—in China, India, Africa, Europe and the Americas—globalization and freer markets are raising real incomes and making poor people better off.

Thanks to markets and globalization, the share of the world's population living in extreme poverty fell from 36 percent in 1990 to 12 percent in 2015 — less than 1 percent in China. Child mortality plummeted; education, literacy, and vaccination soared. As Max Roser of Our World in Datapoints out, newspapers could have run the headline NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN EXTREME POVERTY FELL BY 137,000 SINCE YESTERDAY every day for 25 years.

By 2016, Northern Chinese families that were literally living in caves in the 1990s had brick homes with electricity, clean water and children in school. “When countries see sustained economic growth, you also see declining absolute poverty,” said Charles Kenny of the Center for Global Development. “It’s as close to a universal law as we have.”

And perhaps more importantly, liberalism has liberated billions of people from lives of enforced obedience via slavery and serfdom, from the humiliation of caste, segregation, and apartheid, and generally from having to live as others tell you to live. The promises of the Declaration of Independence—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—are being extended, in the U.S. and elsewhere, to people to whom they had long been denied.

And yet in the face of this overwhelming, though still imperfect, progress, liberalism is under sustained attack from many sides. Ruthless dictators, such as Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Mohammed bin Salman, and the Supreme Leader of Iran forcibly crush dissident voices. They’re also waging well-funded information warfare on liberal societies. And some wobbly democracies have seen strongmen consolidate power. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Hugo Chavez and his follower Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, Narendra Modi in India, and Viktor Orban in Hungary are very actively developing new models of political dominance and eternal reelection.

While elements of the American left have always had a soft spot for every new socialist country—the Soviet Union, Mao Zedong’s China, Fidel Castro’s Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and even Zimbabwe—we now see American conservatives looking abroad for their versions of paradise, with many flocking to Hungary to admire and learn from Orban’s “illiberal democracy.”

In our own country we see self-described conservatives in the Trump era embracing new policies of lavish spending, government control of trade and investment through protectionism, and “industrial policy,” which will subsidize favored companies. We have further seen a toxic culture war against transgender people and LGBTQ representation.

Conservatives have jettisoned Reagan-era talk about freedom. Now they’re focused on power: how to get it and how to wield it to help their friends and to hurt their enemies. Meanwhile, on the left of the Democratic Party, we find growing attempts to censor dissident thoughts — or any discussion — on subjects from COVID-19 to navigating complex gender issues in sports. And there’s increasing talk about socialism.

Despite all the slings and arrows, the momentum of liberal reforms is still generating positive results, especially in the nation founded on the aspiration to protect the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As The Economist noted in April, “Income per person in America was

24% higher than in western Europe in 1990 in [purchasing power parity] terms; today it is about 30% higher. It was 17% higher than in Japan in 1990; today it is 54% higher.”

Yet the new critics on right and left want us to be more like one or another European state, whether France or Hungary.

The U.S. is outpacing other economies, but we could certainly do better, starting with respecting the principles of supply and demand. Soaring housing prices are caused by restraints on supply and unemployment and labor shortages are caused by restrictions on wages and immigration. Restricting imports at the same time restricts exports (known as the Lerner Symmetry theorem), which means restricting wage growth.

Under both Republican and Democratic control of government, we need to constrain exploding government spending, address the growing national debt, and tackle the even bigger “unfunded liabilities” of Social Security and Medicare. We need to stop punishing work and creation through our complicated and punitive tax system. But economic reality doesn’t generally appeal to either left or right these days.

The lesson of the last three centuries is that liberalism works — it gives more people freedom and autonomy and opportunity, it dramatically increases standards of living, and it reduces both domestic and international conflicts.

And yet there are people who want to make the U.S. more like what Hungarian strongman Viktor Orbán calls his “illiberal democracy,” in which government controls society in the name of national greatness. In such an environment, liberals of all sorts — including Reaganite conservatives, free-speech liberals, people who are fiscally conservative and socially liberal, and libertarians — need to see each other as allies in a broad liberal center and push back against organized attacks from those who would tear up and discard the principles of the Declaration of Independence.

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