

From the 'End of History' to the 'End of Liberalism'? A Re-evaluation of the Merits of Liberal Democracies in Contemporary Global Political Philosophy

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Abstract

A variety of pathologies within contemporary Western political regimes question the preference for liberal democracies: they can be contradictory, have produced significant economic inequalities, corroded social fabric, and lack a claim to exceptionalism. This judgment leads critics to conclude that not only the implementation but also the very foundation of liberal principles is flawed. In opposition to Francis Fukuyama's initial (and now revised) claim from 1989, some argue that liberalism, rather than history, has come to its end. This essay argues that there are still merits to liberal democracies that are worth preserving. Utilising arguments from classical and neoliberal traditions it is possible to claim that individualism still serves as a bulwark against the subjugation of individuals and the arbitrary divisions based on ethnicity, race, religion, or nationality. Liberal principles continue to offer an antidote to the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies, nationalistic sentiments, xenophobia and non-democratic regimes in general.

Keywords

Classical liberalism; Collectivism; Democracies; Individualism; Liberty-limitations; Neoliberalism; System-flaws

Introduction¹

After National Socialism was vanquished in the mid-20th century and the USSR began to disintegrate, Francis Fukuyama famously concluded in the late 1980s that Western liberal democracies are witnessing the final form of human government at the end of mankind's ideological evolution (Fukuyama 1989, 1-5). While this assessment ironically inverted Karl Marx's anticipation of a historical development towards a communist utopia, the major guarantee for liberalism's unchallenged supremacy appeared to be the lack of alternative systems (Fukuyama 1989, 1-5). This situation has significantly changed. China's economic boom, as well as the rise of authoritarianism in some European countries and beyond, impose the suspicion that the preference for Western liberal democracies is no longer self-evident. As Michael Blake rightly points out, liberalism is only scarcely compatible with the concept of state borders (Blake 2001, 257-60). Its aspiration to promote liberty as well as its demands for equal concern, respect and distributive justice is often arbitrarily limited to certain territories or nations, calling into question its contemporary value both in domestic affairs as well as in an increasingly globalized framework (Ibid.).

Liberalism needs to prove its significance once again. In order to remain attractive, advocates of liberalism must demonstrate their ability to guarantee and to utilize their primary principles in modern political systems around the globe. However, a remarkable variety of political pathologies to be observed on both sides of the Atlantic impose the suspicion that contemporary liberal democracies are struggling to meet such aspiration: the inequalities between the rich and the poor are seen to be a gaping wound, the endorsement of free markets allowed economic and monetary spheres to crowd into and usurp the realms of virtue and community, and neoliberal hegemony is increasingly understood to be a deceptive attempt to restore (economic) class power (Harvey 2006, 145-51). Simultaneously, the ideal of autonomous, rational individuals free in their pursuit of happiness has gradually been superseded by a characterization of human beings as immature agents whose judgment is faulty and impaired (Conly 2013, 1-7 & 16-24). Such an anthropological assessment leads anti-liberal advocates to postulate high levels of coercive state interference and paternalism in several policy areas – from environmental preservation to social justice. At the same time, dissatisfaction with liberal democracy arguably encouraged right-wing populism, providing the impetus for political resentment, utilized in a frighteningly masterful way by Donald J. Trump, as well as like-minded European politicians, such as Geert Wilders, Viktor Orbán,

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Jaroslav Kaczynski, or Alexander Gauland (Fukuyama 2018, preface; Galston 2018, 8-13; Wike et al. 2019, 13).

The preference for liberalism is increasingly questioned. The fact that liberal democracies find themselves confronted by a wide array of criticism and allegations indicates not that *history* has come to its end, as Fukuyama initially assumed, but that perhaps *liberalism* did.² Such sentiment meets the predictions of Patrick J. Deneen's latest influential monography: "the end of liberalism is in sight" (Deneen 2018, 180). The aim of this essay, however, is to follow the hunch that liberalism still has something to offer that is worth preserving. I argue that individualism, as a core principle in classical liberal thought, did not cease to be of fundamental value in the decades after Fukuyama's claim. Individualism is arguably the very element, which allows liberal democracies to derive a set of merits typically deemed desirable in modern Western societies. The essay concludes that individualism still serves as an antidote to the problems of collectivist doctrines, as a potential alternative. Countering the hazards of subordinating individuals to the will of a collective, arbitrary group membership, and a corresponding separation of people into factions based on religious, ethnic, or racial identities, individualism may be regarded as a crucial element in contemporary political philosophy and in the era of globalization. In this sense, liberal principles can still serve as bulwark against the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies, nationalistic sentiments and political regimes that are neither liberal nor democratic in character. To engage in such line of argument, a brief introduction of fundamental principles typically deemed essential characteristics of classical liberal thought is provided. Afterwards, an outline of the criticism aimed at modern liberal democracies is given in order to contrast it with the potential merits of liberalism predominantly based on the thought of Friedrich August von Hayek and Ludwig von Mises.

² Fukuyama no longer holds his initial claim from 1989. In his 2018 book on identity, he acknowledges that the liberal world order did not benefit everyone equally (Fukuyama 2018, chap. 1). Coinciding with the financial crises, its hegemony started faltering in the mid-2000s and its "inevitable fall" no longer embodies an exaggerated notion (Ibid.). Such a trend has implications in terms of identity: a group believes "that it has an identity that is not being given adequate recognition—either by the outside world, in the case of a nation, or by other members of the same society" (Ibid.). This problem led to the rise of what Fukuyama calls the "politics of resentment" at both sides of the political spectrum, rooted in a common phenomenon: identity politics (Ibid.). Such politics mobilize powerful forces, both in the political left, and the political right, and can include ethnonationalists and religious fundamentalists – groups, whose compatibility with fundamental principles in liberal democracies is questionable at best (Ibid.). In this essay, however, Fukuyama's initial claim on the end of history is of greater interest since his vision of finality is mirrored in the prediction of contemporary critics that predict the inevitable end of the liberal world order (e.g. Deneen 2018, 180; Gray 1993, 240).

The classical foundation of liberalism

The crucial question about the nature and the characteristics of liberalism lacks a simple answer since various definitions compete. Furthermore, its meaning has shifted, and the reinterpretation of the term has led to significant confusion in the second half of the 20th century (Van der Haar 2009, 18). Gerald Gaus et al. (2018 [1996]) point out that “liberalism is more than one thing. On any close examination, it seems to fracture into a range of related but sometimes competing visions.” The “new,” “welfare state” or “social justice” liberalism is characterized by the development of a powerful emphasis on equality, as well as the disentanglement of individual liberty, private property, and the market order (Gaus et al. 2018 [1996]). Such a type of liberalism correspondingly provides an alternative theoretical framework to the “old” classical liberalism (and its revived forms) of John Locke, Adam Smith, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich August von Hayek, and others (Wintrop 1985, 91). In this essay, the term “liberalism” refers to classical liberalism, however, even among classical liberals, the details of liberalism’s definition may vary. Nevertheless, there is a set of basic principles, which most liberals would agree on: individualism, freedom, natural law, spontaneous order, rule of law, and limited state.³

As the term suggests, in opposition to doctrines focusing on the wellbeing of the political community, individualism is clearly concerned with the rights of individuals (Van der Haar 2009, 20-23). Such an assessment does not deny the social nature of human interaction or the need for cooperation to survive, but it mirrors the conviction that the individual is the fundamental unit on which political considerations ought to be based on (Van der Haar 2009, 20).

Liberty as liberalism’s eponymous core value is arguably the most relevant condition for individuals to overcome their challenges and to prosper in society (Van der Haar 2009, 23-24). However, liberalism is not the only political vision that advocates for the maximization of freedom of its citizens. Depending on the definition, the imperatives imposed by a striving for liberty can differ drastically.⁴ Isaiah Berlin famously introduced the

³ In what follows, the explanations of the six terms are primarily based on Van der Haar (2009, 19-35). All terms can (and should be) subject to greater scrutiny and to a juxtaposition with competing definitions. However, such ambition would exceed the scope of this essay. Van der Haar provides a conglomerate of the definitions of classical liberalism’s core elements that are consistently mentioned by authors such as John Gray, Norman Barry, Robert Higgs, Carl P. Close, and David Conway. Correspondingly, this part of the essay is not intended to engage in an exhaustive discussion on the nature of classical liberalism. It merely provides an idea on the essential liberal principles which are present in the writings on classical liberalism and that are frequently subject to a wide array of criticism as the next part illustrates.

⁴ In this essay, “Freedom” and “Liberty” are used interchangeably.

distinction between negative freedom and positive freedom. In the negative sense, liberty is concerned with the question “what is the area within which the subject ... is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?” (Berlin 2002 [1969], 169). Negative freedom is concerned with non-interference and the absence of external obstacles or constraints (Carter 2018 [2003]).⁵ According to Berlin, the relevant question for the positive connotation of the term is “what, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?” (Berlin 2002 [1969], 169). Positive liberty does not focus on external obstacles, barriers, or constraints but on the aspiration of individuals to be their own masters (Ibid.). Such aim can include the desire to live a life which depends on one's own decisions, where one does not become an instrument of other people's will, in order to understand oneself as a subject, rather than an object, and to be led by one's own reasons and purposes (Berlin 2002 [1969], 178). Advocates of positive liberty emphasize that individuals ought to be enabled to progress in life and that, correspondingly, resources may need to be regulated and redistributed. Since *classical* liberals are typically concerned with the protection of individuals from intrusion by other people and especially the state, they most commonly adhere to *negative* liberty (Van der Haar 2009, 23-25).

It is possible to make a case in favour of individual freedom from a consequentialist and utilitarian perspective by constructing “a theory of a free society with reference to the positive outcomes for individuals of free markets and limited government” (Van der Haar 2009, 25). Liberalism's philosophical foundation and its advocacy in favour of individual liberty, however, is based on natural laws and natural rights (Van der Haar 2009, 25-26). Since a multitude of such laws and rights frequently tend to originate from religious or metaphysical commands and considerations (which is a problem for agnostic people), classical liberals emphasize modest and nonreligious forms of natural law doctrines (Ibid.).

In opposition to a greater reliance on state interventions, classical liberals stress a belief in spontaneous order as the outstanding feature of liberalism (Van der Haar 2009, 28-29). Such order does not result from the pursuit of an explicit design but the product of spontaneous developments that exceed an individual's control (Ibid.). Manifestations of spontaneous evolutions can be understood as the outcome of trial and error, social practices, and the competition of different strategies of handling affairs. The free market, the use of

⁵The definition is based on the mainstream reading of Berlin. However, the term is heavily contested: Matthew H. Kramer, for example, describes socio-political liberty as a physical unenclosedness and subjects Hobbes' modern notion of negative liberty (as well as Skinner's reading) to critical scrutiny (Kramer 2003, 3-4 & 46-53).

money, and the development of language are prominent examples of spontaneous order (Ibid.).

The rule of law refers to a higher principle, which “laws”, typically in the shape of legislation, should follow (Ashford 2003 [2001], 76). This means that “legislation and government orders can be measured against a set of moral principles known as natural law” (Ibid.). Such demand for a rule of law is motivated by the need for protection of especially the life and property of individuals via laws secured by the state since not all social order and security can be provided in a spontaneous way (Van der Haar 2009, 30). The supremacy of the rule of law originates from a simple but yet profound observation: people are imperfect (Ibid.). Such assessment is famously mirrored in James Madison’s remark in the Federalist Paper No. 51: “but what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary” (Genovese 2009, 120). In the classical liberal view, such laws ought to apply for everyone equally but should be very limited in their scope. John Locke prominently emphasized the protection of inalienable rights to liberty, life, and property (Locke 2003 [1689], 136-37).

Even though liberals classically favour a slim state with limited government, it is difficult to draw a precise limit to the state’s involvement in an individual’s private life. It is nevertheless worth noticing that even a (neo-)liberal, such as Friedrich von Hayek, allows for a minimum level of social security (von Hayek 1999 [1944], 35-44 & 66-67). Although his position is very sceptical about planned economy and interference in individual affairs, he advocates a slim version of social security, provision of educational opportunities, and urban planning (Ibid.). The concrete scope of the role of government is contested in the liberal tradition and has shifted during the last decades (Gaus et al. 2018). Classical liberals typically assume that only a limited government is justifiable (even though there are minor exceptions as the aforementioned remark on von Hayek illustrates) whereas the rise of “new liberalism” and social justice theories (e.g. John Rawls’s) allowed for a greater role of the state (Ibid.). One of the major motivations for this shift is the loss of trust in markets that aligns well with some of the contemporary critiques on liberal democracies discussed in the next part (Ibid.).

Liberal Democracy: a subject of relentless criticism

The previously outlined list of liberalism’s features is hardly exhaustive. As Nigel Ashford shows in his compact work, the principles of a free society furthermore include civil society, democracy, equality, free enterprise, justice, peace, and tolerance (Ashford 2003 [2001], 4-95). Even though these principles deserve extensive treatment, it suffices to point out that some of the core-characteristics of liberal democracies have been subjected to

tremendous criticism. This section demonstrates that especially the repercussions of liberalism's emphasis on individual and economic liberty are described as a failure of neoliberalism's hegemonic power by its critics (e.g. Brown 2015, 218-20; Lastra and Brener 2017, 49-51). Others point out that individualism is responsible for degrading consequences: "a degraded form of citizenship arises from liberalism's relentless emphasis upon private over public things, self-interest over civic spirit, and aggregation of individual opinion over common good" (Deneen 2018, 165). In a slightly different approach, this line of argument will be examined with recourse to critics from a communitarian tradition, such as Michael Sandel (2012, 135-36).

It seems clear that the merits of liberal democracies are debatable and the claim that liberalism has failed gained popularity. Casting a glance at the titles of contemporary influential evaluative works on liberalism and democracy suffices to spot their highly disputed value in political philosophy. One of the concluding chapters of John Gray's prominent "Post-Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought" (1993) is called "The end of history – or of liberalism?" and Patrick J. Deneen's "Why Liberalism Failed" (2018) is of similar sentiment. It is worth examining some of the voices raised against Western liberal political systems, in order to assess the wide variety of criticisms and to illuminate how such allegations, explicitly or implicitly, question the value of the liberal principle stated before.

There is no shortage of critical voices aimed at liberal democratic systems. Many of them are aimed at the manifestation of liberal principles in the market and neoliberal hegemony, as well as at the isolationist nature of liberalism, which tends to underrate the value of communal ties. David Harvey, for example, argues that free markets, capitalism, and economic freedom as an extension of individual liberties have led to a type of development, which deceitfully restores a class society (Harvey 2006, 152).

Neoliberalism's ambition in the late 20th century was, simply put, to stimulate worldwide growth. Harvey, however, judges this aspiration to have most widely failed. Neoliberalism had remarkable effects, but it did not live up to its promises (Harvey 2006, 151). The overall development in neoliberal democracies suggests that neoliberalism has only been favourable for the upper classes since it restored power to the ruling elites or provided the necessary conditions for the formation of capitalist classes (Ibid., 152). Neoliberalism gave the impetus for an anti-Marxist trend: massive privatization allowed influential corporations to consolidate their positions of power, and deregulations in financial systems paved the way for speculation, predation, fraud, and thievery (Ibid., 153-54). Accompanied by the management and manipulation of crises as well as rollbacks in state redistributions,

neoliberalism's quest was the restoration of class power, rather than the aim for all-inclusive economic growth (Ibid., 149-54). Trends, which substantiate the claim that assets have been transferred to privileged classes, can be found in the revision of common property rights (social benefits, welfare) and privatization allowing environmental commons to be depleted by large companies (Ibid., 153). This judgment is summed up by Harvey as follows: "the first lesson we must learn, therefore, is that if it looks like class struggle and acts like class struggle, then we have to name it for what it is" (Ibid., 157). To encounter this pathological development, one, therefore, must tear aside the neoliberal mask and expose its seductive rhetoric. Thomas Lemke (2002, 54) adds that (neo)liberalism can be characterized as an ideology, rather than a genuine theory. Neoliberal arguments tend to be inherently contradictory, faulty, and manipulative (Lemke 2002, 54). Its attempts to civilize barbaric capitalism and thereby promote an extension of economic spheres into the domain of politics allow capitalism to succeed over the state itself. Lemke goes as far as to claim that neoliberalism is practically anti-humanism (Ibid.). It is standing to reason that this sentiment, perhaps phrased less dramatically, is increasingly present in people's conception of the political situation and is partly responsible for the declining trust in liberalism as well as the growth of outright resentment.

Despite the use of a less sweeping vocabulary, the influential contemporary political philosopher Michael J. Sandel addresses problems in the current order that are of a similar nature. In a fashion resembling the separation between different spheres of our common life described by Michael Walzer, Sandel bases his arguments on different socio-political dimensions (Walzer 1983, 3-50). He primarily focuses his analysis on the effects of monetary and economic spheres which have increasingly dominated our social life in the era of market triumphalism starting during the reign of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s (Sandel 2012, 2-3). The alarming diagnosis suggests that the influence and vocabulary of markets have crowded into aspects of life that were previously governed by non-market norms (Ibid., 4). The fact that an increasing number of goods and services can now be acquired via financial means correspondingly demands a genuine public debate on the proper role of a free market as well as its limitations (Ibid., 1-9). This well-justified claim is crucial for at least two reasons with regards to the foundational position of liberal thought in Western democracies.

The hegemony of economic and monetary spheres indicates that liberal principles can clash with one another. The emphasis on liberty, free markets, and the right to private property allows for almost anything to be traded if all involved parties consent and the

bargaining does not take place under coercion. Such a position aligns with the perception of market-liberals and libertarians (Gaus et al. 2018 [1996]). However, the liberal ideals of equality, democracy, and justice typically also advocate for equal political rights, such as the right to vote. This position broadly aligns with the perception of “new” (or social welfare) liberals (Gaus et al. 2018 [1996]). The different perspectives on, for example, the questions of whether one individual should be allowed to voluntarily sell their vote in an election to the highest bidder, accentuates the clash between principles for two reasons: as shown above, despite both being liberals (at least in name), putting greater emphasis on economic liberty over social equality (and vice versa) can sort liberals into very different schools of liberalism with policy-prescription that can potentially oppose each other (Gaus et al. 2018 [1996]). Furthermore, especially within the context of criticizing the contemporary neoliberal hegemony, the question is provoked whether economic liberty ought to be paramount or whether there are certain mechanisms that ought to remain untainted by market interactions. The set of liberal principles can be contradictory: a consistent insistence on one principle jeopardizes the recognition of the other.

A second reason to be skeptical about the current market hegemony produced by the liberal foundation of Western societies is a phenomenon that Sandel named “Skyboxification” (Sandel 2012, 135-36). It describes the alarming trend where economic liberty, markets, and free enterprises increasingly dissolve communal ties and the social fabric of liberal societies. He eloquently sums up the situation in the concluding chapter of his “What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets”:

“At a time of rising inequality, the marketization of everything means that people of affluence and people of modest means lead increasingly separate lives. We live and work and shop and play in different places. Our children go to different schools. You might call it the skyboxification of American life. It’s not good for democracy, nor is it a satisfying way to live” (Sandel 2012, 136).

Taking Harvey’s and Sandel’s critiques together, it is easy to locate the origins of the argument that liberalism has become an atomistic and corrosive project, as well as an unfulfilled promise to many people. However, even though he agrees on the severe situation in which liberal democracies, especially the United States of America, find themselves in, Deneen (2018) argues that liberalism did not fail to deliver but that it did exactly what it promised to do:

“Liberalism has failed – not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself. It has failed because it has succeeded. As liberalism has ‘become more fully itself,’ as its inner logic has

become more evident and its self-contradictions manifest, it has generated pathologies that are at once deformations of its claims yet realizations of liberal ideology” (Deneen 2018, 3).

These critiques of liberalism (and by extension of liberal democracy) are not symptoms of the inability to live up to its ideals but a testimony of its success. However, it is the success of an ideology whose pretense to neutrality is insidious in character (Deneen 2018, 4-5).

Such an overwhelming array of criticisms leads us back in time to Gray’s judgment from 1993 in response to Fukuyama’s declaration. Gray (1993) points out that liberalism is in fact not that unique and that even four years after the end of the USSR, there was a variety of forms of government under which human beings could flourish – including authoritarian civil societies in East Asia (Gray 1993, 245-47). As he puts it, “authoritarian civil societies of East Asia – South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore – have combined an extraordinary record of economic success with the protection of most individual liberties under the rule of law without adopting all the elements of liberal democracy” (Ibid., 247). Western achievements can be reproduced and, similarly to Deneen, he presumes that arguments in favour of liberal democracies, including Fukuyama’s statement, are symptoms of liberalism’s hegemonic power in American thought (Gray 1993, 249; Deneen 2018, 4-5). Gray concludes that “liberal ideology guarantees blindness to the dangers that liberalism has itself brought about” and “that the days of liberalism are numbered” (Gray 1993, 240).

This section shows that some of the most prominent criticisms are aimed against the economic repercussions of neoliberal hegemony. Harvey and Lemke assume that deregulation, privatization, and unequal growth under liberalism have the potential to restore privileged classes and an inhumane society. Such economic separation is even more alarming with regards to its corrosive effects on social fabric as described by Sandel. It appears to be the case that such pathologies are more than just isolated problems in the Western political order. They are symptoms of liberalism’s inherent flaws, which is a grave observation considering the suspicion that liberal democracy no longer has the strong claim to exceptionalism it used to have during the second half of the 20th century.

Remaining Merits of Liberalism

As the previous section has illustrated, many criticisms of liberalism have been raised doubting its desirability in the 21st century. The allegations appear to be overly severe to maintain the claim that the contemporary pathologies are solely a result of a flawed realization of liberal thought. There seems to be something deficient in liberal democracy as a whole. However, as even Patrick Deneen (2018) must admit, liberalism is the only political

vision, which unlike its great competitors in the 20th century – fascism and communism – still has a claim to viability (Deneen 2018, 5). This assessment invites us to speculate whether there are profound reasons for this. Furthermore, the conclusion that the preference for a political system is no longer self-evident differs from the more radical claim that its days are numbered. There are principles of classical liberal thought that cannot be deemed entirely worthless in the framework of contemporary global political philosophy. One such principle is individualism as a foundation of liberalism.

As von Hayek points out, liberalism differs from fascism and communism in the sense that the latter two want to organize society as well as its resources at one unitary end (von Hayek 2006 [1944], 60). An advocacy in favour of individualism, therefore, finds itself entangled in the established debate with collectivism as its great antagonist. Such a colossal confrontation is too complex to discuss here, and it is furthermore not necessary with regards to the modest claim of this essay that there are certain merits in the liberal foundation of Western democracies worth preserving. Today, liberalism is no longer competing with a collectivist ideology in the shape of German fascism/national-socialism and Soviet communism. However, the rise of authoritarian regimes, the revitalization of national sentiments, identitarian movements, and the rising impact of “identity politics” indicate that collectivist tendencies did not vanish from the political landscape.⁶ Some arguments in favour of individualism, as articulated by for example Ludwig von Mises (1963 [1949], 152), may still serve as an antidote to certain controversial contemporary developments.

Several arguments in support of liberalism can be found, challenging the negative customary terminology of individualism, highlighting its value for current political systems, and questioning the feasibility of collectivism as both its antagonist and its alternative. To begin with, it is worth emphasizing that individualism may not be as corrosive to the social fabric and communal ties as prominent critics assume. As von Mises (1963 [1949]) points out, this notion is frequently misunderstood. Individualism does not embody an inherent anti-communal or anti-society stance: “The philosophy commonly called individualism is a philosophy of social cooperation and the progressive intensification of the social nexus” (von Mises 1963 [1949], 152). The liberal emphasis on the individual as the ultimate political unit does not simultaneously suggest that cooperation and society are worthless. However, the hierarchy is not arbitrary: A collective originates from the actions and ideas of individuals and the collective vanishes or changes if its members adopt a different set of views (von

⁶ This argument goes roughly along the lines of Fukuyama’s observations on the rise of identity politics as well as the politics of resentment and dignity in his recent book (Fukuyama 2018, preface & chap. 1).

Mises 1962, 79). Nevertheless, in von Mises' conception, collectives can be dangerous for several reasons: the hazards of reversing the relationship between individual and collective can lead to the submission of the individual being to the ideology of the collective entity. He judges such a mechanism to be a road to totalitarianism (von Mises 2001 [1957], 251). This prospect is especially problematic if one sympathizes with, for example, the Kantian claim that individuals are of inherent value and ought to be protected in their right to seek happiness and fulfilment through a path of their own choice as long as they respect the equal rights of others (Kant 1964 [1793], 145-46). Individualism has the potential to be a guardian of self-determination and self-ownership. Von Mises proceeds by demonstrating that historically collectives had a habit of claiming superiority over other groups, overshadowing the ideals and the personality of right-thinking people (von Mises 2001 [1957], 59). The supremacy of a collective, however, demands for a separation of its members into omnipotent rulers and "chessmen in the plans of the dictator" (Ibid., 152-53). All these claims are traditional arguments against collectivism and therefore implicitly arguments in favour of the alternative – individualism. Yet, there is one reason that is of outstanding importance with regards to contemporary problems and conflicts: a great quantity of group memberships is arbitrary.

Every human being is arbitrarily born into a family, a race, a country, and a religious and political milieu (von Mises 2001 [1957], 158).⁷ A significant amount of group memberships is merely the result of coincidence. This circumstance imposes great challenges in the framework of an increasingly globalized world, including debates on nationality, (in)tolerance, and migration. As indicated in the introduction, liberalism and individualism have difficulties with the concept of state borders (Blake 2001, 257-60). As Blake (2001, 257) points out, "liberal principles ... are traditionally applied only within the context of the territorial state." And yet he notices that liberals *do* have a commitment to equality as well as a "demand for equal concern and respect" (Ibid.). Such commitments should not be limited to certain territories. Correspondingly, one may argue that even though its realization is flawed, the individualist and egalitarian foundation of liberal principles is a great strength. Perhaps the age of globalization demands for a doctrine that does not appreciate territorial borders. The arbitrary creation of collectives leads to the arbitrary inclusion and exclusion of individuals, which can consecutively provoke major political pathologies, such as the

⁷ Self-evidently, group memberships can be a result of deliberate individual choice as well (jobs, sports clubs, interest groups, friends, etc.). But despite the fact that nationalities, denominations, and even family ties can technically be changed, such group memberships are typically determined to a great degree by an arbitrary factor in the shape of time and place of birth.

rejection of foreign people, as well as the frequent unwillingness to help during the migration “crisis” in recent years. In this sense, the individualist dogma may be reinterpreted as a doctrine against arbitrary separation. During an era of globalization, which promotes international cooperation over the insistence on nation-states, dissolving exclusive collective ties in favour of an allegedly atomistic individualism may not be as absurd as one may suspect at first glance. This argument taken together with traditional reasoning in favour of liberal principles, being a safeguard against the infringement upon individual liberty rights in the aftermath of the horrors during the 20th century, may provide the precursors for the articulation of certain merits that liberal democracies still successfully provide.

As both Gray and Deneen have pointed out, the traditional liberal thought in the USA and beyond has been a predetermining “encompassing political ecosystem in which we have swum, unaware of its existence” (Deneen 2018, 4-5; Gray 1993, 249). The hegemony of liberal thought has arguably led us to conclude that liberal democracies are indeed the final form of government at the end of history and blinded us to the possibility of other feasible alternatives. However, it may also be speculated that the wealth and progress of liberalism have seduced us into taking such luxury for granted and blinded us to the achievements of liberal democracies. There is a case to be made that history did not come to its end, as Fukuyama initially declared in 1989, but perhaps neither did liberalism, at least not yet.

Conclusion

The preference for liberal democracies is no longer as self-evident in the 21st century as it was during Francis Fukuyama’s famous claim in 1989. Despite the tremendous amount of criticism aimed at western political frameworks, this essay argues that there are nevertheless merits in liberal democracies that are worth preserving. This conclusion does not deny significant problems and challenges in the liberal world order. It merely rejects the more radical idea that, due to its flaws, the days of liberalism are numbered.

Following this line of argument, the classical foundation of liberalism is illuminated. It includes principles such as natural law, spontaneous order, rule of law, limited state, freedom, and individualism. Directly or indirectly, especially the latter two have been subjected to scrutiny by a great number of critics since they embody some of the core principles enabling the neoliberal hegemony. Liberalism’s economic promises are judged to be an unfulfilled promise since they led to a restoration of class power, revised common property rights, and have been contradicting and faulty. Such a trend is even more alarming in the era of market triumphalism in which almost everything is up for sale. (Neo)liberalism allowed markets to crowd into aspects of individual and communal life that were previously

governed by non-market norms and therefore has the potential to corrode social fabric in Western democracies. Paired with the observation that liberalism perhaps no longer has a claim to exceptionalism, the above-mentioned problems arguably encouraged political resentment that led to the rise of populism and authoritarian sentiments.

This essay's response to these criticisms is not to vindicate the claim that liberal democracy is a perfect political model, but the suggestion that especially its individualistic foundation has something to offer that is worth preserving. Three strategies are applied: challenging the negative customary terminology of individualism, highlighting its value for the current political system, and questioning the feasibility of collectivism as an exclusionary alternative. Individualism does not ignore the importance of the social nexus, but it simply embodies the conviction that the individual ought to be paramount as the ultimate political unit. In response to the strengthening of collectivist doctrines, both in the political left and the political right, individualism as a core principle in liberal democracies is worth preserving as a safeguard for self-ownership and self-determination.

As a final point, a speculation regarding the loss of communal ties under neoliberalism's hegemony is raised: since group-memberships are frequently a result of coincidence (e.g. place of birth), a positive consequence of the allegedly cold and atomistic individualism can be imagined. Arbitrary separation, for example, based on nationality, has been a source of major conflict in the past. Perhaps liberalism's lack of appreciation for state borders embodies a suitable political ideal for an era of globalization.⁸ However, more research and thought needs to be invested in the topic to evaluate whether liberalism's individualistic character indeed allows people to break loose from their current communities in order to regroup within a more comprehensive global framework.

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⁸ There is a variety of articles worth mentioning that follow a related line of arguments. Jarrod Wiener argues that within the context of neoliberal regimes and globalization as a process of "de-bordering" economic and social relationships, domestic laws are evolving beyond their traditional scope limited by territorial bounds and become essential pillars of a transnational governance (Wiener 2001, 461-79). Philip G. Cerny, Georg Menz, and Susanne Soederberg suggest that domestic and international politics are not two separated realms but instead part of a web that entangles both the nations of the world and ordinary people. (Cerny et al. 2005, 1-30). The very process of globalization is internalized by the individual actions of people and the collective efforts of ethnic groups, classes, and interest groups alike (Ibid.). In a comparable way, they therefore assume that "growing interdependence and the transgressing of boundaries between local, domestic, transnational, and international playing fields increasingly enmesh individuals, classes, interest groups, ethnicities, nations, and institutions of all kinds in social, political, and economic processes ..." (Ibid., 2).

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