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Gated Practice: A Study of Liberalism, Religion, and the Academy

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Gated Practice: A Study of Liberalism, Religion, the Academy

Adelaide Gaughran-Bedell

Introduction

Liberal, the current colloquial container for US leftist politics, comes from the Latin root *liber*, meaning free. I have spent four years at Macalester College, a liberal institution. There have been times in my life where I thought I was a liberal, sometimes I wonder if I am liberal because of my proximity to liberalism—most of the people in my life call themselves liberal, the city I grew up in is liberal. And yet liberalism has often felt like utopian rhetoric ungrounded.

In *Liberalism: Keywords in American Cultural Studies*, Nikhil Pal Singh identifies two different types of liberalism. First, there is *market liberalism*, found in the works of Adam Smith. A system “in which the individual is imagined as *homo œconomicus*, a person whose conduct is naturally coordinated and regulated through competition and trade with others with minimal state interference.”¹ Market liberalism is most often referred to as capitalism. Then there is *political liberalism*, this is usually what we mean when we talk about liberalism: an ideology that defines the rights of individuals, and the relationship

between governance and these individual rights.² With this essay, I want to dive deeper into the roots, practices, and impacts of modern political liberalism.

Seventeenth century philosopher John Locke (often cited as the father of classical liberalism) claimed that in order to be free, each individual has a right to “life, liberty, and property.”³ This became the basis for the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution. John Stuart Mill, another classical liberal theorist, described liberalism as freedom *from* the arbitrary power of government to infringe on our liberties as opposed to “freedom to” meaning the positive freedom to do what we want. To clarify, when these men spoke of individual rights, they were speaking to White, male, property owners. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison both enslaved people. Locke defended slavery using the rhetoric of classical liberalism, saying “[i]f a victim of an assault is entitled to take his attacker's life in self-defense, ... he must also be entitled to take his attacker's liberty. Thus slavery is permissible as a form of penal servitude.”⁴ Masking itself in utopian rhetoric, liberalism has posed as a leader in the fight for

¹Singh, Nikhil Pal. "Liberalism." In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, Second Edition, edited by Burgett Bruce and Hendler Glenn, 153-58. NYU Press, 2014. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1287j69.43.

²Singh.

³Macpherson, C.B., 1962, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁴Locke, John, *Two Treatises of Government*, Peter Laslett, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988, 141.

equality. Yet at its core, liberalism has always been a force that upholds systematic structures of oppression.

Entry into 20th century American politics changed the ways we think about political liberalism. “Against the backdrop of the crisis of the Great Depression, the U.S. philosopher John Dewey (1935, 56) denominated “renascent liberalism” as those efforts of “organized society” to develop and use political administration to produce the actual and not merely the theoretical liberty of the national citizenry.”⁵ This time period marked a change in political liberalism. Socially, liberal politics were pushed to the left by Keynesian economics (New Deal, FDR presidency, Welfare, “a more extensive regime of market regulation, economic planning, and public spending against the old ‘orthodoxies’ of laissez-faire capitalism”⁶). The key difference is that modern liberalism defines freedom not only as “protection *from* or *against* the abusive powers of government” but also includes ‘positive’ freedoms as well,⁷ e.g. welfare, healthcare, education, etc. Even though, in theory, liberals began to support Keynesian economics, market

liberalism remained deeply rooted in laissez-faire capitalism.

If there is one principle that has been consistent within liberalism it is the value of the development of a thought system removed from religion - based in religious tolerance. Classical liberalism and modern liberalism both argue for the separation of Church and state. Yet, the founders of liberalism (modern and classic, in Europe and the US) were all Christian - they held Christian ideals as human ideals. From its beginnings, this separation was put in place in order to naturalize Christian ideals as universal and secular. The separation of Church and state led to a new era in which liberalism acted, under the guise of secularism, as a crypto-Christian⁸ moral belief system.

John Locke recommends an epistemological humility toward those things we cannot know, a practice that he believed would justify tolerance for a range of Christian doctrines... However, this epistemological humility did not extend to certain essentials, which included the moral norms and virtues intrinsically linked by God to public welfare (p. 69). Although these moral norms are in principle self-evident, [he believes] most humans are insufficiently intelligent to intuit

⁵Singh.

⁶Singh.

⁷ Alterman, Eric. “How Classical Liberalism Morphed Into New Deal Liberalism.” Center for American Progress, April 25, 2012. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/general/news/2012/04/26/11379/think-again-how-classical-liberalism-morphed-into-new-deal-liberalism/>.

⁸Skendi, Stavro. "Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under the Ottomans." *Slavic Review* 26, no. 2 (1967): 227-46. Accessed January 5, 2021. doi:10.2307/2492452.

them... In sum, for Locke the only way in which societies would be able to create the conditions for civil order or public welfare would be to habituate Christian moral norms into all citizens from childhood.⁹

In his essay *On the Origin of the 'Private Sphere': A Discourse Analysis of Religion and Politics from Luther to Locke*, Craig Martin comments on the rise of liberalism and the Enlightenment:

Contrary to the popular myth I am attempting to dismantle, I will characterize this shift [to secular thought] in Europe not as one from theocratic coercion to religious freedom but as a shift from one Christian discursive regime to a different Christian discursive regime, in which Christian norms and ideology continued to operate as authoritative for the state.¹⁰

Martin is asking us, in an age where humanity is worshipped over God, to look at liberal constructions of humanity. He makes the claim that they are simply reconstructions of White Christian ideals. With this essay, I have two main goals: First, to illustrate the moral

influence liberalism holds within secular circles by reconstructing it as a crypto-Christian¹¹ secular¹² religion. Second, to unpack the ways in which liberalism has replicated idealization of White Christianity within these circles.

For a working definition of liberalism within this essay, I look again to the definition outlined by Nikhil Pal Singh in his article, *Liberalism: Keywords in American Cultural Studies*. Although he too acknowledges that the ever-changing nature of liberalism makes it difficult to anchor within one political moment, he points to the continuities:

[T]he *Oxford English Dictionary*... defines liberalism as “respectful of individual rights and freedoms, favoring free trade and gradual political and social reform that tends toward individual freedom and democracy.” This definition, replete with its characteristic repetition (“freedoms,” “free,” “freedom”) and allusion to vague temporalities of progress (“gradual,” “tends toward”), encapsulates some of the key attributes and ambiguities of liberalism. Central to every version of

¹¹Skendi.

¹²A note on the language of this piece: for the sake of this analysis - I will be using the category of secular as it exists rhetorically. Things such as Congress, football games, public school curriculums, and liberalism will all be referred to as secular, not because I believe these things to be secular, but because they view themselves this way. They exist within secular rhetoric, have secular ideals, are in the secular sphere.

⁹Santos, Renan. (2012). Martin, Craig. *Masking Hegemony: A genealogy of liberalism, religion and the private sphere*. London: Equinox, 2010. 331-334. 10.22456/1982-8136.36532, 159.

¹⁰ Martin, Craig. (2009). *On the Origin of the 'Private Sphere': A Discourse Analysis of Religion and Politics from Luther to Locke*. *Temenos*. 45. 143-178. 10.33356/temenos.7899.

liberalism is an insistent, quasi-naturalistic link between human and market “freedom.” What remains ambiguous is the specific historical character of liberalism’s supposedly inherent “tendency” toward “democracy” and social “reform.”¹³

Roots I

Sophomore year of high school, my English teacher asked us to write an essay on our belief system. The essay was inspired by the 50s radio show hosted by Edward R. Murrow (the man after whom my high school was named). Murrow hosted thousands on his show - priests, doctors, atheists, nuns - anyone who had a couple of minutes to share their belief system, what guided them through life. The show quickly gained fame, hosting people whose names still have recognition: Helen Keller, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jackie Robinson, Harry Truman. Eighty-five newspapers put out a weekly column inspired by This I Believe. In 1952, a collection of This I believe essays sold 300,000 copies - the most popular new book of that year, second only to the Bible. In a small and dark English classroom, coffee stained pages in hand, I told my classmates that what I believed in was simple: nothing. My family has always been staunchly planted in our atheism. Religion left scattered bits and pieces in our lives, trinkets of tradition: a menorah, twenty Christmas trees, a visit to St.

Paul Cathedral in December, plastic frogs from Passover on my bedside table, Grandma’s matzo ball soup. And yet, six years ago, if you asked me to write an essay on what I believed, I would’ve told you, with the firm conviction of fifteen: that I believe there is no God, no higher power. I believed in an objective truth.

Roots II

I remember learning that Zara, my best friend in high school, believed in God. It was a bigger deal than it should have been, most of the people in my life at that time were atheist. I didn’t understand how someone could believe in God. Gods and ghosts and praying before planes. But when my aunt was diagnosed with Stage IV ovarian cancer our senior year, I asked Zara to pray for her, remembering something I read about how people who are religious survived cancer at higher rates. I had faith in the shadow of a memory, an article I read, a newspaper I trusted. God and ghosts.

Liberal Religion

There are two key frameworks that have been used in attempts to understand what makes something a religion: functionalist and substantive. These frameworks are outlined in Kevin Schillbrick’s article *What Isn’t Religion*, published in *The Journal of Religion* (July 2013). Schillbrick acknowledges that:

Since the very existence of religion depends on historically emergent

¹³Singh.

concepts and since the reality of religion is itself a social construction, what religion is depends upon social recognition... The criterion of a good definition is therefore its practical value... [T]he sociologist Peter [Berger stated] that “definitions cannot, by their very nature, be either ‘true’ or ‘false,’ but only more useful or less so.”¹⁴

My intent in outlining these frameworks is not to draw conclusions about what makes something a religion, only to illustrate the ways in which liberalism fits within these constructions.

A functionalist framework defines religion within a community. “[R]eligion is, for example, what unifies a people, integrates an individual’s conscious will and unconscious drives, or provides guidance in the quest for life’s meaning.”¹⁵ Functionalist theorists such as Émile Durkheim situate religiousness within the collective; religion is the thing that draws people together, gives individuals a collective drive, and creates social norms within communities.¹⁶ “On this account, the focus of a religion can be God, but it can also be one’s nation or a sense of team spirit—whatever generates the sentiments that integrate a collective.”¹⁷ Religion is about

uniting people into what Schilbrack calls a “moral community,” communities with shared rhetoric, shared culture, and shared beliefs of right and wrong. “Functionalist definitions are more flexible, and they permit one to study religions in whatever forms they take from one culture to another, and they permit one to recognize the emergence of new forms of religion.”¹⁸

Liberalism fits a functionalist definition of religion, a community of people with a shared rhetoric and belief system. The term “liberal bubble,” is thrown around by the Left and the Right to call out liberal isolation within their communities, echo-chambers of their own ideas. However, the ways in which people enter these communities is left unnamed. In organized religion, sacred practices that bring people into the community are named: Baptisms, Bat Mitzvahs, communion, pilgrimages, etc. The rules of engagement are clear and those who obey are welcome. By contrast, the process of entering the liberal community is intentionally ambiguous. Because of this, liberalism can claim complete accessibility. There is no initiation associated with liberalism, which must mean that there is no one barred from entering. Liberalism, however, is not a gateless practice. The term “liberal bubble,” is often used to describe liberal arts colleges. Students at Macalester often talk about the difference between the Mac bubble and the “real world.”

¹⁴ Schilbrack, Kevin. “What Isn’t Religion?” *The Journal of Religion* 93, no. 3 (2013): 292. <https://doi.org/10.1086/670276>.

¹⁵ Schilbrack, 293-4.

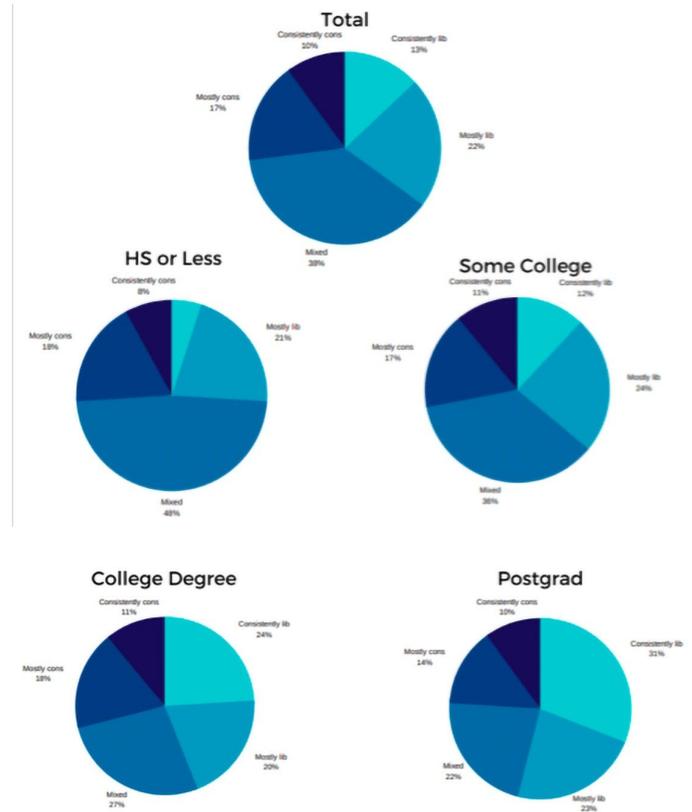
¹⁶ Schilbrack, 294.

¹⁷ Schilbrack, 294.

¹⁸ Schilbrack, 294.

Education and liberalism are inextricably tied. In a study from 2016,¹⁹Pew research found that the more educated people get, the more likely they are to identify themselves as liberal.

Education Level and Political Leanings: based on graph Adults with postgraduate experience most likely to have consistently liberal politics by Pew Research Center



A look at the political self-categorization of people with different levels of education - based on a survey of over 6,000 adults. Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The opinions expressed herein, including any implications for policy, are those of the author and not of Pew Research Center.

If liberalism is the religion, then the academy is its Church, top tier in the hierarchy of objectivity, producer of the American

¹⁹“Adults with Postgraduate Experience Most Likely to Have Consistently Liberal Political Values.” Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. Pew Research Center, April 22, 2016. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/04/26/a-wider-ideological-gap-between-more-and-less-educated-adults/4-22-2016_01/.

professional standard. Once we recognize the academy as a place of learned liberalism, the inaccessibility of modern liberalism and the race/class based hierarchies it creates become blindingly apparent.

According to the National Education Department, 33% of White Americans aged twenty-five and older have at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 19% of Black Americans and 16% of Hispanic Americans. According to the Georgetown University Center for Education and the Workforce, enrollment in the four hundred and sixty-eight best funded and most selective four-year colleges is seventy-five percent white. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center says that nearly seventy-two percent of White students finish a four-year degree in six years, compared to fifty-six percent of Hispanic students and forty-six percent of Black students. A Georgetown study found that nearly a third of Black and Hispanic students with a high school GPA of 3.5 or higher ended up at community colleges, compared to twenty-two percent of White students with the same grades.²⁰

Roots III

My family did not drift from religion, they were severed. Grandma was raised with the

²⁰Marcus, Jon. "Facts about Race and College Admission." The Hechinger Report, March 30, 2020. <https://hechingerreport.org/facts-about-race-and-college-admission/>.

tradition of religion but not God. Grandpa was raised with it all: Catholic Church and Sunday school and saying Grace. I've heard the stories - never from him - of red-knuckled reprimands, of rulers and wooden spoons, of harsh eyes, angry voices, of fathers and nuns. Priests turning up their nose when he asked why he should believe in God, marching out of the room.

The ties severed permanently when he married a Jew, I don't think he ever looked back.

This meant that my upbringing was not only atheist, but was scornful of religion, thinking that we could be wholly objective because we did not have any ties to religion.

It was not until I got to college that I realized my life had been shaped in so many ways by secular, but still subjective belief systems.

Academy

Liberalism does not fit as neatly within a substantive definition of religion - there is no higher power, or spiritual being within liberalism. Substantive theorists situate the religiousness of a community, practice, or act, within the object of worship. "The best-known and most popular substantive definition of religion is that of Edward Tylor and his followers, who identify beliefs and practices as religious when they involve spiritual beings. If a person believes that there exist spiritual beings— such as God, bodhisattvas, or

ancestral spirits—then, on this account, that would be a religious belief.²¹ There is less room under the umbrella of a substantive definition: sports games, secular weddings, birthday parties, traditions that may have their roots in religion, are not technically religious practices within this framework. There must be an otherworldly presence - something spiritual, superhuman, something to worship or to fear - in order for a practice to be religious.

The object of worship (as outlined by Singh) is the idea of freedom. “Central to every version of liberalism is an insistent, quasi-naturalistic link between human and market ‘freedom.’”²² The link between liberalism and the academy comes when we look at the ways in which this freedom is pursued - throughout the history of liberal politics it has been pursued through pursuit of reason. When drawing this conclusion, one has to question where both liberalism and the academy have gone wrong. If they seek a reasonable approach to freedom, why does the academy have such blatant exclusionary practices? I believe that the problem comes when hierarchies are placed on reason. This is done in many ways, but there are two prominent ones that I have seen at my time in a liberal arts institution.

I am an AMST major and an English minor. It took me two years to declare my major, right up to the deadline. I remember

²¹Schilbrack, 294

²²Singh.

the intense indecision of sophomore year, and when talking with friends about what major to choose, one of the main concerns was employability after college. Because Macalester costs so much money, there is this push to make a return on the investment. STEM is often seen as a more “reasonable” major, one that opens doors to success. Humanities majors are not as obviously connected to career tracks. Understandably, students within private education do not want to be eternally indebted to their institution and they trend towards majors that have a reputation of leading to success. We can see this trend toward STEM in the makeup of the 2020 graduating class. The largest majors of the 2020 class were Computer Science (46 students), Economics (55 students), Mathematics (61 students), and Biology (42 students).²³ In contrast, there were 7 graduating seniors in the American Studies major, 2 graduating seniors in the women’s gender and sexuality major, 2 in Latin American Studies, and 2 in Educational Studies. The price of a private education affects not only those excluded but those within. The cost of college influences students’ choice of study and creates hierarchies of power between the humanities and STEM.

When we see revolutionary areas of study (work that challenges social structures

²³“Majors of Graduates 2020.” *Macalester.edu*, www.macalester.edu/ir/wp-content/uploads/sites/156/Majors-of-Graduates-2020.pdf.

of power), they often arise within the humanities. American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Gender Studies, Native Studies, Feminist Theory, and Labor Studies being some examples. This is not to say that a STEM class, STEM scholars, or STEM students cannot act against structures of power. There has been monumental revolutionary work done within STEM. Think of Bob Moses's algebra project: a project founded on the belief that math literacy is a civil right. Moses uses algebra as a tool for community building and "connect[s] math to students' life experiences and everyday language."²⁴ Or the Black Panthers sickle cell screening program. "The Black Panther Party learned that sickle cell anemia was a neglected genetic disease—neglected because most of those affected were of African descent. Although it had been described in 1910, it attracted little public attention and even less funding. Treatment was extremely limited, as it is to this day. There was a rapid screening test based on a simple finger stick, but the test was not widely employed. The Black Panther Party rectified this government failure to act by setting up a national screening program."²⁵ We can see, further, the hierarchies within STEM and within medicine (both of which are often

²⁴Moscow, Jon. "The Algebra Project: Bob Moses on Math Literacy as a Civil Right - Part 1." *Ethical Schools*, 5 May 2020, ethicalschoools.org/2020/02/the-algebra-project-bob-moses-on-math-literacy-as-a-civil-right/.

²⁵Bassett, Mary T. "Beyond Berets: The Black Panthers as Health Activists." *American Journal of Public Health*, American Public Health Association, Oct. 2016, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5024403/.

marketed as objective practices), the value that is placed on some people's bodies over others.

Second, within the academy we see an inability of privilege to name itself. It is the paradox of labeling *The Bluest Eye* as Black literature and labeling *Moby Dick* literature; of calling Marxist economics communist theory and Adam Smith's theory of supply/demand math. This serves to neutralize the privileged position (Whiteness, capitalism) by constructing it as a norm, rather than a subjective analysis. In reality, all scholarly work (all work) is a subjective practice – based in identity, upbringing, exposure or lack of exposure to certain areas of study. In order to achieve understanding, all work must be grounded in the position of the author – what shaped the writing/theorizing. If we recognize that all work is subjective, then no scholars or areas of study can claim neutral objectivity.

Conclusion

The two key contributors to my current political values have been my upbringing and my time at Macalester. I took my first American Studies class (Black Public Intellectuals) the spring semester of my freshman year. We read works by Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Hortense Spillers, Cornel West, DuBois, and James Baldwin – authors and activists that would go on to shape my academic career and ever-changing political values over the next four years. It was Baldwin who said "the paradox of education is precisely this, that as one begins to become

conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not.”²⁶

We often think of revolution as only facing forward, yet the root of the word is ‘revolve’: move around a circle: go forwards and backwards at the same time. In some ways, education from *educatus* (to bring up children, train), may be more accurate if it were called *revolution*. From *revolve*: look back to move forward look forward to move back.

²⁶Baldwin, James. “A Talk to Teachers.” *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, vol. 107, no. 2, 2008, pp. 15–20., doi:10.1111/j.1744-7984.2008.00154.x.

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