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A Comparison Between Modern and Classical Liberalism: Is Modern Liberalism
Truly Liberal?

A few days ago, Pat Buchanan, a well-known conservative commentator, released an article expressing how America is not on the path to Socialism, but is already there. With the climate of car and bank bailouts, trillion dollar stimulus plans packed with perceived liberal-programs, one is left to examine the claim seriously. Conservatives and Republicans alike have echoed the critiques of Obama as a Socialist, and echoing Rahm Emmanuel's statement that 'we can't let this crises go to waste', one is left to wonder more. On what are President Obama's policies modeled after? Are they truly socialistic? Or, are they truly of the Liberal tradition, known currently as Modern Liberalism? If so, how 'liberal' is this modern liberalism, and does it show any influence from the Social-Democratic movement within and abroad? This paper seeks to examine the similarities and differences between classical and modern liberalism, as well as survey the possibility of Social-Democratic thought on Modern Liberalism, and thus examine how 'liberal' modern liberalism actually is.

Before we can proceed to analyze any potential socialist narratives of the Obama administration, and with it this New-Left movement in modern liberalism, we must first move into defining terms. We will first start defining several traits of Liberalism as a whole, as it settled the background for Modern Liberalism's arrival, and accommodate the majority of reference points Modern Liberals use to justify their system as essentially liberal. In our comparative analysis, we will first analyze key themes within these traditions, followed by key thinkers. To begin, we define Liberalism as a whole, as "a political philosophy based on belief in

progress, the essential goodness of the human race, and the autonomy of the individual and standing for the protection of political and civil liberties,” (Meriam-Webster). In more simplistic terms, Liberalism can be defined as the political ideology of preserving the individual’s liberty. This begs the question, what is liberty? Liberty is interchangeable with freedom, and it may be defined as “the ability to think or act as one wishes,” (Heywood 29). In other words, Liberalism attempts to first argue that the foundation of society is founded upon by a social-contract amongst individuals (*see Locke’s Second Treatise*), and that these individuals engage in said contract to best preserve their ability to think and act as they wish. John Locke, the father of this tradition, affirms this notion, arguing that “creatures of the same species and rank...should also be equal amongst another,” and that “every man has a property in his own person...nobody has any right to but himself,” (Locke 8, 19). Individuals are thus of prime importance (being all made in the image of God, and thus maintaining equality in design and self-ownership), both in political power (such as the establishment of a social contract and civil society), and economic pursuit (owning one’s own labor, and the freedom of pursuing the fruit of ones labor). Although such a brief attempt to summarize Liberalism is overtly not complete, we can see core themes that set the foundation for Liberalism: The Individual, Freedom, Reason, and Justice (Heywood 27). We have already established, given Locke’s argument of divine design and self-ownership that individuals are at the root of Liberalism. In addition, we have mentioned the purpose of individuals instituting government, via the social-contract, is to preserve their ability to pursue their aims and preserve their liberty. An additional foundation to this system is one’s access to reason. The individual’s ability to reason is central in engaging in society, making economic

decisions, and establishing government and society. “reason...teaches mankind who will but consult it that, being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions,” (Locke 9). One final liberal theme of importance is the concept of justice, or “a moral standard of fairness and impartiality,” (Heywood 32). Naturally, a combination of individualism, freedom, access to reason, and the pursuit of justice leads one to devise a concept of equality amongst individuals. It is from this idea of equality, as well as a morphed idea of justice, that Modern Liberalism begins its revision.

Having analyzed the central Liberal ideas of individualism, freedom, reason, justice and equality, we may now explore the political direction it led to, known as Classical Liberalism. Before analyzing Classical Liberalism’s defining themes, it would work to our advantage to summarize the initial aims of the liberal state (having hinted to it above. In *Political Ideologies*, Andrew Heywood properly sums these aims of the Liberal state as being first “being created *by* individuals and *for* individuals... Second, social contract theory portrays the state as an umpire or neutral referee in society,” (Heywood 37-38). The characteristic of the government is thus a passive role, or as Locke properly sums it as a ‘night watchman’. This implies a minimalist state, which both preserves one’s civil liberty (freedom from government), and protects one from the state of war (individual or foreign aggression, and governmental coercion). The Classical Liberals best wish to preserve this separation of government and the privacy and liberty of individual, both politically, socially, religiously, and economically. Society is generally atomistic, and made up of reason-driven individuals. Classical liberals believe, given the liberty of the individual, man is best designed to maximize his freedom to allow him maximized reason. This belief in the egoistical individual roots a system of economic and moral efficiency, arguing that since man is best enabled to handle his own economic

and moral choices, he should be protected in-as-much as he doesn't stumble over the boundaries of another man's liberties. In addition, Classical Liberals believe in the existence of natural rights, found in the form of negative rights. Jefferson explained these natural rights as seen in the *Declaration of Independence*, "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. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed," (Jefferson 3). Besides the utter importance of natural rights, and egoistical individual, Government is designed as a 'necessary evil'. The Classical Liberal ideal is then, the least government possible, the absolute protection of natural rights, and the freedom of egoistical individuals to pursue their aims without fear of attack or coercion from governments. This leads way to an acceptance of *laissez faire* economic principles, as advocated by Adam Smith and David Ricardo. The Liberal political model was extended to the economic realm, where reasonably, individuals should also be free to pursue economic aims. "Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way, and to bring both his industry and capital into competition with those of any other man or order of men," (Smith 466). The economic functions best when the government governs least. Due to man's access to reason, and egoistical individualism, Classical Liberalism sought to embrace and maximize the ideas of Adam Smith and free markets, arguing that the preservation of man's liberty naturally meant a preservation of his economic endeavor. It from the perceived failures of a supreme *laissez faire* approach (the Social Darwinism of the 19th

century), as well as a different understanding of justice and equality, that the schism between Classical and Modern Liberalism occurred.

Finally arrived at Modern Liberalism, we must recap our finding. In the end, Liberalism wishes to preserve the liberty of man's actions and desires; in-so-much that they do not trample the natural rights of his/her fellow man. Liberalism advocates the individual as the center of political power and society, as well as emphasizing man's reasonable nature, his God-given status of equal and free, and the justice of maximizing man's individual liberty. Classical Liberalism takes from these ideas, emphasizing a passive and minimal role for government, as well as focusing on a free market *laissez faire* styled economy. From this, Modern Liberalism is born in the wake of grievances against the perceived discriminative nature of *laissez faire* economies, and a different notion of justice. These are found in the arguments that Social Darwinism and *laissez faire* policies do not necessarily make one free, but rather produce inequalities. In other words, the policies made individual's access to pursuing their freedoms unequal, or as popularly proposed, the playing field in which individual access their freedoms is unfair. Maintaining the individual as primal importance, Modern Liberals thought that through using government, as seen in the 20th century in the endeavors of FDR's New Deal, Johnson's Great Society, and JFK's New Frontier, society could maximize an individual's freedom. The focus here was now individuality, or "self-fulfillment achieved through the realization through the realization of an individual's distinctive or unique identity or qualities," (Heywood 55). J.S. Mills, in *On Liberty*, attempted to emphasize the individuality and self-actualization of an individual, "the only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs," (Mill 22). This idea of self-actualization and individuality formed the bridge into modern liberalism: the goal is to provide the environment which best allows the individuality to experience freedom, or actualize themselves. From here, thinkers such as T. H. Green advocated a review of the notion of liberty. This led to the idea of positive freedom, which

were rules made not to protect an individual from government (negative rights), but to advance one's access to fulfilling and advancing their liberty. This came into fruition within the idea of FDR, whom working within the depression, advocated for a positive role for government. The idea was to utilize the government to 'level the playing field', by helping the disadvantaged poor. By implementing welfare-state policies, such as social security and welfare, it was argued that the government could pull individuals from the entangled restraints of poverty and social inequality that prevented them from actualizing their liberty. As justice was earlier mentioned, Government now took the responsibility of enacting social justice, or "a fair or justifiable distribution of wealth and rewards in society," (Heywood 33). In addition to redistributing wealth and providing social services that arguably 'leveled the playing field', the role of government in economics grew. In *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, economist J. M. Keynes argued that the government could take a positive role of by regulating demand via fiscal policy. Although an opposite to the ideals of classical liberalism, Keynesian economics further added to the ability of Modern Liberalism to 'level the playing field'. We thus see the following themes within Modern Liberalism: Individuality, positive freedom, equality, welfare state, and social justice.

With our exploration of Liberalism complete, we may now enter into an aspect of Socialism that may be presumed to be an opponent of liberalism. Breaking away from the revolution-minded goals of traditional socialism, as well as embracing the market system in the hopes of using it to prompt change, Social-Democracy decided that the ideas of Marx were mistaken. Capitalism had not brought about a desire of the working people to overthrow it, and instead proved incredibly complex and intricate. As such, Social democrats, having rejected proletariat-driven revolution, focused on bringing about progressive change through the usage of both Capitalism (a means for producing the wealth to provide the change), and democracy (the engine in which to peaceably bring about change). As Capitalism is understood to provide inequality and poverty, the focus of the Social-Democrat becomes gaining power democratically

to initiate “economic and social engineering,” (Heywood 130), whereas the government guides public policy to meet the needs of inequality, social justice, and equality. The fundamental value here is not the individual as much as it is equality. The government is the sovereign, in the sense that it takes the role of providing policies not in the goal of preserving individuality, but in establishing equality. It is argued that, economically, Social-Democrats are different than Modern-Liberals in that advocate an equality of outcome, whereas the Modern liberal advocates equality of opportunity. Whereas the Social-Democrat argues that society is ethically driven to distribute wealth and skills to create greater equality, Modern Liberalism asks to provide individuals with an environment that creates greater opportunity. Although the theoretical reasoning is arguably different, the methods are blaringly similar. With Social-Democrats arguing wealth distribution to maximize equality, and Modern Liberals arguing wealth distribution to provide equal opportunity, we must ask ourselves if the only difference is the intention. In addition, we find several other similarities. Three in particular are Social-Democracy’s affinity and usage of mixed economy (public and private ownership), economic management (such as Keynesianism), and the welfare state (as the force to produce reform and greater equality). We see all three of this in the very Presidency of Barack Obama: public-funded bailouts of companies and banks for the ‘public good’ (2008 TARP), massive trillion dollar spending packages to artificially increase demand and jobs via spending (2009 Stimulus Package), and a massive expansion in public services all aimed at enacting social justice and equality (including increased food stamps, social services, public education, and energy policies). In addition, talks are even underway regarding public bailouts of failed mortgages, a policy that be ushered no further as justified in the aims of greater equality. These are simply measures unheard of in Classical Liberalism. The usage of public funds, or the produced labor of sovereign individuals, to force about change within segments of society and the economy, via the vehicle of big government, is simply a very un-liberal approach. However, Modern Liberals may argue that it is all being done to expand liberty (as a completely failed economy means reduced opportunity to self-actualize,

and man is not free when he must worry of food and shelter), however the result is the same: Government must take from the merits of one, to provide for the absence of another. In both Social-Democracies, and Modern-Liberalism, although the intention and theory behind justification of the usage of a mixed economy, Keynesianism, and welfare state policies are different, they share the claim of social justice, and utilize incredibly similar measures. This all begs several questions: 1) Has Social-Democracy or Socialism influenced Modern-Liberalism, 2) Does Modern-Liberalism have more in common with Social-Democracies or Classical Liberalism, and 3) Is Modern-Liberalism's approach Liberal, in-as-much as it preserves man's liberty?

In analyzing whether or not Social-Democracy, or Socialism, has influenced Modern-Liberalism, we must first ask is there any past evidence of thinkers or activist whom may have infiltrated the movement with Social-democratic ideas. As such, having been hinted at the possibility of an influence in the form of ideals, we must first conduct a historical survey of any potential ideas and thinkers that may have influenced Modern Liberalism. If such ideas are found to exist, then we may assume there to be a possible relationship, and then move to our next question. Within this survey, we will start with the reaction to the *laissez faire* and the height of Classical Liberalism and Social Darwinism in the 19th century, as seen in the thinkers of Henry D. Lloyd and Edward Bellamy. After reviewing these two thinkers, we will move to analyze the Progressive Party movement that occurred at the turn of the century. After this, we will analyze the positive state and welfare 'New Deal' policies and ideas of FDR and Herby Croly. We will then conclude our survey with reviewing the 'New Left', and such participants as John F. Kennedy and the Students for a Democratic Society.

During the 19th century, it was arguably the height of Classical Liberalism. Rooting itself in the industrial churn of society, and the Social Darwinist movements of thinkers like William G. Sumner, Classical Liberalism was seen as the economic norm. However, several groups and thinkers began to arise in the late 19th century, arguing that Social Darwinist produced severe

inequality and poverty. One such expression of these ideas was found within Edward Bellamy's work, *Looking Backward* (1889). In this fictional novel regarding a man who appears in a communal and socialist America, year 2000, we find a "look at what American society could be in the year 2000 if cooperation and true social and economic equality were substituted for competition and what he considered the sham of political equality," (Dolbeare 287). Already here we see a Classic and Modern divide, between the Classic's desire to provide political economy (negative liberties), and the Modern's desire to promote social equality (social justice). *Looking Backward* provides a further socialized perspective of economic equality, as well as communal ownership, and the social notion of social-participation and progress. Bellamy's ideas may have done well to influence society, as his novel found record-setting sales amongst the public, and populated these socialist ideals in the form of hundreds of 'New Nationalist' clubs which were "hard at work organizing support for Bellamy's program to guarantee material welfare and human dignity for all citizens," (Dolbeare 287). In addition to Bellamy's popularized novel, we also find the ideas of Henry D. Lloyd. In his writing, Henry D. Lloyd focused on providing an alternative to liberal thinking, in the form of a social and economic philosophy that would "harmonize and subordinate large scale economic organization to the ideals of freedom, equality, and humanity in the great society," (Destler 138). It is interesting to note the 'Great Society' and 'New Deal' policies of F.D. Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson, and John F. Kennedy, and how they two spoke of great societies, and the ideals of freedom, equality, and humanity. However, this is merely a curious observation. Lloyd directed his efforts at social reform, and became a leading force that organized urban labor with the later Populist movement (another interesting note being Urban Labor's relations with Modern Liberalism). Lloyd perhaps personified this socialist perspective, when in his speech entitled "Revolution: The Evolution of Socialism," (1894), he spoke of "wealth, like government... [as] the product of co-operation of all, and, like government, must be the property of all its creators, not of a privilege few alone," (Dolbeare 305). The social reform movements of Bellamy and Lloyd were both popularized and influential in groups and

ideas that further lead Modern Liberalist (such as the Progressives, the Populists, and the concept of social justice).

From the inspiration and efforts of individuals like Bellamy and Lloyd came the arrival of progressivism (a reform policy from 1908-1916), and the Progressive Party. Working off a very populist notion, progressives sought the “restoration of popular control over government and the big corporations,” (Dolbeare 379-380). It is from the ashes of the progressive movement, and the positive state welfare policies of FDR, that Modern Liberalism mainly arose. With heavy inspiration, we can expect that the Progressive movement transferred the ideals of Bellamy and Lloyd. We perhaps find this best in the Progressive Party Platform of August 5th, 1912. Many of these issues found themselves as focal points in the arguments of who we consider Modern Liberals (safety standards, child labor laws, minimum wage standards, work weeks and eight hour work days, etc). When we think of liberals, many of these very issues come to mind, so the influence of Progressivism cannot be overlooked. Perhaps more important was the concept of Social and Industrial Justice, whereas the Party Platform describes mentions “the supreme duty of the Nation is the conservation of human resources through an enlightened measure of social and industrial justice,” (Dolbeare 381). These ideas later came into fruition in the form of the Progressive amendments (Articles XVI, XVII, XVIII, XIX, XX, and XXI). It is also worth mentioning that many of the amendments and the ideas of the progressives had their roots in socialist ideas, such as the idea of an income tax (which can be attributed to Marx).

In addition to the progressive movement, several changes in the understanding of a government’s role in the economy began to change. Evolving alongside an ever increasing Presidency and size of government was the Keynesian ideas of using government to affect the economy and produce jobs and demand. This attitude of big helpful government is first seen in the ideas of Herbert Croly, whom tries to synthesis Hamiltonianism to accomplish Madisonian ends. He argues for an increased size of government to control corporations, and serve the “causes of democracy, equal rights, and ultimate social harmony,” (Dolbeare 370). Again, we see

verbal imagery of this concept of social harmony and society, a look that calls forth more images of socialism than it does liberalism. Croly is incredibly important in that he marks “the shift in liberalism from an emphasis on laissez-faire to one on interventionist government,” (Dolbear 370). Increasingly, the government shapes society, instead of the individual, a very un-liberal concept. In *The Promise of American Life*, Croly argues that “the chance which the individual has to compete with his fellows and take a prize in the race is vitally affected by material conditions over which he has no control,” (Croly 181). For this reason, “democracy both recognizes the right of the individual to use his powers to the utmost, and encourage him to do so by offering a fair field,” (Croly 181). One must then ask, what is the agent to aid the lowly man? The “exceptional strength and intelligence,” of the government (Croly 181). Although hinting with levels of individualism (such as stating equal opportunity does not mean forced equal finish), Croly may be summed in saying that individuals cannot actualize their liberty and individualism, unless the government intervenes on their behalf. However, this is blaringly un-liberal, as it says that man’s individual reason is not enough to remove him from the lows of his poverty. Rather, the focus slips from the individual, to the paternalistic government, for the sake of the individual. Although this is seen in the point of equality and actualizing individuals, it is quite questionable whether the necessity of government, an agent that is not an individual, is liberal friendly. With Croly setting down the argument for an expanded role for government, Franklin D. Roosevelt makes it into a reality via his New Deal policies. This is the stage where Modern Liberalism, working from the influence of progressives and other above-mentioned thinkers, puts the theories into practice. F.D.R.’s numerous policies ushered forth the golden age of welfare, establishing Social Security and other welfare programs. It is within Roosevelt’s “An Economic Bill of Rights” (January 11th, 1944), that we find an accurate depiction of the views of Roosevelt when it came to spending and economic policy. “We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence...In our day these economic truths has become accepted as self-evident...The right to a useful and remunerative job in the industries or

shops or farm or mines of the nation; The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation...the right of every family to a decent home... The right to adequate medical care...The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age...The right to a good education. All these rights spell security,” (Roosevelt as quoted in Dolbeare, 419-420). Many of these very issues define Modern Liberalism today, as they still express these very concerns as fundamental rights (Obama has recently passed a 600+ billion down-payment for universal healthcare, which he claims to be fundamental security). Although not to call F.D.R. a Socialist, these very ideas were ones attributed to Marx, and have been the goals of socialism over its extended existence. With such a growth of government and programs, in the name of ‘security’, ‘equality’, and ‘social justice’, one asks where the liberalism within all of this is. The question is quite valid, as the aims reflect Social-Democrat goals more than the preservation of individual liberty from coercion. After all, some may consider wealth-distribution to be a very invasion of something very private and intimate, which Liberalism sought to protect: one’s labor, whether property, or the fruits there of.

One final group to observe, before moving to our two final questions, is what is considered the ‘New Left’. We find examples of these within the populist and youth-driven movements of John F. Kennedy, and the social revolution of the 60s and 70s. In John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address (1961), he spoke in a communal tone, speaking of man’s “struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself,” and asking society to band together “for the freedom of man,” (Kennedy as quoted in Dolbeare, 431-432). Kennedy also pursued the ‘New Frontier’, which contained Social-Democratic ideas such as a minimum wage. In addition to J.F.K. and his efforts in the New Left, we see an extremely Social-Democratic inspired movement within the Students for a Democratic Society, a group of white college students who aimed for a social change. The New Left, such as the SDS, sought to critique the racially divided society of America, and to bring about this change through popular participation. In *The Port Huron Statement* of 1962, the SDS argued that “the goal of man and

society should be human interdependence...” and this “...this kind of interdependence does not mean egoistic individualism,” (Dolbeare 443-444). Egoistic individual was an extremely Classical Liberal affair, and the SDS continued to hint at their social-democrat influence.

If we can define socialism as the effort “to help the masses of people see the nature of the world they live in and understand how collective action might reconstruct it into a more satisfyingly human society,” may we not attribute many of those very points of modern liberalism? (Dolbeare 323). Does Modern-Liberalism have more in common with Social-Democracies or Classical Liberalism? Having analyzed the various historical possibilities for Social-Democrat thought, as well as the similarities with Social-Democrat methods, this paper must admit that Modern Liberalism does have an extreme amount of similarities. Between the distribution of wealth to accomplish ‘social justice’ and equality, to the originally socialist ideas of public education and the income tax, we have discovered that through Social-Democratic thinkers and the progressive movement, Modern Liberalism has been influenced by Social-Democratic ideas of justice, equality, and welfare.

With this, we must conclude with our final question: Is Modern-Liberalism’s approach Liberal, in-as-much as it preserves man’s liberty? It is the opinion of this paper that its approach is not liberal. Working from the liberal tradition, and using Lockean principles as its Godfather figure, wealth distribution is hardly a liberal principle in the least. We must understand that, removing the labor of an individual for the absence of labor in another, is a completely un-liberal idea. If we can equate liberty with the pursuit of property, and justice with man’s ability to rightly have the fruit of his labor, how does wealth distribution accomplish this? This is working off the presupposition that property is tantamount to liberty, however I do not find it a stretch. I believe Locke and the founding fathers would find themselves in firm agreement. Perhaps the test is in this: does the efforts of Modern Liberals, by using the power of the state, growing its size, creating welfare policies, and seeking social justice, match more the mantra of Social-Democratic reform, or the core themes of liberty and individualism of Liberalism? I would argue the former.

The ideas mentioned above, as well as the possibilities of inspiration from Social-Democratic thinkers, fall far too near those very measures used by the Social Democrats. The Social Democrat may have the theory and rhetoric different than that of the Modern Liberal, but are the tools the same? Obama has recently pursued stimulus packages, massive liberal welfare expansions, universal healthcare, and 'change'. Oddly enough, this is the very same 'change' the SDS, the Progressives, Lloyd, and Bellamy sought to enact. Perhaps, given the staunch liberal tradition of America (as a nation founded upon Liberalism), Social-Democracy must use the guise of 'Modern Liberalism', or the rhetoric, to receive the trust of the people for reform. Socialism is overtly a stigma in U.S. society, so a term such as 'Modern Liberal' is much easier to swallow. However, it appears that the goals and the methods are one and the same: Change.

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