

Little government to big State: the tragicomedy of L. T. Hobhouse

I am going to talk about the history of two words: first about “ideology” and then, at more length, about “liberalism”. My principal guides will be two thinkers who were once influential and are now largely – and justly – ignored: for ideology Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836) and for liberalism Leonard Trelawny (known as L T) Hobhouse (1864-1929). The mediocrity of both writers is tedious, but also helpful, because it reveals their arguments’ fundamental problems.

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I start with Tracy. He is now rarely read, despite serious attention from Thomas Jefferson and Michel Foucault. However, he helped develop two still resonant claims: that human sciences can and should offer the same precision and objectivity as physical sciences, and that human societies can and should be planned and managed in a scientifically rational way. Tracy coined “ideology” to describe his science-infused approach to study and policy. The new word combined the “logos” of scientific reasoning with the “idea”, which Tracy understood as a sort of materialist version of platonic forms.

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Tracy identified Ideology as the rational, scientific successor to Christianity’s irrational doctrines. Like those doctrines, the new ideology could, should, and would be developed into “a solid and well-linked system”. Ideology would replace the Church’s reliance on unverifiable claims of God-given truth, with physical and objective science, so much so that Tracy called it a branch of zoology.

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For Tracy, this human zoology objectively demonstrates that happiness and freedom are “the same idea considered under two different aspects”, happiness being individual and liberty social. The description leads to a prescription which is also a prediction. Individual happiness and social freedom will increase as the human sciences provide more knowledge. To develop and spread this knowledge, Tracy and his fellow ideologues developed a curriculum for scientific public education.

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The educational project did not survive the turmoil of early nineteenth century France, but Tracy’s intellectual community was initially influential enough to garner sharp criticism from some distinguished contemporaries. Napoleon complained about the “dangerous dreamers” who preferred the worthless individual happiness of civil freedom to his dictatorial glory. Tracy’s Ideology, the emperor argued, claimed to present objective truth, but actually promoted erroneous opinions.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels widened and deepened Napoleon’s disdain. Their *German Ideology*, written in 1846 but not published until 1924, uses the word to

describe and insult the approach of rival German socialists. The ideology of the non-revolutionary socialists was unrealistically abstract, and these non-Communists were oblivious to the formative influence of their bourgeois economic position on their thinking. Of course, the young revolutionary authors did not consider that their own system of social analysis might also be an ideology.

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That oversight was corrected in Karl Mannheim's 1929 book. *Ideology and Utopia*. Influenced by the newly available *German Ideology*, the German sociologist wrote about "total ideologies": abstract systems that claim to explain the forces of history, and that attract numerous fervent supporters. He observed that a series of total ideologies, most notably Marxism, had been very popular from the French Revolution onwards.

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Why are people drawn to total ideologies? In my judgement, one reason is that these systems offer, as Tracy boasted, secular substitutes for traditional religions. Like religions, ideologies provide the intellectual satisfaction of supposedly rational, objective, and complete explanations of almost everything important. Also, ideologies inspire fervent, religious-style communities. Members often bitterly attack their enemies, especially former friends who have fallen away from the pure creed.

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Another appealing aspect of total ideologies is their promise of fairly clear paths of social amelioration. This positive and practical thinking is reminiscent of the early Christian heresy of Pelagianism. Pelagians claimed, roughly speaking, that God had given all people the ability to become perfect, if only they worked hard at self-improvement.

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Modern Pelagian-ideologues have similarly high, although God-free, expectations of what can be produced by disciplined dedication to some great and supposedly scientific principle. The principles vary: the progress of freedom, technocratic reason, historical necessity, survival of the fittest, the cult of the Leader or of the Party.

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Before leaving "ideology", I should point out that the claims of all Pelagian-ideologies, from Tracy onward, are far too good to be true. Their totalising and reductive systems of worldly ideas cannot capture either the greatness or the misery of the human condition.

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I should also point out the frequent cruelty of ideologues with political power. Their pure and fervent consciences excuse – or demand – persecution of their many presumed enemies.

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Now, liberalism. “The progress of freedom”, which began my list of ideological principles, is a common description of the liberal cause. Am I then saying that this freedom-loving liberalism is actually an ideology? I am. Of course, liberals will object to my description. They are, they say, non-judgmental, tolerant, pluralistic, and truly scientific – the opposite of ideological.

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I think that Hobhouse’s *Liberalism*, a long pamphlet published in 1911, can help clarify the situation. As I will explain, his own explanation of the essence of liberalism is clearly inadequate. However, his unspoken assumptions express liberalism’s consistent, reductive, and ideological core.

First, a little background. Hobhouse was a *Guardian* journalist, a labour union secretary, the first Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics, and a leading liberal thinker. He wrote *Liberalism* to justify and promote what he calls New Liberalism. The booklet’s goals are both broadly intellectual and narrowly political.

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Intellectually, Hobhouse wishes to abandon – or, as he thinks, to develop – the Old Liberalism of individual happiness, minimal governments, and maximal economic and social freedoms. New Liberalism does endorse the traditional liberal freedoms of speech and religion, but it is centred on governments, on extensive and intrusive governments. Hobhouse wants political authorities that impose high taxes on the rich, manage substantial welfare programmes for the poor, and have extensive control of the means of production.

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In British politics, *Liberalism* aims to move the Liberal Party from the Old to the New Liberalism. The party was traditionally the home of utilitarian philosophers, high-minded aristocrats, factory owners, and some of the expanding bourgeoisie. With Hobhouse’s proposed shift, it would also represent the much larger and increasingly enfranchised mass of low-paid British workers.

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American political “liberals” still identify with the new, government-centred liberalism, but the British political effort was a clear failure. The country’s working class overwhelmingly turned to the new Labour Party, which espoused the ideology of socialism. Socialism was one of Old Liberalism’s traditional enemies.

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The enmity was reasonable. Socialists endorsed many policies that Old Liberals despised, and vice versa. Hobhouse, however, saw no contradiction. He portrays the New Liberalism as a natural development of consistent liberal thinking.

Superficially, that portrayal is comical, as the following informal summary of *Liberalism* should make clear:

Old Liberals say that the less a government gets involved in people's lives, the better it serves them. We New Liberals haven't changed our minds about that, not one little bit. Also, liberals are still the sworn enemies of socialists. They think governments should tell people how to be free, whereas we want to let people be free. That's a big difference that hasn't changed, not one little bit.

The only thing that has changed is that, well, we've been thinking about the freedom that we want to give people, and you know what, a lot of people just aren't ready to receive it. They need help. Not bossy Socialist help, of course, but good liberal help from a good liberal government. As small a government as possible – of course, of course – but it does need to be a bit bigger, well, really, quite a bit bigger, than we liberals used to think.

So, you see, nothing has really changed. Sure, old liberals opposed laws that limited the freedom of workers to agree to toil for 80 hour weeks in dangerous factories while now we call for a large welfare state that regulates wages and working hours, a state that makes sure children learn about the importance of true freedom during their many years of compulsory schooling. But we're still defending the same thing, freedom. Without a doubt, at bottom the New Liberalism has exactly the same principles as the Old one. Without a doubt."

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Hobhouse expresses my "without a doubt" as the consistency at "the heart of liberalism". He explains that both the Old and New generations of liberals support equality, but the New ones see the need to ensure that all people have equal opportunities. All liberals support freedom, but the New ones are aware that freedom without "moral discipline" is not true freedom. If, argues Hobhouse, we think carefully about "the right of the individual", we realise that in an unequal society many individuals will not be able to exercise their rights. To use the vocabulary of G. W. F. Hegel (and Isaiah Berlin), Hobhouse sees positive New Liberal freedom as simply a further development of negative Old Liberal freedom.

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Hobhouse's own explanation of this doctrinal development is almost mystical. It comes "flowing from the necessities of continuous advance in those regions of truth and of ethics which constitute the matters of highest social concern." Thanks to this

“continuous advance”, liberals can now look towards a “possible ethical harmony”, a “social ideal” which “men might attain”, “partly by discipline, partly by the improvement of the conditions of life”.

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What Hobhouse calls “Liberal Socialism” will merely be “reorganising” the Old Liberal constraints on freedom. This reorganisation will avoid Socialist excesses or cruelty, because of the rule of law and the spread of liberal education. As with Tracy’s planned ideological society, schools would be vital teachers of freedom and promoters of happiness.

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For Old Liberals, Hobhouse’s claim of a single, consistent liberalism is insulting. New Liberals have all but abandoned their trust in the free choices of *individuals* about political, economic, and social matters. Rather, New Liberalism is built around the freedom of substantial and active *governments*. For the foreseeable future, only enlightened New Liberal governments can exercise the true freedom needed to make the most important political, economic, and social choices.

Hobhouse denies any insult. He says that his New Liberalism only endorses a “State coercion” that is limited, beneficent, and freedom-promoting. Of course, “a man may for his own sake...be compelled to do what we think right...”. However, Hobhouse is confident that the New Liberal “we” will only compel a few people, those clearly “in need of care”. He lists “the idiot, the imbecile, the feeble-minded or the drunkard”.

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All Old Liberals will mock this promise of restraint. Some Old Liberals, those who want morally non-judgmental governments that support morally pluralist societies, will see a grim comedy. Hobhouse does not really notice his moral ambitions for New Liberal governments, but they are significant. Most obviously, the need to eliminate the essential unfreedom of inequality leads Hobhouse to condemn all political, economic, and social inequalities as unjust unless proven otherwise. Since in practice inequalities are rampant, these presumed moral wrongs are extensive. Who is to set the moral standards for merited and unmerited inequalities? Who is to enforce these moral standards? New Liberal governments.

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For today’s Old Liberals, often known as libertarians, Hobhouse was a foolish optimist. Over the century since *Liberalism* appeared, governments that self-identify as liberal have often imposed significant limits on Old Liberal freedoms. Indeed, what Hegel, an indirect influence on Hobhouse, called the State has increasingly crushed, co-opted, or taken control of economies, education, healthcare, and family structures. Moral judgements guide their policies.

Hobhouse was equally and sometimes tragically wrong to think that “there is no intrinsic and inevitable conflict between liberty and compulsion”, as least for Old Liberal liberty. In the welfare systems of today’s liberal democracies, governments force almost everyone, not just the feeble few, to accept their liberty-limiting and morally imperious care. The list of people subject to more specific State compulsion now includes anyone declared to be excessively religious, homophobic, racist, sexist, or, as recent anti-viral restrictions revealed, unhealthy.

The social policies of most autocratic States largely follow the New Liberal template. These governments have, or aspire to have, similarly extensive and bossy systems of care, and definitely do have much longer lists of people in need of compulsion: for example those with the wrong religion or who lack sufficient Party loyalty.

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Old Liberals are not wrong to call New Liberals heretics, but they do not see the whole picture. Hobhouse has the right intellectual instincts about the unity of liberalism. However, the best explanation for the consistency of the Old and the New varieties is ideological, not mystical or developmental. I see five unifying characteristics.

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First, both liberalisms are Pelagian in their approach to freedom. Liberals, old and new, are confident that all people can become truly free, once the right sort of education teaches them how to make the right sort of individual efforts.

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Second, the consistent liberal political vision is resolutely non-religious and non-transcendental. Liberals see no substantial public, let alone political, role for creeds, clergy, or any sort of established or transcendental truths and virtues. As Hobhouse recognised, the many liberals who endorse the quasi-transcendental glories of nationalism are inconsistent – one could say ideologically impure.

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Third, liberals are all social egalitarians. Old Liberals firmly do not want to enforce equality, while New ones theoretically do, but both groups assume that in any just society, every person has equal freedoms, rights, and opportunities.

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Fourth, all liberals are convinced that they are clearly right. This conviction is ideological. Liberals always see their policies and prejudices as rational and their worldview as complete. To quote the Old Liberal American Declaration of Independence, their key ideas are “self-evident”.

This conviction is undeserved. That is a matter of judgement, of course. However, Hobhouse’s negative judgement of Old Liberalism that it unjustly ignores the social

injustice of ignorance and poverty, is persuasive. So is the Old Liberal judgement that New Liberal States will eventually use their freedom unjustly, to compel (or nudge) everyone and to coerce both real and imagined opponents.

The common theme in these cross-condemnations is something that no Pelagian fully recognises: the unavoidable effects of the fear, greed, and other moral failings of human nature on even the best-designed governments and even the best-intentioned individuals. Neither rulers, whether minimal or maximal, nor ruled, however well-educated, can ever be sufficiently beneficent to create a free liberal society.

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The fifth liberal consistency is the denigration or rejection of “intermediate organisations”, that is of everything that is not either the expansive State or a solitary individual. These organisations include hereditary social hierarchies, churches, universities, businesses, and families. For both Old and New Liberals, they are arbitrary and changeable things, entirely subservient to the preferences of their individual members and totally subject to the State’s ultimate control.

It is this shared desire to flatten society, not Hobhouse’s mystical “advance in...truth and of ethics”, that best explains why so many Old Liberals could become New ones. The choice of which side of the duality controls the liberal regime – free adult individuals or a free State – is secondary to the continuing liberal agenda of disempowering inherently unfree intermediate organisations.

In 1935, the American philosopher John Dewey explained that the liberal “conception of liberty is always relative to forces that at a given time and place are increasingly felt to be oppressive”. In practices, those oppressive forces are always traditions embodied in non-state organisations.

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Sadly for liberals, sound societies, good governments, and virtuous individuals are necessarily built with, on, and around these despised forces and organisations. The fully liberal individual, who is free from all non-State authorities and loyalties, easily slips into a demoralising isolation. The free governments of fully liberal States, unrestrained by and transcendental or traditional moral authority, easily fall into immoral persecution of anyone judged unworthy of freedom.

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In an anti-liberal spirit, I should note that intermediate organisations generally rely on some type of inequality. Children look up to parents and elders, employees to bosses, common soldiers to officers, students to teachers, worshippers to priests and to God. In St Paul’s Christian marriage, husband and wife look up to each other. These hierarchical relations are always flawed, but not sufficiently flawed to justify the consistent liberal desire to abolish them, one after another.

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Indeed, I believe that the liberal effort to dismantle or disempower all hierarchical non-State organisations stands reality on its head. Old Liberalism's dream of effective social equality without a harsh government to enforce it is a foolish fantasy. New Liberalism's equally ideological dream of kindly, government-enforced social equality is at least as fantastical, but much more dangerous.

The 20th century literary critic Lionel Trilling gives a psychological description of what has happened to Hobhouse's dreams. "[W]hen once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, [we] go on and make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion."