



“Liberals” and “Conservatives” - The Money of Fools, Part III

Most liberals are not liberal and most conservatives are not conservative. We might be better off just calling them X and Y, instead of imagining that we are really describing their philosophies. Moreover, like most confusion, it has consequences.

The late liberal Professor Tony Judt of New York University gave this definition of liberals: “A liberal is someone who opposes interference in the affairs of others: who is tolerant of dissenting attitudes and unconventional behavior.”

According to Professor Judt, liberals favor “keeping other people out of our lives, leaving individuals the maximum space in which to live and flourish as they choose.”



That is certainly in keeping with the dictionary definition of liberalism and with most contemporary liberals’ vision of themselves. But, if we follow Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes’ admonition to “think things, not words” and look beyond the label to the tangible realities of the world, we find almost the exact opposite of what the word “liberal” is supposed to mean.

Most of us would probably regard the current administration in Washington — both the White House and the Congress — as “liberal,” even though the word “progressive” may be more in vogue.

Does the sweeping legislation empowering federal officials to tell doctors, patients, hospitals, and insurance companies what to do, when it comes to medical care, sound like leaving individuals the maximum space to live their lives as they choose?

Communities that have had overwhelmingly liberal elected officials for decades abound in nanny state regulations, micro-managing everything from home-building to garbage collection. San Francisco is a classic example. Among its innumerable micro-managing laws is one recently passed requiring that gas stations must remove the little levers that allow motorists to pump gas into their cars without having to hold the nozzle.

Liberals are usually willing to let people violate the traditional standards of the larger society but crack down on those who dare to violate liberals’ own notions and fetishes.

Our academic institutions are overwhelmingly dominated by liberals. They feature speech codes that punish politically incorrect statements. Even to apply to many colleges and universities, students must have spent time as “volunteers” for activities arbitrarily defined by admissions committees as “community service.”

As for conservatism, it has no specific political meaning, because everything depends on what you are trying to conserve. In the last days of the Soviet Union, those who were trying to maintain the



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Communist system were widely — and correctly — described as “conservatives,” though they had nothing in common with such conservatives as William F. Buckley or Milton Friedman.

Professor Friedman for years fought a losing battle against being labeled a conservative. He considered himself a liberal in the original sense of the word and wrote a book titled *The Tyranny of the Status Quo*. Friedman proposed radical changes in things ranging from the public schools to the Federal Reserve System.

But he is remembered today as one of the great conservatives of our time. Great, yes. But conservative? It depends on what you mean by conservative.

Conservatism, in its original meaning, would require preserving the welfare state and widespread government intervention in the economy. Neither Milton Friedman nor most of the other people designated as conservatives today want that.

Liberals often flatter themselves with having the generosity that the word implies. Many of them might be shocked to discover that Ronald Reagan donated a higher percentage of his income to charity than either Ted Kennedy or Franklin D. Roosevelt. Nor was this unusual. Conservatives in general donate more of their income and their time to charitable endeavors and donate far more blood.

We are probably stuck with having to use words like liberal and conservative. But we can at least recognize them as nothing more than political flags of convenience. We need not accept these words literally, as the money of fools.

This is part 3 of a multi-part series.

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