

Political Ideology: Liberalism

Liberalism is one of the most influential political ideologies of the modern world. At its heart lies the **belief in individual freedom, equal rights, rule of law, and limited government**. Emerging from the intellectual ferment of the Enlightenment, liberalism challenged pre-modern hierarchies and sought to **reorganise political life around the dignity and autonomy** of individuals. Over centuries, it has evolved and diversified, shaping democratic constitutions, economic systems, and international orders across the globe.

Origin of Liberalism

The origins of liberalism do not lie in a single philosophical treatise or revolutionary moment. Rather, liberalism emerged gradually through a long **historical struggle against arbitrary power, absolute authority, and hierarchical privilege**. The first decisive rupture in this journey occurred in medieval England, during a **bitter confrontation between the barons and King John** in the early thirteenth century.

The Feud Between Barons and King John

In early medieval Europe, political authority was personalised. **Kings ruled by divine sanction**, and law was often indistinguishable from royal will. In England, King John's reign marked the intensification of this absolutist tendency. **Heavy taxation, arbitrary confiscation of property, military failures, and disregard for feudal customs alienated the landed nobility**. What began as a feud over privileges soon evolved into a fundamental question:

Is the king above the law, or subject to it?

The barons' rebellion forced King John to accept a written charter called Magna Carta in 1215 that placed explicit limits on royal authority. This

was not a democratic document in the modern sense, but it introduced a revolutionary idea: political power must be constrained by law, and even the sovereign is accountable. The charter affirmed that **property could not be seized without due process, that taxes required consent**, and that justice could not be sold or denied.

This moment is critical for liberalism because it **introduced three foundational principles**: *Rule of law over personal rule, Protection of property & Consent as the basis of legitimate authority*

Expansion of Parliamentary Authority

Over the following centuries, the English political system evolved through conflict rather than design. Monarchs repeatedly attempted to bypass customary restraints, while **Parliament increasingly asserted its role as a representative body**. The key liberal idea that emerged during this phase was that **taxation and legislation require representation**.

By the seventeenth century, this tension exploded into open confrontation. The **English Civil War** was not merely a dynastic conflict—it was an **ideological struggle over sovereignty**.

The execution of a reigning monarch shattered the belief that kings ruled by divine right alone. Even though monarchy was later restored, it returned as a constitutional institution, not an absolute one.

The settlement that followed established enduring liberal principles:

The supremacy of Parliament, Regular sessions and elections, Judicial independence & Protection against arbitrary arrest

This period firmly embedded the belief that authority must be accountable, a cornerstone of liberal political thought.

From Medieval Society to the Enlightenment

Social Life in Medieval Society

Medieval society, roughly spanning from the **5th to the 15th century**, was organised around rigid hierarchy and collective identity. Individuals derived their social position not from personal achievement but from **birth, land ownership, and religious status**. Society was commonly divided into three estates: those who **prayed (clergy)**, those who **fought (nobility)**, and those who **worked (peasants)**.

Religion permeated every aspect of life. **The Church** was not merely a spiritual institution but a **central social authority regulating marriage, education, morality, and even scientific inquiry**. Literacy was largely confined to clergy, and knowledge was preserved through monasteries. Life was governed by custom and tradition rather than written law or rational debate.

Social mobility was extremely limited. A peasant born into serfdom was tied to the land and to the lord who owned it. Obligations such as unpaid labour, rents in kind, and compulsory service defined daily existence. Community life revolved around the manor, church festivals, and agricultural cycles.

Political Life in Medieval Society

Politically, medieval Europe **lacked the concept of a sovereign state** as understood today. Authority was fragmented and personalised. Kings ruled, but their power was constrained by local lords, religious authorities, and customary practices. **Political loyalty was owed not to an abstract state but to a person**.

Law was local, customary, and often unwritten. Justice varied from one region to another. There was no uniform legal system, standing army, or bureaucratic administration. **Political power rested on land ownership** and military capacity rather than institutional legitimacy.

The Church functioned as a parallel political authority. Popes could challenge kings, excommunicate rulers, and influence succession. This dual authority of Church and Crown often resulted in conflict over supremacy, shaping early debates on the limits of political power.

Economic Life in Medieval Society

The medieval economy was **overwhelmingly agrarian**. Wealth was measured in land, not money. **The manorial system formed the economic backbone**, where production was primarily for subsistence rather than markets. Trade existed but was limited and localised.

Technological progress was slow. Agricultural tools were rudimentary, and **productivity was low. Famines were frequent**, most notably during the Great Famine of the early 14th century. **The Black Death** in the mid-14th century dramatically reduced population, altering labour relations and weakening feudal bonds.

The money economy was underdeveloped, and banking remained rudimentary until the late medieval period. Economic life was governed by tradition, not innovation.

The Manorial System

The manorial system was the basic way in which rural life was organised in medieval Europe. It was not just an economic arrangement but a complete social and political world in itself. For most people living during the Middle Ages, life did not revolve around kings, cities, or distant wars—**it revolved around the manor**.

A manor was a large estate owned by a lord. It included the lord's house or castle, agricultural land, pastures, forests, a church, and the huts of peasants. Almost everything a person needed for daily life—food,

shelter, work, worship, and justice—was found within this small area. Because travel and trade were limited, the manor aimed to be self-sufficient.

At the centre of the manor stood the lord, who owned the land. He might be a noble or a knight and often owed military service to a higher lord or king. The lord did not farm the land himself. **Instead, he allowed peasants to use portions of his land in return for labour and rent.** In theory, the lord also had duties: he was expected to protect the manor from attacks and maintain order.

The land of the manor was divided into **two main parts**. One part was the **demesne, which belonged directly to the lord.** Crops grown on this land were used to support the lord's household. **The other part was divided into small strips and given to peasants to cultivate for their own survival.**

Most peasants were serfs. A serf was not a slave, but neither was he free. He was legally bound to the land and could not leave the manor without the lord's permission. In return for using land, **serfs had to perform unpaid labour on the lord's fields for several days each week.** They also paid rent in the form of crops, livestock, or services.

Over time, the manorial system began to weaken. **Population decline due to plagues reduced the labour force, giving peasants greater bargaining power.** Expansion of trade, growth of towns, and use of money rents slowly undermined the system. By the late medieval period, many serfs were becoming free tenants, and the rigid structure of the manor started to dissolve.

The Feudal System

The feudal system was the main way political power, land, and social relationships were organised in medieval Europe. It developed in a time when there was **no strong central government** and people lived in constant fear of

invasion, war, and lawlessness. In such conditions, **protection became more important than freedom**, and land became the key source of power.

At the top of the feudal system stood the king. In theory, the king owned all the land in the kingdom. In practice, his authority was limited. **He did not have a permanent army, a strong bureaucracy**, or the means to control distant territories directly. **To rule, he depended on powerful nobles.**

The king granted large portions of land, called fiefs, to nobles such as dukes and counts. In return, these nobles promised loyalty and military service. This promise was not just verbal; it was **formalised through a ceremony of homage, where the noble swore allegiance to the king.** This relationship was personal, not institutional.

These nobles became lords of their lands. They controlled justice, collected dues, and commanded soldiers within their territories. Just as the king depended on them, **they in turn depended on vassals**, usually knights, to defend their land. Knights received smaller pieces of land in exchange for fighting when called upon.

At the bottom of this structure were the peasants and serfs. They worked the land but owned none of it. **Serfs were tied to the land** and could not leave without permission. Their lives were shaped by labour obligations, rents, and customary duties. In exchange, they received protection and the right to cultivate land for survival.

The Church played a stabilising role in feudal society. It taught that social hierarchy was part of God's plan. Kings were encouraged to rule justly, nobles to protect the weak, and peasants to obey their lords. This religious justification helped maintain the system for centuries.

Treaty of Westphalia (1648)

The Treaty of Westphalia, signed in 1648, marked a turning point in European and world history. It **brought an end to the Thirty Years' War**, one of the most destructive conflicts Europe had ever witnessed. The Thirty Years' War began in **1618 in the Holy Roman Empire**.

What started as a **religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants** soon expanded into a complex struggle **involving major European powers**. Entire regions were devastated. Cities were destroyed, populations declined sharply due to war, famine, and disease, and normal economic life collapsed. By **the 1640s, it became clear that no side could achieve total victory**.

One of the most important ideas that emerged from the treaty was **the principle of state sovereignty**. Rulers were recognised as having full authority over their territories without interference from external powers. This meant that political power was now tied to **defined territorial boundaries**.

The treaty also reinforced the principle that **each ruler could decide the religion of his state**. Religion was gradually pushed out of international politics and confined more to domestic life.

Another major outcome was the **weakening of supranational authorities**. The Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor lost much of their influence over European politics. **Power shifted decisively toward independent states** such as France, Sweden, and other emerging territorial powers.

The Treaty of Westphalia also laid the groundwork for a legal and diplomatic system among states. **States were treated as formally equal in law**, regardless of their size or strength.

Renaissance and Enlightenment

The Renaissance: Rebirth of Learning

The Renaissance **began in Italy around the 14th century** and gradually spread across Europe. The word “**Renaissance**” means **rebirth**, and it signified the **rediscovery of classical Greek and Roman knowledge** that had been neglected during the Middle Ages.

Medieval society placed God and the Church at the centre of life. The Renaissance did not reject religion, but it **shifted attention toward human beings**. This new outlook, known as **humanism**, celebrated human potential, creativity, and reason.

The Renaissance also **encouraged critical thinking**. Scholars began **questioning traditional interpretations of texts**. Ancient works were read in original languages, leading to more independent judgment. Education expanded beyond monasteries to universities and private academies.

A major development during this period was the **spread of printing in the 15th century**, which made books cheaper and knowledge more accessible. Ideas could now travel faster and reach a wider audience, slowly **breaking the monopoly of the Church over learning**.

The Enlightenment: Age of Reason

The Enlightenment followed the Renaissance and reached its peak in the 17th and 18th centuries. If the Renaissance rediscovered classical learning, the Enlightenment **applied reason to society and politics**. Thinkers believed that **human reason could solve social problems** just as it had explained natural phenomena.

One of the most powerful ideas of the Enlightenment was that **individuals possess natural rights**. These rights were not gifts from rulers but inherent in human nature. Governments existed to protect these rights, not to control people arbitrarily.

Another central idea was the social contract. Thinkers argued that political authority arises from an **agreement among individuals to create a government for mutual benefit.** This challenged the doctrine of divine right and justified resistance to unjust rulers.

The Enlightenment also **promoted the idea of limited government.** Concentration of power was seen as dangerous. Instead, political power should be divided among different institutions to prevent tyranny. This idea deeply influenced modern constitutions.

Religious tolerance became a major Enlightenment theme. Thinkers argued that faith should be a matter of personal conscience, not state enforcement. This helped reduce religious conflict and supported freedom of belief.

Economically, Enlightenment thinking **encouraged freedom of trade and production.** Interference by the state in markets was criticised as inefficient and harmful. This laid the groundwork for industrialisation and capitalism.

John Locke and the Philosophy of Liberalism

The political upheavals of seventeenth-century England demanded theoretical justification. This was provided most systematically by John Locke, whose ideas form the philosophical bedrock of liberalism.

Locke rejected the idea that political authority originates from divine will. Instead, he argued that **individuals are born with natural rights—life, liberty, and property**—which exist prior to the state. The state is created through a social contract to protect these rights. When it fails to do so, citizens possess the moral right to resist and replace it.

This argument transformed politics in three profound ways:

Individuals, not rulers, became the source of legitimacy

Rights were conceived as inherent, not granted

Government became conditional and revocable

Locke's emphasis on property was especially influential. Property was not merely material wealth; it symbolised personal autonomy and security. **The protection of property became synonymous with the protection of liberty itself.**

Classical Liberalism and Modern Liberalism

Classical Liberalism

Classical liberalism emerged between the 17th and mid-19th centuries, during the **decline of feudalism and the rise of capitalist markets**. It developed as a response to absolute monarchy, feudal privilege, and mercantilist control.

Classical liberals believed that the **state is the main threat to freedom**.

Therefore, its **powers must be strictly limited**. Freedom, in this view, meant absence of interference, especially from government.

John Locke is the foundational thinker of classical liberalism. He argued that individuals possess natural rights to **life, liberty, and property**, and that the **purpose of government is to protect these rights**. When governments overstep these limits, people have the right to resist.

In economic life, classical liberalism defended **free markets and private property**. Adam Smith argued that when individuals pursue their own interests in a competitive market, society benefits as a whole. State intervention was seen as inefficient and harmful.

Historically, classical liberalism shaped the American Revolution, the early constitutional system of the United States, and nineteenth-century British political reforms. **Expansion of free trade, abolition of feudal restrictions, and growth of parliamentary government reflected classical liberal ideals.**

Limits of Classical Liberalism

By the mid-19th century, industrial capitalism had created new forms of inequality. Workers were legally free but economically dependent. **Long working hours, child labour, urban poverty, and poor living conditions** exposed the limits of classical liberal ideas.

Critics argued that **formal freedom without social support was hollow**. A person free in law but starving in reality was not truly free. These conditions forced liberal thinkers to rethink their assumptions.

Modern Liberalism

Modern liberalism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a response to industrial society. It did not reject liberty, but redefined it.

Thinkers like T. H. Green argued that freedom is not just freedom from interference, **but the ability to act meaningfully**. Poverty, ignorance, and ill-health restrict freedom just as much as state control.

Modern liberals accepted a positive role for the state. The state was no longer seen only as a threat, but as an **instrument to expand real freedom**. Public education, labour laws, healthcare, and social security were viewed as enabling individual development.

This shift was reflected in political practice. **Welfare reforms, progressive taxation, and regulation of working conditions** became part of liberal governance. The state began to intervene to correct market failures and protect vulnerable groups.

Key Differences

Classical liberalism views the state as a necessary evil, while modern liberalism sees it as a potential enabler of freedom. Classical liberals emphasise negative liberty, whereas modern liberals focus on positive liberty.

Economically, classical liberalism **trusts markets almost completely**, while modern liberalism accepts **regulation and redistribution** to ensure fair opportunity.

Socially, classical liberalism prioritises individual responsibility, whereas modern liberalism recognises structural constraints on choice.

Continuities Between the Two

Despite their differences, both forms of liberalism share core commitments: **respect for individual dignity, rule of law, constitutional limits on power, and protection of basic rights**. Modern liberalism builds upon, rather than rejects, the foundations laid by classical liberalism.

Core Principles of Liberalism

1. Individual Liberty

At the heart of liberalism lies the belief that the **individual is the basic unit of moral and political life**. Liberalism begins with the assumption that **human beings are capable of reason, choice, and self-direction**. Therefore, they should be free to decide how to live their lives, so long as they do not harm others.

John Stuart Mill gave the clearest expression to this principle in On Liberty, where he defended freedom of thought, expression, and lifestyle.

He warned that liberty can be threatened not only by governments but also by social pressure and public opinion. His harm principle established that coercion is justified only to prevent harm to others, not to enforce morality.

Historically, this idea shaped struggles for civil liberties across societies. Freedom of speech became central to democratic movements in Europe and North

America. **In the twentieth century, this principle expanded to include personal freedoms related to privacy, belief, and identity.**

2. Natural Rights and Human Rights

Liberalism holds that individuals possess **certain rights simply by virtue of being human.** These rights are not gifts from rulers or governments; they exist prior to the state and place moral limits on political authority.

This principle was articulated powerfully by **John Locke, who argued that individuals have natural rights to life, liberty, and property.**

Government, in this view, is created to protect these rights. If it fails to do so, it loses legitimacy.

The language of rights was **later universalised** beyond property-owning men. Over time, liberal societies **expanded rights to religious minorities, workers, women, and formerly enslaved people.** The abolition of slavery, extension of voting rights, and recognition of gender equality all drew upon the liberal idea that individuals possess inherent moral worth.

3. Consent and Legitimacy

A central liberal claim is that political power is **legitimate only when it is based on consent.** Authority does not flow from divine will, tradition, or force, but from the agreement of free individuals.

This idea developed as a direct **challenge to the doctrine of divine right monarchy.** Locke argued that rulers are trustees of power, not owners of it. Political obedience is conditional, not absolute.

4. Rule of Law and Equality Before Law

Liberalism insists that **law must rule,** not individuals. Power should be exercised according to known, general, and stable rules, rather than personal discretion.

In medieval societies, law was often arbitrary and uneven. Liberalism emerged alongside **demands for predictable legal systems** that treated individuals equally. This principle developed through struggles against arbitrary taxation, imprisonment, and confiscation.

Equality before law became a defining feature of liberal states. **Titles, birth privileges, and personal status were gradually replaced by legal citizenship.** Written constitutions, independent courts, and due process safeguards institutionalised this idea.

5. Limited Government and Separation of Powers

Liberalism views power as necessary but dangerous. Therefore, it argues that **government must be limited** in scope and **divided in structure.**

Early liberals feared concentration of authority, whether in monarchs or majorities. Political thinkers argued that **unchecked power leads to tyranny,** even when exercised in the name of the people.

The idea of **separating powers among different institutions—legislative, executive, and judicial**—emerged as a safeguard against abuse. Checks and balances were designed to ensure that no single authority could dominate political life.

6. Pluralism

Liberalism recognises that societies are morally and culturally diverse.

Individuals hold different beliefs, values, and ways of life. Rather than imposing uniformity, **liberalism promotes tolerance and peaceful coexistence.**

This principle emerged from the **exhaustion caused by religious wars in Europe.** The idea that political order requires acceptance of difference gradually replaced attempts to enforce religious conformity.

In modern liberal thought, pluralism extends **beyond religion to include cultural, linguistic, ideological, and lifestyle differences**. Thinkers like Isaiah Berlin argued that human values are many and often conflicting. No single moral vision can claim universal authority.

7. Freedom of Thought & Expression

Liberalism places great value on intellectual freedom. The ability to think, question, criticise, and express ideas is seen as essential for both individual growth and social progress.

This principle developed through struggles against censorship, religious dogma, and state control of knowledge. **Liberal thinkers argued that truth emerges through debate, not suppression.**

8. Social Justice

While early liberalism focused on freedom from interference, modern liberalism recognised that **formal freedom is meaningless without fair conditions**. Poverty, illiteracy, and social exclusion limit real choice.

Thinkers like T. H. Green and John Rawls argued that the **state has a role in creating conditions that enable individuals** to exercise freedom meaningfully. Education, healthcare, and social security were seen not as threats to liberty but as its foundations.

Rawls's idea that social arrangements should benefit the least advantaged gave liberalism a moral framework for **addressing inequality without abandoning individual rights**. This principle influenced welfare policies and constitutional commitments across many societies.

Liberalism and Its Major Thinkers

Thomas Hobbes

The story of liberalism begins with Thomas Hobbes, writing in the shadow of the **English Civil War in the seventeenth century**. Hobbes lived through a time of chaos, violence, and political collapse. His primary concern was not freedom, but order.

In his famous work **Leviathan (1651)**, Hobbes described human life in the absence of political authority as a “**state of nature**” where there is no common power to keep people in check. In this condition, individuals are equal in their ability to harm one another, driven by fear and self-interest. Hobbes famously described such life as:

“solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”

To escape this condition, individuals enter into a social contract, surrendering their natural freedom to a sovereign authority in exchange for security and peace. For Hobbes, the sovereign must possess absolute power, because divided authority would lead back to civil war.

Although Hobbes defended strong authority, his contribution to liberalism lies in a crucial shift: **Power arises from human agreement, not from God**. This secular foundation of political authority became essential for later liberal thought, even though liberals rejected Hobbes’s justification of absolutism.

John Locke: The True Founder of Liberalism

In his **Two Treatises of Government (1689)**, Locke also begins with the **state of nature, but unlike Hobbes, he presents it as a condition of relative peace** and freedom, governed by reason and natural law. Human beings are not enemies by nature; they are moral agents capable of cooperation.

Locke argued that **individuals possess natural rights to life, liberty, and property**. These rights exist prior to the state and place limits on political authority. **Government is created through a social contract only to protect these rights.**

Locke's most powerful idea was that government is conditional. If rulers violate natural rights, they lose legitimacy. In such cases, resistance is not rebellion but a moral duty. As Locke wrote:

“Wherever law ends, tyranny begins.”

This idea permanently transformed political thought. Authority was no longer sacred or unquestionable. It had to justify itself in terms of rights and consent.

Locke's Refutation of Filmer: Rejection of Divine Right

Locke's liberalism was sharpened through his **direct attack on Sir Robert Filmer, a defender of absolute monarchy**. Filmer's work **Patriarcha argued that kings rule by divine right**, inheriting authority from Adam, the biblical father of humanity.

Locke systematically dismantled this argument in the **First Treatise of Government**. He rejected the idea that political power could be inherited like property or traced to divine lineage. Locke showed that:

There was no historical proof of Adam's political authority

Even if Adam had authority, it could not be inherited

Political power cannot be justified through scripture

By refuting Filmer, Locke destroyed the intellectual foundation of absolutism. He replaced it with a new principle: political authority comes from the consent of free individuals, not from God or ancestry. This was a decisive moment in the birth of liberalism.

John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill wrote at a time when democratic governments were expanding, but social conformity and moral control were also growing. **His central concern was not just tyranny by rulers, but tyranny by society itself.**

In his famous work **On Liberty (1859)**, Mill argued that **individual freedom is essential for personal growth and social progress**. He believed that human beings develop their best capacities only when they are free to think, speak, and live in their own way.

Mill's most well-known idea is **the harm principle**. According to him, the only legitimate reason for society or the state to restrict an individual's freedom is to prevent harm to others. He expressed this idea clearly when he wrote:

“Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”

This meant that actions that affect only the individual—such as beliefs, opinions, or personal lifestyle choices—should not be interfered with, even if society finds them immoral or unpopular.

Mill placed great importance on freedom of expression. He argued that even false opinions should be allowed, because they help society test and strengthen truth. Silencing opinions, he believed, robs humanity of intellectual progress.

T. H. Green

Thomas Hill Green lived in a period when **industrial capitalism had created deep social inequalities**. Many people were legally free but trapped in poverty, ill-health, and ignorance. Green believed that classical liberalism misunderstood the true nature of freedom.

In his work **Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation**, Green argued that freedom does not merely mean absence of restraint. A starving or uneducated person may be free in law, but not free in reality. **True freedom, for Green, is the ability to realise one's moral and intellectual potential.**

Green distinguished between:

Negative freedom: freedom from interference

Positive freedom: freedom to act meaningfully

He argued that the state should not only prevent harm but also create conditions in which individuals can genuinely be free. This included education, public health, and regulation of harmful practices.

Green did not see the state as an enemy of liberty. Instead, he viewed it as a **moral institution that could help individuals achieve self-development.** He famously argued that:

“Freedom is the power to do what one ought to do.”

This idea transformed liberalism. The state was no longer just a watchman; it became a partner in freedom. Green’s ideas laid the intellectual foundation for welfare liberalism and later social democratic policies.

Isaiah Berlin

By the twentieth century, liberalism faced new challenges—from totalitarianism, mass politics, and ideological extremism. Isaiah Berlin helped clarify liberalism by redefining the concept of liberty itself.

In his influential essay **“Two Concepts of Liberty”**, Berlin distinguished between:

Negative liberty: freedom from interference

Positive liberty: freedom to control one’s own life

Berlin warned that positive liberty, when misused, could justify authoritarianism. Governments could claim to know what is “best” for individuals and impose control in the name of freedom. He famously cautioned:

“Freedom for the wolves has often meant death for the sheep.”

Berlin defended pluralism and argued that human values are many, conflicting, and incommensurable. No single ideology can claim absolute truth. Liberalism, for Berlin, meant tolerance, restraint, and respect for diversity, not moral perfection.

John Rawls

In his influential work **A Theory of Justice (1971)**, Rawls proposed that social and political institutions must be judged by **principles that free and equal individuals would choose under fair conditions**.

He introduced the **idea of the original position**, a thought experiment where individuals choose principles of justice behind a **veil of ignorance**. In this situation, people do not know their class, gender, talents, or social status. This forces them to choose rules that are fair to everyone.

From this, Rawls derived two key principles:

Equal basic liberties for all—such as freedom of speech, conscience, and political participation.

Social and economic inequalities are acceptable only if they benefit the least advantaged and are attached to fair equality of opportunity.

Rawls famously described justice as:

“Justice is the first virtue of social institutions.”

Comprehensive vs Political Liberalism Debate

Liberalism, as it moved from philosophical writing into real societies, encountered a difficult question: **Should liberalism offer a complete vision of life, or should it restrict itself to political principles alone?** This tension produced what is often described as the debate between comprehensive liberalism and political liberalism.

Comprehensive Liberalism

Comprehensive liberalism treats liberalism as a full moral and social doctrine. It addresses **not only political institutions but also personal values, social relations, and cultural practices**. It speaks about how individuals should live, how society should organise itself, and how freedom should be understood across different spheres of life.

In this approach, liberty is closely tied to culture, language, religion, customs, and social practices. Comprehensive liberalism recognises that people do not experience freedom in abstraction. **They experience it through their traditions, moral beliefs, and everyday struggles**. Therefore, liberalism must engage with these realities if it wishes to liberate individuals and society meaningfully.

When liberalism moves into actual political struggle—against tyranny, colonial rule, or social oppression—it cannot remain neutral or detached. It must address the poor, the marginalised, and the culturally rooted. A liberal movement that talks only about abstract political rights but ignores hunger, unemployment, or social exclusion **fails to connect with real people**.

This is why comprehensive liberals argue that liberalism becomes comprehensive precisely because it is political. To mobilise society against oppression, liberals must **respect dominant religious cultures** rather than aggressively dismantling them. Liberation from tyranny must not appear as an attack on faith, language, or moral traditions. Otherwise, liberalism risks alienating the very people it claims to empower.

Political Liberalism

Political liberalism takes a different path. It argues that liberalism should **limit itself to political principles** necessary for peaceful coexistence in plural societies. It does not claim to define the good life or impose moral values.

Instead, it **focuses on basic political rights** such as freedom of speech, equality before law, and fair political procedures.

This approach emerges from the **recognition that modern societies are deeply diverse**. People hold conflicting beliefs about religion, family, morality, and culture. Political liberalism **seeks to avoid conflict by remaining neutral** on these matters and concentrating on constitutional principles that everyone can accept, regardless of their worldview.

In theory, **political liberalism promotes tolerance and stability**. It allows people with very different lifestyles and beliefs to coexist under a shared political framework. The state refrains from promoting any particular moral doctrine and instead guarantees basic freedoms.

However, critics argue that this narrow focus can become morally thin and politically evasive. When liberalism is reduced to procedure alone, it may fail to respond to social injustice, economic exploitation, or cultural domination.

The Practical Tension: Selective Liberalism

The debate becomes sharper when liberalism is practiced selectively. A person may call themselves liberal because they **support a progressive personal lifestyle, yet remain indifferent to political repression**. Such a liberal may coexist comfortably with a secular authoritarian regime, as long as personal freedoms in limited spaces are allowed.

Similarly, another version of political liberalism may **reduce liberty to market freedom**. This allows self-described liberals **to cooperate with authoritarian rulers in the name of economic reform**. Human rights violations, censorship, and repression are ignored, while economic liberalisation is promoted through international financial institutions.

In such cases, liberalism becomes fragmented. **Political liberty is separated from social justice, and economic reform is divorced from human**

dignity. The language of liberalism is used to justify compromise with power rather than resistance to oppression.

Why Comprehensive Liberalism Matters?

Supporters of comprehensive liberalism argue that people cannot be mobilised by abstract freedoms alone. **A hungry person does not understand liberty** if it does not speak to economic survival. **A religious society** resists liberalism if it is presented as hostile to faith. **A culturally rooted community** rejects liberalism if it appears elitist or foreign.

Therefore, **liberalism must address economic hardship, cultural identity, and moral concerns together.** Political freedom must be linked with social reform and respect for cultural foundations. Only then can liberalism become a genuine force for liberation rather than a language of elite politics.

Criticism of Liberalism

1. Liberalism is Atomistic

One of the earliest criticisms is that **liberalism views individuals as isolated, self-sufficient atoms, detached from society, history, and culture.**

Liberal thinkers often describe individuals as rational choosers who exist prior to society and enter it voluntarily. Critics argue that this image is unrealistic.

Human beings are born into families, languages, religions, and social hierarchies. Their identities are shaped long before they can make rational choices.

Communitarian thinkers argue that liberalism ignores this social embeddedness.

Michael Sandel, in his critique of Rawls, famously argued that liberalism assumes an “unencumbered self,” detached from moral and

social ties. He wrote that liberalism imagines a self “prior to its ends,” which does not reflect real human life.

2. Liberalism Protects Inequality

A major criticism comes from socialist and Marxist traditions, which argue that **liberalism protects economic inequality** under the guise of freedom.

Classical liberalism defends private property and free markets, claiming they ensure liberty. Critics respond that **this freedom mainly benefits those who already possess wealth and power**. Legal equality hides material inequality.

Karl Marx argued that liberal rights are “bourgeois rights,” designed to protect private property rather than human emancipation. He famously wrote that political equality under liberalism exists alongside economic exploitation, creating a system where workers are “free” only to sell their labour.

3. Liberalism Reduces Freedom to Legal Rights

Another criticism is that **liberalism understands freedom too narrowly**—as formal legal rights, rather than real capacity.

A person may have the right to vote, speak, or work, but **without education, healthcare, or economic security, these rights remain ineffective**.

Critics argue that liberalism often confuses formal freedom with real freedom.

4. Liberal Neutrality is a Myth

Political liberalism claims that the **state should remain neutral between different moral and cultural views**. Critics argue that neutrality is impossible.

Every legal system reflects values—about family, property, education, and morality. **By claiming neutrality, liberalism often masks the dominance of particular social groups and cultural norms.**

Communitarian critics argue that liberal neutrality weakens shared moral bonds. When the state refuses to affirm common values, social cohesion erodes.

Alasdair MacIntyre famously described liberalism as a tradition that pretends to be traditionless.

5. Selective Liberalism

Critics argue that **when liberalism prioritises markets over human rights, it becomes morally compromised.** Political liberty is sacrificed for economic efficiency. Liberal language is used to justify engagement with regimes that violate basic freedoms.

This selective liberalism exposes a deep contradiction: freedom is defended in theory but ignored in practice when it conflicts with economic or strategic interests.