

“a doctrine that ‘entrusts the general welfare to no one group or class’ . . . [that advances] the interest of non-capitalist groups. . .in. . .’that enduring struggle between the business community and the rest of society which is the guarantee of freedom in a liberal capitalist state’ . . . a liberalism that accepted capitalism . . .but was also extremely suspicious of capitalist’ . . .protecting ordinary Americans from the power of business”

The notion of “liberal”, from the Latin term *liber* (long i), ‘free’ (and related to the term *liber*, ‘book’, but we won’t go there for now), has had a checkered history. Beginning some 300 years ago, it referred in the realm of mercantilist economics to the idea that entrepreneurship and business in general should be free from government interference. In roughly the same era (cf, “the Enlightenment”), it was referred in the realm of social and political thought to the idea that certain rights and practices (e.g., suffrage, the secret ballot, equality before the law, etc.) were necessary for free men (an idea later extended to include women).

Those social and economic notions have been more or less tangled up in people’s minds since the beginning. While European national “liberalism” was widely blamed for World War I (and by some for WW II and later wars), in the inter-war US it was the term of choice to describe FDR’s New Deal, an admittedly makeshift set of policies, programs and ideals to combat the Great Depression, roundly reviled by both Right and Left,

By the Cold War 50s in the US, the economic and social concepts were so thoroughly confused that the term “liberalism” was easily painted by conservatives as the entryway for Communism in government and society, the anti-business, anti-Christian, anti-morality Great Satan of the Left.

By the 60s, the same “liberalism” was seen by influential sectors of the Left as wholly dedicated to war-mongering, Wall St repression of the working class and cultural freedom, and growing inequality on all fronts; and by the 70s had come almost full circle so that the liberalism of Washington and New York “neo-cons” was widely defined as “Neo-liberalism”, ie, equated with the original economic liberalism of the 18th C, a confounding of concepts that became widely accepted in the big-money politics of the Reagan-Thatcher years and is even more so now, in the plutocratic corporate ascendancy of the Bush-Clinton-Bush-Obama-Trump years.

Our current understanding of the terms “liberal” and “liberalism” were to significant extent shaped in the Kennedy-Johnson years, and one of the most important shapers was the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., whose influence (in person in the White House and in many books, perhaps most clearly in *The Vital Center*) is traced in this review by Sean Wilentz in his review of Richard Aldous’ new book, *Schlesinger: The Imperial Historian*.

http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/02/08/arthur-schlesinger-high-table-liberal/?sub_key=5a78a4ba2c640