

Welcome back to our series on the values of liberalism.

In the past two articles, we have explored the two most central values of liberalism: liberty and individualism. These two core values of liberal thinking do not only distinguish liberals from all other ideologies; but also give grounding to the idea of human rights, one of the most important ideas in human history.

And in fact, as we have seen in the last article, we can proudly say it has been a liberal achievement to make rights a universal value that is now shared amongst almost all societies all around the globe and that is written down in a shared document called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights! In this article, we will now explore another reason why liberals are so committed to individual rights. Because they protect us from the powerful and them abusing their power.

But before we dive right into the topic, let me have a short disclaimer: Do not be scared off by the title of the article.

By “Skepticism about Power,” we do not mean that liberals are in favor of anarchy, disorder, or revolution. As we will see later in the article “Peace”, liberals want to change the world through ideas, not force. And that is maybe the main reason why we remain skeptical about the use of power. Let’s dive right into it. In order to know what we should be skeptical about, we need to know what power exactly is and how we can define it. Power, at least in the way that we use it here is best understood as the ability to make others do what you want.

And this can take various shapes. Of course, you can physically force others to do what you want; but it also ranges to cases where you merely influence people Maybe through your social status, position in business, or other forms of authority to do what you want them to do.

When it comes to politics, we are especially concerned with cases where the government or the state is involved. Because the state is granted a special status: Do not get us wrong. There is nothing per se wrong with making people do what you want. There is nothing per se wrong with power and with the fact that the state has a special role in all of that.

Liberals recognize that we need hierarchy, authority, and leadership in order to organize ourselves in a complex society. In fact, it would be hard to imagine how human beings could organize themselves without these tools of social coordination. We need them to run businesses, organize meetings, and get things done. So just to be clear: liberals do not oppose all forms of power. But liberals also recognize that there is a flip side to hierarchy and authority. And that is its potential for exploitation and domination. In other words, where there is power, there is also the potential for abuse. Because if we grant individuals the ability to make other people do what they deem to be right, there is (and will always be) the risk of them overstepping their marks.

And history has shown us (unfortunately too often) that human beings abuse such positions of power, especially when they are granted without any limitations. And this is why liberals have always warned about state expansion or when important separations between for example the church and the state broke down. But is not only state power. Liberals are also concerned with social power structures. And that is why liberals also have been at the forefront of the feminist or civil rights movements.

As you can see, liberals have always warned about this human tendency to abuse the powers that are given to them. That is why liberals have always warned about the expansion of state or individual leaders. In fact, the British (and great liberal) thinker Lord Acton once

wrote: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Power seems to do something to us, something potentially dangerous. If we are granted power, we want more of it. And Acton and liberals, in general, have indicated this tendency.

Just think of a silly example. Some of you might be parents. And in this role as a parent, you are responsible for your child. You act as their guardian. So, you are acting in a position of power. And we bet you also feel (at least from time to time) the urge to make your kid eat the broccoli or the greens that you yourself have rejected many times. That might be a silly example but it is nothing else than a variation of the scent by the beginning of this article, you might have been worried about the rebellious side of Liberalism. That we are calling for revolution and anarchy.

But hopefully, you now see that this is not what we have in mind. Instead, “skepticism about power is a deep and profound insight into the human psyche, about the impact of being in power on our behavior. Throughout history, it has been liberals who worried about the abuse of authority.

So far, the skepticism that we sketched here sounds like a state of mind, like a mindset. However, in order to be skeptical, we also need the tools that allow us to limit our powers.

And this brings us to our next article and to one of the most powerful tools that prevent the abuse of power.