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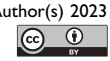
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In search of the common good: The postliberal project Left and Right

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Abstract
This article contributes to an understanding of the backlash against liberalism by reconstructing the emergence and development of an increasingly influential strand of Anglo-American thought that challenges liberalism, known as postliberalism. The central diagnostic claim of postliberalism is that the two dominant forms of post-WW2 liberalism, market liberalism and social liberalism, instead of being somehow opposed, have coalesced around an all-encompassing sociopolitical project that above all else seeks to maximize individual autonomy. As a result, postliberals hold, the liberal order has become increasingly unable to cultivate the communal resources on which human sociability depends and erodes the values liberalism purportedly defends. The article argues that a central, albeit not necessarily insurmountable, challenge for postliberalism lies in moving from a critique of liberalism to proposed remedies for its perceived deficiencies, without slipping into a political project with clear illiberal rather than merely non-liberal implications.

Keywords
Common good, conservatism, illiberalism, liberalism, postliberalism

In recent years, a variety of illiberal leaders, parties and movements have been gaining ground in all parts of the world (Plattner, 2019). As a consequence, the theoretical underpinnings of what is conventionally denoted as 'populism' have received extensive scholarly attention among social and political theorists, and specifically the intellectual

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origins of far-right forms of populism, often referred to as the New Right. The New Right is usually traced back to the voluminous writings of Alain De Benoist and the French *Nouvelle Droite* and is in the United States most closely associated with so-called paleoconservatives such as Paul Gottfried, Sam Francis and Mel Bradford (Drolet & Williams, 2018, 2020). For the most part, the New Right revolves around the promotion of the return to some version of ethno-nationalism as foundation for political community (Rose, 2021). It is, as prominent diagnosticians of the New Right have argued, important to subject these challenges to liberalism to academic scrutiny not only since many of such projects have great popular appeal but also serious intellectual foundations (Drolet & Williams, 2022, p. 36).

This article contributes to an understanding of the backlash against liberalism by reconstructing the emergence and development of an Anglo-American strand of thought that challenges liberalism, known as postliberalism. The central diagnostic claim of postliberalism is that the two dominant forms of post-WW2 liberalism, market liberalism and social liberalism, instead of being somehow opposed, have coalesced around an all-encompassing sociopolitical project that above all else seeks to maximize individual autonomy. As a result, postliberals hold, the liberal order has become increasingly unable to cultivate the communal resources on which human sociability depends and erodes the values liberalism purportedly defends. Liberalism, in other words, tends to lead to its own undoing. Postliberalism is politically ambiguous. While postliberalism originated in the United Kingdom, where it became positioned as a centre-left project and often seen as closely affiliated to the 'Blue Labour' movement, it has become a key strand in the renewal of conservatism in the United States. Unlike many populist movements world-wide (de Cleen, 2017), postliberals have an uneasy relationship with nationalism and even the most conservative postliberals do not embrace ethnonationalism. By examining the trajectory of British and US postliberalism, one may more clearly appreciate what is at stake politically in critics of liberalism and start unravelling the political ambiguity of contemporary forms of illiberalism.

The article is primarily reconstructive and only secondarily critical. While the diagnostic side of postliberalism will resonate with segments on the Left and Right, I argue that the suggestion of a return to the common good as an antidote to unfettered individualism, is running into similar challenges as other critics of liberalism, and harbors, in some, but not all, versions of postliberalism, clear illiberal, rather than merely non-liberal, implications. Methodologically, the article understands postliberalism as a discursive formation which spans several academic fields including political philosophy, theology, jurisprudence and sociology. It should also be pointed out that the purpose of the article is not to assess the postliberal understanding of liberalism against how prominent liberals understand their ideology. Critics who contend that individual postliberals misread classic liberal texts may well be correct but miss the larger point insofar as postliberals view liberalism not so much as a theory, which exists in a set of texts, but rather as an all-encompassing sociopolitical project of ordering societies (Vermeule, 2019b).[1]

Stephen Holmes noted in in his classic *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* that the disparagement of liberalism has been 'a recurring feature of Western political culture' ever since the French Revolution (Holmes, 1993, p. xi). The claim of this article is not that the

ideas advanced as part of the postliberal project are altogether novel. To be sure, there are plenty of continuities between the communitarian critics of liberalism, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in response to Rawlsian liberalism, and postliberalism. Alastair McIntyre, in particular, developed a critique of liberal modernity which clearly resonates with the project advanced by the leading postliberal thinkers (1984). However, postliberal ideas are rapidly becoming influential, at the same time as their intellectual lineages are poorly, if at all, understood (cp Casey, 2021). British intellectuals embracing postliberal ideas have for more than a decade been working actively to influence debates within the Labour (Finlayson, 2011; Wintour, 2011) as well as Conservative Parties (Coman, 2021). And even more importantly, postliberals in the United States have become one of the most influential groups in the broader conservative political landscape (Zerofsky, 2021). Nor are these ideas solely confined to universities in the United States either. Republican Senator Marco Rubio, for instance, recently spoke favorably of a 'common good capitalism', which quite clearly recalls postliberal themes (Krein & Pappin, 2020). US and British postliberals share a similar critique of liberalism, cite similar authors – sometime each other – and appear in similar outlets. Prominent public intellectuals such as Francis Fukuyama (2022) and Samuel Moyn (2018) have engaged US postliberals, in particular the writings of Patrick Deneen and Adrian Vermeuele. As an Anglo-American tradition of thought, however, postliberalism has so far received scant academic attention. In contrast to the thinkers associated with the New Right, postliberals are part of the academic mainstream, and found at major universities in the United Kingdom as well as in the United States. Their project therefore warrants serious non-polemical, albeit critical, scrutiny.

The article unfolds as follows. The first section is historical and traces the emergence of postliberalism in the United Kingdom and in the United States. The second part reconstructs the postliberal diagnosis of liberalism in four steps and shows that post-liberalism constitutes a coherent Anglo-American tradition of thought: The first step reconstructs the core postliberal critique of liberalism, which hinges on a particular reading of social contract theory, and revolves around a claim about the self-undermining quality of liberalism. The second, third and fourth steps reconstruct the postliberal understanding of liberalism not so much as a theory but a project of domestic as well as global sociopolitical ordering. The third part is critical and turns to the prescriptions of postliberals, that is, what to do about the perceived shortcomings of liberalism in sustaining flourishing sociopolitical orders. At this point, postliberals face similar challenges as their communitarian predecessors when appealing to the common good in pluralistic societies. The concluding section briefly summarizes the article.

Origins of postliberalism

As a label, postliberalism has been used in a number of different contexts. For instance, in the mid-1990s British political theorist John Gray (1996) used 'postliberalism' to denote what might come after the foundationalist baggage in the liberal tradition was shed – baggage which he argued was incompatible with a strong version of value pluralism. Liberalism, Gray contended, needed to be rethought along post-foundationalist lines. While Gray remained involved in postliberal circles, his writings

did not become touchstones in the British postliberal movement. The British wing of postliberalism rather traces its philosophical origins back to an influential strand of theology known as Radical Orthodoxy, which is highly critical of secular modernity and what is perceived as its chief ideological expression, namely liberalism. Radical Orthodoxy established itself in the 1990s through the writings of John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (1999) and had a substantial impact on more philosophically oriented theology primarily in the United Kingdom but also in the United States and beyond (Horan, 2014).

The most immediate origin on British postliberalism, however, lies in the formation of a movement known as Blue Labour, by Labour peer and political theorist Maurice Glasman in response to Labour's resounding defeat in the 2010 elections (Davis, 2011). It is also at this point that postliberalism started being used to describe a rather thoroughgoing critique of liberalism. As a reaction to the market-friendly Third Way championed by Tony Blair, and theorized by sociologist Anthony Giddens (1998), Glasman took a much more skeptical view of democracy as turning into 'an oligarchy with the liberal left in control of culture and the liberal right in control of the economy' (Blue Labour, n.d.). In addition to Glasman, the Blue Labour movement included academics such as Jonathan Rutherford, Marc Stears and Stuart White as well as Labour politicians such as Hazel Blears and Jon Cruddas (Glasman et al., 2011). At the time, *New Statesman* described the rise of Blue Labour as emerging out of a realization that the combination of social liberalism and economic liberalism, which had been gaining ground ever since the days of Thatcher, 'does not provide all the answers to Britain's most entrenched problems: its imbalanced economy, its atomized society, its lack of common identity' (Quoted in Pabst, 2015, p. 24). The liberalism of both parties, Glasman argued, ignored the social bonds that hold societies together at the expense of liberal contract theory. Glasman advocated a political order which prioritized family and local communities, and whose inheritance stems from 'conservative socialism which is about protecting nature and human value from the commodification of capitalism and the transactional culture of the market' (Blue Labour, n.d.). However, against conservative communitarianism, Blue Labour acknowledged and even celebrated that there are a plurality of different meaning-conferring communal traditions. As a positive vision for society, thinkers of the Blue Labour movement started referring to 'the common good', posited against a collectivist politics based on identity as well as an individualism that acknowledged no higher good than the individual's self-interest.

In 2015, an anthology edited by Ian Geary and Adrian Pabst collected a number of essays seeking to promote and flesh out the Blue Labour project along with the theologians associated with Radical Orthodoxy (Geary & Pabst, 2015). To that effect, the anthology included contributions by Maurice Glasman, John Milbank and Labour MP Jon Cruddas. On the centre right, Philip Blond, a former student of Milbank's and political theorist, established *ResPublica*, a think tank which has promoted postliberal ideas and is believed to have exerted a certain amount of influence on former Tory Prime Minister's David Cameron's thinking (Hennessy, 2010). Moreover, throughout the decade, a number of public policy think tanks in the United Kingdom, such as *ResPublica* and *Demos*, as well as magazines such as *Prospect*, *New Statesman* and *UnHerd*, have been debating as well as championing postliberal ideas. Further, a number

of well-known intellectuals have been involved in discussing postliberal themes, including former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and *Prospect*'s longtime editor David Goodhart, whose much discussed *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* echoes many postliberal themes, such as the importance of place, culture and belonging to many people outside the metropolitan centres of the West (Goodhart, 2017).

British postliberalism was from its inception closely linked to British politics and perhaps therefore, ill-suited for exportation to other countries (Pabst, 2015, p. 6). A similar set of ideas however, also travelling under the postliberal heading, have become highly influential in the renewal of American conservatism. In fact, although its intellectual roots extend much further back, one may date the emergence of the US wing of postliberalism from the time around Trump's election in 2016. Conservative intellectuals were fiercely divided over Trump, who, as has often been pointed out, was far from a conventional conservative. One of the more important consequences of Donald Trump's capture of the GOP was that it opened up space for a sweeping questioning of received dogmas in the broader conservative movement. In particular, the alliance between economic liberalism and social conservatism, so-called fusionism, which had sustained the Republican Party ever since the 1950s, came under increased critical scrutiny (Continetti, 2022). In 2019, some of the most high-profile conservative intellectuals published a short piece in one of the most important conservative US magazines *First Things* highly critical of fusionism – to which they referred as 'the Dead Consensus' – and set off an intense debate in conservative circles (Ahmari et al., 2019).

As part of the renewal of American conservatism, some intellectuals with varying degrees of acceptance of Trump's capture of the GOP took a renewed interest in nationalism, and 'national conservatism' became frequently used to denote this strand of conservatism (e.g. Hazony, 2018). The most ambitious attempt to renew conservative thought in the United States, however, did not come in terms of a return to nationalism, which had anyway always been sitting uneasy in an American context, but in the form of postliberalism (Continetti, 2022, pp. 375–402). In 2018, Patrick Deneen, a conservative academic at Notre Dame, published what should so far be seen as the defining work of US postliberalism: *Why Liberalism Failed*. The book received positive acclaim not only from conservatives but also from people across the political spectrum, including Cornel West and Barack Obama. Deneen's book generated substantial debate on the state of liberalism and was crucial for the intellectual consolidation of the US wing of postliberalism.

Furthermore, advancing a similar set of ideas, Gladden Pappin and Julius Krein were central in establishing a postliberal ideational ecosystem. As a student at Harvard, political theorist Pappin got to know fellow conservatives with whom he would eventually establish the ironically named *Journal of American Greatness* and its successor publication, *American Affairs*. What particularly animated Pappin and his fellow conservatives was a dissatisfaction with the conservative establishment's embrace of a small state, coupled with what they perceived as an abdication on cultural issues to the Left (Oppenheimer, 2021). When *American Affairs* was launched at the Harvard Club in New York in 2017, there was, as Matthew Continetti writes, reason to believe that it might come to serve a similar influential role for Trump's presidency as the *Weekly Standard*

had for George W. Bush's administration (Continetti, 2022, p. 378). That did not happen, however. Krein publicly disowned Trump in the wake of Trump's failure to distance himself from the alt-right at the Charlottesville rally later that year (Krein, 2017). Instead of becoming the journal of Trumpism, *American Affairs* became, as Continetti put it, 'the quarterly journal of postliberalism' (Continetti, 2022, p. 379). In 2022, another magazine with a similar profile as *American Affairs* called *Compact Magazine* was established. Just like *American Affairs*, *Compact Magazine* started publishing texts by critics of liberalism on the Right as well as the Left. In addition, religious conservative journal *First Things* has under the editorship of R. R. Reno also published a number of articles increasingly critical of liberalism (Macdougald, 2020).

US postliberalism had in the early 2020s coalesced around a set of ideas proposed by Patrick Deneen, Harvard Law School professor Adrian Vermeule, Pappin and Chad Pecknold of the American Catholic University. In 2021, Deneen, Vermeule, Pappin and Pecknold begun publishing a newsletter under the heading of postliberalism, starting from the premise that 'the modern liberal ordering of the world is exhausted' (Deneen, Pappin, Pecknold, Vermeule, n.d.). The postliberals are not primarily, if at all, nationalists, and it would be difficult to label them as ethnonationalist in any meaningful sense of the word. On the contrary, Deneen has sometimes been charged with being 'anti-American' due to his thoroughgoing repudiation of the liberal tradition, which, after all, is usually understood to pervade the founding of the United States (e.g. Will, 2020). All of them, however, are fiercely critical of the twin liberalisms perceived to dominate contemporary American politics. The article now turns to the content of these ideas, in order to show that postliberalism constitutes a coherent tradition of thought, which revolves around a particular understanding of social contract theory, coupled with a claim about the self-undermining character of liberalism.

Liberalism diagnosed

As noted above, British postliberalism may best be described as having originated as a theological critique of modernity centred around the writings of theologians John Milbank et al. (1999). In the defining work of radical orthodoxy, *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank (2006) started from the premise that secularization cannot be understood as a historical process which, by practices of 'desacralizing the social', uncovers an original untouched realm of being. Instead, and anticipating Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007), the secular realm must itself be understood as a particularistic and contingent sociopolitical order and therefore subject to a form of genealogical critique. From such a premise, he set out to show that social theory is permeated by assumptions which, instead of being theologically neutral, are grounded in a series of reversals of classical Augustinian Christian categories. Drawing on poststructuralist philosophy, Milbank argued that these reversals, which are supposed to provide a stable foundation for Western secular modernity, are no more securely grounded than the Christian ones they have displaced. Instead of letting social theory permeated by the (anti)theological assumptions of secular modernity function as a metalanguage by which Christianity may be re-interpreted ('liberal Christianity'), Milbank's goal was to reinstate theology as a metalanguage in its own right by which secular modernity itself could be situated

and critiqued. More positively, the goal of his enterprise was to open up space for an Anglo-Catholic 'orthodox' Christian social vision as a full-fledged alternative to the secular order of the West. In Milbank's account, contractarian liberal political theory à la Hobbes and Locke is understood as an expression of the anti-Christian ontology of violence.[2] On such an ontology of violence, and perhaps most clearly demonstrated in Hobbes's nominalist political theory, the competitive atomistic individual is hypostatized and inscribed as the fundamental unit of political order. The Hobbesian individual becomes *the* liberal subject. The contractarianism of Locke, Rousseau and Kant does not, on this reading, challenge the rationale for political order which Hobbes provides.

While largely critical of liberal political theory, radical orthodoxy nevertheless remained mostly concerned with theology and had a limited impact outside these debates. However, towards the mid-2010s, John Milbank and Adrian Pabst drew out the implications of radical orthodoxy for political theory under the heading of postliberalism.[3] They argued that the cultural liberalism of the 1960s on the Left and the economic liberalism of the 1980s on the Right had produced a West simultaneously 'atomistic and authoritarian' and brought about an 'unprecedented augmentation of power and wealth in the hands of a few'. This ideological constellation, they asserted, enabled 'a new, rootless oligarchy' practicing 'a manipulative populism' to the detriment of the vast majority of ordinary people (2016, p. 1). The two forms of liberalism worked together from the very beginning, having radicalized and combined the Hobbesian understanding of an abstract individual predisposed to conflict, with the Lockean presupposition of man's unconditional right to self-ownership. Akin to communitarian critics of liberalism, they argued that liberal political theory had in fact 'redefined human nature as fundamentally individual existence abstracted from social embeddedness', and liberal practice has 'replaced the quest for reciprocal recognition and mutual flourishing with the pursuit of wealth, power and pleasure', leading to 'economic instability, social disorder and ecological devastation' (p. 2). Since liberalism has abandoned any substantive vision of the good, 'liberalism does not so much liberate society from the "tyranny of the Good" as impose a "new tyranny of freedom *from* mutual obligation"' (pp. 18–19, my emphasis). What they call the 'metacrisis' of liberalism,

> consists more specifically in its evermore exposed tendency at once to abstract from reality and yet to reduce everything to its bare materiality. This twin tendency leaves an irreducible *aporia* between human will and artifice on the one hand, and imagined laws of nature on the other – the violent "state of nature" (as for Hobbes) or conflict-ridden human association (as for Rousseau) that requires the remedies of coercive state control and market competition. In this way, liberal ideas and institutions rest on a violent ontology and a pessimistic anthropology that incentivize and reward bad behaviour.

On the one hand, on their account, liberalism has from its very inception tended to prioritize individual autonomy as the highest good. On the other hand, the intensification of individualism is also understood as a historical process closely linked to secularization and, above else, the deracinating effects of capitalism, which tends to commodify an ever-increasing number of social bonds.

A few years later, the most important diagnostic work of the American wing of postliberalism to have appeared thus far, Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed*, was published. As we shall see, although Deneen's text does not refer to the British postliberals, and is firmly rooted in the American context, his critique is similar to the one advanced by Milbank and Pabst, and crucially also hinges on a reading of Hobbes and Locke. Deneen's central argument is that liberalism, understood as originating some 500 years ago, and the structuring philosophy for the US republic, has failed not because it has been realized incompletely or captured by special interests of big business, but rather because its inner logic tends to undermine its core aims. In other words, the pathologies that Deneen thinks that liberalism has generated should not be understood as somehow external to the liberal project but rather as realizations and manifestations of liberal ideology. Paradoxically, therefore, liberalism 'has failed because liberalism has succeeded' (pp. 3, 179):

> A political philosophy that was launched to foster greater equity, defend a pluralist tapestry of different cultures and beliefs, protect human dignity, and, of course, expand liberty, in practice generates titanic inequality, enforces uniformity and homogeneity, fosters material and spiritual degradation, and undermines freedom. (p. 3)

Deneen, just like Milbank and Pabst, has an expansive understanding of liberalism. Liberalism is not understood as merely a form of constitutional government, which upholds a set of rights against the whims of the majority, but an all-encompassing political project, which seeks to remake all life in its own image. This is not so because of some nefarious design but, as we shall see, due to the steady erosion of all sources of authority deemed as external to the individual will.

Reminiscent of Benjamin Constant's famous argument about the difference between ancient and modern conceptualizations of liberty (1819), Deneen argues that the classical meaning of liberty, which was preoccupied with cultivating the virtues necessary for participation in self-government, was gradually transformed starting with Machiavelli and later completed in the social contract tradition of Hobbes and Locke. The wholly negative understanding of liberty and 'emancipation' that liberal thinkers came to subscribe to was rather one that sought to do away with any impediment to the exercise of the individual's desires. Liberalism, in this understanding, rests upon two bedrock assumptions: anthropological individualism coupled with a voluntarist understanding of choice, and a belief in the radical separation and opposition between man and nature (p. 37). The second commitment is initially understood as an imperative to master, control and conquer nature, and then increasingly also turned inwards to human nature itself, culminating in contemporary discourses of transhumanism (p. 31). From these assumptions follow a gradual redefinition of the classical understanding of liberty. Liberty for liberalism becomes understood as 'the most extensive possible expansion of the human sphere of autonomous action' (p. 37). This understanding of liberty encourages a particular hermeneutic of suspicion against all sources that might be understood to place restrictions upon the individual's will: culture, religion, tradition, family, communal norms and indeed modern science to the extent that it would suggest biological and material constraints on an individual's desires. Ontologically, liberalism

goes hand in hand with some version of social constructivism suggesting that everything is in flux, and epistemologically with an increasingly radical form of subjectivism (the emphasis on 'lived experience' as foundation for knowledge).

The modern state's principal task becomes to optimize and maximize the conditions under which the exercise of individual liberty is possible, first in the form of safeguarding a variety of rights, and then, increasingly actively work to remove potential sources of constraint on the human will. 'As the authority of social norms dissipates, they are increasingly felt to be residual, arbitrary, and oppressive, motivating calls for the state to actively work towards their eradication' (p. 38). It is thus no coincidence that the sovereign state emerges at the same time as the modern sovereign individual: 'The state becomes the main driver of individualism, while individualism becomes the main source of expanding power and authority of the state' (p. 46). In a position reminiscent of Karl Polanyi's, capitalism, which for its very existence depends on the creation of individualistic consumerist desires, becomes contingent on an ever-growing regulatory state. In essence then, free market capitalism demands an expanding state. Deneen describes the dynamic by which individualism and statism proceeds in tandem as follows,

> The expansion of liberalism rests upon a vicious and reinforcing cycle in which state expansion secures the end of individual fragmentation, in turn requiring further state expansion to control a society without shared norms, practices, or beliefs. Liberalism thus increasingly requires a legal and administrative regime, driven by the imperative of replacing all nonliberal forms of support for human flourishing (such as schools, medicine and charity), and hollowing any deeply held sense of shared future or fate among the citizenry. (p. 62)

Individualism, with its emphasis on free markets, and statism are therefore not opposed, as contemporary US political discourse often holds, where liberals advocate for a bigger redistributive state and conservatives for more individual freedom vis-à-vis the state. Instead, US mainstream conservatism and liberalism operate in a tacit alliance since they share the same goal. One may in addition to the theoretical and rather abstract interpretation of how liberalism has played out in Europe and the United States examined above, identify how liberalism, understood as a project of ordering, has impacted domestic and global politics.

Liberalism and domestic social stratification

The sociological dimension of postliberalism draws most prominently on the works of social historian Christopher Lasch (Deneen, 2018, p. 149; Pabst, 2021, pp. 80–86; Pappin, 2020). In contrast to Ortega y Gasset's famous *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930), depicting the Bolshevik and fascist mass movements as threatening social order, Lasch argued that the post-war era was instead characterized by a 'revolt of the elites' (Lasch, 1996). The new elites, the professional-managerial classes, embraced meritocracy and, bolstered by a belief in their intellectual abilities, turned increasingly 'petulant, self-righteous, intolerant' regarding the lower classes with 'scorn and apprehension' (1996, p. 28), and gradually withdrew from the society they ruled. Left wing politics, Lasch believed, has increasingly been reduced to a number of rights-based struggles

whose 'only coherent demand aims at inclusion in the dominant structures rather than at a revolutionary transformation of social relations' (p. 27). Liberalism had, in the United States at least, quite simply conquered democratic socialism, by appropriating the egalitarian language of the Left. The rise of the meritocratic elites went hand in hand with a generalized culture of narcissism, which Lasch diagnosed in *The Culture of Narcissism* (2018 [1979]). Here, Lasch argued that politics had ceased to be about social change but rather centres on self-realization: 'the culture of competitive individualism . . . has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of all against all' (p. 4). Narcissism, which he understood as a psychological profile of uprooted anxious individuals, emerged as the defining socio-psychological pathology of bourgeois individualism (p. 4). For Lasch, this was more than anything else a problem since the functioning of democracy depends on a rough distribution of wealth, but also because 'self-governing communities, not individuals, are the basic units of democratic society' (p. 8).

Lasch's position was difficult to place on a conventional political spectrum since he, like Deneen, was highly critical of capitalism as the driver of the dislocating dynamic that had devastating effects of American democracy, but also of expressive individualism, whose principal manifestation, social liberalism, tended to deprive the working classes of their very communal foundations, such as family life and religion (Dionne, 2018). Moreover, Lasch's diagnosis has been updated and popularized by Michael Lind in a series of articles published first in *American Affairs* and then as a book in 2020. In *The New Class War* (2020), he sets out to document the populist backlash as emerging out of a growing gap between increasingly isolated managerial elites and the working classes. Lind argues that by the turn of the twenty-first century, technocratic neoliberalism had taken over all realms of US society, whether governmental, cultural or economic. In Lind's account, the election of Trump and 'demagogic populism' should most fundamentally be understood as a symptom of the unchecked power of technocratic neoliberalism (2020, p. xxiii).

Liberalism and global politics

From the shared diagnosis of postliberal thinkers a particular perspective on global politics follows logically, which has been elaborated by Milbank and Pabst (2016), and in a series of writings by Pabst (e.g. 2016, 2018). US postliberals have written less about international relations per se, but their analysis nevertheless converges with the one offered by Milbank and Pabst on important points (Deneen et al., 2022). The postliberal diagnosis of international relations departs from the observation that, similarly to the domestic sociopolitical order, the crisis of the international order is understood as a symptom of an intensifying liberalism, which tends to work towards its own undoing (2016, p. 316). In a stance that is diametrically opposed to John Ikenberry's argument that the liberal international order is threatened by illiberal forces, and the solution therefore is *more* liberalism (2018), the postliberal position is that the rise of illiberal forces should be understood as the dialectical response to a liberalism that is increasingly exposing its own contradictions. As Pabst puts it, 'the populist insurgency and the rise of civilizational states are part of the same phenomena: a backlash against a politics of the global rather than the national and the local; a politics of utopia rather than place; and a

politics of individualized identity rather than shared belonging' (2021, p. 173). However, since liberalism no longer espouses a substantive good, it also becomes a deeply ambiguous project: 'the ambivalence of liberalism lies in the tendency to release human energy and foster individual freedoms while at the same time failing to guide the forces it unleashes on an international as well as national scale' (Milbank & Pabst, 2016, p. 318). There is thus no preordained telos inherent in the liberal project as such.

The US-led liberal order that emerged following the end of the Second World War is understood as closely reflecting what happened to liberalism in domestic settings. Milbank and Pabst argue that 'US hegemony views national states as liberal egos writ large. This conception rests on liberal norms of individualism and voluntarism that are deeply rooted in American political life and have been exported by successive administrations, which promote national ends by imperial means' (p. 316). Moreover, the expansion of global governance ever since the 1970s has tended to strengthen the statism that liberalism increasingly depends on for expanding individual freedoms domestically. Instead of eroding state power then, global governance has strengthened states at the expense of local decision-making levels, or moved decision-making authority even further away from national democratic fora (p. 322). Just like in domestic settings, liberalism is understood as turning increasingly intolerant against competing projects and echoing Carl Schmitt, 'Enlightenment liberalism ironically threatens to turn war into an unlimited action against an enemy of civilization as such' (p. 326). What has happened then, is, at least in part due to the failure of liberalism to accept any boundaries to itself, that expansionist liberal universalism is being transformed into civilizational blocks,

> The US has largely sought to impose on other countries merely formalistic and economistic principles that derive from its own predominantly liberal theory of itself, more perhaps than from the truth of the way it has reliably worked out in practice. It has offered this thin gruel rather than the solid sustenance of a deep-rooted Western culture with which other cultures might enter into conversation (p. 336).

The postliberal analysis appears somewhat similar to other critics of liberal internationalism, not least ones indebted to the writings of Carl Schmitt, who have also been highly critical of the expansionist nature of liberalism (e.g. Rasch, 2003). However, the main difference in relation to Schmittian critics of liberalism lies in their understanding of the social contract tradition, which Milbank developed most fully already in the 1990s and also found in Deneen's writings (Deneen, 2021). The postliberal problem with liberalism is mainly traced back to Hobbes's conception of political community. The crux of the matter lies in Hobbes's nominalist ontology where political order inevitably entails a violent imposition on recalcitrant being in a state of nature (Milbank & Pabst, 2016, p. 356). Though Locke had serious objections to Hobbes's nominalism, neither he nor Kant fundamentally altered the ontological premises of contractarianism found in *Leviathan*. Thus, liberal domestic *and* international politics, Milbank and Pabst argue, 'rests on the idea of *asocial sociability*: human beings understood as naturally self-interested and jealous vis-a-vis others, which eventually engenders some kind of competitive order' (2016, p. 356). Liberalism, Milbank and Pabst contend, naturalizes a

competitive order, which is at odds with the tradition it displaces, a neoplatonist Christian ontology of 'underlying harmonic peace' (Borg, 2018, p. 42).

Postliberal feminism

As a final area of postliberal critique, and in order to more fully bring out the social dimensions of the postliberal project, it is instructive to turn to a growing number of critics of liberal feminism. While the original British postliberals have been relatively silent on questions of gender, in his influential diagnosis, Deneen contended that the emancipation liberalism promised women was of questionable value since such liberation in effect meant to trade one job for another, that is, to move from the household to 'the workforce of modern capitalism' (2018, p. 187). However, in recent years postliberal ideas have been extended into the realm of sexual liberation, where the value of liberal sexual ethics for women has been critically scrutinized. In broader terms, their critique could be located within a contemporary trend to resurrect so-called second wave feminism, focusing on sexuality and pornography and historically associated with the writings of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon (Srinivasan, 2022). This critique has been articulated by a variety of intellectuals of rather diverse backgrounds, although most of them quite explicitly claim a postliberal mantle: atheist feminist author Louise Perry (e.g. 2022); Catholic scholar Erika Bachiochi (e.g. 2021); *Washington Post* columnist and author Christine Emba (e.g. 2022); author Mary Harrington (2023), and Nina Power (e.g. 2022), British academic philosopher and editor of postliberal *Compact*. While these authors differ in many regards, they advance a critique of sex-positive feminism, which places the autonomous choosing individual at the centre of a sexual ethic they argue are harmful for women.

In recent works, both of which have received a fair amount of attention, Christine Emba (2022) and Louise Perry (2022) seek in different ways to stake out a skeptical position on the value of sexual liberation. As a starting point, they argue that many women are dissatisfied with the current condition of sexual liberation. In agreement with second-wave feminists, and in particular Andrea Dworkin, Emba and Perry argue that the medical innovations of contraception and abortion, while in many ways positive for women, enabled a liberal sexual ethic, which on closer inspection turns out to mainly favor men over women. Central to Perry's charge against liberal feminism is her skepticism of 'sexual disenchantment', that is, the notion that sex should be seen as any other commodity traded on a free market between consenting adults. The belief in sexual disenchantment along with the liberal emphasis on maximizing the space for an individual's right to make her own decisions, she argues, leads to outcomes that instead of improving the lot of women does the exact opposite. A liberal sexual ethic, Perry argues, is instead of somehow neutral, in fact modelled upon male desire. Liberal feminists, she contends, 'promises women freedom and when that promise comes up against the hard limits imposed by biology, then the ideology directs women to chip away at those through the use of money, technology and the bodies of poorer people' (2022, p. 9). Or, as Emba puts it, making a similar argument, the liberal understanding of freedom has in effect revealed itself to be 'the freedom to be people open to anything except connection . . . cavalier about sex and disdainful of real feeling' (2022, pp. 46–47). The only

normative standard that liberals may raise, i.e. mutual consent, turns in practice out to be harmful for many women.

However, the target of postliberals is not merely liberal sex-positive feminism, but at least for some of them, broader than that. Mary Harrington has in a series of writings, and explicitly claiming a postliberal mantle, argued that contemporary liberalism is currently best characterized as *bio-libertarianism*, 'a worldview that believes human freedom necessitates radical unmooring from the givens of our bodies' (2021). In some ways echoing intersectional feminists, she argues that 'what we think of as "feminism" today is mainly driven by bourgeois white American women.' Moreover, and contrary to a substantial share of contemporary scholarship in gender studies, Harrington argues that Butlerian-informed queer theory, where not only gender but sex itself is understood as an effect of performative practices, and which celebrates nothing but pure, untrammeled freedom of self-creation, should be understood as a radical form of liberalism – having little to do with, and may even run counter to, improving the lot of women, the historical goal of feminism.

Postliberal alternatives: In search of the common good

From global politics to sexual relations, the postliberal diagnosis of the sociopolitical effects of the liberal project is, as we have seen, bleak. Having demonstrated that post-liberalism in the United States and the United Kingdom constitutes a coherent strand of thought, which understands liberalism is a similar way, this section turns to postliberal alternatives to the liberal order. While the postliberal diagnosis of liberalism may, to a certain extent at least, enjoy some cross-partisan appeal, attempts at articulating post-liberal alternatives to liberal ordering practices have evoked more controversy. At this point, the divergence between British and American postliberals become apparent. While British postliberals have been trying to articulate a social vision, which could, as we shall see, be thought of as a kind of radical centrism (Pabst, 2021), some American postliberals have, within the polarized US domestic setting, articulated a statist version of postliberal conservatism, which risks slipping into outright illiberalism. Herein lies a profound tension between the British postliberals who firmly reject Viktor Orbán's self-proclaimed 'illiberal democracy' as a blueprint for postliberal politics (Pabst, 2021, pp. 14, 20–21), and some American postliberals, who, albeit with some hesitation, have increasingly come, if not embrace, certainly flirt with the increasingly autocratic ruler in Hungary (Zerofsky, 2021). The turn towards statism among some key US postliberals illustrates the challenges in moving beyond liberalism without slipping into illiberalism.

While leading postliberals typically claim not to be *anti-liberal*, and rather argue that they want to make space for non-liberal forms of life (Deneen, 2018, p. 182; Pabst, 2021, pp. 3–4), one particular version of postliberalism, as articulated by Adrian Vermeule, highlights what is at stake when trying to articulate non-liberal social orders. To begin with, one may note that postliberals on both sides on the Atlantic have proposed rather non-controversial policy proposals for revitalizing communities and supporting families so as to act as bulwarks against the deracinating forces of state and market. However, a certain turn in US postliberalism has envisaged a much more extensive role of the state in actively promoting a substantive vision of the common good, in contrast to liberal

proceduralism aimed at maximizing conditions for the exercise of individual autonomy.[4] As perhaps most forcefully brought out by Adrian Vermeule and in the debate that has ensued over his writings on 'common good constitutionalism', the crux of the debate lies in identifying a substantive vision of the common good as a ground for a renewed, and *non-liberal*, sociopolitical order.

From the very beginning of British postliberalism, there was a strong emphasis on strengthening the common good in relation to individual autonomy. The proposals advanced included polices aimed at strengthening intermediary institutions between state and individual; decentralizing state power to local communities; bolstering trade unions; and encouraging corporatist governance – all within a subsidiarist and internationalist global order (Glasman, 2022; Pabst, 2021). In essence, these proposals were broadly consistent with the Labour tradition in the United Kingdom, and European Social Democracy at large. Pabst recently defined the aim of postliberal politics as rebuilding 'community and nurture our ability to live fulfilled lives in common', while promoting 'a corporatist model that is democratic and internationalist, reconstructing the everyday economy and the national economy combined with international institutions to constrain capital' (2021, p. 21). In *Why Liberalism Failed*, Deneen argued not so much for an alternative theory to liberalism but rather for a renewed set of practices, which tries to recapture what has been eroded by what he perceives as liberalism's relentless undoing of human relationality (2018, p. 182).

Some US postliberals, and in particular a variety of authors published in *American Affairs*, have advocated for a considerably larger role for the government in supporting the intermediary institutions between state and individual. For instance, instead of 'liberal statism', Pappin has argued for comprehensive family policies, and that the state should engage in extensive industrial policy to shore up domestic manufacturing (Pappin & Molla, 2019; Pappin, 2020). While these policy proposals may be understood as rather uncontroversial, what has generated much heated debate concerns the substantive vision that postliberals would want societies to be pervaded by, often referred to as the common good, and utilizing state power to accomplish that (e.g. Chappel, 2020; Levitz, 2020). Most controversially, some American postliberals have tied the common good to a particular tradition of Catholic social teaching known as integralism, which aims at re-integrating domains previously separated, such as society and economy and holds that 'the liberal separation of politics and the common good is unsustainable and must be reintegrated' (Pappin, 2020). On such an understanding, the state should actively promote a set of substantive values beyond liberal proceduralism, which, as seen above, postliberals understand not as somehow neutral but through and through peculiar to liberalism and therefore political.

The most fully worked out version of such integralism has been offered by Vermeule who has advanced a distinctly postliberal critique of the self-undermining character of liberalism in a series of eclectic writings (e.g. 2019a, 2019b). Unlike Deneen's earlier proposals of encouraging communitarian localisms as a counterweight against liberalism, Vermeule has argued for a wholesale restructuring of the US legal order oriented towards the common good. More specifically, Vermeule has worked out a distinctive approach to constitutional interpretation which he denotes 'common good

constitutionalism' (2022). Against originalist jurisprudence, which holds that 'constitutional meaning was fixed at the time of the Constitution's enactment', a common good constitutionalism would instead be based 'on the principles that government helps direct persons, associations, and society generally toward the common good' (Vermeule, 2020). Originalism, Vermeule contends, has outlived its usefulness as an alternative to the liberal 'living constitutionalist' tradition, which seeks to promote 'individualism, radical autonomy, and identarian egalitarianism' (2022, p. 23). In fact, common good constitutionalism has not at its aim 'to maximize the autonomy of each person . . . subject to the like autonomy of all' but 'the flourishing of a well-ordered political community' (pp. 24, 7). The goods that the legal system is to promote, and what ultimately makes a legal system exercise legitimate public authority lies in his rendition in the classical legal tradition. These goods include peace, justice and abundance, which he extrapolates to contemporary societies as health, safety and economic security as well as the regulative principles of solidarity and subsidiarity (2022, p. 7).

While pitched at a high level of abstraction, Vermeule's substantive vision for a common good, and the role of the state in implementing that vision, illustrates the difficulties critics of liberalism always had when attempting to move from diagnostics to proposing supposedly non-liberal alternatives to the perceived pathologies that the liberal order has generated. A political project that, at least in Vermeule's case, seeks to appeal to a standard intended to constrain and limit already existing individual autonomy, and using state power in doing so, would seem to approach unequivocal authoritarianism. As Stephen Holmes argued, the liberal skepticism towards conceptions of the common good has consisted in the observation that it was strategically misused to justify 'authority, monopoly, privilege, and social hierarchy' (1993, p. 198).

However, there may be resources within the postliberal tradition itself to correct for such tendencies. In what is arguably the most elaborate postliberal positive vision currently on offer,[6] Pabst explicitly warns against postliberals 'being seduced by the lure of demagogic populism or outright authoritarianism' (Pabst, 2021, p. 20). Like other postliberals, he defends a certain vision of politics oriented towards the common good. For Pabst, however, the common good assumes more of a perpetual quest than a clearly defined end-point (2021, p. 62). Recognizing that modern societies are characterized by deep pluralism, nevertheless 'inscribed in our human nature', certain basic goods such as 'mutual dependency, association, self-organization, community, attachment and affection' are to be found (2021, p. 73). Underlying Pabst's conception of the common good lies a commitment to pluralism. Such a pluralism, however, is not understood as a recognition of incommensurable values that are likely to clash à la Isaiah Berlin's understanding of value pluralism. Instead, such a pluralism is most adequately cultivated in a pluralist polity, a renewed corporatism, and by attachment to a personalism, which recognizes individuals not as atomized beings but embedded and embodied persons, where individuality is always given meaning in a communal context.[5] Moreover, his conception of pluralism is not tied to a specific faith tradition, thereby broadening its appeal beyond the Christian and post-Christian West (2021, p. 103).

Conclusion

It is evident that the liberal project is in deep crisis domestically as well as internationally. Defenders of the liberal order have, due to the hegemonic character of liberalism, for a long time been able to largely ignore its most radical critics. As other contributors to the debate on contemporary forms of illiberalism have acknowledged, it is no longer sufficient to dismiss liberalism's critics as fundamentally illegitimate – a move which in itself confirms rather than challenges the postliberal diagnosis. This article has contributed to an understanding of liberalism's critics by reconstructing what I have referred to as the postliberal project. As argued, there is enough coherence in postliberal thought on both sides of the Atlantic to refer to this tradition as a common project. A crucial first step for a critical engagement with these thinkers is an appreciation that postliberalism indeed does constitute a coherent project, which revolves around a particular interpretation of social contract theory and a claim about the self-undermining quality of the liberal order, domestic and global.

In the final analysis, postliberalism stands out as a theoretically sophisticated and highly ambitious attempt to offer a diagnosis of widespread social malaise in late modern societies and the ways in which the liberal project itself is to blame. The postliberal appeal to orient politics to the common good will, and indeed has, evoked more controversy. To some, such a project will appear as deeply *uncritical*, and lack appropriate attention to relations of power, domination and social hierarchies. Specifically, appeals to the common good will no doubt by some, akin to appeals to a universal, be understood as particularistic and power-laden claims, benefitting some at the expense of others. Others, however, will appreciate the postliberal attempt to re-think socio-political order *without* positing an originary dimension of societal conflict, as much modern and postmodern political and social theory undoubtedly does.

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Notes

1. On this point, the reader is encouraged to consult Chappel (2020) and, for a postliberal defence, Milbank and Pabst (2016, pp. 28–58).
2. By an 'ontology of violence', Milbank refers to a differential ontology in which the constitutive parts are understood as arbitrarily and violently related, evident in Hobbes's *Leviathan* and perhaps most clearly brought out in Nietzsche's writings and the twentieth-century French Nietzscheans. See Milbank (2006, pp. 278–326).
3. The latest full-length statement of a postliberal position is to be found in Adrian Pabst's *Postliberal Politics* (2021), where he both expands and in some ways popularize the postliberalism he presented earlier with Milbank.
4. Deneen's position appears to have shifted from localism to a cautious embrace of statism. See in particular Deneen (2021b).
5. This commitment to pluralism is shared by Michael Lind, see (2020, pp. 131–165).
6. However, Deneen's forthcoming *Regime Change* (Forthcoming) is likely to substantially advance this conversation.

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