Hope for the Lost Souls of Liberalism

The Western model of individual liberty and religious neutrality is in trouble. A return to the big questions is in order.

By Barton Swaim

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Liberalism is in trouble. I don't mean the narrow "liberalism" of the post-1960s Democratic Party, although that's in trouble, too. I mean liberalism in the wider, classical sense—a view of government and society embracing free markets, representative democracy, individual freedom, strict limits on state power, and religious neutrality.

Twenty-five years ago, that understanding of liberalism was almost unquestionable. Not anymore. On the left, markets generate inequality, democracy works only when it achieves the right outcomes, individual freedom is uninteresting unless it involves sexual innovation or abortion, the state is everything, and religion doesn't deserve neutrality. On the right—or anyway the intellectual/populist right—markets destroy traditional moral conventions, democracy is mostly a sham, individual freedom encourages behavioral deviancies, state power is a force for good, and the First Amendment's ban on the establishment of religion was likely a bad idea.

Partisans will dispute these characterizations, but the liberal order in America (and Europe) is under attack—and not without reason. Political debates in Washington are bereft of good faith, the education system idealizes self-hatred and sexual confusion, and even corporate leaders—who until yesterday could be counted on to champion patriotism and hard work—eagerly recite the maxims of idiots.

I have read many critiques of liberalism, but none so original as "Why We Are Restless: On the Modern Quest for Contentment" by Benjamin Storey and Jenna

Silber Storey. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say the book doesn't so much criticize liberalism as explain why it's neither the cause of our problems nor their solution.

Mr. and Mrs. Storey, 46 and 45 respectively, teach political philosophy and run the Tocqueville Program at Furman University; for the present academic year they're also visiting scholars at the American Enterprise Institute. On a recent visit to Furman's campus, I met them in Mrs. Storey's book-laden but very tidy office. (Disclosure: My daughter is a student at Furman, although she avoids the subject of political philosophy on the not unreasonable grounds that "politics stresses me out.")

At the core of their book is the reflection that educated people in modern liberal democracies are very comfortable with proximate arguments and not at all with ultimate ones—in other words, that moderns can debate means but not ends.

What do they mean by "ends"? "I teach Plato's 'Gorgias,' " Mr. Storey says. " Socrates is arguing with Callicles about what the best way of life is. And so I will ask my students: What's the best way of life? Just like that. The standard response is: What are you talking about? They look at me as if to say: You can't ask that question!"

So it is, he thinks, in liberal societies generally: We're allowed to debate all questions but ultimate ones. "We're assuming we can't have an answer to these questions, without even asking them." In the classroom, he says, both he and his wife "try to shift students from a stance of dogmatic skepticism, in which they assume before the inquiry begins that you can't ask ultimate questions, to a place of zetetic or seeking skepticism, in which you recognize that, despite all your doubts and apprehensions, you have to at least ask questions about God and the good and the nature of the universe."

Liberalism began in the 16th and 17th centuries as a response to the violent political struggles of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation—the so-called wars of religion. European philosophers and political leaders sought a political worldview in which a man was able to hold his own views and practice his own religion without

reference to the mythology of the dominant culture around him. To oversimplify the ideal: In public he would behave as a loyal citizen; in private he could affirm or deny transubstantiation or decide he cared little either way.

The beginnings of liberalism are most clearly evident in the philosophy of John Locke (1632-1704). But Locke's writings aren't famously readable, and the Storeys begin their book with Michel de Montaigne (1533-92). Montaigne was no philosopher, and that is the point: He was a wonderful essayist but didn't strive for universal truth. The Storeys call the Montaignian ideal "immanent contentment": an outlook that values satisfaction in the moment and has little interest in the grand principles along which society might be reordered. Montaigne, in this view, is the prototypical liberal.

As attractive as the liberal worldview is, the Storeys think, it has ceased to satisfy. "Liberalism isn't popular among a lot of younger people," Mrs. Storey says, "because it was designed to solve a different anthropological problem from the ones we're facing. We were different people when we came up with our liberal institutions to solve the strife of war and persecution." The political institutions of liberalism, she says, were designed for people who "were already strongly committed to churches, localities, professions and families. But when private lives have broken down—families dissolved, localities less important, religious life absent—liberalism's framework institutions no longer make sense." Young people in particular, she says, aren't interested in the "prosaic" Montaignian life: "It just isn't enough for them. It has no transcendence. They're going to go beyond it."

Many critiques of liberalism and modernity quickly become critiques of the free market. It's a tempting solution because the market is something you can change or rearrange by force of law. The Storeys don't take that view. "The problems we're facing right now are not fundamentally economic problems," he says. "They're fundamentally educational and philosophical problems. The way forward is a multigenerational project, and it's going to begin in schools."

Another way to explain the plight of 21st-century liberalism, the Storeys argue, is that it has become bereft of "forms." Tocqueville used that term in "Democracy in America" but didn't define it. He meant traditions, social conventions, taboos. Aristocratic societies rely heavily on forms; each person, high or low, understands the expectations his role places on him and responds accordingly. Democratic societies tend to spurn forms. Tocqueville, a French aristocrat, preferred democracy but worried that democratic citizens might forget forms altogether.

Mr. and Mrs. Storey want to resist the march toward formlessness. "In the classroom," he says, "I always wear a tie when I teach. I call my students Mister this and Miss that. The reason we do that isn't to make people feel uncomfortable; it's to create proper distance between teacher and student. I'm saying to them: I'm putting my tie on because I respect you and respect the subject we're studying. I'm going to speak to you in a very formal way, like an adult, and I'm going to ask you to rise up and be an adult."

The loss of forms in modern democratic societies, the Storeys contend, cultivates a kind of chronic restlessness and anxiety. Without forms—without conventions and attendant expectations, without institutional connections defining our relationships—"every decision becomes an existential crisis," Mrs. Storey says. "You're a free-floating atom. You have to guess what the proper response is to any circumstance."

If these free-floating atoms aren't bound to institutions and conventions, many are governed by our nationalized political mayhem. Are young people terrorized by the protean demands of influencers and Twitter mobs? "There's a nervousness in the classroom when we talk about political topics that I didn't notice four or five years ago," Mr. Storey says. "Students now come of age in a fully different world in which saying the wrong thing—or even not saying the right thing—can destroy you. One of our students was chased off a certain social media platform, I forget which one, because there was a rally around some cause célèbre and he just didn't say anything. He was denounced for saying nothing."

Mr. Storey adds that “Tocqueville described 200 years ago the tyranny of the majority over thought, in which people are constantly taking their intellectual bearings from what they think they’re expected to believe.”

The Storeys met at the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, where they studied under the conservative intellectuals Leon and Amy Kass. Like their teachers, who were also married (Mrs. Kass died in 2015), the Storeys have an almost parental affection for their students. Although they are broadly sympathetic with French and American conservatism—you could guess that much by Mr. Storey’s tie-wearing and use of honorifics—students of wildly divergent political allegiances consider them favorites.

The couple’s conservatism consists above all in the belief that “old, wise books,” as he puts it, have something to teach us. “Old, wise books.” That, in essence, is their answer to the newspaperman’s inevitable question: So what are we going to do about this mess? Or, to put it differently: If liberalism was designed for people ensconced in a labyrinth of institutions, and the citizens of 21st-century democracies are no longer such people, what do we do with liberalism?

Other rightward-leaning critiques of liberalism—I think especially of Patrick Deneen’s “Why Liberalism Failed” (2018)—fault the liberal order itself for the hedonistic perversities, economic inequalities and cultural oppressiveness they see in modern American culture. Mr. and Mrs. Storey steer a different course. In their book they credit the liberal order with a “profound awareness of the manifold and conflicting dimensions of human life and of the consequent challenges of self-government.” Their hope, Mr. Storey says, “is that the liberal institutions that have done so much good for our country can weather the current wave of disorder.”

The task for today, in their view, isn’t to dynamite liberalism, on the one hand, or to encourage its pathologies, on the other. It is, as Mrs. Storey says, “to recover the preconditions of liberalism’s success.” To do that “is going to require returning to preliberal sources—the resources of classical thought, Christian thought and Jewish thought, and the communal practices that turn those traditions into ways of life.

These ways of thinking aim to cultivate order in the soul in a way that liberal thought does not."

All this talk of order and souls puts me in mind of Plato's "Republic." I haven't read it in 30 years but I remember that Plato wanted to draw a connection between order in the soul and order in the city, or polis. On a shelf in Mrs. Storey's office I spy a copy of the University of Chicago intellectual Allan Bloom's famous translation of the "Republic," so perhaps I'm on to something. Perhaps the Storeys' point can be put as simply as this: You can't fix the city as long as the souls are a mess.
Mr. Swaim is a Journal editorial page writer.

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