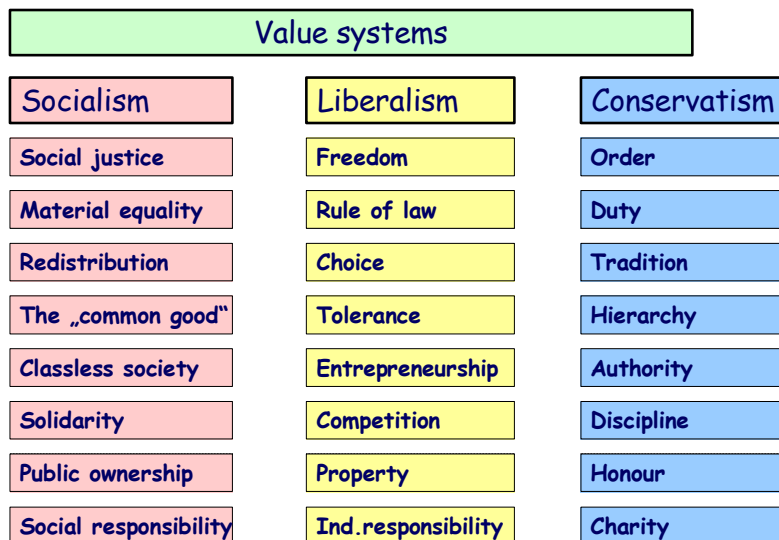


Liberalism today – freedom first

POLITICAL VALUES – A REVIEW OF BASICS¹

The following diagram shows a selection of values² that are important for each of the three political mainstreams: socialism, liberalism and conservatism.



These values are linked to a core value and to each other in very obvious ways and form “value systems”. Here are some examples of these linkages:

Liberals focus on freedom (or liberty – which is the same thing). It is their core value. When liberals talk about freedom they talk about the freedom of the individual.

Freedom and individual responsibility are inextricably linked. There’s no freedom without responsibility and no responsibility without freedom.

Tolerance is a precondition for freedom and for commitment to human rights.

¹ Text by Stefan Melnik (©)

² There are more, of course. Some other important values are mentioned in the text below.

Protection of human rights means protection of freedom. Political rights are part of our freedom and mean, among other things, participation and democracy... [etc].

The conservative value system emphasises order, tradition and conservation (which is the basis for order). Important conservative values include: discipline, authority, hierarchy, stability and unity³. Conservatives tend to focus on issues such as “the nation”, “the family” and “morality”. Perceived threats to their integrity stem, so conservatives claim, from disregard for order and tradition.

Socialists emphasise equality and the values related thereto. When they discuss equality, they not only emphasise a “level playing field” but also envisage “equal outcomes,” something that is termed “social justice”. Hence their preoccupation with redistribution, social security and the minimisation of risk. Liberty and private property must be restricted because, in their view, they tend to generate or perpetuate difference and inequality. “Collective ownership” and “collective decision-making” are the best safeguards against an unequal and unjust society.

Despite differences in the cultures we come from and different political histories, we have a common understanding of the basic values of each of these political mainstreams.

There is an important liberal value that is often forgotten – and yet it is implicit in many of the things liberals strive for: it is EDUCATION. A few comments on education:

- ⇒ We shouldn't forget that liberalism is a product of enlightenment
- ⇒ The liberal commitment to the individual doesn't stop at the notion that the individual is the best judge of his/her own interests. The commitment to the individual includes commitment to maximising opportunities and commitment to self-fulfilment. This implies education.
- ⇒ Progress as a liberal value is inconceivable without education.
- ⇒ When liberals talk about education they don't mean "learning by rote," but "learning to decide for oneself."

There are different liberal traditions throughout the world, and sometimes even within a single country, but **all liberals** - whether "libertarian", "classical liberal" or "social liberal" - **have a common denominator: they believe in putting freedom and the individual first.**

Considerable differences are also to be found within other political mainstreams [the differences between orthodox Marxist and the social democracy of *New Labour* (United Kingdom) are considerable].

Christian Democrat and Green philosophies are hybrid in nature. Frequently, they represent mixtures of conservative and socialist value systems.

Liberals subscribe to the central values of the French Revolution - "liberty", "equality" and "fraternity" but, in contrast to the socialist tradition, **subordinate equality and fraternity to liberty**. Equality and fraternity also mean different things: for liberals "equality", for instance, translates into *equality before the law, optimal opportunities for all, no systematic and enforced preferences, and universal suffrage*. "Fraternity" is expressed in tolerance and respect for human dignity.

³ The contrasting liberal value is diversity.

The most important distinguishing feature of liberalism is that it distrusts decisions made on behalf of collective entities, whether these entities are *nations*, *classes*, [eg, the "working class"], *castes*, *religious groups* [Hindus, Moslems, Christians], *civil services*, *business*, *employees*, *generations* [eg, pensioners and future pensioners]. All such decisions tend towards arbitrariness in that they ignore differences within such an entity, overlook individual needs and create new injustices. Liberalism with its focus on the individual is the most radical alternative to collectivist convictions [see following illustration].

