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HHS

History of the Human Sciences
1–24
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DOI: 10.1177/09526951241278578
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The environmental counter-history of liberalism: A formidable challenge?

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Abstract

In the view of the Marxist philosopher Domenico Losurdo, liberalism is 'the most dogged enemy of freedom'. This surprising statement runs contrary to the received wisdom among liberal thinkers. Losurdo and other 'counter-historians' of liberalism are very effective at exposing the historical atrocities that liberal states have committed, and which have been supported by liberal philosophers – including slavery, racism, genocide, and the subjugation of the working class. But what implications, if any, does this have for contemporary theory? I will argue that there is an important contemporary variation of this 'counter-history'. Liberalism-in-practice is currently implicated in various forms of environmental degradation and resulting structural violence against disempowered groups. Moreover, divorcing these failings of liberalism-in-practice from liberalism-in-theory is a challenging philosophical endeavour, because even the *philosophy* of liberalism has difficulties adjusting to environmental issues. The contemporary version of the counter-history thus presents a powerful although not decisive challenge, one worthy of greater discussion.

Keywords

capitalism, counter-history, ecology, liberalism, Losurdo

Introduction

The gap between normative theory and the history of ideas has widened in recent years, at least within liberal political theory. Many liberal theorists, as well as many non-liberals,

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are of the view that building a coherent and normatively sound political theory has little to do with a thorough analysis of history (Bell, 2014: 692; Miller, 1990). On the other side of this cultural divide, however, is a group of Marxists, socialists, and activist scholars who believe that the essence of an ideology lies in its *practice*. These writers subject the history of liberalism-in-practice to close scrutiny, and they attempt to refute the commonly held view that liberalism has been the main driver of social progress over the last three centuries. Against liberal historians and philosophers, these 'counter-historians' of liberalism attempt to show that liberalism has often held back social progress, and has been bound up with various oppressive practices throughout modern history.

I shall argue that historians and philosophers should consider the counter-history of liberalism to be a formidable intellectual challenge to liberal theory. This article will start by outlining the 'original' counter-history of liberalism, as presented by theorists such as Losurdo and others. After this, I will analyse possible liberal responses to this counter-history, which is an important and so far neglected task. I shall contend that liberals have, broadly, three lines of response to the original counter-history of liberalism. First, while liberals should acknowledge that the history of existing liberalism has some effect on the tenability of theoretical liberalism, they can appeal to a theory/practice distinction. That is, they can argue that it is a mistake to *completely* shackle liberal theory to history and practices. Secondly, liberals can argue that liberalism has been better in practice than the alternatives to it, even if it has fallen short of optimistic expectations. Moreover, liberals can point to the fact that counter-historians have exaggerated the degree to which liberalism has been historically regressive, and can contend that liberalism has been a progressive force in many cases. While none of these responses refutes the counter-history of liberalism individually, I think they *collectively* provide a strong defence of liberalism.

In the next section, I will present an 'updated' counter-history of liberalism that has more force against contemporary liberal theory. This will involve drawing attention to subtler forms of violence and oppression that are connected to both the practice and theory of liberalism. I shall argue that existing liberalism has been implicated in climate change and other forms of environmental degradation. This in turn means that liberal states have been responsible for much of the structural violence against the global poor and other vulnerable groups that frequently results from anthropogenic environmental problems. It is not possible for liberals to brush this aside by claiming that it is merely an issue for existing liberal states rather than liberal theory, because even the more attractive forms of liberal theory usually endorse capitalism and economic growth, both of which are highlighted by many climate scientists as being key drivers of our current environmental crisis. Therefore, the updated form of the counter-history of liberalism has more force against plausible and attractive contemporary forms of liberal theory. I will consider the potential response that some liberals, particularly Rawlsians, can quite easily reject capitalism and economic growth, and therefore that even the updated counter-history of liberalism has little force against contemporary liberal theories. I will also consider the response that appeals to 'negative liberalism'. This reply claims that all the possible alternatives to liberalism do just as badly on an environmental level, and therefore that the updated counter-history of liberalism loses much of its force. I will argue that Rawlsian property-owning democracy and liberal socialism do not

ultimately overcome a capitalistic and growth-based ethos, and so this response fails. I will also argue that we have some good reasons to focus on liberalism instead of other theories, not least because liberalism is probably still the dominant ideology in the world today. I will conclude that the environmentalist version of the counter-history represents a formidable challenge to contemporary liberalism.

The approach outlined in this article adds venom to the environmentalist critique of liberalism given by theorists such as Arran Gare, Murray Bookchin, and Daniel Faber. By providing historical evidence for existing liberalism's role in environmental degradation, and in particular by emphasising the importance of environmental structural violence, this article bolsters the historical dimension of the environmentalist critique. Moreover, I will argue that the connections between liberalism, capitalism, and economic growth are (for the most part) necessary rather than merely incidental. When combined with the history of actual liberal states and their very strong (if not uniform) tendency to be capitalistic, this helps to strengthen the case against liberalism from an environmentalist perspective.

It is important to offer a definition, or at least a general understanding, of liberalism. Curiously, some counter-historians fail to do so. In a way, this is understandable, because liberalism is notoriously difficult to define: 'Liberalism is more than one thing. On any close examination, it seems to fracture into a range of related but sometimes competing visions' (Courtland, Gaus, and Schmidtz, 2022: Para. 1). In a broad sense, however, some characteristics that liberals generally share would be the following: belief in the importance of the individual and individual freedom; support for the rule of law and a separation of powers; a distrust of authority based on tradition; and, at least in principle, support for human rights and civil liberties (ibid.). As we shall see, however, counter-historians have challenged the notion that liberalism is always committed to these principles.

A history of the counter-history of liberalism

Although by no means the first counter-historian of liberalism, the Italian philosopher Domenico Losurdo is probably the most influential of them. Other counter-historians, some of whom wrote their best known works before Losurdo, include Anthony Arblaster, Mike Davis, C. B. Macpherson, and Frankfurt School philosophers such as Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm. Works by thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas also share similar features, although their concerns are generally more theoretical. In this article, I will be focusing on the Marxist counter-history as presented by Losurdo and others, instead of the critique seen in MacIntyre or the Frankfurt School's approach. In Losurdo's *Liberalism: A Counter-history* (2014), the author offers a blistering critique of liberalism, and in particular its claim to be the key 'civilising force' in modern history. His argument is largely historical in nature, and he eschews a discussion based on abstract considerations. Although Losurdo's critique of liberalism involves drawing historical connections between liberalism and various forms of oppression, the book is not simply an exercise in stacking up a list of atrocities committed by liberals: he is arguing that the often sordid historical reality of liberalism makes it more difficult to defend on a theoretical level. He poses a 'series of embarrassing questions' at the beginning of the book. He asks the reader whether John C. Calhoun

should be considered a liberal – this US vice-president gave a passionate defence of individual liberty and was forthright in condemning ‘fanaticism’ and ‘crusades’. On the surface, he sounds like a reasonable liberal. But Calhoun’s defence of individual liberty extended to slave owners, because he saw them as victims of abolitionist ‘fanatics’ who wished to impose a despotic regime that would deny slave owners their constitutional right to hold private property (Losurdo, 2014: 1–2). Was Calhoun a liberal? Presumably, most contemporary liberals would say he was not, considering that he held such views.

However, that answer would invite further ‘embarrassing’ questions. For instance, if Calhoun was not a liberal, why should we consider John Locke to be ‘the father of liberalism’? Locke also argued passionately in favour of individual freedom, but defended slavery as the ‘temporary outcome of a just war’ (Locke, 1940[1689]: 157–8; Losurdo, 2014: 4). Moreover, although Locke argued strongly for religious toleration, he denied rights to Catholics and atheists, since he considered them a threat to the foundations of civilised society (Locke, 1993[1689]: 415–26). So, was Locke a liberal? Losurdo proceeds to stack up a catalogue of liberal misdeeds. Liberal states have practised eugenics, and several liberal philosophers have supported this; liberalism and racial slavery had a ‘unique twin birth’, and slavery was supported by many other liberal thinkers (Losurdo, 2014: Ch. 2; see also Mills, 2017, for a discussion of ‘racial liberalism’). Much of the social progress for which liberals often take credit was frequently the result of workers’ struggle, and social reforms were sometimes hampered by liberalism. In short, liberals and proto-liberals in the 18th and 19th centuries claimed to be committed to freedom, but it turned out to be freedom only for a select ‘community of the free’.

The fact that liberals have often reserved political freedoms for a select constituency highlights a recurring theme in the counter-history of liberalism: the *hypocrisy* exhibited by many liberals through the ages. According to counter-historians, this is not merely incidental; the hypocrisy arises because liberals often make unstated assumptions, some of which they may not even be fully aware of. As C. B. Macpherson writes in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, ‘It would be strange indeed if a thinker did not sometimes carry over into his premisses some general assumptions about the nature of man or of society, shaped by living in his own society.… No man formulates all that is in his mind.… What they leave unformulated may nevertheless pervade their thinking’ (1970: 6). These unguarded assumptions and sources of social prejudice constitute, in the view of counter-historians, one of the key reasons why embarrassing questions such as those mentioned above arise.

Similar ‘embarrassing’ questions could be based in the contemporary world, even though Losurdo does not do this in *Liberalism*. Many political scientists and philosophers are of the view that liberal democracy is now the ‘final form of human government’ and represents ‘the end of history’ (Barry, 2001: 285; Fukuyama, 2012; cf. Gutmann, 1985: 322). In ‘The Underbelly of Liberalism’, Evan Jones sums up the left-wing critique of this view: ‘Behind the West’s triumphalist label [“liberal democracy”] are myriad anomalies. They are inconsistent with the conditions for personal liberty.… Disproportionate incarceration rates amongst African-Americans, a community vulnerability to police violence and ongoing voter disenfranchisement, all highlight that the tangible outcomes continue to run contrary to the formal symbolism of [the Civil Rights Act of] 1964’ (2020: 80). To

put it simply, the reality of liberal democracy is often oppressive, and we might add that non-liberal politics is still popular worldwide.

Some critics of liberalism focus on other aspects of more recent history. As Anthony Arblaster points out in *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism* (1987), Cold War liberalism – the form of anti-communist liberalism that was popular in the 1950s and 1960s – could be just as contradictory and hypocritical as the classical liberalism of the 17th and 18th centuries. Cold War liberals such as Daniel Bell and Isaiah Berlin championed freedom, but this freedom could not always be extended to communists, who were themselves enemies of freedom and sometimes needed to have their liberty curtailed (ibid.: 313–16; cf. Arblaster, 1985). Cold War liberals understandably feared totalitarianism in the aftermath of the Nazi era and Stalin's regime, but this concern with totalitarianism led Cold War liberals to support measures aimed at 'containing' communism, which entailed arming and financing anti-communist regimes and movements around the world. Of course, not all of these were liberal, and some were full-blown authoritarian societies. How could Cold War liberals justify containing communism by supporting regimes that were seemingly just as bad, and in some cases even worse? Their strategy was to frame non-liberal anti-communist states as 'authoritarian', in contrast to the 'totalitarian' communist regimes. The former were disreputable by liberal standards, but in the eyes of Cold War liberals they did not aim for complete control of society and the economy in the same way as totalitarian regimes. In that sense, they were on some level redeemable. Some may see this as little more than a cynical exercise in geopolitics. But it also had much to do with the ideological commitment to anti-communism, because communism was seen as nothing less than an embodiment of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and thus the West's support for regimes that were 'merely authoritarian' was considered a necessary evil (Arblaster, 1987: 317–20). Of course, in reality it was never clear if communist regimes were actually worse than the anti-communist movements that were supported by the West. Would it really have been preferable to live under Pinochet's regime in Chile, or through the Guatemalan Civil War under Efraín Ríos Montt, than to live in Soviet Russia or Cuba? The idea that there was a clear distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes now strikes us as not much more than a convenient fiction.

The underlying issue that Western liberal states outsource some of their brutality remains today. Critics of liberalism often argue that, if most of us do not suffer privation and physical violence in the modern Western world, one of the reasons is that we have exported many of our problems. The 'War on Terror', which has been justified in part as a defence of liberal democracy, is a case in point. Not only has the War on Terror been justified as a defence of liberal democracy by some politicians, but in the early years many of the most vehement criticisms of it were put forward not by liberal theorists but instead by Marxists and other radicals, as well as IR realists (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2003). In the 2000s, many liberals were ambivalent about the War on Terror – if they did not outright support it (see Roberts, 2005). However, the War on Terror has failed to achieve most of its objectives, has cost an estimated $8 trillion, and has claimed countless military and civilian lives.[1]

There are some lesser-known cases too. The Second Congo War, which was possibly the deadliest conflict since World War II, was influenced by Western economic interests,

not least the Democratic Republic of the Congo's abundant natural resources (Poulsen, 2012). As Losurdo says, 'As for the right to live "in freedom from fear", this is denied every day by the policy of war, the threat of war and Obama's use of drones' (2018: Para. 17). And as Evan Jones concludes, 'Liberalism, purportedly denoting freedom of the individual, was always and everywhere intended selectively.... Liberalism and its latter day variant, liberal democracy, are, in the hands of representative proponents, pure ideology – *de facto* vehicles for anti-egalitarian propaganda and practices' (2020: 81–2).

In sum, counter-historians of liberalism criticise the commonly held view that liberalism has been responsible for most of the progress throughout the last 300 years or so. The idea that liberalism has been responsible for most of the benefits of modernity and few of its ills is put under the microscope and found to be inaccurate. Counter-historians of liberalism usually focus on the era of classical liberalism in the 18th and 19th centuries, although some of them do cover more recent periods. As I hope to have shown, the counter-history of liberalism *can* at least be applied to more recent history and contemporary affairs.[2] To a significant degree, counter-historians of liberalism mirror many critics of Marxism, such as those who authored *The Black Book of Communism* (1999). These critics believe that the reality of Marxism has an impact on the defensibility of Marxist *theory*. Counter-historians of liberalism turn this on its head by showing that liberals should also have plenty to be embarrassed about. We shall now turn to an analysis of whether this constitutes a powerful critique of liberalism.

Countering the counter-history: Unfairness to liberalism?

Most liberals would be unimpressed with these arguments. They have at least three possible lines of reply. First, they can argue that the correct approach to political philosophy is that of ideal theory, or they can argue that, even if we should adhere to non-ideal theory, we can maintain a fairly strict division between history and normative theory. Secondly, they could accept that there is much truth in counter-historians' claims about liberalism-in-practice – and that this *does* have an impact on the theory of liberalism – but they could contend that liberalism is still preferable to the alternatives. One of the most influential forms of such 'negative liberalism' is Judith Shklar's liberalism of fear, and Isaiah Berlin's liberalism also falls within this family of views (Berlin, 1969; Shklar, 1998). Thirdly, liberals could agree that the study of history has an impact on normative theorising, but they could challenge counter-historians' historical evidence against liberalism. All three approaches are somewhat promising, and taken in combination they can provide a strong defence of liberalism against the counter-history of liberalism as outlined above. Let's analyse each of these responses in turn.

First, most contemporary liberals would object to the suggestion that the moral failings of existing liberal societies should have much bearing on liberal theory. In other words, the fact that existing liberal societies are often oppressive should not lead us to the conclusion that liberal theory is flawed. Most contemporary liberals make a conceptual separation between 'ideal theory' and 'non-ideal theory'. The former concerns the abstract values and principles of liberalism, and largely ignores real-world limitations and injustices. Non-ideal theory, by contrast, considers the injustices of the real world when

formulating political principles and commitments. To be clear, the terms ‘ideal theory’ and ‘non-ideal theory’ can be used in different ways, and I am not analysing all of them in this article. ‘Ideal theory’ can be used to refer to the idea of ‘strict compliance’ with the principles of justice. This sort of ideal theory supposes that almost all citizens will accept the basic principles of justice, and will not gratuitously disregard them for their personal advantage (see Rawls, 1971; Valentini, 2012: 655). It can also refer to the view that ‘feasibility’ is not a particularly important consideration when formulating moral and political principles. In other words, this sort of ‘ideal theory’ says that, even if a political ideal is very difficult to put into practice, that does not imply that the ideal is flawed (see Valentini, 2012: 654).

However, this is not exactly how I am using the term ‘ideal theory’ in this article. I am using the term to refer to the related position that the reality of existing societies has nothing more than a marginal impact on the plausibility of a political theory (see Langlois, 2008: 353–4; cf. Mills, 2005: 171). In other words, I am referring to the sort of ideal theory that claims that there is a strong distinction between theory and practice. This distinction is such that the actual reality of a political ideology should not be construed as having a significant effect on whether that theory is defensible in the abstract. Thus, the actual reality of liberalism, and the fact that existing liberal societies are often unjust in numerous ways, does not have a significant impact on the tenability of theoretical forms of liberalism. On this view, liberalism is a theory that makes a strong commitment to human freedom, equality, and human rights, *and* this ideal can be separated from the often oppressive nature of existing liberal states. Now, almost all ideal theorists would concede that we should pay *some* attention to history and social science, because an ideal cannot be truly *normative* if it is impossible or almost impossible to put it into practice (see Volacu, 2018). However, they would argue that, just because achieving the liberal ideal might involve massive social change, that does not imply that there is anything faulty about the ideal. We should concentrate on making the liberal ideal attractive, rational, and coherent on a philosophical level rather than concentrating on the failings of actual *states*: that is a task for political scientists, sociologists, politicians, and others.

While ideal theorists are almost certainly going to think that this response to the counter-history of liberalism is correct, it is also important to recognise that even some theorists on the ‘non-ideal’ wing would recoil at the idea that the analysis of actual states – or at least the sort of analysis given by the counter-historians – is particularly relevant to whether a political theory stands up to scrutiny (see Miller, 1990). If philosophers such as John Locke held repellent views that undermined rather than enhanced human freedom, even non-ideal liberals may not see the relevance of this to contemporary theorising. Locke was a sort of liberal, they might say, but some of his thinking was not true to liberal principles. Why should the fact that Locke failed to be true to the cause of freedom have any bearing on contemporary theory? There is little doubt, I think, about why books such as *Liberalism: A Counter-history* have been largely ignored by liberal political philosophers.

While this kind of response to the counter-history of liberalism seems powerful initially, it is in fact only partly successful on closer inspection. First, it is not always true that liberal political philosophers defend *only* theoretical liberalism: some of them

also defend existing liberal states (e.g. Fukuyama, 2012). Secondly, and more importantly, there are some cases in which it simply does not seem appropriate to completely separate theory and practice.

Consider the political philosophy of fascism. This could appear a strange choice, since any theory of fascism might be thought to explicitly call for violence, oppression, and racism. A neo-fascist, however, might appeal to the theory of Italian fascism put forward in Giovanni Gentile's *The Origins and Doctrine of Fascism* (2004[1932]), which makes, for instance, little mention of racism and none of anti-Semitism.[3] One of the problems for an 'ideal fascist', though, is simply that it would be wrong to say that 'fascism in practice' has no bearing on 'fascism in theory'. Would the historical reality that Italian fascists ultimately helped the Nazis to kill millions of Jewish people be theoretically relevant here? Certainly, this fact would not serve to *completely refute* the neo-fascist, but it would be theoretically relevant. The same can be said about persecution in fascist Italy and Spain: even if an 'ideal fascist' found a way to avoid calling directly for this, the suspicion would surely remain that tyranny is the true essence of fascism. If we say that this historical evidence is not relevant, we are diminishing our capacity to learn from history and unnecessarily narrowing political debate. In sum, ideal theory has its limits, and moreover creating a clear distinction between history and philosophy seems inappropriate in some cases.

That said, it would also be a mistake to shackle philosophy completely to history and practices. While I agree with counter-historians of liberalism that there is a danger of political philosophy becoming too abstract, we also have to worry about concentrating too heavily on practices. While I believe that many theorists draw too sharp a distinction between history and philosophy, that does not mean that there is no truth in their claims. Take the case of John Rawls and his thoughts about 'property-owning democracy'.[4] It is true that no existing liberal societies have been property-owning democracies, at least in the sense that Rawls uses the term (see Jackson, 2005: 438). However, this does not mean that Rawls and his followers should not be permitted to put forward the latter as an attractive ideal. The mistake would be to use ideal theory to brush aside all concerns about the way in which liberalism has unfolded in practice, or to insist that the history of ideas has no bearing on contemporary thought. It is not illegitimate to be a liberal theorist who criticises her own society and wishes for change. All theorists are entitled to create a distinction between theory and practice to some extent, and to put forward an ethical ideal, even if all existing societies fall short of it.

Liberals can draw upon other responses to complement these arguments. In the above passages, I have conceded that the imperfect reality of liberalism has some bearing on liberal theory. But we might wonder whether any political theory can do better. Marxism, for instance, is an ideology nominally premised on the ideals of human emancipation, equality, and liberation from the capitalist system. It may acknowledge the need for a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' led by a class of professional revolutionaries, but this is considered to be temporary, and the professional class should be democratically recallable.

However, the actual history of Marxism has often betrayed this ideal. For instance, the number of victims of Joseph Stalin's government is contested, but if we include the Soviet famine of 1932–3, the number cannot be lower than 6 million and is possibly much higher (Snyder, 2010). China's 'Great Helmsman' Mao Zedong was responsible

for millions of deaths in the Great Leap Forward, which led to possibly the deadliest famine in human history in absolute terms (Li and Yang, 2005). And what of contemporary China? It is true that China has been successful by many measures over the last few decades. Losurdo praised China for its poverty reduction, infrastructure, and for providing an alternative to the 'Washington Consensus' (2018: Para. 16). However, we should also consider the thousands who are executed in China every year, the mass surveillance, and the former programme of 're-education through labour'. In recent years, China has oppressed the Uyghur minorities, which has resulted in possibly the largest mass internment on the grounds of ethnicity since World War II (Finley, 2021). Because non-liberal states have often been violent and oppressive, we might still be inclined to believe that liberal states are preferable to the alternatives.

A more positive defence of liberalism would be to question the historical data used by counter-historians. On this view, liberalism has not held back freedom and democracy but has in fact advanced them, perhaps more than any other political movement in history. Traditionally, liberals have been wedded to a fairly strong form of the idea of progress, which portrays humanity's journey as a story of development from a barbaric past to a relatively free and democratic present. Liberalism is construed as being a key driver of social progress throughout the centuries. For counter-historians, however, the age of liberalism in the 18th and 19th centuries was if anything *more* brutal than what came before. Losurdo talks about how liberalism and racial slavery had a 'unique twin birth', and he implies that this form of slavery was far worse than (say) ancient Greek and Roman slavery (2014: Ch. 2). He also discusses how chattel slavery declined precipitously in the Middle Ages, and only made a return with the coming of liberal modernity.[5] Both Losurdo and Arblaster document how the death penalty was used in the 18th and 19th centuries as a tool for controlling the poor, and how during the rise of liberalism the number of capital offences increased vertiginously, and so on. This stands in stark contrast to the picture given by proponents of liberal progress, who believe that the liberal Enlightenment precipitated much social and moral advancement.

To be sure, this somewhat Whiggish view of history is less popular than it used to be among liberals (see Rosenblum, 1985: 305; cf. Shklar, 1998). Nonetheless, the idea of progress is still commonly encountered, and spirited defences of it have been fashionable in recent years. Many continue to maintain that we have made a great deal of social progress over the last two centuries or so, and liberalism is often construed as having played a large role in this moral advancement (see Mueller, 2009; Pinker, 2018). Clearly, this constitutes a direct attack on the view of history offered by Losurdo and others. Counter-historians could reply that much of the 'good news' that proponents of liberal progress have championed – such as the 'European homicide decline' and the idea that war is on the wane – has faced serious criticisms from some scientists, anthropologists, historians, and others. It is true that recent advocates of liberal progress have been called out for their exaggeration of the barbarism of the pre-liberal past, their use of unreliable historical evidence, and their mishandling of statistics (Bessel, 2018; Braumoeller, 2019; Charbonnier, 2021: 5; Smail, 2021). They have also been criticised for their oversimplification of the Enlightenment, which was never straightforwardly a liberal movement and contained many illiberal elements (see Dwyer, 2018; Gray, 2018).[6]

Nonetheless, even if we are sceptical about some of the claims made on behalf of liberal progress, it seems wrong to believe that liberalism has been as historically regressive as counter-historians sometimes suggest. On some issues, we have made moral progress, and while we must acknowledge the role played by the great mass movements for social change, it is too simplistic to claim that liberalism has most often held back progress and rarely advanced it. Some important movements for social change, such as LGBT and feminist movements, have often benefited from liberalism, because liberal states have allowed them to exist and have often protected their right to free speech.[7] Nancy Rosenblum's review of *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism* is, because of such considerations, entitled 'Unfairness to Liberalism' (1985).

A contemporary counter-history: Environmental degradation and structural violence

Counter-historians of liberalism could make their critique more powerful if they focused on subtler forms of violence and oppression, and made a more concerted effort to connect these practices to the theoretical commitments of liberalism. In this section, I will focus on structural violence and environmental degradation, rather than more obvious atrocities, wars, and so on. It is not much of a secret that liberal societies have had an uneasy relationship with the natural world. It is widely known that, since the coming of modernity, the planet's mean surface temperature has increased significantly, mainly because of the burning of fossil fuels. It would be a mistake, though, to focus only on the fact that the planet is heating up. We should also consider issues such as the loss of biodiversity and the sixth mass extinction, as well as overfishing, declining freshwater resources, and deforestation. All of these phenomena are closely interlinked, but it is the combination of factors that is important: the climate emergency comprises several environmental challenges that add up to the possibility of severe, permanent damage to the environment and human life (Ripple *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, since at least the 1980s, world leaders have known about the destructive possibility of climate change and other forms of environmental degradation (and the effects that these will have on people), because the science has been relatively clear, and it is not at all plausible to suggest that leaders have not had good access to scientific advice.[8] Therefore, at least as far as this period of time is concerned, environmental degradation and the related structural violence (resulting from the actions of liberal states) is a product of the counter-historians' favourite motif, *liberal hypocrisy*. That is, liberal states in this period have claimed to support freedom, equality, human rights, and international development, but have also undermined these things through their general disregard for the environment.

The age of fossil fuel consumption began (for the most part) in fledgling liberal states such as Britain and US. It is true that many non-liberal societies have also had an appalling environmental record (see infra), but there can be little question that liberal states are at least as responsible as non-liberal societies. Even though China is currently the world leader in greenhouse gases emissions in absolute terms, we have to take into consideration the large size of China's population as well as the fact that much of the consumption

of Chinese goods happens in the West. It is also sometimes overlooked that China and other non-Western countries are in the process of trying to catch up with the West. The 'World Scientists' Warning of a Climate Emergency', which was signed by more than 11,000 scientists, makes this observation: 'The climate crisis is closely linked to excessive consumption of the wealthy lifestyle. The most affluent countries are mainly responsible for the historical GHG [greenhouse gas] emissions and generally have the greatest per capita emissions' (Ripple *et al.*, 2020: 8). These scientists are effectively saying that environmental problems are closely linked to *capitalism* and *economic growth*, two things that have typically been supported by liberalism: 'Excessive extraction of materials and overexploitation of ecosystems, driven by economic growth, must be quickly curtailed to maintain long-term sustainability of the biosphere' (ibid.: 11). As Gerardo Ceballos and others have put it in the context of discussing the ongoing Holocene Extinction, 'Much less frequently mentioned are … the ultimate drivers of those immediate causes of biotic destruction, namely, human overpopulation and continued population growth, and overconsumption, especially by the rich. These drivers, all of which trace to the fiction that perpetual growth can occur on a finite planet, are themselves increasing rapidly' (Ceballos, Ehrlich, and Dirzo, 2017: 6095; for similar concerns, see also Kendall, 2000; Ripple *et al.*, 2017).

This ecological degradation not only directly harms non-human animals and the natural world generally, but also leads to human death and suffering. Environmental problems are bound up with wealth inequality and poverty, with the global poor suffering disproportionately from the effects of pollution and climate change. Rob Nixon has termed this phenomenon 'slow violence', and he begins his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) with this revealing quote from Lant Pritchett and Lawrence Summers from a confidential World Bank memo: 'I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that.… I've always thought that countries in Africa are vastly under polluted.… Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries?' (ibid.: 1) Although Pritchett and Summers claimed that the memo was ironic, it highlights an implicit attitude among many affluent Western citizens towards the developing world. As Nixon says, 'We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive.… Had Summers advocated invading Africa with weapons of mass destruction, his proposal would have fallen under conventional definitions of violence. … Advocating invading countries with mass forms of slow-motion toxicity, however, requires rethinking our accepted assumptions of violence to include slow violence' (ibid.: 2–3). Nixon is correct that environmental violence is often slower and subtler than direct physical violence, and the sort of violence that he discusses is something that helps to update and strengthen the counter-history of liberalism. Unlike Nixon, however, I shall continue to use of the terminology of 'structural violence', as it is a broader and more well-established term than 'slow violence', and it covers more of the phenomena that I wish to analyse.

Structural violence can rear its head in many different forms. It is more challenging to measure than obvious forms of violence such as those highlighted by the original counter-

history of liberalism. As Dayna Nadine Scott writes in her review of Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence*, 'It [slow violence] remains obscured … because it is not what we expect violence to be: explosive and sensationally visible. Instead, slow violence is incremental and accretive, and it jumbles expected connections between spatial and temporal scales' (2012: 480). Structural violence against disempowered groups can, however, be indirectly measured not only through pollution but also proxies such as obesity, chronic stress, drug addiction, and depression (see Smail, 2021). These phenomena can be linked to a state of disempowerment and relative poverty. The form of structural violence that poses most of a problem for contemporary liberals is the form that results from ecological degradation. Most contemporary liberals have taken issues such as straightforward disempowerment and poverty seriously, and have proposed sometimes wide-ranging wealth redistribution (e.g. Rawls, 1971), so it would be more difficult to make a strong connection between the theory and the practice in this case. However, environmentally questionable market economies of the kind that typically characterise modern societies – which are wedded to increasing growth and material affluence – are typically accepted and endorsed (explicitly or tacitly) by liberal theorists.

If they were to focus on structural violence of the kind outlined above, does that mean that critics of liberalism could write a powerful contemporary counter-history of liberalism? I think they could, and this should be considered a strong challenge even to more plausible and attractive forms of contemporary liberalism. If environmental degradation is closely linked to the concepts of growth and capitalism, and these are in turn endorsed by liberal theory – and if environmental problems lead to structural violence against disempowered groups – the theory of liberalism can to some degree be implicated. In other words, in the case of structural violence and environmental degradation, in contrast to the original counter-history of liberalism, it is more difficult to divorce theory and practice. The point I am making is not that this is a decisive blow to liberalism, but unlike the 'classic' counter-history of liberalism, ecological problems and slow, structural violence pose more theoretical difficulties.

Nonetheless, the updated counter-history of liberalism will face a number of objections. First, some might dispute the idea that the updated counter-history of liberalism, focusing on structural violence and environmental issues, really does mark a serious departure from the original counter-history of liberalism. Certainly, there is a plausible connection between liberalism and capitalism – and as we saw above, we can make a good case for the connection between capitalism and environmental violence. However, the connection between liberalism and capitalism was also highlighted in the original counter-history of liberalism. If my replies to the original counter-history in the second section were correct – in particular the appeal to a theory/practice distinction – why could we not use similar replies to the updated counter-history of liberalism? The answer lies in the fact that some forms of contemporary liberalism have, in both theory and practice, been quite successful at taming the openly oppressive aspects of capitalism, or at least proposing plausible ways in which we could do this. Eliminating extreme poverty, workhouses, child labour, and hunger does appear to be possible within a capitalist system, as does introducing a minimum wage, universal education, and socialised healthcare. As things currently stand, these institutions are flawed (to one degree or another) in existing liberal democracies, but it is not excessively far-fetched to think

that such institutional problems could be mitigated with some reforms. However, the difference is that, regarding environmental structural violence, it is more difficult to conceptually separate capitalism and growth from the range of ecological issues mentioned in this section. This is best shown through an explanation of how it is comparatively straightforward to devise a liberal political theory that eliminates the most obviously oppressive aspects of capitalism.

As I argued earlier, the original counter-history is effective at exposing the atrocities that happened under liberalism (or proto-liberalism) in the 17th–19th centuries. However, in the late 19th century, a 'New Liberalism' arose, epitomised by the work of John Stuart Mill, T. H. Green, J. A. Hobson, and Leonard Hobhouse (see Mill, 2022[1879]; Freeden, 1978). This form of liberalism marked the birth of modern social liberalism, with an emphasis on individual flourishing, the need for good working conditions, and a repudiation of the idea that economic intervention was necessarily in tension with individual freedom. Thus, New Liberalism was a theory of social reform. At around the same time, movements for social change and trade unions augmented the pressure to create a welfare state, decent pay, and good conditions for working people. Although political parties nominally wedded to liberalism started to experience electoral difficulties in many countries (the Liberal Party in the UK, for instance), liberal democracy more broadly construed had something of a golden age in the West after the allied victory in World War II. Capitalism was retained, but elements of socialism were incorporated into it. Slums began to disappear, people's healthcare improved dramatically, workers could often afford property, and many enjoyed the prospect of a comfortable retirement, in an era sometimes called the 'Golden Age of Capitalism'. With some idealisation that was not too unrealistic, it became possible to argue that we could have most of the liberal freedoms worth having, while at the same time retaining capitalism but regulating it so that Dickensian social conditions, as well as the most oppressive property relations, were eliminated. And this is exactly what philosophers such as Rawls, Dworkin, Ackerman, Nagel, Barry, and others proceeded to do. Even though many believe we have experienced something of a reversal of fortunes for ordinary people in the West since the post-war heyday (see McMahon, 2024), there is nothing incoherent about employing a certain level of idealisation to argue for social liberalism along the lines suggested by Rawls and others.

Contrast this, however, with the ecological crisis and the structural violence that results from this, such as the pain and suffering caused to victims of extreme weather events, biodiversity loss, and sea level rises. Many have puzzled over why progress has been so slow regarding climate change and other environmental problems, with this being compared unfavourably with issues such as restoring the ozone layer or reducing abject poverty. To my mind, there is a relatively straightforward answer to this. Enforcing the Montreal Protocol, for example, did not involve having to make serious changes to the fundamentals of the way in which we live. The same can be said about poverty reduction – this can be achieved through a 'business as usual' approach. It is well known that capitalism and growth can reduce the rate of absolute poverty (although, importantly, not inequality and relative poverty). To be clear, climate change has been ignored or downplayed for *many* reasons, including because of the pressure from the fossil fuel industry and its lobbyists, but the primary reason is that combating ecological degradation will involve making serious changes to our way of life and our economic

structure. It is imperative that we drive less, fly less, consume less meat and fewer animal products, curb overconsumption, and dramatically reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. These practices are so deeply ingrained in our economies, societies, and cultures that even questioning them is considered highly controversial (for politicians, activists, etc.). To put it simply, it is not too difficult – at least in contemporary political theory – to reform capitalism so that the obvious oppressive practices are eliminated, but it is much more challenging to explain how we could retain the benefits of contemporary capitalism and economic growth while *also* avoiding the ecological degradation and structural violence that they lead to.

In the light of this, it is noteworthy that, even when contemporary liberals write about environmental issues, they often defend mainstream (capitalistic and growth-based) economics, alongside the consumption associated with the current Western lifestyle. Or, perhaps more commonly, these issues are avoided by liberals altogether. The former approach is exemplified by the work of Mark Sagoff, who provides a lengthy defence of capitalistic growth, free markets, and the system of international relations that existed in the mid 2000s (see Sagoff, 2007).[9] The alternative approach of ignoring these issues, or mentioning them relatively briefly, can be found in many liberal environmentalist works, particularly those that emphasise the primacy of ideal theory (see Hailwood, 2004). Some of these liberal theorists do recognise the problems of capitalism and growth in passing, but they attempt to steer away from the troubling issue of how liberalism – as a political theory unsympathetic to state control of the economy and wedded to individual freedom – could avoid at least tacitly endorsing capitalism and economic growth, and all the associated ecological problems (see ibid.: 142).

Let us therefore recap the reasons why the updated counter-history of liberalism presents a more formidable challenge than the original form presented by Losurdo and others. Liberals typically make a commitment to a growth-based market economy, and you cannot have growth – at least in the form that we currently have it – without an energy source (fossil fuels being especially effective). Moreover, growth in its current form requires more land use, more buildings, more flights, more vehicles, and so on. In other words, growth probably needs to be curtailed significantly in order to promote sustainability. Capitalism and other growth-based economic systems make this difficult to achieve, and conceptually speaking it is difficult to separate liberalism from capitalism and economic growth.

Can Rawlsian liberalism defuse the updated counter-history of liberalism?

One of the key moves made in this article is that liberal theory is closely bound up with capitalism and economic growth, and some philosophers have argued against this. In this section, I will rebut the potential response that liberals can quite easily reject capitalism and growth, and therefore that the updated counter-history of liberalism lacks force against (some) contemporary forms of liberalism. It is relatively straightforward to demonstrate that existing liberalism has generally been capitalistic, and it is also clear that liberal theory has often been used as the theoretical justification for capitalism and growth. For one thing, almost all existing liberal societies are described as being (or as having been) ‘capitalistic’. This applies even to liberal states that intervene quite

heavily in the capitalist economy, such as Norway and the Netherlands – we should, of course, always remember that the term 'capitalism' refers to a broad range of economic systems. Moreover, the writings of liberals and proto-liberals such as Locke, Hume, Smith, Mandeville, Jefferson, and J. S. Mill have been used to provide theoretical support for a capitalistic system (Ince, 2018).

However, it is not so easy to show that contemporary liberals need to make a philosophical commitment to supporting capitalism. Some philosophers, particularly those who are influenced by John Rawls, have claimed that they reject capitalism. For instance, according to Samuel Freeman, 'Rawls argues that, correctly applied to the choice of a social system, the principles of justice do not justify any form of capitalism. The two economic systems that meet these principles' requirements are property-owning democracy and liberal socialism. Since neither is capitalist, and both limit inequalities and broadly disseminate ownership and control of productive capital, high-flying Wall Street buccaneers and other sources of capitalist inequalities will not exist in these societies' (Freeman, 2013: 10). And, as Martin O'Neill and Thad Williamson put it, 'Rawls did not endorse capitalism, and did not assume that the allowances made for socioeconomic inequality under the second principle of justice necessitated a capitalist organization of production' (O'Neill and Williamson, 2009: 4; see also Jackson, 2005: 439–40; O'Neill, 2020: 160; and the collection of essays in Williamson and O'Neill, 2012).

I think that, although this position is understandably attractive, it is flawed, at least if construed as a convincing response to the updated counter-history of liberalism. It will not be possible to discuss this issue comprehensively in the space I have here. However, I shall argue that, although Rawlsian property-owning democracy and liberal socialism have many positive features, they do not completely abolish the environmentally problematic aspects of modern capitalism and growth. I will concentrate mostly on property-owning democracy rather than liberal socialism in this section, as Rawls suggests that the former is his preferred system.

First, it is uncertain whether John Rawls thought that property-owning democracy was supposed to constitute a completely 'anti-capitalist' system. Some passages in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* indicate that he may have thought this, whereas others suggest the opposite or are unclear (see Rawls, 2001: Section 52).

However, perhaps focusing on what Rawls himself thought somewhat misses the point; we should instead consider whether a property-owning democracy is intrinsically anti-capitalist (regardless of whether Rawls thought so). At first, it does not seem accurate to say that property-owning democracy would be completely anti-capitalist, at least if we use a sufficiently broad definition of capitalism, such as the following:

> We can understand capitalism as an economic system where the range of goods and services on offer is governed in accord with a strong right to private property and a system in which prices are set by private organizations. People are free to exchange goods and services under whatever terms they contract for, with few restrictions. (Vallier, 2021: Section 4)

As property-owning democracy still includes a right to private property, a market system, and some private ownership of the means of production, it would not be anti-capitalist under a broad definition such as the one given above. Because of this,

some commentators consider property-owning democracy to fall within capitalism, and see Rawls's theory as proposing significant amendments to, and many restrictions on, contemporary capitalism, but not as completely anti-capitalist (Forrester, 2022: 11; Van 't Klooster, 2019: 679; cf. Dworkin, 2012: 133). Alan Thomas adopts something like this position in his book *Republic of Equals: Predistribution and Property-Owning Democracy* (2016), which is a defence of Rawlsian property-owning democracy from the perspective of liberal republicanism. According to Thomas, under a property-owning democracy, 'the interests of capital will be plural, dispersed, and then recombined in new ways, so as to generate a capitalism that is no longer a threat to liberal-democratic values; rather, it is potentially convergent with them' (ibid.: 20–1).

However, as we saw above, some philosophers argue that Rawlsian property-owning democracy is not a form of capitalism at all. I think the strongest version of this argument runs roughly as follows. Capitalism, we might think, is not just a system with some private ownership of the means of production and markets, but is instead a system in which there is a distinction between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. That is, most people work for the capitalist class for a living, and do not own the means of production; the capitalist class owns the means of production and extracts profit. Of course, in any modern capitalist economy, things are considerably more complex than this, because there will be other groups making up society. These include small business owners, civil servants, some doctors, and people (usually women) who undertake unpaid care work and domestic work. However, it is fair to say that the bourgeoisie/proletariat distinction still has a prominent place in most modern economies, and usually constitutes the primary economic relation in capitalist societies (see Marx and Engels, 2002[1848]: Ch. 1). It might therefore be thought that, if a property-owning democracy with a wide distribution of productive assets were established, the bourgeoisie/proletariat distinction would no longer be a significant feature of that society, and it would amount to an abolition of capitalism.

However, even if we accept this narrower, broadly Marxist, understanding of capitalism, it still seems too strong to claim that property-owning democracy would lead to a complete overhaul of capitalism. One reason for this is that, although productive assets would be more widely dispersed, some people would still have more than others, and some would use their money and property to start their own businesses, or would invest it. Whether because of sound judgment or good luck, some people would become wealthier than others through their businesses or investments. On the other hand, some people would undoubtedly make imprudent decisions, and would use up their money and property. Presumably, capitalistic activity would still arise, because some people would want to employ others in their businesses, and some workers would agree to this arrangement. To illustrate this, we can consider 'capital grants', which are sometimes considered to be a key aspect of property-owning democracy.[10] A capital grant is usually understood as an unconditional large sum of money paid to every citizen upon reaching adulthood. Exactly how much the sum would amount to, when it would be paid, and whether there would be significant conditions attached to it, are all areas of substantial contention (see Ackerman and Alstott, 1999). Stuart White (2016: 106) writes that 'it [property-owning democracy] is also compatible

with, and arguably requires, the idea of a universal capital grant: a scheme under which each citizen would receive a substantial basic endowment of wealth in early adulthood as of right'.

Although they would probably bring about more equality than we currently have in capitalist states, capital grants would inevitably be used quite differently by different people. For instance, some people would spend their money on large purchases like cars, musical instruments, gaming consoles, and so on. Others would invest their money or buy property, and in some cases they would be in a position to employ others. Those wishing to spend their capital grants might be willing to take paid employment, and capitalistic activity would arise. Without routine state intervention to prevent this from happening – something that Rawls rejects – it would be impossible to abolish capitalism entirely.

Clearly, state redistribution of assets would occur periodically in Rawlsian property-owning democracies, and Rawls has no principled objection to this. However, it would seem that this regulation would have to be limited. If not, it would interfere with people's basic liberties, and perhaps their conception of the good. Moreover, preventing all capitalistic activity, such as the establishment of small and medium-sized businesses, might be in tension with the difference principle, which, even in his later work, Rawls still thinks is probably the most reasonable or just economic principle (see Rawls, 2001: Section 22).

Some theorists have also drawn on Rawls's remarks about liberal socialism as inspiration for creating an anti-capitalist form of liberalism. Liberal socialism seems more promising on this score, because it would potentially leave less room for private ownership of the means of production. Here is one way in which liberal socialism could work: under liberal socialism, the primary means of production would be organised on a co-operative basis, and the state would provide leases to workers' co-operatives on a long-term basis. In this way, the bourgeois/proletarian distinction would cease to be a significant aspect of society, and democracy in the workplace would be achieved. The most detailed defence of Rawlsian liberal socialism is probably William A. Edmundson's *John Rawls: Reticent Socialist* (2017). It will not be possible to undertake a thorough analysis of Rawlsian liberal socialism. All I can do here is outline some possible ways in which counter-historians could push back against Rawlsian liberal socialism, at least if construed as an answer to the environmentalist counter-history of liberalism.

As was the case with property-owning democracy, some commentators do not consider liberal socialism to be an attempt to completely eliminate capitalism. As Ian Adams writes, 'Many socialists have come to see virtue in capitalism as an economic system, and have sought to control, modify, and domesticate it so that it serves society as a whole and not merely individual self interest. It will be convenient to call this version of socialism "liberal socialism"' (Adams, 1998: 104). Some of the reasons to doubt property-owning democracy's ability to defuse the updated counter-history of liberalism that I outlined above also seem to apply to Rawlsian liberal socialism. Furthermore, some of the same policies will be present in both systems, and the two ideas overlap to a significant degree. For instance, it is not clear that private ownership of the means of production would be completely abolished under liberal socialism, and presumably people would have the freedom to spend money in different ways.

Therefore, some capitalistic activity might still arise, as I argued above in the discussion of property-owning democracy.

Another, more fundamental, line of criticism from counter-historians would run as follows. Even if we could somehow present Rawlsian property-owning democracy or liberal socialism as resolutely anti-capitalist, that would not in itself defeat the ecological problems caused by economic growth and the relentless pursuit of affluence. Indeed, property-owning democracy and liberal socialism, alongside egalitarian liberalism more generally, are still premised on the idea that the wealthy lifestyle should be open to all, or at least a far wider range of people. Underlying these theories is the belief that those who are currently disadvantaged should be able to consume with the same vigour as the Western middle class. Even if they are anti-capitalist to a large extent, that does not necessarily mean that they are *anti-growth*, and ultimately this is the most important issue. We should bear in mind that it is possible to have growth-based economies without capitalism (see McNeill and Engelke, 2014: 193–8).

To sum up this section: it is clear that Rawlsian property-owning democracy and liberalism socialism are economically egalitarian proposals, at least compared to mainstream Western economics. However, the considerations raised in this section also show that they probably do not provide a convincing response to the environmentalist counter-history of liberalism, regardless of their other positive features.[11]

Can 'negative liberalism' defuse the updated counter-history of liberalism?

There is another potentially appealing response to the environmentalist counter-history of liberalism that I wish to analyse, and that is 'negative liberalism'. In its simplest form, this runs roughly as follows. Even if it is true that liberal societies have been environmentally destructive throughout history, most non-liberal societies, such as the Soviet Union and China, have also had an awful environmental record. Liberalism does no worse than other political theories in this respect, and there is no evidence that socialist or other non-liberal societies will do any better in the future. Furthermore, socialist political theory, while often hostile to capitalism, is still usually attached to the ideals of growth and consumption. Writing in 1990, Tatiana Zaharchenko claimed that 'the Soviet Union's extensive environmental problems have been widely documented. Soviet industries emit 60 million tons of pollutants into the air each year, much more than industries in the United States.… Many rivers also are dangerously polluted.… Mismanagement has also led to habitat and therefore species destruction' (Zaharchenko, 1990: 457–8). Some theorists who are not particularly sympathetic to liberalism have had to contend with the fact that the environmental crisis appears, in many respects, to be a 'problem of modernity' rather than a problem for liberalism per se. In his book *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas* (2021), Pierre Charbonnier offers some evidence to suggest that the environmental destruction seen in existing socialist societies is not simply a 'corruption' of socialist theory. As he writes, 'From the point of view of the industrial classes, i.e., of the bourgeoisie, but also of the workers' movements, the peasantry worldwide appeared [to be reactionary]. This is clearly illustrated in Marx's comments on rural life' (Charbonnier, 2021: 166). This

Marxist disdain for 'rural life' and attachment to the land often served as an incentive for degrading the natural environment. In practice, this often took the form of rapid industrialisation/urbanisation, and the pursuit of unsustainable forms of economic growth (see McNeill and Engelke, 2014: 193–4). To put it simply: the problems of environmental destruction and unsustainable growth are by no means unique to liberalism.

It is not possible to address this issue fully within the scope of this article, but I think that there are good reasons for focusing on liberalism in this article. Of course, one could simply respond to this worry by claiming that, just because non-liberal theories have a similar problem, that does not mean this is not a serious issue for liberalism. However, it might be argued that no theory will ever do better than liberalism on this score, and therefore the environmental counter-history of liberalism cannot be a real problem for liberal political philosophy.

One reason for concentrating on liberalism is that it still has a position of dominance in the world today, although it is increasingly contested. Liberalism is still the dominant political ideology within the United States, which remains the foremost power in the world. US economic dominance is increasingly challenged by China, but America still has the largest economy by nominal GDP, and its conventional military is by far the strongest in the world. Clearly, US liberalism is being challenged both externally (e.g. by China and Russia) and internally (e.g. by Donald Trump and sections of the Republican Party). Nonetheless, liberalism, broadly construed, remains a key aspect of American culture and politics. If we consider American influence alongside that of its most important Western allies – such as the UK, France, Germany, and Italy – it is clear that liberalism remains one of the dominant forces in the world today. Considering its continuing influence in world affairs, it makes sense to focus on liberalism.

Another reason to focus on liberalism is that, if the arguments in sections three and four of this article are correct, there are some prima facie reasons to believe that the connection between liberalism and environmental degradation is not merely incidental, but is a product of liberalism's general support for capitalism and growth. Does every *non-liberal* political theory have the same problem? As we saw in Section 2, liberals can challenge the connection between some theoretical forms of liberalism and the wrongdoings of existing liberal states discussed by Losurdo and others. It could be contended that some non-liberal theories, particularly socialism and anarchism, can argue along the same lines in response to the fact that the environmental policies of existing socialist states have often been deplorable. This is the position adopted by many non-liberal environmentalists. They believe that, in contrast to liberal capitalism, non-liberal socialism at least includes the *possibility* of environmental preservation, even if the reality of socialism in this respect is often lamentable (Gare, 2002: 60–1). To put it slightly differently, some forms of eco-socialism and eco-anarchism may lack the theoretical connection with capitalism and growth that I have argued liberalism usually has. Consequently, the updated counter-history of liberalism arguably does not have as much force against these theories. Therefore, appealing to 'negative liberalism' is not a conclusive response to the environmental counter-history of liberalism.

Lastly, one could contest the idea that almost all existing non-liberal states have been as bad as liberal ones on an environmental level. To a significant degree, existing liberal states are responsible for the environmental crisis: they are the largest emitters

historically, often the worst on a per capita basis, and they are still the mainstay of the international economic system that encourages ever greater levels of consumption and growth. Of course, this is a complex issue that I cannot possibly assess fully here. However, if we consider this alongside the issues raised in the paragraphs above, the prospects for an environmentalist 'negative liberalism' are not very promising. If liberals are going to respond successfully to the environmental counter-history of liberalism, it will not be possible to rely solely on a form of 'negative liberalism'.

Conclusion

Liberalism faces a challenge from a group of counter-historians who connect liberalism-in-practice with various forms of violence and oppression. Opposing the view of liberalism as a force for social progress, these theorists believe that liberalism has in fact been bound up with all manner of unpalatable practices. I have outlined this challenge and how liberals might respond to it. I have maintained that liberals have several lines of reply to the original counter-history of liberalism, and that these taken together add up to a fairly strong response. However, there is a contemporary version of this counter-history that focuses on liberal states' environmental misdeeds and structural violence against disempowered groups. Liberals should treat this as a serious intellectual challenge, particularly because there is a connection between the theory of liberalism and the liberal malpractices outlined in this article. While non-liberal states and theories may face similar criticisms, this remains a serious challenge for liberalism.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

I would like to thank Seiriol Morgan, Martin Sticker, and two anonymous referees for their help and comments on earlier drafts of this article. I would also like to thank the participants at the University of Bristol's Philosophy PGR Summer Conference 2022 and the School of Arts PGR Summer Conference 2022.

1. This is not to say that I am against all forms of Western military intervention, but the War on Terror's legacy is on the whole a very negative one.
2. This is one reason that the counter-history of liberalism can withstand the criticism that some of the societies discussed by Losurdo 'were not truly liberal' (for one example of this criticism, see Bell, 2014: 692).

3. The question of whether Italian fascism had racist (particularly antisemitic) elements is contested by scholars, but it is generally agreed that it was far less obsessed with race than Nazism was (Bernardini, 1977).
4. For Rawls, a property-owning democracy is a system in which there is a wide distribution of property, high taxes on wealth, and laws to restrict monopolisation of the means of production.
5. As one reviewer of *Liberalism: A Counter-history* has said, 'It is John Locke that justified the absolute power of the white master over the black slave, whereas Jean Bodin, the theoretician of the absolute monarchy, had condemned it a century earlier' (Amable, 2014: 814; Losurdo, 2014: 4).
6. Gray and Dwyer both reference, for instance, the Jacobins and Bolsheviks as illiberal Enlightenment (or Enlightenment-derived) movements.
7. This is not to say, of course, that we should romanticise such social movements, some of which were themselves rife with prejudice. Nonetheless, it is commonly accepted that they were an important part of the story of achieving (e.g.) better working conditions, democracy, and greater levels of gender equality.
8. World leaders actually knew about serious environmental problems before the 1980s, because the dangers of (e.g.) over-exploitation, nuclear testing, chemical and biological weapons, and the destruction of wildlife were known decades (or even centuries) earlier. However, it was somewhat more plausible for leaders to claim ignorance before the science became completely clear.
9. To be fair to Sagoff, his book does not provide a completely unwavering defence of growth and markets, but generally he supports them and denies that they are at the root of many environmental problems.
10. Some proponents of property-owning democracy and liberal socialism have also argued for the related idea of an unconditional basic income. See Jackson (2012: 45–6) for a discussion of this.
11. Largely because of space limitations – and also because Rawlsian liberalism is the dominant framework in liberal political philosophy – I am leaving out a discussion of John Stuart Mill's liberal socialism. Mill is noteworthy because he criticised economic growth, and had environmentalist concerns in mind when he put forward his theory of liberal socialism (see McCabe, 2021: 54–5). While the claim that Millian liberal socialism successfully answers the updated counter-history of liberalism is speculative and contestable, I think it may have more potential than other liberal theories in this regard. However, even if this is true, it only shows that one specific form of liberalism could answer the concerns outlined in this article. It is worth remembering that the aim of this article is not to offer a conclusive criticism of all forms of liberalism.

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