Liberal Democracy and Its Limits

A Preliminary Proposal

We propose a series of speakers, workshops, core distinction courses and debates on the topic of "Liberal Democracy and Its Limits." We define liberal democracy as that regime type which secures personal freedom and private property (relying primarily on market mechanisms for the production and distribution of resources) and governs according to the rule of law through representative government responsive to the people in periodic elections. It is a regime type defined in terms of its limits -- its respect for freedoms of the individual and limits to its authority. Not only does it limit its authority, it limits its aspirations. It is also then a regime type that should be explored for the limits of its goodness and claims to universality. It does not seek, at least not directly, “to make its citizens good and doers of noble deeds” (Aristotle); nor does it seek to steer them in the direction of the right faith. Nonetheless, if not as some enthusiasts have described it, “the end of history,” liberal democracy has become the prevailing regime aspiration (and apparently the only regime type in which a University such as Colgate or an institution such as PPE can flourish). Yet, much about it remains unknown. And much is contested. Just what is it? How good is it?

The theme will function as a two-year project for the Institute. The first year will focus on historical, conceptual, and philosophical questions, such as: "What is liberal democracy?", “How did it come into being?” “Is it the end of history?” “How good is...

* The term "End of History" is easily misunderstood, so perhaps a few words of explanation or in order. It does not mean the end of time, the end of the world, the apocalypse. Nor does it mean that there will be no further events meriting the attention of reflective narrators. Rather, it involves a special understanding of the word "History," as first developed by Hegel.

All history requires some degree of abstraction from the concrete particulars of life as the historian picks out what is important for the question or concern he or she wishes to address. As understood by Hegel, History requires the greatest abstraction of all, since it asks, is there a "point," a single secular story, underlying all human events? The mega-plot for Hegel is the great battle of regime types and the possibility of its culmination over the millennia in a single regime type that will prove of such enduring stability that all other regimes will eventually come to emulate it. There may still be a century or so of "mopping up" events, but that's not really History. The big story is over. Hegel in fact declared the End of History, perhaps a tad prematurely, with Napoleon's victory in the Battle of Jena (1806), marking for Hegel the inevitable demise of the remnants of feudal aristocracy.

As new regime types emerged and liberal republicanism/democracy struggled with fascism and communism across the greater part of the 20th century, Hegel's theory was treated as a quaint conceit. But with the fall of communism, the thesis reappeared with greater plausibility and was ably articulated in 1992 by Francis Fukuyama in a book with that title, The End of History.... Like his predecessor, Fukuyama has been commonly misunderstood. He raises the possibility and urges the plausibility that we
it? "Is it good for all times and all places, or only some places some of the time?" "How did it, and how can it, come into being?" "Is it sustainable?" The second year will focus more on empirical questions, such as: "What are the political, economic, and cultural dynamics that might lead to liberalism, to democracy, and to liberal democracy?" What is the relation of property; rule of law; corruption; economic development; the civic virtues required by liberal democracy?" Such questions might be explored either through case studies of different countries or with issues common to many countries. As indicated by the suggested questions, the division between the themes of our first and second division is not sharp and we will not pass by opportunities that avail themselves out of sequence.

What follows is simply a list of topics, around which we could build various things: visiting speakers, core courses, scholar in residence, workshops, symposia on topics on which our Fellows are currently working or topics in which some of our Fellows have published (Jay Mandel's new book on globalization, Bruce Rutherford's on liberalization, Barry Shain's on the nature of rights, Michael Johnston's on corruption, etc.). The list is designed to be merely suggestive--subtopics, thinkers worth thinking about, departments that might be interested; we welcome your further thoughts on how it might be developed. Among other things we hope will emerge from this project is a two volume edited work, How to Think about Liberal Democracy: we will welcome your contributions.

**First year: Liberal Democracy in Political Theory and Political Practice.**

**Democracy (without liberalism):**
- The Emergence of Democracy and Republican Government: Athens, Sparta, Rome. (Classics)
- Thinkers: Plato, Aristotle, Cicero. (Philosophy and Political Science)

**Liberalism (without, necessarily, democracy):**
- The Enlightenment.
- The Religious Question.
- The "Corruption" of the Republican Ideal of Government.
- Thinkers: Locke, Mandeville, Voltaire, Kant, Adam Smith. Rousseau.
  (Economics, History, Philosophy, Political Science)

**Liberal Democracy.**
- Regime Foundations of the American and the French Revolutions: (History, Political Science)
- Thinkers: Madison, Hamilton, Jefferson, Rousseau, Diderot, Robespierre, de Stael, de Tocqueville, Burke.

have reached the End of History. He does not assert that this is necessarily the case. And, even if we have reached the End of History, Fukuyama is not entirely sure that this is a story with a happy conclusion: hence, the often neglected second half of his title: "... and the Last Man," evoking Nietzsche’s image of the self satisfied, complacent, and boring person whom he thought modern life would produce. So it is in that broad spirit and open-mindedness that we ask: Is Liberal Democracy the End of History?
The (Defining) Limits of Liberal Democracy:
   Personal freedoms and property rights: are they inseparable?
   The Rule of Law.

The (Normative) Limits of Liberal Democracy:
   Challenges to liberal democracy in the name of human excellence (true
   aristocracy); true religion (theocracy); equality (socialism); citizenship
   (radical republicanism).

Second year: The (Empirical) Limits of Contemporary Liberal Democracy:
   Liberalism:
   Political, economic, and cultural dynamics that might lead to liberalism (without
democracy). (We use the word "might" here and below not just to admit that
our knowledge is likely to be at best a guess (however educated), but to
emphasize that much is open to human choice.)
   Case studies: 17th --18th century Great Britain; contemporary Singapore, China.
   Topics:??

   Democracy:
   Political, economic, and cultural dynamics that might lead to democracy (without
liberalism).
   Case studies: Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, Russia under Putin, Nigeria,
   Ukraine.
   Topics:??

   Liberal Democracy:
   Political, economic, and cultural dynamics that might lead to liberal democracy.
   Case studies – on the road towards liberal democracy?: Turkey, Chile.
   Topics: Why do markets sometimes seem to promote democracy (as in Turkey
   and Chile), but in other cases seem to reinforce the power of an autocracy
   (China)?

   Implications for Economic Development:
   Markets and Institutions.
   Corruption.

   Implications for Foreign-Policy:
   Should the United States champion Liberal Democracy?
   Hard and Soft Diplomacy.