

What Is Liberalism?

The Quest for Individual Freedom

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Liberalism is one of the principal doctrines in Western political philosophy. Its core values are typically expressed in terms of *individual freedom* and *equality*. How these two ought to be understood is a matter of dispute so that they are often differently declined in different places or among different groups. Even so, it is typical to associate liberalism with democracy, capitalism, freedom of religion, and human rights.

Liberalism has been mostly defended in England and the United States. Among the authors that most contributed to the development of liberalism, [John Locke](#) (1632-1704) and [John Stuart Mill](#) (1808-1873).

Early Liberalism

Political and civic behavior describable as liberal can be found across the history of humanity, but liberalism as a full-fledged doctrine can be traced back to approximately three hundred and fifty years ago, in northern Europe, England, and Holland in particular. It should be remarked, however, that the history of liberalism is entrenched with the one of an earlier cultural movement, namely [humanism](#), which flourished in central Europe, especially in Florence, in the 1300 and 1400s, reaching its apex during Renaissance, in fifteen hundreds.

It is indeed in those countries that most delved into the exercise of free trade and exchange of people and ideas that liberalism thrived.

The Revolution of 1688 marks, from this perspective, an important date for liberal doctrine, underlined by the success of entrepreneurs such as Lord Shaftesbury and authors such as John Locke, who returned to England after 1688 and resolved to finally publish his masterpiece, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), wherein he provided also a defense of individual liberties that are key to the liberalist doctrine.

Modern Liberalism

Despite its recent origins, liberalism has an articulated history testifying of its key role in modern Western society. The two great revolutions, in [America](#) (1776) and [France](#) (1789) refined some of the key ideas behind liberalism: democracy, equal rights, human rights, the separation between State and religion and freedom of religion, the focus on the individual well-being.

The 19th century was a period of intense refinement of the values of liberalism, which had to face the novel economic and social conditions posed by incipient industrial revolution. Not only authors such as John Stuart Mill gave a fundamental contribution to liberalism, bringing to the philosophical attention topics such as freedom of speech, the liberties of women and of slaves; but also the birth of the socialist and communist doctrines, among others under the influence of [Karl Marx](#) and the French utopists, forced liberalists to refine their views and bond into more cohesive political groups.

In the 20th century, liberalism was restated to adjust to the changing economic situation by authors such as Ludwig von Mises and John Maynard Keynes. The politics and lifestyle diffused by the United States throughout the world, then, gave a key impulse to the success of liberal lifestyle, at least in practice if not in principle.

In more recent decades, liberalism has been used also to address the pressing issues of the crisis of capitalism and the [globalized society](#). As the 21st century enters into its central phase, liberalism is still a driving doctrine that

inspires political leaders and individual citizens. It is the duty of all those who live in a civil society to confront with such a doctrine.

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