

## *Post-Liberal Politics*

# LIBERALISM IN SEARCH OF VISION: Responding to the Lost Connection between Policy and Lifestyle with the Christian Socialist Movement as a Case Study

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### I. INTRODUCTION

**A**ccording to post-liberal political theory, liberalism has undermined shared ideas of the good by valorising choice as the only good. The result is that there is no shared vision by which to challenge forces of instrumentalisation. Yet post-liberal theory tends to ground its critique in liberal theory, without sufficiently anchoring arguments in what Jeffrey Alexander has called ‘proximate actors and agencies’; that is, in this case, political institutions and processes.<sup>1</sup> In order to do this, the paper offers a slightly alternative genealogy of liberal political theory to that ordinarily provided by post-liberals. It

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander and Smith, ‘The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology’ in Alexander *The Meanings of Social Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14.

focuses on political hypocrisy: the notion that there is one rule for the people and another for rulers. It then critically anchors this genealogy in UK political institutions and processes, which it demonstrates tend to undermine a connection between policy and lifestyle. Finally, the paper ethnographically explores a possible response offered by one organisation in the UK: Christians on the Left (formerly the Christian Socialist Movement). While it is recognised that focusing on the UK may be at the expense of international linchpins, the lack of clarity amongst post-liberals thus far as to the proximal actors and agencies through which liberalism operates calls for detailed focus on one area.

Liberalism is a notoriously broad concept which may mean something very different depending on the political context. In the US, liberal is often used to refer to social democrats, while in the UK liberal often suggests *laissez-faire*. For the purposes of this paper I intend three ideas primarily: that all ideas of the good are equally valid; that politics therefore must be and can be undertaken without an understanding of what is good; and that in the absence of an idea of the good, wealth is the best measure of both political success and individual happiness. This is a necessarily controversial argument. First of all liberalism tends to be associated with liberty—the premise of which must be that all ideas of the good are equally valid—but not with a lack of good. Second, liberalism is almost universally acknowledged as a force for good. Actually I agree that any laudable political philosophy requires a commitment to liberty. Yet it is my task to show that the assertion of this principle as an end in itself leads to instrumentalisation.

By instrumentalisation, I mean the orienting of our relationships with things and people as ones of user to resource. The central way, this paper suggests, that instrumentalisation reveals itself, is as a disconnect between lifestyle and policy pervading politicians, what politicians expect of business, institutions and the public, and what individual members of the public expect of themselves.

The consequences of this disconnect are far reaching. Understanding its history and primary features can help us to see a commonality between a number of seemingly disparate problems: the increasing similarity between parties, the MPs expenses scandal, the banker bonus furore, and the combination of the media hacking scandal and the Murdoch BSkyB takeover bid. Though in some cases starting as far back as 2008, these events remain on the surface of public discourse in 2016. A few years ago, these events seemed to be underscored by low levels of political engagement and riots. Actions to overcome these problems have often be derided as merely scratching the surface: attempts to look beyond old party divisions just seems to lead to shifts to the centre and populism; only a few MPs were criminally charged over their expenses fiddling; the banks only received a levy while bankers continue to receive excessive bonuses; and the present conservative government continues to avoid the full implications of the Leveson Inquiry into the Culture, Practice and Ethics of the Press. As Milbank and Pabst point out, the seeming intractable nature of liberal political philosophy, safeguarded by a Westminster elite that appear out of touch with ordinary people, may well help us to understand current disengagement with political institutions and parties, with some choosing protest over voting, and others voting for far-right populist parties.<sup>2</sup>

## **2. HISTORY: THE FALL OF TELEOLOGY AND THE RISE OF LIBERALISM**

This section seeks to summarise post-liberal arguments, which rely on a genealogical critique of liberal political theory. But it does so with a twist. I focus on political hypocrisy: the notion that there is one rule for the people, and another for rulers. I suggest that this tradition of political hypocrisy feeds into a

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<sup>2</sup> John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

liberal distinction between a public and private self. Taken together, political hypocrisy and the distinction between a public and private self undermine the ability of politics to play a role in social and ethical renewal. This alternative genealogy then provides me with a basis for anchoring problems with liberal political theory in real institutions and processes in the UK; namely, a lost connection between policy and lifestyle.

Political hypocrisy appears age-old. The Bible offers us a rich history of hypocritical leaders; leaders who preached the virtues of life lived one way but who lived their own in a completely different way. Yet if political hypocrisy is age old, the history of denunciations of political hypocrisy is equally old. Two traditions stand out. The first is that told by the Bible. The Old Testament is full of prophetic voices warning of the dangers of hypocrisy (Jer 7:4-11 ; Isa 1:10-17 ; 58:2-7 ; Hosea 6:4-6 ; Amos 4:4-5 ; 5:21-22). And the New Testament is replete with calls against hypocrisy from one such voice (Matthew 22:15-18 ; 1 Peter 2:1). These voices were not always calling for dissent, but just as often were whispering to rulers, personally pointing out their shortcomings. Amongst these voices there is an implicit conviction that if we can change peoples' hearts we can change politics. This was a tradition that stressed the importance of charity and justice. The second tradition is that of Plato and Aristotle. For Plato political justice is derived from the internal justice of those in charge.<sup>3</sup> And for Aristotle, politics is not a process of formulating and delivering policies but a process of forming friendships towards a conception of the good.<sup>4</sup> This tradition stressed the importance of teleology, of studying the highest end of humanity and exploring how best to bring about that end. For Plato the process of rational self-reform guides good policy, for Aristotle the process of building friendships does.

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<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Republic* (London: Penguin, 2003), Book IV.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* (London: Dover, 2000).

These two traditions, the Judeo-Christian and the Platonic-Aristotelian, converged in a long line of advice to rulers concerning how best to conduct oneself in office, from around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD: whether this meant teaching the future ruler as Aristotle himself did Alexander; writing treatises as with the *Mirrors for Princes* tradition; or actually offering first hand advice. The role of these advisors was to ensure that rulers were good, practicing virtue in the way they carried out the duties of their office. In our contemporary climate where advisors can just as often be called “spin - doctors” this tradition of moral advice can be hard to imagine. So what changed? A number of threads converged.

The first thread was provided by Machiavelli. In his *The Prince*, published in 1532 and ostensibly in the same tradition of offering political advice, Machiavelli did something entirely new. He argued that it is of no use having a conception of the good if one does not have power—an argument that will be very familiar to those following contemporary Labour Party Politics in the UK. Politics should therefore be the amoral task of gaining and maintaining power. And this task cannot be achieved by good action. Machiavelli does not have to be regarded as demonic here. Isaiah Berlin has shown that it is quite acceptable to see Machiavelli as warning against the employment of misplaced ideals about humanity to the detriment of those they seek to serve.<sup>5</sup> Better to see people as they are, as fundamentally evil, and to learn how to manipulate them accordingly. This began a philosophy of what Pierre Manent has called ‘the fecundity of evil’, whereby harnessing the power of evil is a necessary prerequisite of gaining power.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Originality of Machiavelli’ in Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinksi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 87-93.

It was Grotius, a Dutch legal philosopher who, with the publication of *On the Law of War and Peace* in 1625, suggested politics could be a science much like physics, constructed without need of reference to God or any other teleological vision.<sup>7</sup> Grotius was seeking a way to denounce the religious violence rife in his time. There are three important features of this philosophy. The first is that it severs the link between policy and lifestyle. If policy is a science, its just execution has nothing to do with the lifestyle of the policy maker. The second is that it equally undermines those outside of the political process: if politics is a science then individuals are cogs within the order it promotes. The third problem is that it begins a process of forcing morality into the private sphere. If morality is not required in politics, then it follows that morality has no place in politics.

Similarly, Hobbes' *Leviathan*, published in 1651, sought a fair means of arbitrating between warring teleological visions. Hobbes posited a hypothetical social contract based on the notion that people wanted to avoid violent death. He said that people should offer allegiance to a leviathan with a monopoly of power. It is to this leviathan to dictate religious policy. Hobbes then, adds a further problem: apart from under the auspices of a leviathan, men cannot be trusted to act in a morally responsible manner. This notion is what John Milbank calls the 'ontology of evil'.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand individuals are expected to be privately corrupt. And on the other hand, and because of this, the state is given almost unlimited authority to intervene in the public sphere. With Hobbes we begin to see the distinction between a public and private self. At this point, however, it is the former that has the upper hand.

Later, the tables begin to turn, and keeping morality private becomes a right. John Locke tells us that we cannot impose issues of religion because no human

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<sup>7</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 420.

can have access to universal laws, because it is impossible to coerce people to believe anything and because anyway coercion leads to more violence than does tolerance.<sup>9</sup> As Charles Taylor has acknowledged, this step with Locke marks the beginning of a trend away from the Platonic-Aristotelian notion that the individual cannot be considered a fully competent human except as part of society, in which the individual is justified in so far as he or she serves society. Instead this idea is turned on its head and society is justified in so far as it serves individuals.<sup>10</sup> Taylor explains that after Locke this idea will increase in intensity, in scope and in popularity so that within a few centuries it becomes the defining concept of our social imaginary.

By way of example, almost two centuries later J.S. Mill argues that one should be able to do whatever one pleases so long as it does not harm anyone else.<sup>11</sup> A famous phrase sums up the principle: 'your liberty to swing your fist ends just where my nose begins'. If policy has nothing to do with lifestyle, the lifestyles of people in positions of public importance are inconsequential. In some ways this is a laudable cultural trend, allowing for people to be true to themselves in their private lives without worrying about public scrutiny. But it also lends to moral relativism. There is no longer a hierarchy of values but of rights. If we deem public discussions of private morality intrusive, we allow morally reprehensible behaviour to spread amongst those in positions of public importance, as well as potentially abandoning people without the education or support to lead virtuous lives. Nor are these problems merely theoretical. We have seen examples of both in recent years, as well as of one informing the other. The most extreme example of this came in the UK riots of 2011. The MPs expenses scandal, the banker

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<sup>9</sup> John Locke, 'A Letter Concerning Toleration' in *A Letter Concerning Toleration, and Other Writings* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 170.

<sup>11</sup> J.S. Mill *On Liberty* (London: Dover, 2002).

bonus furore, and the media hacking scandal were all offered as excuses for rioting amongst those involved.<sup>12</sup>

The final thread I want to mention is added by Adam Smith, who suggested that the *telos* could not be constructed and implemented but instead was a by-product of primarily selfish behaviour. Says Smith: 'By pursuing his own interest [one] frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good'.<sup>13</sup> In the interests of good Smith embraced the fecundity of evil.

All of this gets far more complicated when we discuss Max Weber. I am tracing those thinkers that brought us to our present state of instrumentalisation, a matter on which Weber seems conflicted. In some ways Weber certainly contributed to instrumentalisation, claiming that 'one can, in principle, master all things by calculation'.<sup>14</sup> But as Sung Ho Kim has argued, Weber is ambivalent about what this means. One might suggest that while epistemologically positivist, that is, confident about the technical scope of science to develop a harmonious social order and so in line with Grotius, he nonetheless worries that science is morally corrosive, suggesting that for this order to be implemented, humans must be treated as cogs in a machine. Similarly, *The Protestant Work Ethic* is largely seen as providing a 'non-Marxist genealogy of capitalism', in which values such as self-responsibility and hard work play a key role.<sup>15</sup> But Kim shows that Weber might equally be seen as neo-Marxist, lamenting the capitalist separation of workers from the means of production. My opinion is that it is best to see Weber's ambivalence as a product of his time. He is simultaneously

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<sup>12</sup> Guardian LSE Reading the Riots, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots>, accessed March 6, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Random House 1994), 485.

<sup>14</sup> Max Weber quoted in Sung Ho Kim, 'Max Weber', *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2012, Edward N. Zalta (ed.) at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/weber/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



confident in the power of scientific method to improve social order, but regretful of its corrosive power.

This same ambivalence permeates contemporary political theory such that even when we look at approaches to tackling the trends I have outlined above, such as the descent of politics into management, or the policy stalemate that arises from the privatisation and diversification of morality, still those approaches themselves are liberal, that is, they do not have any clear idea of the good life to offer. So when we look at Habermas' approach to tackling the descent of politics into management, there is a stalemate when he arrives at pushing for a normative response. Habermas recognises that a normative response is required, that politics must ground itself in a more fundamental legitimacy than the expertise of leaders, but rather than being able to specify what this normative response must be, Habermas can only specify the conditions under which such a response would itself be legitimate; namely, one that is radically inclusive. Hence Habermas says, resting on a Hobbesian analysis, that because past attempts to ground politics in a more fundamental legitimacy have led to violence, 'democratic legitimacy is the only one available today...The idea of replacing it or complementing by some presumable "deeper" grounding of the constitution in a generally binding way amounts to obscurantism'.<sup>16</sup> So for instance, to quote Habermas again, 'a [normative position] is valid just in case the foreseeable consequences and side-effects of its general observance for the interests and value-orientations of *each individual* could be *jointly* accepted by *all* concerned without coercion'. But in the conditions of radical liberalism we have arrived at today, in which there is an infinite array of moral positions, one must ask what normative position could be so universally assented to: could health care free at the point of use be so justified? Could universal benefits? Because Habermas

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<sup>16</sup> Jurgen Habermas, "'The Political": The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology' in Mendieta and VanAntwerpen, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2011), 24

starts from a liberal position, his principle of universal assent is actually a perfect formula of critique for eroding the state. If there is no common good, there can be no goods in common.

It is possible to respond of course that for Habermas the ideal environment for the full operation of the public sphere is when the conditions for liberalism are best satisfied. So Habermas sees liberalism as a prerequisite for building a common good. The point is not to privatise morality but to give people the autonomy they deserve such that all can be involved in building a common good. Once this individual autonomy is achieved, we need to focus on building democratic structures. Yet the whole point I am making is that the notion of privatised morality eventually infiltrates our social imaginary to the extent that is no longer desirable or even conceivable to build a common good; only to create temporary partnerships of common interest. Now, even a cursory reading of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* would clarify that for Habermas it is not liberalism itself but the corruption of liberalism in welfarism and neoliberalism, whereby either the state or companies monopolise the public sphere, that slowly erodes people's autonomy and hence their power to act and bring about change. But again, what is it in our social imaginary that stops us from standing up to these incursions?

When thinkers do look at the social fragmentation that I think Habermas ignores and which I am suggesting must be tackled before we can begin to build a public sphere, again the approach is radically instrumental. This is especially true of the thinker most favoured by those operating in the political world: Robert Putnam. Putnam's framing of social capital has had a profound effect on politicians and policy analysts. All of a sudden there is real concern for the previously considered soft issue of social fragmentation. But this concern is grounded in the realisation that strong communities mean less crime, less need for welfare, better coordination of resources. In other words, the new interest in the social is grounded in the notion that it represents capital: the term does not

just lead us in some mysterious way to think of the social in terms of capital thereby devaluing the social—though it does do this as well—rather it actually makes us think of the social in terms of how much money it saves. Strong communities are cheap communities.<sup>17</sup>

My purpose here has not been to undermine liberalism entirely; liberalism, and the ideas of thinkers discussed above in particular, carries with it some important ideas concerning freedom and wealth creation. My concern is that the discourses and practices used to achieve these ends do more harm than the ends do good. The means lead to a disconnect between lifestyle and policy which is morally corrosive.

### **3. CONTEMPORARY POLITICS: ADOPTING THE DISCOURSES AND PRACTICES OF LIBERALISM**

I have already begun to discuss on a theoretical level the ways in which the discourses of liberalism can foreclose the possibility of a morally engaged politics. But in order to demonstrate this point we need to look at the ways liberal discourses have been adopted and turned into practice historically and how they are employed at present. Because the primary vision in Europe generally and the UK specifically is Christian, the story of how teleology has been lost is synonymous with story of Christian decline, both in society at large and in the microcosm of Westminster politics. As shall be discussed in the next chapter, this does not necessarily mean that Christianity must be revived. Today there are many visions that may challenge state and market and provide possibilities for social and ethical renewal.

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<sup>17</sup> For a detailed, far better researched, and interesting reflection on this see Adam Dinham, *Faith and Social Capital after the Debt Crisis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Backhouse has explained that liberalism was first adopted as a creed in opposition to Christian authoritarianism.<sup>18</sup> Liberals promoted the disestablishment of the Church of England in order to free the faith from political constraints and to promote freedom of religious expression. This marks the adoption of the Hobbes-Locke trend of thought. It is against this backdrop that Backhouse sees liberalism today. In more recent history the opposition to authoritarianism plays a key part in defining what it means to be a liberal—as does the promotion of individual rights. But on the one hand social liberalism has been forever bound up with economic liberalism, and on the other liberalism is too often about negative freedom—freedom from—rather than positive freedom—freedom for.

Milbank, an inspiration for both Phillip Blond—Red Tory—and Maurice Glasman—Blue Labour—has said that ‘in the face of the secret alliance of cultural with economic liberalism, we need now to invent a new sort of politics which links egalitarianism to the pursuit of objective values and virtues’.<sup>19</sup> What is this secret alliance he refers to? Cliff Alcock, Guy Daily and Edwin Griggs have described classical liberalism, stemming from Locke, Mill and Smith as suggesting that ‘the blindly self-interested behaviour of a myriad of individuals interacting as buyers and sellers in a variety of markets—for labour, capital and goods—results in beneficial ‘unintended consequences’ for all’ and that ‘individual action is deemed to be superior to collective action (at least in the form of government action)’.<sup>20</sup> In the interests of both social and economic freedom, classical liberals promoted a vision of a small state.

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Backhouse, *Experiments in Living: Christianity and the Liberal Democrat Party* (London: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> John Milbank, ‘Red Toryism is the best hope of a new progressive politics’ *The Guardian*, 22 May 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Cliff Alcock, Guy Daly, and Edwin Griggs, *Introduction to Social Policy* (Harlow: Longman 2008), 187.

In the early to mid-twentieth century, "New Liberals" such as Keynes and Beveridge associated individualism with 'individual self-development rather than simply as assertion of individual rights and negative liberty' and so increasingly the state had a moral and financial role in supporting self-development.<sup>21</sup> But this shift was bound up with pressure from the labour movement.<sup>22</sup> Unless liberalism is supplemented with discourses of equality and fraternity, it always eventually accepts that the best way to spread autonomy is to allow the rich to get rich and for the proceeds of their wealth to trickle down.

This latter argument was championed in neo-liberalism, adopted, and to some extent constructed, by successive Thatcher governments. And the same discourses of neoliberalism were identified during the Coalition government of 2010-15.<sup>23</sup> But socialism too is easily corroded once it accepts the premises and discourses of liberalism. Milbank has said that because Marxism and atheist socialism tend to accept liberalism's premises, that the ends we seek are the maximisation of individual autonomy and wealth, they will always lose to liberalism, which wants the same and delivers them better.<sup>24</sup> The same attitude could also be found amongst New Labour.<sup>25</sup> In particular, New Labour pioneers continued to promote individual wealth so long as it could be redistributed. In

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<sup>21</sup> Alcock, Daly, and Griggs, *Introduction to Social Policy*.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Bickley, *Building Jerusalem: Christianity and the Labour Party* (London: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> See for example Hodkinson and Robbins 'The return of class war conservatism? Housing under the UK Coalition Government' in *Critical Social Policy* 3, No. 1 (2013): 57-77; Wright, 'Fantasies of empowerment: mapping neoliberal discourse in the coalition government's schools policy' in *Journal of Education Policy* 27 (3) (2012): 279-294; MacLeavy, 'A 'new politics' of austerity, workfare and gender? The UK coalition government's welfare reform policy', *Regions, Economy and Society* 4, No. 3 (2011): 355-367.

<sup>24</sup> Stacey, 'Workers of the World...Love One Another?', *Telos* 160 (2012): 183-191.

<sup>25</sup> Fuller and Geddes, 'Urban Governance Under Neoliberalism: New Labour and the Restructuring of State-Space', *Antipode* 40, No. 2 (2008): 252-282; Smith and Morton, 'Nine Years of New Labour: Neoliberalism and Workers' Rights', *BJIR* 44, No. 3 (2006): 401-420; May, Cloke and Johnson, May, Cloke and Johnson 'Rephrasing neoliberalism: New Labour and Britain's crisis of street homelessness', *Antipode* 37 (2005): 703-30.

the words of Peter Mandelson in 1997, New Labour was ‘intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich as long as they pay their taxes’.<sup>26</sup> What this attitude fails to recognise is on the one hand the lack of solidarity that results from this relaxation concerning individualism;<sup>27</sup> and on the other, the lack of social responsibility felt on the part of wealthy individuals, and indeed all those that hear the message, when they are encouraged to see taxation as substituting for consciousness.<sup>28</sup> McLellan predicted this would be a problem in 1996.<sup>29</sup> He foresaw that Tony Blair’s stress on community was doomed to break down into instrumental factors since in order for a community to behave as a community it needs to stress a vision beyond itself: ‘Tony Blair’s Fabian pamphlet on Socialism talks of social justice, equality and community—but these ideas are left floating in a way that suggests they could be blown in almost any direction’.<sup>30</sup> For McLellan, as for Milbank, this is evidence of the need for Christian theology to underpin policy.<sup>31</sup> My own research suggests that we need not accept this stark choice between reviving a Christian tradition and accepting total liberalism. Instead it is possible to develop processes of inclusively constructing teleological visions: that is, visions of how the world and relationships could be; that can never be reached but are always ahead of us; that cannot be fully defined and therefore cannot be exclusive.<sup>32</sup> Such visions have often been identified with the

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<sup>26</sup> Mandelson quoted in Shiv Malik ‘Peter Mandelson gets nervous about people getting filthy rich’, *The Guardian*, January 26, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Wilkinson and Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (London: Penguin, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Frank Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: The Disinherited Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 149.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 45–46; John Milbank *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 315.

<sup>32</sup> Stacey, ‘The God-shaped Hole in Post-Liberalism: Why community development matters’ in Turnbull, *Post-Liberalism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, forthcoming 2017); idem, ‘The Post-Liberal Idea of the Person in Pluralist Settings’ in Wood, *Renewing the Self: Contemporary Religious Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

Christian tradition, but similar ideas are available in numerous other cultures. Moreover, in a predominantly Christian country such visions will inevitably involve contemporary Christian ideas—just not exclusively.

The loss of such vision in liberal discourse often applies to civil society too. Here it is worth recalling the *Compass* campaign against the *Commercialisation of childhood*.<sup>33</sup> Although encouraged by *Compass*' victory in receiving commitment from retailers to be more responsible in the way that they advertise to young people, especially with reference to their use of sex and sexuality, many are worried that if anyone had asked *Compass* just why they were against the commercialisation of childhood, why it was wrong, they would have struggled to provide an answer. Because really, to be against the commercialisation of childhood, we need to be against the commercialisation of life *per se*. It is as if the campaign draws on the last remaining vestiges of a shared idea of the good without having articulated what that idea is. Left unexamined, it is worth questioning whether any such idea will remain.

Of course there is an answer internal to liberalism here: in the interests of autonomy one should not encourage behaviour that has serious implications as to a person's identity unless they can reasonably be thought to have the critical awareness to see those implications. But this argument itself easily dissolves once we begin to interrogate a) what counts as critical awareness b) who gets to decide what a reasonable level of critical awareness is c) how laws based on undermining critical awareness will be enforced and d) whether critical awareness is acquired with age or whether we would consider it unacceptable to use sexually provocative material to advertise products to fully grown adults with a low IQ. This last point relates to a similar problem I was pointed to by Maurice

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<sup>33</sup> Zoe Williams, 'Commercialisation of Childhood'. Online: <https://www.compassonline.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/thecommercialisationofchildhood.pdf> (accessed 27 April 2017).

Glasman; namely, Labour's inability to take a critical stance against pornography. From the liberal point of view, pornography, at least legal pornography, so long as it is produced by and with consenting adults and watched by consenting adults is not problematic enough to make into an issue. Specifically in this case what we require is a vision of the common good that does not accept the objectification of vulnerable people. More generally, we need vision.

The stress on negative freedom, freedom from political, social or economic constraints, is a laudable linchpin. But without something prior, it can equally be corrosive. Freedom must be sought with the goal of seeking a common good that affects the way we live our lives. This point has been explored in depth by Chiara Lubich in her aptly titled speech 'Liberty, Equality, Whatever happened to Fraternity?'<sup>34</sup> If freedom simply means freedom from judgement of any kind, then we will lose the possibility of holding politicians, businesses, and people to account.

#### **4. REAL WORLD, REAL PROBLEMS: FAULTS OF TODAY AS FAULTS OF LIBERALISM**

I will cover four concrete examples here with which those familiar with the UK context will be familiar: the increasing similarity between parties, the MPs expenses scandal, the banker bonus furore, and the media hacking scandal. Although many of these issues arose as early as 2008, they remain worth exploring because they are still on the surface of public discourse. I will be taking a fresh look at these issues with a mind to understanding how they could have happened in what are still seen as some of our most cherished institutions.

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<sup>34</sup> Chiara Lubich, 'Liberty, Equality...what happened to Fraternity?' in *Essential Writings: Spirituality, Dialogue, Culture* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007), 257-64.



The increasing similarity between parties directly betrays a lack of vision. If we look back to the mid-nineteenth century, even though each party drew from Christianity for inspiration, each party had a strong and unique vision. To some extent the alignment between parties shows a triumph of socialist principles: health, education. But there is a similar convergence around free market principles. Even the majority of the Labour Party now largely sees free market principles as integral to not only wealth creation but also public service delivery. The convergence around free market principles is most concerning because as much as being the result of intellectual or moral agreement, it is increasingly the result of weakness. As suggested in the discussion of Smith above, and as I discuss in far more detail elsewhere, without vision it is difficult to stand up to instrumental arguments.<sup>35</sup>

The MPs expenses scandal shed light on a corrosive disconnect between lifestyle and policy. But in order to understand this disconnect, we cannot naively regard the scandal as betraying an inflated sense of entitlement amongst politicians who are only out for themselves. Most people who get into politics do so because they believe in something, because they see an injustice, a problem that needs fixing or have a vision of something better. MPs, especially those representing constituencies outside of London, work hard and spend a lot of time away from their family and friends. When parliament is sitting it is thought that the average MP works 71 hours a week—or one and a half full-time jobs according to the EU Working Time Directive.<sup>36</sup>

But perhaps what the expenses scandal does betray is a loss of the importance of leading an exemplary lifestyle if one is to put forward policies that inspire public engagement. Nietzsche famously said that the early Christians managed

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<sup>35</sup> Stacey, 'The God-shaped Hole in Post-Liberalism'; idem, 'A Post-Liberal Idea of the Person: Religious and Cultural Strategies for Persons as People'.

<sup>36</sup> Matt Korris, *A Year in the Life: From a Member of Public to Member of Parliament* (London: Hansard Society, 2005).

to inspire so many converts because of their ascetic lifestyle. Seeing Christians living in poverty and abstaining from excesses of drink and promiscuity led people to surmise “all that suffering cannot be for nothing.” A similar suffering has to be undertaken for most great visions today. The artist, the civil society activist and (personal experience tells me!) the academic alike must undergo financial difficulty in order to work for what they believe in. Scott Atran has undertaken research to show that the same principle draws religious believers into great acts of personal sacrifice: the struggle is a sign of the virtue of the cause.<sup>37</sup> And Graeber demonstrates the same in politics.<sup>38</sup> Today we often hear arguments that if we want the best people to work in politics, we must pay them wages to compete with the private sector. Personally I do not see this. Suffering reminds us that we are doing something meaningful.

As the civil service *Standard of Conduct* suggests, as important as the self-understanding behind politicians’ actions is the public perception of those actions. This idea is rooted in the notion that democracy functions on the basis of trust; that politicians and political institutions require at the very least fair, honest and legal behaviour in order to maintain their legitimacy. A recent report by a consortium of academics known collectively as PIDOP demonstrated that one of the key factors in disengagement with conventional politics, namely party membership, voting, and paying taxes, is a lack of trust in politicians or political institutions.<sup>39</sup> And, to reiterate, the Guardian/LSE Reading the Riots research saw rioters citing lack of trust in politicians and political institutions as an excuse for rioting.<sup>40</sup> It is worth exploring further whether the attention the expenses

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<sup>37</sup> Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy* (London: Penguin, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2009), 11.

<sup>39</sup> PIDOP, ‘European Policy Brief’. Online: <http://www.fahs.surrey.ac.uk/pidop/documents/Briefings/PIDOP%20Policy%20Briefing%20Paper%20No.%207.pdf> (accessed 1 November 2012).

<sup>40</sup> Guardian/LSE ‘Reading the Riots: Investigating England’s Summer of Disorder’. Online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/interactive/2011/dec/14/reading-the-riots-investigating-england-s-summer-of-disorder-full-report> (accessed 1 November 2012).

scandal received and the emotional impact it had were down to its bringing to the surface a number of deeper underlying concerns regarding the disconnect between policy and lifestyle.

The first concern might be privilege. The stereotype of politicians is one of old white men, more specifically old white middle class men. Despite good efforts amongst the Labour party in particular, the stereotype is largely accurate. Moreover, as a Labour MP put it to me recently, Labour, historically the party of the working man and woman, "is slowly catching up with the Tories and Liberal Democrats as a party of the professional middle class". This trend is linked to the much maligned professionalization of politics whereby young people fresh out of a top university begin as researchers for MPs, then become advisors and eventually are selected by the party to become politicians in their own right. It is becoming increasingly rare for people to rise up in an entirely separate industry before entering party politics. People lose a sense of what it is like to be anything but a politician. On top of this there is a Catch 22 situation whereby people need experience before they can work as a researcher. What this usually entails is an unpaid internship, which itself tends to be a luxury of middle class children.

All of this creates a view amongst lower earners that politics is the way the middle class serves the middle class. This attitude goes back at least to Plato's *Republic* when Thrasymachus quipped to Socrates 'justice is the interest of the stronger'.<sup>41</sup> This suggestion is so offensive to politicians not only because they wish to serve everybody equally but more importantly because they think politics is more than merely looking out for interests. Instead, politics is about carving out a meaningful vision of the future—but is it any longer?

The third talking point is the furore surrounding banker bonuses and the unwillingness of banks to lend to small businesses. The surface concern is that

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<sup>41</sup> Plato, *Republic* (London: Penguin, 2007), 26.

the banks and bankers brought about our current economic woes and so banks and bankers should pay. But the deeper question to ask is why we have allowed banks to operate in the way, why we have substituted banking for manufacturing as opposed to complementing one with the other, and why the government fears putting on pressure to cut bonuses and force banks to lend to small businesses. We need the business of banking to be considered as moral at every step. Max Wind-Cowie, researcher at *Demos*, cites the US Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) to suggest that this kind of moralisation of banking would not be all that difficult.<sup>42</sup> The CRA ‘imposes a statutory obligation, on retail banks, to provide credit services that meet the needs of low and moderate-income communities’.<sup>43</sup> By sharing social responsibility with the private sector in this way, we can restore a connection between wealth creation and moral action.

In their book *Crisis and Recovery: Ethics, Economics and Justice*, Larry Elliot and Rowan Williams suggest that the present economic crisis provides a tipping point for rethinking what is important, prioritising moral vision over economic success.<sup>44</sup> It is with this idea in mind that Ed Miliband’s call for a more “responsible capitalism” should have been and was heeded. A good step in this direction was the move on the part of Vince Cable during the 2010-15 Coalition Government to make executive pay increases subject to shareholder scrutiny and sanction. We should consider how this idea will play out in majority state owned companies.

Finally, the combination of the media hacking scandal and the Murdoch BSkyB takeover bid, which evolved into a public debate about the appropriateness of relations between politicians and the press as much as anything reminded people of the important role the media plays in holding

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<sup>42</sup> Wind-Cowie, *Recapitalising the Poor* (London, Demos, 2009), 43.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Larry Elliot and Rowan Williams, *Crisis and Recovery: Ethics, Economics, and Justice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

politicians to account on the basis of lifestyle. Although the culture is changing on the continent, the UK has led the way in terms of holding politicians to account for their moral decisions. In this sense the UK still has a strong anti-Nietzschean stance. Although some politicians might prefer it were otherwise, we expect a strong connection between public policy and the private morality of our politicians.

## **5. TOWARDS A VISION: THE RECENT WORK AND CAMPAIGNS OF THE CHRISTIANS ON THE LEFT AS A CASE STUDY**

For six months in 2012 I acted as a participant observer at Christians on the Left (CotL), then called the Christian Socialist Movement. In the following I will explain how the vision of CotL has helped them to restore the connection between lifestyle and policy. I begin by explaining my methodology. I then explore the history of CotL. I then discuss its effort to restore a connection between lifestyle and policy with reference to three key areas: politics, economy and media. Before I get underway, I want to give a brief intellectual history so that the reader has an understanding of what it means to be a Christian Socialist Movement. I will also have to explain my methodological approach.

The research involved in this paper was undertaken in a six-month period in 2012 while working as participant observer at Christians on the Left. The data provided is taken from a larger study which explored how to develop solidarity in the context of social and economic liberalism on the one hand, and religious plurality on the other. The study involved four groups exploring sources of solidarity in the religiously plural context of London. Data was collected using a combination of interviews, focus groups and ethnographic field notes. Unless otherwise stated, all unattributed quotations are from anonymised conversations with politicians and practitioners met in the field.

The key question then, during my time at CotL, was how did they develop solidarity in this dual context of social and economic liberalism and religious plurality. Their key strategy, I observed, was to restore a connection between lifestyle and policy: reigniting public faith in politics, and politicians' faith in the public. I made regular visits to their offices in Labour HQ, where I undertook most of my writing. I observed them at work, involved myself in their teaching fellow Christians the importance of political engagement, and played a part in their campaigns in order to get a feel of why and how they do what they do.

My methodological approach to empirical research has always been an intellectual and emotional struggle. As the reader will understand from the first section of this paper, the conceptual background I am critiquing is a shift from a politics concerned with what is good to a value-neutral politics concerned with what is efficient. But since I am tired of this point being merely theoretically stated, the intention of my research generally and for this piece in particular is to empirically explore the point in order to draw conclusions relevant for policy. But value neutrality plays an important part in empirical research. So the risk I face in moving from the abstract to the practical is no less than undermining the very reason for my having undertaken my research in the first place.

The process I developed to deal with this discrepancy I call ethno-theology. Ethno-theology involves being open about the normative positions that inspire the researcher before they enter the field. But it also involves critical-realism and hermeneutics. It is critically-realist because it assumes that conceptual background key to the research, namely the decline of teleology amidst the rise of liberalism, may be influencing the actions of participants without their ever using the words. It is hermeneutic because it accepts that this conceptual background is a preliminary theoretical device only, allowing that other ideas may better explain participants' reasons for action, and that better, more inspiring normative positions may arise in one's time with the organisation. I am

extremely thankful for participants' putting their trust in me as a participant in their work so as I could learn how they operate.

In my time working at CotL, it was called the Christian Socialist Movement. This name, while potentially exclusionary, was a far better indicator of the tradition from which the organisation arose. Arguably the ideas underpinning Christian Socialism are as old as Christianity itself.<sup>45</sup> Stephen Beer, Political Communications Officer at the Christian Socialist Movement, points to how the Old Testament offers a radical agenda for redistributing wealth: 'In Deuteronomy 15 we find that every seven years the Israelites were required to cancel debts to each other. Every 50 years, the land was reallocated to its original owners' (Beer 2009). And yet Robert Leach has quite correctly suggested that

...an obvious problem for those who would claim some mutual dependence between Christianity and socialism is that so many other Christians have derived quite different social, economic and political implications from the same source.<sup>46</sup>

This point is ostensibly supported by the dual influence of John Milbank, arguably the greatest living intellectual influence on Christian Socialism, on Maurice Glasman's Blue Labour and Phillip Blond's Red Tory. Yet to think this divergent appeal betrays a lack of substance is to miss the commonalty between Glasman and Blond and by extension what it means to be a Christian Socialist.

The best way to understand what it means to be a Christian Socialist is to focus on what the former take "socialism" to mean. For Christian Socialists, rather than intending state-sponsored community development, state ownership of industry, state regulation on business or the radical redistribution of resources,

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<sup>45</sup> Kenneth Leach, *Christian Socialism* (Aberdeen: Political Studies Association, 2002), 4.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

“socialism” refers to a political philosophy based on stressing social goals such as human dignity, friendship, reciprocity and empowerment.

Its roots are in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglican distaste with political economy, or, more simply, with competition. Hence Edward Norman tells us that Frederick Denison Maurice would lament that competition was

“a disease”; a “monstrous and anarchical condition”; “a struggle to get for oneself and to prevent anyone else from getting”...he could not tolerate, he said, “the blasphemous thought that this destructive principle was divine law”.<sup>47</sup>

Because capitalism is seen as undermining social goals, Christian Socialism often seems to adopt traditionally socialist agendas. But protecting against capitalism can also mean fighting seemingly conservative agendas such as the promotion of trade guilds, cooperatives, and mutuals, promoting local trade at the expense of the free market and possibly. Moreover, one strand that might tentatively be called Christian Socialist is the Red Toryism of Phillip Blond whereby ostensibly right wing agendas such as rolling back the state are supported. Only in this case the state is not rolled back to promote competition; rather the state is rolled back with the aim of promoting local, community support.

That it takes on agendas of both left and right does not make Christian Socialism all things for all people. It is not a populist movement. Indeed, while both parties seem to shift to the centre, succumbing to economic liberalism on the one hand and social liberalism on the other, Christian Socialism carves out a specifically unpopulist (though one hopes time will prove not unpopular!) centre, being neither economically nor socially liberal.

Finally, it is important to stress what it means to be a movement. In the words of the current Director of the CSM, Andy Flannagan

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<sup>47</sup> Edward R. Norman, *The Victorian Christian Socialists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 16.



I have become more and more convinced that transformation in countries only happens through movements, and that movements only happen when folks with a passion for certain policies flesh them out in their lifestyle. Our nation has seen too much of those who espouse certain policies but whose lifestyles look no different to anyone else. There are also plenty of us who studiously model a different way of living, that springs from a different set of values, yet step back from arguing to see those values fleshed out in public policy. Both are required, and to be a movement, you need both.<sup>48</sup>

So stressing that the CSM is a movement reminds us that politics is about getting together with people, creating a common good that influences the way people should live their lives, changing your own lifestyle first and creating policies that give people the power to change theirs.

Christian Socialism is unashamedly a politics concerned with lifestyle. Especially under the leadership of Andy Flannagan, CotL stresses ethical practice at every step. *Labour Neighbours* is a programme that began in February 2010 proposing to 'model a new gateway for activism connected to the Labour movement, involving community service, social action, and local community organising'.<sup>49</sup> The idea is to use the influence of the Labour Party as well as local Labour resources and people to galvanise local action. Labour would return to its roots in community organizing—acting as a go-between for the groups that already exist—and community development—providing an opportunity for people with no organisational affiliation to get involved in their community. On the one hand, the idea is that to be a member of the Labour Party must mean more than devising policy—it must mean being involved in one's community; and on the

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<sup>48</sup> Flannagan, 'Put your money where your mouth is'. Online: [http://www.thecsm.org.uk/Articles/160987/Christian\\_Socialist\\_Movement/Articles/The\\_Common\\_Good/Issue\\_200\\_Feeling/Can\\_we\\_apply.aspx](http://www.thecsm.org.uk/Articles/160987/Christian_Socialist_Movement/Articles/The_Common_Good/Issue_200_Feeling/Can_we_apply.aspx) (accessed 24 July 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Ian Geary, 'Labour Neighbours – The Plan'. Online: [http://www.thecsm.org.uk/Articles/160987/Christian\\_Socialist\\_Movement/Articles/The\\_Common\\_Good/Issue\\_200\\_Feeling/Can\\_we\\_apply.aspx](http://www.thecsm.org.uk/Articles/160987/Christian_Socialist_Movement/Articles/The_Common_Good/Issue_200_Feeling/Can_we_apply.aspx) (accessed 24 July 2012).

other, to really change one's community, it is important to link up with organisations that have real power.

The work of linking community activists to party politics is not an easy task. This is particularly problematic amongst faith-based activists. When political theorists and policy makers speak of the rights of people of faith to be involved in the public sphere, they often do so as though the "people of faith" were an army banging at the doors of parliament, demanding to be involved. In fact, the experience of CotL suggests the opposite is the case. CotL involves itself in convincing people of faith that it is not a betrayal of their faith to get involved in politics. Certainly a number of Christians worry that to 'render unto Caesar' means to stay out of politics (Matthew 22:21). Similarly some Muslims I have spoken with in research outside of CotL suggest that involving oneself in man's law may be seen as denying God's law.

The key way that CotL convince people of faith to get involved in politics is to go into seminaries and schools and teach. They use a combination of Biblical argument and appeals to the power of Christian morals to alter action. The most convincing argument in this regard comes from Rob Carr, in 2012 CotL's Office and Communications Manager, who at a talk delivered to the Salvation Army, described the work of CotL as putting 'steel in the spines of politicians' by 'whispering in their ear', giving them the moral confidence to stand up for social issues. The phrase 'putting steel in the spines of politicians' recalls the tradition of offering advice to rulers mentioned in the first section of this article – providing people with a vision beyond instrumentality. CotL reminds its MPs of a vision from which they can derive real-world principles. It does so through writing pamphlets, holding meetings and conferences and forming friendships with MPs.

The CotL approach to economy helps to distinguish them from the "third way" approach associated with New Labour whereby free markets are allowed to flourish so as to increase standard tax revenue for social spending, and from

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Fabian Orthodoxy whereby it is enough for socialism to be implemented from above via policy. The CotL idea is to be about both policy and personal action. There are a number of policy initiatives such as the campaign for a financial transaction tax, based on the US *Robin Hood Tax* and aimed at charging banks for financial transactions so as to invest the money on social spending; the campaign to separate retail and investment banks so that people's private savings are free from major risk; and the campaign to increase regulation on banking. Yet alongside these there are also personal action initiatives like *Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is*, which aims to make ordinary people move their money, to switch their bank accounts, to banks that invest in only ethical companies. The point here is to become an ethical consumer, forcing banks to alter their behaviour by voting with one's feet. Government action and individual action must go hand in hand.

Because it is as much about lifestyle as it is about policy, the CSM has a strong focus on raising the profile of its campaigns in the media. It uses and reinforces the media as a tool for holding politicians to account and also as a moral force showing a way to do politics outside of Westminster. This strategy reminds us that the place of the public is not simply to pressure politicians to pass laws that will in their turn change our life choices; it is also, perhaps more fundamentally, about changing the world by gathering together with people to change our own and others' life choices. The media then is not simply a place to hold people to account but to inspire them to act differently. This CSM approach also seems like a far healthier relationship for politicians to have with the media. Rather than hiding from the media, politicians should feel comfortable to talk about lifestyle choices in the media. They do not only represent constituents through expressing the latter's wishes in policy formation but by leading exemplary lifestyles. And leading an exemplary lifestyle itself need not simply mean following tradition; it might mean carving out a new way of living honourably.

## 6. CONCLUSION

CotL is, obviously, a Christian movement. But I hope it is clear from the foregoing discussion that I do not think only a Christian organisation could carve out the solutions I have been discussing. This is not a treatise seeking to bring people back to Christ. Certain strands of Christian belief have been employed to drag us into these problems in the first place. And indeed, it is equally possible that any other faith or none could achieve the same outcomes. In my own research thus far I have explored other Abrahamic faiths, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Instead, what I am suggesting is that some belief must hold priority over liberty in order for us to hold off the forces of instrumentalisation.

The point of discussing the actions of CotL is to demonstrate *one* way in which groups are able to challenge the forces of instrumentalisation by restoring the connection between lifestyle and policy. I have already explained that my time at CotL was part of a larger study seeking to understand how solidarity is constructed out of the dual context of social and economic liberalism *and* religious plurality. While CotL offer clear and practical ways of challenging social and economic liberalism, their work clearly cannot speak to the range of religious and nonreligious beliefs found in the contemporary UK, let alone the world. How to address both contexts at once is far more complicated, and something I have tried to address elsewhere.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Stacey, 'The God-shaped Hole in Post-Liberalism'; Stacey, 'A Post-Liberal Idea of the Person'.