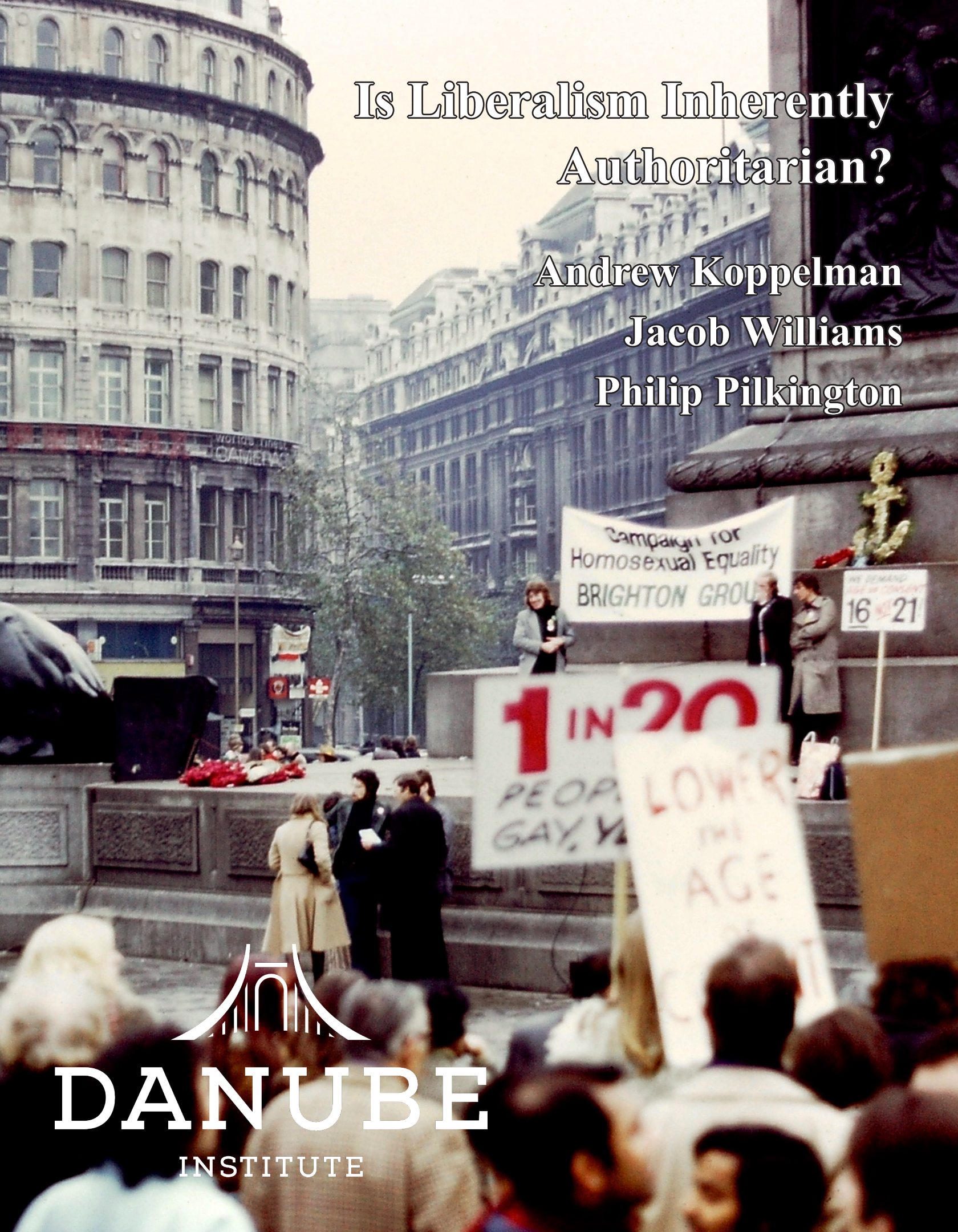


Is Liberalism Inherently Authoritarian?

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Image: Campaign for Homosexual equality, London, England - August 28th, 1971



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About the Danube Institute

The Danube Institute, established in 2013 by the Batthyány Lajos Foundation in Budapest, serves as a hub for the exchange of ideas and individuals within Central Europe and between Central Europe, other parts of Europe, and the English-speaking world. Rooted in a commitment to respectful conservatism in cultural, religious, and social life, the Institute also upholds the broad classical liberal tradition in economics and a realistic Atlanticism in national security policy. These guiding principles are complemented by a dedication to exploring the interplay between democracy and patriotism, emphasising the nation-state as the cornerstone of democratic governance and international cooperation.

Through research, analysis, publication, debate, and scholarly exchanges, the Danube Institute engages with centre-right intellectuals, political leaders, and public-spirited citizens, while also fostering dialogue with counterparts on the democratic centre-left. Its activities include establishing and supporting research groups, facilitating international conferences and fellowships, and encouraging youth participation in scholarly and political discourse. By drawing upon the expertise of leading minds across national boundaries, the Institute aims to contribute to the development of democratic societies grounded in national identity and civic engagement.

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Is Liberalism Inherently Authoritarian?

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Abstract

The following series of comments arises from a recent event at the Danube Institute, entitled ‘Is Liberalism a Threat to Religious Liberty?’, held on 3 December 2025. The debate was difficult to contain within the framework of religious liberty alone, as the topics that arose in response to this question touched on the nature of liberalism itself. What emerged from this discussion was an extensive debate on the nature of liberalism and postliberalism. The three participants have written up their thoughts on this discussion, which we are publishing below. We believe this is one of the most comprehensive debates between liberals and postliberals in recent months.

The Mystery of Postliberalism

I was surprised to be invited to speak at the Danube Institute, the postliberal think tank in Budapest.¹ I've written a harsh critique of the distorted account of liberalism in the writings of Patrick Deneen and Adrian Vermeule, two of the most prominent postliberal theorists². Neither of them has deigned to respond, so I appreciate Danube Institute's willingness to engage. The event was a model of liberal disagreement—you can hear a podcast that the other participants and I recorded—but I am now surer than ever of this: postliberalism is so undertheorized that it is hard to give an intelligible account of its claims³.

The question we debated was “Is Liberalism a Threat to Religious Liberty?” It became clear in our discussions that it is motivated by some genuinely troubling recent events. An abortion protester was convicted in England for holding up a sign near a clinic⁴. A Finnish politician was prosecuted for quoting a Bible verse condemning homosexuality⁵. A comedian was arrested at Heathrow Airport for anti-trans tweets⁶.

But the formulation is strange. All these episodes are grotesque invasions of free speech, a core liberal right. None have happened or are likely to happen in the United States, precisely because it has unusually strong free speech protection and is, to that extent, more *liberal*. The notion of religious liberty is an *artifact* of liberalism, which, beginning in the late Renaissance, supplanted the then-common view that heretical religious beliefs were intolerable and required forcible suppression by the state. It is part of the larger liberal commitment to allowing people to live as they like.

Yet the danger liberalism allegedly presents to religion is a central theme in postliberal writing, including that of my interlocutors at the event, Philip Pilkington and Jacob Williams. The core critical claim of postliberalism is that liberalism inevitably turns into its opposite; that what begins as an ideology of tolerance and free speech ends in repression.

The most prominent proponent of this idea is Deneen. In his most recent book, *Regime Change*, he points to a “tyrannical liberalism... that is not a contradiction of liberalism but its fulfilment.”⁷ The Millean liberal idea of experiments of living sounded tolerant, but “embedded in its deepest logic was its potential, and inevitability, of being wielded as an aggressive tool of domination and even tyrannical power.”⁸ Liberalism seeks “the forced imposition of radical expressivism upon the population by the power elite;” “the outright political, cultural, economic, and social suppression of its opposition.”⁹ Its “political order becomes devoted – with white-hot fervor – to the eradication of any law, custom, or tradition that has as its premise that there are objective conditions of *good* that require public support.”¹⁰ All this involves claims about the psychology of liberals, yet the book's chapter on “The Power Elite” (like his earlier *Why Liberalism Failed*) says little about the psychology of the class he is purportedly analyzing. Later he becomes outright conspiratorial, describing “the elite adopting the banner of ‘democracy’ and egalitarianism as cover for the further advancement of their status.”¹¹

Likewise, Pilkington's book, *The Collapse of Global Liberalism*, defines liberalism as “the Enlightenment political ideology par excellence that sought to level and ‘rationalize’ social and political relationships. Liberalism's target has always been hierarchical structures in politics and society at large.”¹² He summarily declares: “Religion is inherently illiberal in that it imposes a completely hierarchical, non-liberal worldview on its adherents—which is why liberals tend to either hate or distrust religion.”¹³

I cannot think of a single liberal philosopher or politician who understands their project this way, and there are plenty of religious liberals. The theorists do test hierarchies with something like John Rawls's difference principle, asking that inequalities be justified, but many inequalities can meet that test.

The classic Lockean liberal response to diversity is to draw clear boundaries, in order to create a private sphere where citizens are free to exercise their religion in ways that other citizens find repugnant. John Locke argued that diversity need not produce conflict so long as there were clear boundaries of property. A congregation could do what it liked within its own building. Those who regarded its activities as heretical were free to assemble in a different building of their own. (The relation between Locke's theory of property and his theory of religious liberty deserves more exploration than it has gotten.)

Hierarchical structures within religion are perfectly acceptable to liberalism so long as they are freely consented to by everyone within those structures. Hierarchy must be justified, but consent suffices to justify.¹⁴ Shifting our focus from theory to practice, American law has never questioned the right of the Catholic church to confine the priesthood to males, or to impose on the priesthood difficult demands such as celibacy, or to condemn as immoral homosexual sex and contraception. Liberals often harshly denounce and stigmatize these ideas, putting painful social pressure on those who hold them: however, the postliberals claim more than this: outright coercion and censorship. Liberals believe in free speech, even for ideas we don't like.

Williams worries, for similar reasons, that liberalism may be headed toward "the mass removal of children from gender-critical homes, the forced closure of conservative religious schools or churches that do not conduct same-sex weddings, and the repeal or rewriting of the First Amendment to permit draconian hate speech legislation." No politician or leading writer on the left is proposing anything like this.

So, the question the panel was asked is strangely paradoxical - something like asking whether soccer is a threat to the practice of scoring goals. Williams helpfully elucidates the nature of the postliberal claim. He thinks that the issue is not what liberal theory envisions, but liberalism's consequences in practice.

He writes: "the implicit thought seems to be that the voluntarist assumptions embedded in the regime are progressively extended to new domains of human life and stripped of their hedges and qualifications," and that thus "citizens who merely wish in their private lives or freely chosen associations to hold and teach more traditional beliefs about human flourishing—especially beliefs that harbour reservations about sexual autonomy—are increasingly targeted by the state for coercive correction."¹⁵

He observes that the postliberal critique of liberalism consists of two claims: that the liberal valorization of choice presupposes and tends increasingly to insist upon "an antiteleological metaphysics, whereby human fulfilment is achieved through the exercise of choice rather than conformity to a normative natural order" (which he calls the *Structural Radicalization Thesis*) and that this in turn produces a tendency to increasingly restrict the liberty of traditionalists (which he calls the *Coercive Liberalism Thesis*)¹⁶. Deneen says he has "written in imitation of the classical explorations of the 'logic of a regime.'¹⁷ Williams proposed, on this basis, a hypothesis that clarifies the event's puzzling question: "Implementing liberal theory in a state—a regime—tends to cause that regime to decay into one that is not liberal, a regime ordered around coercive progressivism—in other words, around compelling citizens to embrace a particular progressive vision of the human good."

The claim here is of a familiar kind, structurally similar to one that Plato develops in Book VIII of the *Republic* (which is surely one of the "classical explorations" that Deneen refers to). There Socrates considers the various types of regime, and explains how each of them tends to manifest internal tensions that cause it to degenerate into a different and worse kind of regime. (Which however cannot in itself be a criticism of any particular form, because "for everything that has come into being there is decay.")

For instance, a timocracy, a regime based on the heroic pursuit of honor, tends eventually to produce status competition based on wealth, and so generates a new and unattractive kind of citizen: "Instead of men who love victory and honor, they finally become lovers of money-making and money; and they praise and admire the wealthy man and bring him to the ruling offices, while they dishonor the poor man."¹⁸ The regime then becomes an oligarchy.



*Marble bust of John Locke at
Trinity College's Old Library Long Room
(Shutterstock)*

This kind of tension within a regime generates what Marx called a contradiction: the regime itself generates forces that undermine it. Marxism itself offers a cautionary illustration. Lenin's revolutionary vanguard bears some resemblances to Plato's timocracy. Both are led by a class of people who define themselves by their devotion to a demanding ideal. Both regimes, however, create tempting opportunities for wealth and so corrupt the ruling class. Lenin was always already on the path to Brezhnev. There was a similar effect when the papacy was granted political power: it attracted people who wanted it.

The Structural Radicalization Thesis is a claim of this kind. Liberal theorists may not intend to produce a regime that restricts traditionalists' rights to freedom of association and freedom of speech. They in fact would defend such rights. But, the thesis claims, the regime they bring into being produces people who do not respect such rights, just as Brezhnev and his minions did not give a damn about the well-being of the working classes. And such people tend to invade those rights. That's the Coercive Liberalism Thesis.

Pilkington seems to have a similar dynamic in mind when he writes that "when liberal ideas start to dissolve 'arbitrary' hierarchies, they tend to go all the way: while liberals start with critiquing the lord-serf relationship, soon they are critiquing the parent-child relationship, and soon after that they are questioning whether gender exists."¹⁹ Such notions "tend to disrupt society because they corrode natural social bonds and replace them with contractual arrangements."²⁰

As I have said, episodes of left-authoritarianism have certainly occurred. But authoritarianism is illiberal. The postliberals don't seem to notice that the authoritarian left has produced a reaction by the liberal left, with new organizations of liberals fighting for free speech²¹. My own work builds on liberal premises to advocate for accommodation of conservatives like them. I have been arguing for years that liberalism properly understood (in both theory and practice) protects religious liberty as one of its core commitments²², and calls for prudential accommodation of the gay rights/religious liberty conflict (which is an issue postliberals tend to focus on)²³.

Liberalism, William Galston has written, aims at "maximum feasible accommodation of diverse legitimate ways of life" – or, as Hunter S. Thompson put it, the "right to be weird."²⁴ Very little is as weird as other people's religions.

Why think that the authoritarianism originates in liberalism? The only one of these writers who offers a reason to trace the coercion to liberalism itself is Deneen, who offers grotesque misreadings of classic liberal writers such as Locke and Mill and then claims that their ideas have repressive implications. In my critique in the *Notre Dame Law Review*, I observed that Deneen and Vermeule both claim a quasi-Marxian inevitability²⁵. The comparison is to Marx's advantage. Unlike Marx they are reticent about the causal processes by which this alleged inevitability comes about. My interlocutors in Budapest never did much to fill this gap.

Tolerance for diverse ways of life, including conservative religiosity, is one of the core commitments of liberalism. Liberal regimes don't always achieve that. No regime fully realizes its ideals. But the accomplishments of actual liberal regimes are impressive. The Danube Institute cheerfully agreed to my request to set up a PowerPoint presentation. I surprised them by offering a presentation with only one slide. It showed an image drawn, not from theory, but from an actual existing liberal society – specifically, New York City. In March 2017, a right wing Twitter user posted this:



/pol/ News Network @polNewsNetwork1 · Mar 1

This is the future that liberals want.



4.0K 7.6K 19K

Evidently the intention of the Twitter post was to arouse fear and revulsion toward both of the people in the photo, and toward the regime that let such people into public spaces. It backfired spectacularly. The post quickly became the object of viral ridicule. One user commented: “religious freedom, kinky daytime drag looks, and a robust public transit program? SIGN ME THE FUCK UP.” BuzzFeed tracked down Gilda Wabbit, the drag queen in the photo, who said, “I won’t speak for all liberals, but my goal is for everyone—white, brown, drag queen, soccer mom, cisgender, trans, heterosexual, queer, working class, middle class—to be able to exist as they choose without judgement or fear.”

Postliberals are clearly not among the enthusiasts. They broadly fall into two categories. One group, broadly consistent with the person who made the original post, is troubled that in this case liberalism *succeeded*: two people, each of whom appears to be committed to a view of the world that doesn’t leave much room for the other, nonetheless coexist peacefully, evidently by presuming that the other has a right to be there. In the future some postliberals want, one or both would somehow be made to disappear. (The ubiquity of that kind of postliberal is voluminously documented in Laura K. Field’s impressive new book, *Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right* (Princeton University Press, 2025).) If this is what you hope for, I haven’t got a lot to say to you. Aristotle is right that people need minimal decent socialization before they can even begin to think about ethics. I find this ideal terrifying and sickening. We can’t be friends.

A second variety of postliberal, however, doesn’t dispute that it might be nice for such different people to coexist, but they think it just isn’t possible. Sooner or later one tribe will attack another. That claim gives me hope. Gilda really is harmless. (Liberals will worry about whether women in burkas face communal coercion. Some do and some do not.) The fear of Gilda is empirical and susceptible to refutation.

The coercive liberalism thesis is that, in a society that lets Gilda ride the subway, religious traditionalists are bound eventually to be repressed. But the purported inevitability is unexplained.

More than that: *one can’t even tell what the causal hypothesis is*. Williams delicately writes: “The postliberals tend to avoid providing highly detailed mechanisms for this process²⁶.” All we get is ominous claims about inexorable logic, with the logic unexplained. Plato offered an account of the psychology of the timocrats that led them unawares toward oligarchy. Marx offered an excruciatingly detailed hypothesis about the crisis tendencies in capitalism. Where’s the corresponding account here?

One of the closest studies of coercive wokeness, Greg Lukianoff & Jonathan Haidt’s book *The Coddling of the American Mind* (Penguin, 2019), concludes that this tendency became widespread around 2015. But liberalism has been around for a lot longer than that. Why did coercive liberalism take so long to get there? If liberalism persisted so long without it, perhaps there is a different cause for recent illiberal developments?

So, I end with a challenge for the postliberals. I still find your claims mysterious. If the logic of the regime really produces structural radicalization and coercion, can you spell out the causal processes you are alleging? (As I noted above, the authoritarian left has produced vigorous resistance from the liberal left.) If not, then all your critique of liberalism offers is the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy – the notion that, if one event happened after another event, the first event caused the second. The result is intellectually lazy scapegoating. And it’s counterproductive. As the title of the panel reveals, postliberals are happy to invoke liberal ideas when they need them. Right now, they do need them. Let us help you.

Raphael's School of Athens
(Shutterstock)



Postliberalism Without Perfection: Why the Mechanism for Coercive Liberalism is not Mysterious

Andrew Koppelman is one of the sophisticated interlocutors of today’s postliberal intellectuals, and also among their most sincere and good faith critics. Debating whether liberalism threatens religious liberty with Koppelman at the Danube Institute was a pleasure, and an occasion for stimulating reflection on my own efforts to clarify the (not-so-mysterious) ways in which actually-existing liberalism is undermining religious freedom.

Nevertheless, Koppelman’s complaint that postliberalism is a “mystery” is itself mysterious to me. He seems to me to have failed to see the wood for the trees. When people are arrested and prosecuted for praying outside abortion clinics, quoting Biblical teachings on sexuality, or joking about gender dysphoria, *all of these ‘illiberal’ acts follow from the same underlying ideology, and this ideology is being propagated by actually-existing ‘liberal’ regimes and the culture they create.*

In what follows, I offer a “postliberalism without perfection”. I do not aspire to provide an absolutely watertight causal story for liberalism’s decay into progressive-authoritarianism. I do not claim absolute certainty about liberalism’s current or future trajectory. I do not make any claims about strict inevitability. The social-scientific research needed to give us the level of confidence such claims would require has not been conducted. Until that changes, we must see the liberal order through a glass darkly. We must deal in likelihood, not certainty. I will show that a specific causal mechanism, leading to coercive progressivism, emerges from the conceptual logic of liberal ideology when it is applied in practice. The mechanism is not fully deterministic. But we are warranted in holding that the likelihood of liberal societies decaying into regimes that coercively impose progressive social values is very high.

Koppelman acknowledges that this debate is no longer, in the first instance, about liberal *theory*. I agree. I concede that the theories of liberal philosophers like John Rawls, Joseph Raz, or Ronald Dworkin do not contain rationales for arresting abortion protestors or gender-critical comedians. I claim that the ideas of these thinkers nevertheless have consequences—consequences the thinkers themselves, were they consistent, would repudiate. But consequences we ignore at our peril.

Drawing on my work²⁷—both published and unpublished²⁸—as well as on the contents of my remarks at Budapest,²⁹ Koppelman rightly says that postliberalism, as I understand it, is based on two claims.

1. The *Structural Radicalization* Thesis holds that actually-existing liberal states tend to propagate ‘voluntarism’, i.e., the ideal of radical human autonomy.
2. The *Coercive Liberalism Thesis* holds that, as this ideal spreads, actors in these states tend to support more and more coercion of persons who reject this ideal (be they traditional religious believers, secular social conservatives, or whatever else).

Koppelman says that my support for both of these theses is “mysterious”. Can I, he asks, “spell out the causal processes [I am] alleging?”

I believe I can. I believe I did so at Budapest, but it is entirely possible that what seemed, to me, to clearly represent an explanation of a causal process did not seem that way to anybody else. So let me, now, set out the postliberal challenge—without perfection, but with clarity.

Structural Radicalisation

Suppose, at one pregnant historical moment, a state (call it Convivia) commits itself to implementing the theory of John Rawls’s 1993 *Political Liberalism*.³⁰ Since—nuances of Rawlsian exegesis and interpretation notwithstanding—this theory requires all coercive laws be based on reasons that do not appeal to controversial religious or philosophical “conceptions of the good”, quite a radical program of legal reform is immediately initiated.

The Convivians realise that many of their laws have long been based on controversial conceptions of the good—specifically, let us say, on a particular interpretation of Mahayana Buddhism and its associated moral codes. Laws forbidding public blasphemy against Buddhist texts, or punishing sexual misconduct and intoxication, all seem to have been based on unacceptably controversial premises. So the Convivians engage in a bonfire of the public morals laws.

A few years later, all laws prescribing penalties for conduct that is wrong only by the standards of the hitherto-dominant religion have been abolished. Convivians have much more personal freedom. They can have hitherto-illicit forms of sex, take hitherto-illicit drugs, and burn the Tripitaka without risking state coercion.

So far, so good. Nothing in Convivia's actions directly harms or persecutes conservative Buddhists who cling to the old moral code. They may grumble that standards are being lowered and civilization seems to be collapsing, but nobody is harming them. They can believe what they want, say what they want, and teach their beliefs to their own children and in their own temples. (They can even retreat to a 'bodhisattva option' of internal exile in intentional communities, if they wish.)

But will it stop there? I think not. Let me make it clear that I am not asserting *inevitability* here. But let us consider the way Convivians will likely *understand* the changes.

To do so, let us modify our initially fanciful example. Rather than programmatically implementing Rawls, liberal Convivian legislators and judges (like real ones in our actual world) appeal to a disjointed and often inchoate mix of rationales to explain and justify their actions. Some, sometimes, speak of state neutrality. Others speak of ending patriarchy and priestcraft. Some argue that religion will be strengthened when the dead hand of the state no longer enforces its demands; others, that this is the first necessary step to crushing the infamy of superstition. Some liberals claim the old moral codes are from now on to be rightly rejected both publicly and privately; others, that to enforce these codes at gunpoint had always been self-defeating - but that the obligation to pursue private virtue must be pursued with renewed vigor.

The above is, of course, roughly what happened in most Western societies from the 1960s and 1970s onwards. Laws enforcing sexual morality and substantively privileging religion were, fairly quickly, either repealed or abolished: liberal politicians offered the public a cacophony of often-conflicting rationales for their actions.

How, then, should we assume Convivians, or citizens of Western countries in the last third of the last century, interpreted what was happening?

The obvious answer is that they understood the law, which had always been a "coercive teacher", to be witnessing to a new set of purported moral truths. Citizens will, of course, respond to this legal witnessing in various ways. Some will consciously resist the teaching. Some will embrace it enthusiastically. Some will regard it with ambivalence. But the state has just put its thumb on the scales of judgement in a powerful fashion. Few will be able to escape the influence of the new teaching, even if the influence manifests itself mainly in virulent rejection of this new progressive regime.

Over time, therefore, the attitudes of the citizens toward human flourishing will change. And they will change in the direction of voluntarism: the belief that the human good consists in the unfettered exercise of choice, irrespective of the object chosen. That the state endorses voluntarism is the simplest and readily available explanation for the overall package of new policies and legal changes. By default, state law is viewed as upholding moral truth. The state now upholds the legal right to do whatever one wishes so long as one doesn't harm others, and seemingly expresses an attitude of public indifference towards self-regarding ethical choices. By default, people interpret the state as witnessing to a moral truth as well as a legal right, and so their personal moral beliefs tend to be pushed in the same direction—and thus, toward voluntarism.

Thus, over time, Convivians will come to be "human beings of a certain type". The regime has its own cultural ethos. It pervasively shapes people in a way liberal theory does not require, but this shaping is a consequence of applying liberalism in the real world. Of course, not all citizens are influenced in this way, all the time. But enough are so influenced that the direction of travel is clear.

You don't have to be a postliberal or a conservative to recognize this. Alexandre Lefebvre, an impeccably left-liberal political theorist, says as much. Lefebvre even cites Patrick Deneen and Adrian Vermeule says he agrees with their claims about the way real-world liberalism is pervasively influencing culture.

Coercive Liberalism

But I want to go one step further than Lefebvre. I want to ask, as more and more citizens embrace a more and more voluntarist moral code, how this will reflexively impact upon their political beliefs.



Pro-choice protestors gathered outside the Supreme Court to protest overturning of Roe Vs Wade (Shutterstock)

What kind of laws will they come to support? I think the answer is exactly the kind of laws that Koppelman and I complain about. Namely, laws forbidding praying outside abortion clinics, quoting Biblical teachings on homosexuality, or joking about gender dysphoria. Just think through the psychology briefly to see this. Suppose Alf was born two or three generations after Convivia's bonfire of the morals laws. He has been raised in a culture in which (to quote Lefebvre) increasingly voluntarist-inflected assumptions about human flourishing are "as water is to fish". He can't really imagine taking non-voluntaristic moral codes seriously.

Naturally, Alf is likely to come to see expressing and acting on such codes as harming people in ways the state has reason to coercively present. As Deneen observes in *Regime Change*, "harm" can come to encompass any failure to "openly and publicly approve of any and all "experiments."³⁴

Does it harm me if my neighbour publishes a pamphlet saying homosexual acts are sinful, or his church teaches this to its congregation? Does it harm a child if their parents tell them there are two genders? Does it harm a woman considering an abortion to see someone praying for her unborn child outside the clinic?

If we're sufficiently committed to voluntarism, the answer is "yes". All these actions express an appeal to strong evaluation—represent a judgement of the autonomous individual's choices on the basis of standards he or she rejects.³⁵ They potentially impinge on the individual emotionally, in ways that make his or her voluntaristic lifestyle less easy and less thickly autonomous. And thus, the more Alf and his fellow Convivians come to embrace radical voluntarism, the more they come to embrace coercive liberalism, too. Legal change begets structural radicalization of culture. Structural radicalization of culture begets demand for coercive liberalism.

Let me spell out the mechanism I am positing in a few simple steps:

1. Liberal theory demands the repeal of laws regulating personal morality.
2. Laws regulating personal morality are repealed; politicians offer an inchoate mix of rationales for this.
3. The state inadvertently witnesses to the purported truth of voluntarism about personal ethics.

4. Citizens, responding to the state's inadvertent cues, increasingly come to embrace voluntarism.
5. Voluntarist citizens come to see speech or action expressing the strong evaluation of lifestyle choice as harmful.
6. The state increasingly persecutes anti-voluntarist speech and action—religious traditionalists and social conservatives bear the brunt.

Thus, Deneen again: at stage (7), the state is increasingly "forcing... churches, religious organizations, and other traditional communities to conform to progressivist ideology".³⁶ Perhaps, as major campaigns in the UK are calling for, it will criminalize "private prayer" and "casual conversations" that do not conform.³⁷

Now, I understand that Koppelman objects to the link between step (4) and (5) of this mechanism. In our unpublished correspondence, he claims that I "still need... to explain how [step] 4 could produce [step] 5". Koppelman raises two objections here. The first is better understood as a challenge to the truth of the claim of step (4) that *citizens in liberal regimes increasingly embrace voluntarism in response to the liberal state's inadvertent cues*. The second is a direct challenge to the truth of the claim of step (5), that *embracing voluntarism gives people reason to see expressing or acting on non-voluntarist beliefs as harmful, and thus gives them a pro tanto reason to want the state to suppress such speech or action*. I will first deal with the challenge to the claim of step (4).

Are liberal states spreading voluntarism?

In our email correspondence, Koppelman has pointed out, quite correctly, that atheists can and often do embrace forms of strong evaluation, and that many secular, progressive citizens seem committed to strongly evaluating, say, the life of a musical virtuoso as better than the life of a dysfunctional ketamine addict. "Most liberals" who embrace voluntarism, he observed, "would be heartbroken if their children elected to pursue [the latter] kind of life."

In response to this claim, I observe that these secular, progressive citizens often do not hold entirely self-consistent sets of beliefs. It seems to me that voluntarism is most pervasive, at present, in the domain of sexuality. Secular progressives are far more reluctant to negatively judge self-regarding sexual acts than other kinds of acts. It is harder for them to employ strong evaluations against the porn addict's life than the pothead's.

I further claim that this type of inconsistency or tension is *precisely what we should expect* if liberal states really are inadvertently spreading voluntarism through legal-cultural cues. Where have those cues been most salient in the last six decades? Clearly, in the domain of sexuality and intimate relationships. In two generations, liberal states went from (wrongly and cruelly) criminalizing homosexual acts to decking the public square in flags celebrating the deepest of the seven deadly sins. No such radical transformation has occurred in public policy on drugs or high culture. Yet do we not see cultural pressure on those strong evaluations that progressives still affirm? While educated liberal elites surely prefer poetry to pushpin, do they not increasingly regard this as a mere personal preference, like preferring Chinese tea to Indian? Do not progressive educationalist campaigns to substitute Toni Morrison for Tolstoy evince, in part, a rejection of strong evaluation of high culture?

Note that I claim in step (4) that the liberal state's attempt to instantiate legal neutrality about sexual morality tends to also communicate a message of *moral* indifference to citizens about self-regarding sexual acts. Koppelman asks why, analogously, "a legal right to belong to whatever religion one wishes would [not] make citizens indifferent to religion", claiming that "it hasn't worked out that way in the United States."

This claim about American religion seems quite mistaken. American religious neutrality was tentative and partial until post-war jurisprudential changes, beginning with *Everson v. Board of Education* in 1947, that roughly coincided with the legal-political sexual revolution. Federal and state governments didn't, before this time, uphold anything like the specific conception or determination of religious neutrality that Koppelman recommends today.³⁸

Still, it is very plausible that the gradual incorporation of Catholics and Jews into the dominant religious culture led to a growth in religious relativism and *de facto* indifferentism. Will Herberg's 1955 *Protestant - Catholic - Jew* showed how high levels of adherence to and practice of these three religions coincided with an interconfessional commitment to a liberal-inflected "American way of life" that was more than a political doctrine but involved comprehensive values—the pursuit of wealth and personal comfort, for instance—too.³⁹

Updating the story for the post-*Abington* era in which the informal establishment of generic Protestantism came to an end, Robert Putnam and David Campbell's 2010 *American Grace* observed that, in contradiction to their denominations' official doctrines, most religiously-committed Americans are theological pluralists, believing that other traditions offer equally valid paths to salvation.⁴⁰ How many Catholics and Protestants believed this about each other's faiths prior to the rise of liberal religious neutrality? The message here is that it is very hard for a regime to uphold *legal* neutrality without inadvertently communicating *moral* neutrality too. Is it really likely that legalizing cannabis, or incest, would have no effect on people's beliefs about the morality of lighting joints or dating their sisters?

I conclude, then, that Koppelman's objection to the claim of step (4), that liberal legal neutrality inadvertently spreads voluntarist attitudes among the citizens, fails.

Does voluntarism lead to coercive liberalism?

What of Koppelman's challenge to the claim of step (5), that—granting step (4)—the voluntarism spread by liberalism will also tend to generate support among voluntarists for coercing more traditionally-minded citizens.

Koppelman says in our correspondence that my argument for this claim relies on "Deneen's perverse misinterpretation of Mill". I am not committed to the claim that Deneen is a good exegete of Mill; I do not mean to assert that Mill's own ideas committed him to coercive liberalism. Rather, the important claim Deneen makes is that "harm" is an inescapably moralized concept. Precisely what counts as harm, for a person, always depends on their wider conception of human flourishing. So, why does a voluntarist conception of flourishing tend to yield the conclusion that we can be "harmed" by the non-violent speech and actions of traditionalists and social conservatives?

I think it is easiest to see this with a concrete example. Why does the UK's Ban Conversion Therapy Coalition think that "casual conversations" and "private prayers" can harm gay people?⁴¹ Surely, the *only* way to make sense of this belief is to assume that these campaigners (1) think that sexual autonomy is a great good and (2) hold an extremely thick and demanding conception of autonomy such that autonomy can be undermined by merely hearing an exhortation to conform oneself to a strongly evaluative standard.



An image of George Floyd during a demonstration after his death (Shutterstock)

On this conception of autonomy, just being presented with strong evaluations in speech or writing can *undermine* your autonomy, and therefore harm you, by constituting an external imposition on your self-determination. From (1) and (2), it follows that, since a very great good is undermined by such exhortation, (3) gay people are harmed by it when they hear people advocate conversion or celibacy in “casual conversations” and “private prayers”. From Millian liberalism in conjunction with (3), the state thus has a *pro tanto* reason to coercively prevent this harm. I claim that this extremely thick and demanding conception of (sexual) autonomy comes from (sexual) voluntarism.

As far as I can tell, Koppelman has not offered any alternative account of the sources of this coercive-liberal belief. In previous correspondence, he has argued that many LGBT activists think that many social conservatives believe homosexual conduct to be wrong only, or mainly, as a result of pure prejudice. Could we extrapolate from this claim of Koppelman’s to the further claim that this belief about pure prejudice explains the intolerance of some of these activists? Perhaps they are intolerant because they think the views and actions they do not wish to tolerate are nothing but the expression of pure prejudice, but not because of a deep commitment to thick sexual autonomy?

Koppelman has observed in our previous conversations that the intolerance of some LGBT rights activists arises, in part, from a conjunction of (1) the specific belief that gay relationships (not broad sexual autonomy) are intrinsically valuable and (2) the (accurate) belief that gay people have often been, and sometimes still are, the victims of cruel abuse and unfair discrimination. From these two beliefs, we might, extrapolating from Koppelman’s observations, posit that these activists draw the mistaken inference that (3) denying that gay relationships are intrinsically valuable *constitutes* such cruel abuse and/or unfair discrimination (and thus that the state has a *pro tanto* reason to coercively prevent this denial).

I have too much confidence in the intelligence of intolerant LGBT rights activists to find this story convincing. It requires the activists to make some pretty basic cognitive errors. They must assume that, because gay people have often been the victims of cruelty and gay relationships are intrinsically good, denying this goodness constitutes cruelty—and is, even in its theologically and philosophically sophisticated forms, only a “mask for prejudice”.

This is an obviously fallacious piece of reasoning. It is startling to me to think that people with advanced degrees in law, political science, or philosophy could believe this conclusion on the basis of such an appallingly bad argument. But this appalling argument is the only way to get from (1) and (2) to support for coercive liberalism.

We should avoid ascribing to malice what can adequately be explained by stupidity. We should also avoid ascribing to stupidity what can be better explained by consistent moral reasoning from bad basic premises. All the more so since, in this case, stupidity doesn’t explain much at all. Why did this particular kind of stupidity—this particular basic inferential error—explode on college campuses and in liberal newsrooms around 2015?

I can explain the rise of coercive liberalism on gay rights by appealing to generational turnover: a critical mass of young people, raised in the pervasive voluntarist background culture that had only really (per Lefebvre) become completely dominant in the 1990s, changed the balance of opinion from tolerance to an intolerant commitment to radical autonomy to seeing expression of strong evaluations as harmful. I don’t see how Koppelman can explain the change. My account of the genealogy of wokeness better explains the observed behaviour of woke people than any alternative on offer. We should believe the claim of step (5) because *sexual voluntarism tends to make people think that expressing conservative views about sex is harmful*.

On Wokeness

The above is, of course, necessarily speculative. But it is not “mysterious” or “ominous” or “unexplained”. Each stage in my proposed mechanism is subject to empirical testing and verification. Most of the necessary testing has not been done, so there are few hard facts on the basis of which to assess the postliberal theses. But there are some pertinent facts of which Koppelman ought to take more notice.

Koppelman cites what he calls “one of the closest studies of coercive wokeness”, Lukianoff and Haidt’s *Coddling of the American Mind*,⁴² and complains that “liberalism has been around for a lot longer” than wokeness, which “became widespread around 2015”.

But liberalism, in the relevant sense, has been around for only a few decades. (Set aside debates about what liberal theory strictly requires and when this was implemented). The posited trigger event (step (1) in my mechanism) is the bonfire of moral laws that began only in the 1960s and that in some jurisdictions was completed much more recently. The fact that “coercive liberalism took so long to get there” is perhaps not so “mysterious” after all.

Another close study of wokeness is Eric Kaufmann’s *The Third Awakening*. Chapter 8 (‘Youthquake’) is chilling reading for those who think wokeness is an ephemeral blip. Koppelman ought to read it closely and pursue the empirical studies Kaufmann cites. These studies show us that young people are *far* more likely to embrace woke illiberalism than older people (*ten times* more likely, depending on the issue being asked about).⁴³

They also show us that these young people *probably won’t grow out of it*. Why not? Because every previous generation formed a few of free speech and personal freedom in early adulthood and more-or-less stuck with it. Chong and Citrin’s paper on the topic demonstrates that, over the last one hundred years, each cohort’s views on these issues was remarkably sticky once they reached their early twenties.⁴⁴

Koppelman may complain that this is a crude inductive inference. Just because Gen Z’s parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents held sticky beliefs doesn’t necessarily mean Gen Z will be the same. But until we have concrete proof that Gen Z are bucking the trend, normal inductive inference is on my side. If Adam and Eve watch the sun rise ten mornings in a row, and argue as to whether it will rise the next morning, the burden of proof is surely on the skeptic.

In our correspondence, Koppelman has argued that he is “not obligated” to “provide an alternative diagnosis or prognosis” of coercive progressivism. This is true. But, through my defense of steps (4) and (5) of the mechanism for the Coercive Liberalism Thesis, I have shown that the thesis is plausible. Kaufmann’s evidence is further corroboration of the Thesis. It does not, on its own, prove that the Thesis is true. It does, however, refute any attempt to cite the recency of wokeness as evidence that the Thesis is *false*. Wokeness is not, as Koppelman has argued elsewhere, a mere “blip” that is unlikely to be related to deep structural dynamics in liberal societies.⁴⁵

Conclusion

I believe I have answered Koppelman’s challenge. I have laid out a clear causal mechanism for the two postliberal theses that is in no way “mysterious”. I have defended these theses against the objections Koppelman raised in our previous correspondence. And I have refuted Koppelman’s attempt to cite empirical studies of wokeness as evidence against the theses.

Let me end with a final word on the sexual revolution. Koppelman has expressed skepticism in our correspondence about my claim that this revolution “was so radical that only then did liberalism fully emerge”.

He complains that I do not take due account of how far it was also “a big deal... for Catholics and Protestants to tolerate one another over the preceding centuries”. But in many ways the sexual revolution was, if not a bigger deal, a much more unprecedented one.

The legal-political dimension of this revolution involved the creation of (an approximation of) a regime-type that had never before existed in human history: a regime purporting not to coercively impose a specific comprehensive moral doctrine on its citizens.

By contrast, a regime, like the United States or UK in the 1950s, in which people are arrested, imprisoned, and chemically castrated for private sexual choices, is *not* a liberal regime. It may (as the United States or UK at this time did) instantiate important elements of liberalism within its practices and ideological apparatus. But it is still a regime that—like all previous ones—coercively imposes, if not a specific religion, at least a family of (perhaps “Judeo-Christian”) comprehensive moral doctrines about human sexuality.

Religious tolerance was not a new idea. It had been practiced, in various ways and to varying degrees, by the Ottomans, the Chinese, and the Mughals, among other states. Refraining from coercively imposing any comprehensive moral doctrine—the legal-political dimension of the sexual revolution—was a truly original notion. We are still reeling from its unintended consequences.

Postliberalism holds that the naked public square does not remain naked for long: that the law is experienced as a teacher of morality even when it doesn't intend to be one. But, as I said in Budapest, I think the correct way to respond to this observation is to explore non-coercive ways of counteracting the voluntarist (and thence coercive-liberal) tilt that liberal legal neutrality unintentionally gives to culture.

This tilt does not just comprise the pervasive non-coercive ways in which liberalism shapes our *comprehensive* values in a *voluntarist* direction, but also the ways in which this shaping tends to tilt *political* attitudes in a *coercive-liberal* direction. Postliberalism, as I understand it, is simply asking liberals to recognize that the tilt exists.

I suspect that Koppelman and I will continue to disagree in good faith about the truth of the claims in steps (4) and (5).

I fully admit I am not *certain* of their truth: I think they are provisionally plausible for all the reasons I explained above. But one important liberal insight is that our “total experience, our whole course of life up to now” shapes our judgement of complex questions, like the ones we have been discussing, on which conclusive empirical evidence does not exist.⁴⁶ I hope that one day this evidence does exist: I can think of few more important research programs for political science. Until that day, Koppelman and I may have to disagree on the postliberal question. Perhaps we can agree, at least, that postliberalism is not a mystery but a set of reasoned conjectures about the dynamics of our contemporary liberal regimes.

Our discussion in Budapest was, as Koppelman says, a “model of liberal disagreement”. I hope that, if we are witnessing what Philip Pilkington calls the “collapse of global liberalism”,⁴⁷ it will not involve any loss of liberality in debate.



*Confirmation Ceremony during a Catholic Mass,
St Francis de Sales basilica (Shutterstock)*

Liberal Idealism Versus the Natural Law

Since Descartes wrote about it in the 1620s, Western thinkers have been captivated by the ghost of the *Mathesis Universalis* – a quasi-mathematical language that would transcend all intellectual disciplines and unify them. In the 20th century, this dream was once more put on the table by the early Wittgenstein, who thought that the problems of philosophy could be solved by a more precise view of language. Engaging in an extremely fruitful and cordial debate with Professor Koppelman has convinced me⁴⁸ that for some people, liberal political theory serves as a sort of *Mathesis Universalis*, but for the governance of people.

Liberalism for Professor Koppelman is, I think, first and foremost a series of ideas and abstract propositions. It is, in a very real sense, an *idealist system*. Koppelman seems to think that if this idealist system can be shown to be without contradiction on paper, it will also work in practice. In this, the intellectually robust liberalism that Koppelman espouses seems very much like Marxism in that it outlines a program for an ideal society and then only secondarily concerns itself with whether this ideal can ever be realized in practice, given the highly imperfect nature of the material that is being moulded by the ideas: that is, human beings.

This tendency to create an idealistic system first and consider reality second, gives rise to a persistent tendency in Professor Koppelman toward what I will call the “no true liberal” fallacy. That is, when Koppelman is confronted with liberal thinkers, politicians, political activists, etc., who do not subscribe to the ideals of his system, he dismisses them as not being liberal. When the liberal political elite of Britain engage in gross violations of liberalism’s own free speech principles, they are defined as being non-liberal. What are these self-identified liberals if they are not liberals? I do not know. Like the Scotsman who does not like porridge in the “no true Scotsman” fallacy, they are simply defined by negation: non-liberal.

Koppelman seems to think that true liberals only really exist today in the United States. When confronted with my view—that liberalism is inherently about the destruction of what liberals see as arbitrary hierarchies—Koppelman states that “I cannot think of a single liberal philosopher or politician who understands their project this way.” But the question is not whether they “understand their project in this way.”

Rather, the question is whether this is the driving force in liberal politics and thought.

Koppelman says of his own system’s engagement with hierarchies that I should refer to the rules laid out by John Rawls’ “difference principle”. We can define this roughly as such: “Inequalities are only justified if they make the worst-off group better off than they would be under any alternative feasible arrangement”. This is precisely the quasi-economic or utilitarian language that I highlight in my book as being how liberals judge hierarchies. If a hierarchy is justified to a liberal, it must meet some principle vaguely resembling that of Pareto optimality in economics. The problem with these abstract principles is that people will simply disagree about whether a given social situation is optimal. One person might say that women being forced not to work and instead staying at home benefits the weakest group—the children—and is therefore justified. A similar argument could be made for disallowing divorce. Another will say that the woman in this arrangement becomes the weakest group and that she should therefore be allowed to work. These sorts of highly abstract principles are all but useless when we are trying to judge morality or the social structures that morality creates. They are also just naïve. The debate around female labour and divorce is quite obviously an issue that gives rise to a great deal of emotion and passion in the political sphere. But passion, like the human beings that generate it, does not fit easily into the idealist system that is liberalism.

More generally, Koppelman has a strange relationship with realist views of politics in general. For example, he is perfectly willing to concede that the ideals of Marxism fell apart when confronted with the raw power struggles of actually-existing socialist politics. Yet when it is suggested that liberal politics might be infected by the same raw power struggles Koppelman recoils. Raw power struggles can taint the idealist Marxist system, but not the idealist liberal system for some reason. Being a realist, I am of the view that raw power struggles are part of human nature and will be a feature of any and all political systems, and that pretending otherwise is not just delusional, but dangerous. Koppelman provides a picture of a cross-dresser on a train seat next to a Muslim woman on a subway as evidence that liberalism can quell the passions of people who have different beliefs. Well, it is not hard to find counter-evidence on the internet.

The internet today is full of liberals attacking conservatives and conservatives attacking liberals. Each side can, of course, select images that emphasize that one side is at fault or that the other is hypocritical, but ultimately, what we see when we dive into the depths of the internet is a society riven by conflict over values. This is a time-tested truth that we have known since Adam: confronted with radically different belief systems, people can be truly brutal to one another.

Koppelman's implicit anthropology has, I think, as naïve a view of human nature as the anthropology of the Marxists: in my view, people will not subordinate strongly held beliefs and identities to the abstract diktats of the idealist liberal system any more than they will subordinate their desire to acquire resources to the idealist socialist system. And a society that ignores this time-tested wisdom will descend into ever-escalating moral and political conflict that will very likely end in violence.

This brings me to Williams' intervention. Firstly, I should say that Williams should be lauded for laying out the basic argument so clearly. But I still fear that the debate is muddled because of the implicit assumptions at work. Koppelman is predominantly promoting an idealist system based on *a priori* principles. Williams is making a series of empirical statements. There is no marrying or reconciling these two because we have no agreed-upon basis of whether the evidence is sufficiently strong to override the *a priori* system. While I have made plenty of empirical statements in my book on the collapse of liberalism, ultimately, I subscribe to natural law principles: that is, I think we can have access to *a priori* knowledge about human beings and their motivations. We can also use this knowledge, accumulated over centuries of human experience, to make strong predictions about what will happen to a society that takes a misguided path.

This is where we link up with Plato's theory of the cycle of regimes. Plato does not conduct an econometric study to determine whether the cycle of regimes is correct or incorrect. Such a study could be interesting, no doubt, but to my mind, it is not really needed. Take the question of the descent from decadence to extreme violence that Williams discusses. He says that it is not inevitable but rather probable. I think that it is absolutely inevitable, but this is a minor point of disagreement.

How do I know this? I appeal to my reason. Take the analogy of a family. If a father and mother govern children in a highly libertarian manner, imposing almost no rules to the point where toilet training is barely undertaken, will this decadence be followed by violence? Very probably.

This is precisely how you raise future violent criminals who do not care about the consequences of their actions and are completely driven by their desires and emotions. I do not need a "study" to tell me this, although I will gladly look at one. It is, as the layman says, common sense. The non-layman would say that it is a judgment that recognizes the natural law. Natural law is common sense. And the philosophical study of natural law is the gradual accumulation of common sense over time, which is precisely what we find in Plato's *Republic*.

To my mind, Williams is self-evidently correct when he argues that human beings will always default back to extremely closely held, fundamental belief systems, and they will act out in violence when these belief systems are strongly challenged.

All human history tells us this. Liberalism, in the historical reading I propose, arose out of the Wars of Religion, and to the extent that those wars were an ideological dispute, it was because of this common-sense observation. And ultimately this is what the dispute comes down to: Williams and I think that natural law—or common sense, if you like—is admissible in the court of philosophical law, and Koppelman does not. Koppelman thinks that idealist *a priori* political systems are functional if they are logically coherent, and I (I will not speak for Williams here) do not think that this is true.

The entire debate is, to my mind, two people who think that natural law is real and discernible by human reason against a person who does not believe this. The debate is therefore eminently two post-Enlightenment thinkers debating an Enlightenment thinker, which maps quite nicely onto two postliberal thinkers debating a liberal thinker.



*Trans parade, London
(Shutterstock)*

Koppelman's Surrebuttal

Thanks to both of my discussants for their thoughtful engagement.

Williams has responded to me with a more definite account of the alleged mechanism of Structural Radicalization and Coercive Liberalism than he offered in Budapest. He offers it as an interpretation of the claims of Deneen and Vermeule, but in this regard he is better than either of them, because he makes his claims clear. I'm still not persuaded, because it's not clear how the causation could work in the way he describes.

In the seven-step sequence that he now lays out, the key step is between 4 and 5. Once "citizens, responding to the state's inadvertent cues, increasingly come to embrace voluntarism," this allegedly leads to a condition in which "voluntarist citizens come to see speech or action expressing the strong evaluation of lifestyle choice as harmful." He still needs to explain how 4 could produce 5.

By "voluntarism" he means the rejection of any form of what Charles Taylor calls strong evaluation - "discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged."⁴⁹ Taylor however thinks that strong evaluation is an ineradicable part of human experience, and that its gravitational power is felt even in nominally atheistic worldviews. A central theme of Taylor's book *A Secular Age* (as I emphasized when I reviewed it⁵⁰) is that it persists even in nominally atheistic worldviews.

Perhaps some denizens of liberal societies believe, as Williams puts it, "that the human good consists in the unfettered exercise of choice, irrespective of the object chosen," but I suspect they are rare. Williams writes: "The state now upholds the *legal* right to do whatever one wishes so long as one doesn't harm others, and seemingly expresses an attitude of public indifference towards self-regarding ethical choices." Citizens, he says, come to accept this indifference. But by the same logic one might have predicted that a legal right to belong to whatever religion one wishes would make citizens indifferent to religion.

It hasn't worked out that way in the United States.

There has been a decline in religiosity, but it, too, is a recent development. (Williams thinks, for reasons not stated, that the sexual revolution of the 1960s was so radical that only then did liberalism fully emerge. He underestimates what a big deal it was for Catholics and Protestants to tolerate one another.)

Williams cites Alexandre Lefebvre's book *Liberalism As A Way of Life* for the proposition that liberalism "has its own cultural ethos"⁵¹ and tends to produce a certain kind of person. Lefebvre is right that in liberal regimes, citizens tend to be socialized into distinctive patterns of mutual respect. But he overstates his case when he claims that for liberals, "the right is our good."⁵² There's more to life than living in a fair system of cooperation.

Lefebvre writes that, for liberals, "being a good person comes to mean not harming others."⁵³

This is a mistaken anthropological description of the worldview, and in particular the ideals, of the pertinent population. One can scrupulously avoid harming others while spending one's days in a drugged stupor, if one has legitimately acquired the means to live that way. Most liberals who belong to the subculture he describes would be heartbroken if their children elected to pursue that kind of life. They value projects that reach well beyond not harming others, such as reading the novels of Tolstoy, playing the violin, designing beautiful clothes or buildings, or having children and spending time with them. These are related to liberalism only in that liberalism provides the liberty and prosperity with which to pursue them. One attraction of liberalism is that in liberal societies people do pursue them. Among the pertinent goods are the various ends associated with religion. A liberal society creates space for people to pursue those, and many do.

But stipulate that liberalism produces a distinctive kind of person. Why think that this kind of person will want to coerce traditionalists? Lefebvre acknowledges that a liberal ethic tends to pervade modern societies, but in a recent response to Deneen and Vermeule, he writes that "liberalism's reach extends through persuasion, norms, and institutions, not through force."⁵⁴ And he concludes: "A comprehensive yet pluralist liberalism can own its cultural dominance without turning it into a program of moral compulsion."

Williams hypothesizes that a typical liberal citizen “can’t really imagine taking non-voluntaristic moral codes seriously.” Stipulate someone who thinks that. It *still* doesn’t entail coercion. Williams writes that “Naturally, [the liberal citizen] is likely to come to see expressing and acting on such codes as harming people in ways the state has reason to coercively prevent.” The word “naturally” is doing all the work here.

He then relies on Deneen’s perverse misinterpretation of Mill. Deneen claims that Mill’s principle, that coercion is only appropriate in order to prevent harm to others, leaves room for “the accusation of harm . . . against anyone who does not openly and publicly approve of any and all ‘experiments.’”⁵⁵ Mill says nothing like that, and his defense of free speech contemplates exactly the kind of zealous disagreement that Deneen thinks he would forbid. Jeremy Waldron has persuasively shown that the moral distress of having one’s cherished ideals challenged cannot possibly count as harm for Mill: “since Mill valued moral confrontation and the shattering of moral complacency as means to social progress, he must have regarded moral distress as a positive good rather than as a harm that society ought to intervene to prevent.”⁵⁶ (One of Williams’s points resonates here: “Precisely what counts as harm, for a person, always depends on their wider conception of human flourishing.”)

Why suppose that a liberal will think that the negative judgments of others “potentially impinge on the individual emotionally, in ways that make his or her voluntaristic lifestyle less easy and less thickly autonomous”? It’s quite possible that Gilda Wabbit and her seatmate each has a negative judgment of the other’s choices. The liberal way of life that Lefebvre describes entails that they both put up with that, as a norm in a diverse regime. Parts of the left have lost their grip on this truth, and a new fragility has emerged, but Williams hasn’t explained how that *even could have been* caused by liberalism as he understands it. There is no logical or, so far as I know, empirical connection between voluntarism and the notion that people are fragile and capable of being severely harmed by distressing speech – harmed so severely that the state should respond with censorship. There is another gap, this time between (5) and (6).

So Williams hasn’t closed the crucial gaps. It may be hard for Gilda to understand what motivates the woman in the burka. I doubt that I understand it myself. I don’t think that entitles me to bother her. A core commitment of liberalism is the guarantee of rights even for people whom others find unintelligible.

Finally, Williams offers evidence of the durability of the illiberal turn to rebut my claim that it is an historical blip. We had some conversations about this in Budapest, but on reflection I don’t think I need here to offer any speculations about the origins or future fortunes of wokeness. The Coercive Liberalism Thesis is a specific causal claim. If you have a skin rash and tell me it was caused by a witch’s curse, I am not obligated to provide an alternative diagnosis or prognosis. I just need to ask you for evidence. (The stickiness of the phenomenon says nothing about causation. The persistence of your rash is not evidence for the witchcraft hypothesis.) Wokeness is certainly a blip to the extent that it arrived long after the advent of liberalism. Its tardy arrival is a pretty good reason to think that, whatever may have caused it, it wasn’t liberalism.

Pilkington offers a different critique: I’m a political dreamer who hasn’t attended to the unworkability of liberalism in practice. “Koppelman thinks that idealist *a priori* political systems are functional if they are logically coherent.” Actually I don’t think that. I think the best case for liberalism is the fact that liberal societies really exist and are the best places to live in the modern world, which is why so many from other societies are trying to immigrate into them. Theory is valuable for articulating the value of what liberals have accomplished in practice.

Free speech is a core commitment of liberalism, in both theory and practice. So, when liberals call out some on the left for betraying that commitment, they are not committing the “no true Scotsman” fallacy. They are saying that liberalism is a coherent, distinctive approach to government, and that it therefore cannot include anything that happens to label itself liberal. If free speech is a liberal idea, then people who want to suppress speech that displeases them are not liberals.

There are indeed antireligious liberals, but they are a minority even of those who self-identify as having no religion. See David E. Campbell, Geoffrey C. Layman, & John C. Green, *Secular Surge: A New Fault Line in American Politics* (2020). There is a strong constituency for separation of church and state, but it is not antireligious: since the 1600s that idea in most of its forms has been based on the fear that religion can be degraded and corrupted by state support.⁵⁷

I hoped that Gilda Wabbit would be a sufficient response to the claim of idealism: look, here's an actually existing liberal society, it succeeds in peacefully accommodating enormous diversity. Pilkington responds that nasty conflicts between liberals and conservatives are "counterevidence." But all those conflicts show is that the liberal project sometimes fails. A Ford with an empty gas tank is not counterevidence of the idea that automobiles are useful for transportation.

He claims that the peaceful coexistence in the photo is unsustainable: "people will not subordinate strongly held beliefs and identities to the abstract diktats of the idealist liberal system," and the attempt to implement liberalism "will descend into ever-escalating moral and political conflict that will very likely end in extreme violence."

That sometimes happens, although the nasty attacks he cites are almost entirely verbal. (Liberalism doesn't end conflict, but directs it into nonviolent channels.) Dire predictions about the future are not good substitutes for actual evidence from the past. He claims that "human beings will always default back to extremely closely held, fundamental belief systems and they will act out in violence when these belief systems are strongly challenged. All human history tells us this." He cites the Wars of Religion. But those wars ended. Societies became more liberal. And life got a lot better. Why would anyone want to bring back the world we endured before liberalism?

I'm grateful to the Danube Institute for making this exchange possible and providing me with the opportunity to speak to this unsympathetic audience. One distinctive pleasure that a free society offers is engagement with people with radically different views than one's own about matters that matter. This is the future liberals want.

Endnotes

¹This paper by Andrew Koppelman, “The Mystery of Postliberalism”, though inspired by an event at the Danube Institute, also and first appeared in a nearly identical version in *The Unpopulist* on February 16, 2026, under the title “The Unbearable Intellectual Lightness of the Postliberal Being.” <https://www.theunpopulist.net/p/the-unbearable-intellectual-lightness> (retrieved on 16 March 2026). Andrew Koppelman is the John Paul Stevens Professor of Law and Professor (by courtesy) of Political Science, Department of Philosophy, Affiliated Faculty, Northwestern University.

²Koppelman, A., ‘It is Tash Whom He Serves: Deneen and Vermeule on Liberalism’, **98 Notre Dame L. Rev. 1525 (2023) and Northwestern Public Law Research Paper No. 22-38.**

³Koppelman, A., Pilkington, P., and Williams, J., ‘Liberalism’s last stand’/Danube Culture, **Danube Institute Podcast 4** December 2025, on Spotify.

⁴<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/woman-found-guilty-uk-abortion-free-speech-case-monitored-by-us-2025-04-04/>

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