Chapter Three
Social Factors and Effects of Liberalism

The Sociological Constitution of Liberalism

Liberalism as an ideological and social system is a historically recent and comparatively specific and contingent, so limited, phenomenon, a product and defining element of Western Modernity. Modern Western society constitutes what Mannheim (1986: 31–2) calls the “socio-historical precondition” or “sociological constellation” of liberalism\(^1\) understood by him primarily as an ideology, and subsequently of conservatism as the anti-liberal reaction and antagonism, within his sociology of knowledge. Alternatively, within Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge, liberal ideology is the product of definite social factors in modern Western societies at a certain historical point. Specifically, these factors of liberalism encompass the conjunction of an “explicitly dynamic (processive)” (Mannheim 1986: 85) society, through the process of social differentiation and stratification, with ideas corresponding to these processes, and the political factor as a “nucleus” of the newly emerging strata. The latter include, first and foremost, the bourgeoisie (self) defined as the primary liberal stratum or class, historically “at the time of the Enlightenment” (Beck 2000: 19).

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\(^1\) This comparative-historical novelty and specificity or boundedness of liberalism indicate that, as Alexander (1998: 32) states, the “options for ideological discourse are more historically bounded [viz. conservative, liberal, radical]”. 
Similarly, even economists like Mises (1950) point to the “general sociological and economic foundations of the liberal doctrine”, thus adopting or echoing the major premise of Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge in respect to liberalism as an ideology. Contemporary sociologists also adopt Mannheim’s premise by treating liberalism as a “lived tradition whose historically contingent central notions developed within, and have proven to be of great value for, individualist and pluralist cultures” (Brink 2000: 16–7). In this view, liberal ideals are “historically generated, the product of a particular, specifically modern culture and of a shared liberal tradition. [Thus] conceptions of individual rights, liberty, and autonomy are by necessity socially constituted” (Beiner 1992: 18).

However, Mannheim’s approach while insightful and fruitful in treating liberalism as an ideology, a set of principles and doctrine, leaves much to be desired in respect of its treatment as an actual or potential social system, a complex of institutions and practices realizing or reflecting these liberal ideals. By centering on liberalism as an ideology (or utopia) and de-centering on it as a social system, a liberal society, this approach overlooks that “Liberalism” has been, is or can be both, by analogy to, for example, medi- evalism, traditionalism, feudalism, fundamentalism, despotism, capitalism, socialism, communism, fascism, conservatism, neo-conservatism, neo-fascism, and other Weberian ideal types. The analogy of liberalism, though not fully identical and reducible (Dahrendorf 1979), to modern capitalism (and socialism), as both an ideological doctrine and a social system of institutions and practices, is particularly instructive. In this sense, liberalism was not only “historically generated” and “socially constituted” as an ideology and ideal, but also, as a social system and institutional structure, “historically generative” and “socially constitutive” of various other effects and phenomena in Western and other societies, such as liberty, democracy, equality, inclusion, justice, universalism, diversity, rationalism, secularism, optimism, pacifism, humanism, etc. In short, like capitalism liberalism is to be understood as both socially conditioned “idealism” and socially conditioning “institutionalism” (of liberty). Consequently, an expanded version of Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge applied to liberalism reconsiders both its societal factors as liberal ideology and effects as liberal society.