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**Absorbing the Backlash against Liberal Society:  
Rawls's Political Liberalism vs. Mill's Comprehensive Liberalism**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the conditions under which backlash against liberal society can be absorbed. A comparison of the pluralist and rationalist theories of liberalism demonstrate the difficulties faced by liberal society in absorbing the backlash. On the one hand, pluralism can be exploited by illiberal groups against liberalism. On the other hand, rationalist approach as represented by John Stuart Mill's doctrine of comprehensive liberalism may lead to a Prisoner's Dilemma type of situation. Efforts to liberalize illiberal groups may backfire, on the aggregate causing society to be in a much worse position. This paper finds that the political liberalism of John Rawls offers a plausible compromise between rationalist and pluralist approaches in liberalism in regard to absorbing backlash against liberalism from illiberal groups. The Rawlsian idea of overlapping consensus that is limited to political liberalism, not comprehensive liberalism, and reasonable pluralism indicate a possibility for achieving compromise between illiberal groups and liberal society. The interactions of these two groups are characterized by the Battle of the Sexes game, where both parties gain by coordinating their activities and finding a compromise. Most importantly, the attained compromise is sustainable because it does not apply to activities outside of the political realm.

**Keywords:** Liberal Society, Backlash, Pluralism, Comprehensive Liberalism, Political Liberalism

## **I. Introduction**

A liberal society based on pluralism may face a backlash against its foundational principles. In essence, the backlash may emerge against the very principles of pluralism. While pluralism can be considered crucial for the existence of liberal society, there is a danger that too much pluralism may work against the general interests of society. Antipluralist illiberal groups may block pluralist policies. Therefore “limited” or “reasonable pluralism” may have advantages over complete pluralism. Some form of consensus on underlying political principles may be better than the absence of such a consensus.

I will argue that Rawls’s concept of political liberalism is more effective in absorbing backlash against pluralism in pluralist society than Mill’s doctrine of comprehensive liberalism. I will explore whether sufficient conditions in pluralist society can exist in a way that such backlash against pluralism may not emerge at all and, in the case such backlash against pluralism does occur, whether some pluralist societies are better positioned to absorb the backlash than others.

I will start by outlining the reasons for a backlash against liberal democratic society as well as the nature of the potential backlash. Then I will offer a broad overview of debates in liberal political doctrine and normative debates on pluralist and rationalist concepts of liberalism. Concretely, I will focus on analyzing the relative merits of the theories of John Stuart Mill and John Rawls. I will conclude by outlining the core argument of the paper.

## II. Backlash against Liberal Society

This paper focuses on the backlash against liberal society that emerges within the society. Hence, it does not address the issue of potential backlash against liberal society from external forces, such as non-liberal societies outside of liberal society and/or non-liberal groups in other societies. However, it must be acknowledged that a connection between external and internal factors could exist. Nevertheless, certain external factors (e.g. non-liberal groups in non-liberal societies supporting non-liberal groups in liberal societies) can be factored in as having influence on internal factors. Thus, the analysis of backlash emerging within liberal society already captures such dynamics.

The inevitability of a backlash against liberal society can be found in Karl Polanyi's book *Great Transformation*.<sup>1</sup> The notion that for every action there is a reaction and any movement leads to countermovement indicates some reasons why backlash may emerge against liberalism.<sup>2</sup> Liberal society based on a doctrine of liberalism will try to organize the society according to its core principles. However, within this liberal society are groups who have not accepted the principles of liberalism at all or who may think that those particular principles of liberalism are not acceptable. Polanyi's critique of the liberal project may be described as too far-fetched, but his idea that capitalism is created by state intervention has some merit.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, liberal society does not emerge on its own. A fair amount of social engineering is required in the process of creating a liberal society and maintaining the society.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon, 1944). 130-134

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 130-134.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 201-219.

Polanyi uses the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century as empirical evidence in support of his argument. Efforts for increasing the role of markets in Western societies led to a backlash that aimed to limit the power of markets. An obvious example of such a backlash is the rise of protectionism and isolationism in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe and North America. Polanyi argues that the market functioned in the interests of dominant trading classes for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> Landed interests and working classes stood for social protection and limits on the market.<sup>5</sup> The interests of different classes converged toward protectionism when competition in trading classes intensified and the conditions exploited by the trading classes had changed.<sup>6</sup> The distribution of economic wealth became more reliant on the government than ever before.<sup>7</sup> The dominance of one ideology led to imperialism and competition between different empires. Hence, the backlash reaction to the predominance of one ideology (liberalism) led to the predominance of another ideology. This all contributed to the onset of World War I and World War II. On a more positive note, it can be said that although events in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a nearly devastating effect on mankind, the societies based on pluralism managed, in the long run, to survive and prosper. Illiberal societies without pluralism had some short-term achievements but eventually collapsed.

Most importantly, analogies of the situation described by Polanyi can be found today as expressed by anti-globalization movements, grass-roots movements that purport to protect the local environment from big businesses and so on. Hence, it is crucial for liberal society to create a framework that avoids or absorbs potential backlash before it

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon, 1944), 132.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 201-204

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

reaches the extent described by Polanyi. While many of the issues described above may sound economic and like a question of fair distribution, they in fact have much broader social and political roots. Most importantly, many economic issues may be embedded in, or at least directly connected to, social and political issues.

In today's societies backlash against liberal society based on pluralism may come from a number of sources. Technological determinists may feel that too much debate over proper policy direction or what technologies should be allowed in a liberal society will discourage the technological wonders from being invented by slowing down the whole technological progress and thus inhibiting innovation. Authoritarian society (e.g. Singapore) may be superior to a liberal one from their perspective. Nature lovers may find that liberal society, with its belief in progress and by exploitation of the newest technologies, will damage the environment. Like the Luddites, they may rise against machines and want to limit others' liberties to develop new technologies.

An even more significant source of potential backlash lies in religious groups who may see a threat to the existence of their religion in, say, certain rights granted to sexual minorities or liberal principles followed by public schools. They may use the liberal institutional framework for pursuing non-liberal ends, blocking the spread of liberal policies. Many examples can illustrate this case: Large Muslim minorities in many European countries feel threatened by liberal social, political and economic policies. The Muslim community may view legalization of gay marriage in the Netherlands as a policy that undermines their religious values about marriage. Legislating gay marriages in Massachusetts may strengthen the positions of the Christian Right throughout the United States, particularly in the south as many groups may take a more extreme position than

before in reaction to the liberal policies of Massachusetts. Muslims in the United Kingdom may feel that free movement of labor (as a policy of economic liberalization) from new poor member countries of European Union may threaten their jobs. Rules against wearing religious symbols at French public schools may be in conflict with the beliefs of the Muslim community in regard to proper clothing for women. The list goes on. In the end, some groups may actively promote turning a liberal society into an authoritarian Muslim state, as has been done by some groups in England.

All of the groups described above can use the freedom afforded by a liberal society based on pluralism for promoting their causes. As their aims are in principle against liberal society and pluralism, there is a danger that such groups may undermine liberal society. While such an outcome may not be achieved by one single group, it may be an intended and/or unintended consequence of many non-liberal groups blocking the functioning of liberal framework in the name of their self-interests. In other words, pluralism itself can be exploited for work against pluralism. Hence, too much pluralism has the potential to be self-destructive. The following sections will analyze under what conditions pluralism can become self-destructive and what would be a proper framework in liberal society to maintain pluralism and to absorb or even avoid potential backlash.

### **III. Absorbing Backlash: Pluralists vs. Rationalists**

Having outlined some key factors that may lead to the emergence of a backlash against liberalism within liberal society, a question is raised as to what kind of organizing principles of liberal society can most effectively deal with such backlash. This requires taking a look at normative liberal theories and principles and what they offer for

organizing a society. Often, there is a tendency to divide liberal thinkers into two categories: social or welfare liberals (e.g. Rawls, Mill) and market or classical liberals or libertarians (e.g. Hayek or Nozick). However, this distinction may be overemphasized and not as fundamental as it seems.<sup>8</sup> In the end, they all support private property, free enterprise and many other liberties. The real question asks to what extent people should be free to pursue their goals and to what extent their actions should be limited by the state. For instance, while Mill supported a high tax on luxury goods and inheritance, he was for proportional income tax.<sup>9</sup>

A more crucial distinction of liberal thinkers is whether they are pluralists or rationalists.<sup>10</sup> Jacob Levy argues that this divide of liberalism is much older than the welfarist and market-orientated divide.<sup>11</sup> Pluralist liberalism is hostile toward central state authorities and supportive of local and voluntary communities and associations. Rationalist liberalism is supportive of state-centralized power to impose unified law, emphasizes equality before law, does not want to make exceptions for local communities nor weigh in their distinctions in implementing the law. It rests on the assumptions of progressive individuals and the universality of its doctrine. Most importantly, while this distinction is not identical to the welfarist and market divide, pluralist and rationalist liberals may have differing beliefs about underlying economic principles.<sup>12</sup>

A typical representative of pluralist liberalism is F.A. Hayek. Hayek talks of liberal society as a Great Society in which various other partial societies and groups

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<sup>8</sup> Jacob T Levy, Liberalism's Divide, After Socialism and Before. *Social Philosophy and Policy* (Social Philosophy and Policy Foundation: 2003), 279. Available at <http://polisci.spc.uchicago.edu/~jtlevy/>

<sup>9</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., ed. William J. Ashley, 1909. Seventh edition), Book V, Chapter II.

<sup>10</sup> Jacob T Levy, Liberalism's Divide, After Socialism and Before. *Social Philosophy and Policy* (Social Philosophy and Policy Foundation: 2003), 279-280. Available at <http://polisci.spc.uchicago.edu/~jtlevy/>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



exist.<sup>13</sup> Each individual may be simultaneously a member of the Great Society and the groups within the Great Society. Government has a special position in the Great Society, bearing a function which “is somewhat like that of a maintenance squad of factory, its object is not to produce any particular services or products to be consumed by citizens but rather to see that the mechanism which regulates the production of those goods and services is kept in working order.”<sup>14</sup> Hayek stresses that this function of government provides an essential condition for the preservation of that overall order.<sup>15</sup> Hayek is critical of government’s efforts to create laws that cover seemingly every particular situation and interest of every particular group within society.<sup>16</sup> In many ways, Hayekian liberalism, with its emphasis on pluralism and the importance of localized dispersed knowledge<sup>17</sup> that enables a price mechanism to work smoothly by giving proper signals to all actors, is closer to Burckian conservatism<sup>18</sup> than to the radical utilitarian liberalism of Mill and that of Bentham.

On the opposite side is the “aggressively secular and liberal morality, which stands in the tradition established by John Stuart Mill”<sup>19</sup>. The views of John Stuart Mill are certainly rationalist. It is obvious in Mill’s hostility toward religion, purely religious education and tradition, and the tyranny that might exist within a family in regard to treatment of women clearly points in this direction.<sup>20</sup> Mill brings out specific dangers that

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<sup>13</sup> Friedrich A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Volume I, Rules and Order, (University of Chicago Press: 1983), 47.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-144.

<sup>17</sup> See F.A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *American Economic Review* (35: 1945), 519-530.

<sup>18</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in Peter J. Stanlis eds, *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1963), 431-461.

<sup>19</sup> Stuart Hampshire. *Justice is Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 51.

<sup>20</sup> <sup>20</sup> John Stuart Mill.. *On Liberty*. In Mary Warnock eds *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Essay on Bentham*. (Glasgow: Collins. Fount Paperbacks, 1982) 176-180, 238, 241.

illiberal groups in society may pose by limiting the liberties of other individuals. Of course, tyranny of the majority in a liberal society can be protected by a constitution that gives equal rights to all citizens. However, maintaining the liberal framework, including these constitutional rights, requires political support. Mill's approach in creating a coherent liberal society is to educate its citizens and encourage all individuals to become liberal. In this sense Mill offers a more proactive agenda than Hayek and other pluralists, because moderate social engineering helps to maintain the liberal society.

This divide among liberal thinkers is crucial for formulating principles by which liberal society should act in regard to non-liberal groups. Particularly so, if it is assumed that non-liberal groups are a potential source of backlash against liberal society itself. Obviously, pluralist thinkers would want minimal state discretion toward diverse groups in society and would argue that a liberal state should not try to "liberalize" illiberal groups. From this perspective, it could be argued that the very existence of pluralism is a sufficient condition for preserving liberal society. Efforts to turn individuals into liberals and groups into liberal democracies will do more harm than good.

A rationalist would take a reverse position and argue that a liberal state has a responsibility to promote individual autonomy and choice. Many illiberal groups may violate the rights of women, and freedom to act according to their beliefs may instill sexist beliefs among its member, thereby opposing the core value of liberal society. The rationalist would argue that having such illiberal "states" within a liberal state will threaten liberal society at large. By liberalizing illiberal groups, the potential backlash against liberalism can be eliminated as well.

On the balance, it is hard to see that liberal society based on pluralism can be sustainable as the pluralism can turn into hyper-pluralism. Illiberal groups may block pluralist policies by using the framework provided this very pluralist society. At the same time, this is not to say pluralism as an important organizing principle should be abandoned all together. Society should be based on “reasonable” pluralism because both extremes, hyper-pluralism and the absence of pluralism, may undermine liberal society. The degree of pluralism should be sufficient to allow all members of the society to enjoy their liberties and, at the same time, to not allow illiberal groups to block the proper functioning of liberal society.

The following sections of this paper will take a look at the relative merits of theories by two key thinkers in liberal tradition. It will start with the rationalist position of John Stuart Mill. The discussion will then turn to John Rawls and an analysis of how his organizing principles of liberal society fare in this debate between pluralists and rationalists.

#### **IV. Comprehensive Liberalism of Mill**

Mill’s rationalism and critique of illiberal ways of life are strongly founded in the concept of individuality. For Mill, free development of individuality is one of the essential elements of well-being.<sup>21</sup> However, according to Mill, the difficulty of each individual developing personal individuality arises in the inability of the majority of people to recognize its importance. “The majority, being satisfied with the ways of mankind as they now are..., cannot comprehend why those ways should not be good enough for

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<sup>21</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*. In Mary Warnock eds *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Essay on Bentham*. (Glasgow: Collins. Fount Paperbacks, 1982), 185.

everybody...,” writes Mill.<sup>22</sup> Particularly, the practicing of customs and traditions made the realization of full potential of individuality impossible.<sup>23</sup> From this perspective, there is a trade-off between having a society based on customs and traditions and a society that allows full realization of individuality. Illiberal groups that impose their customs and traditions on society block the realization of individuality of other individuals. In the context of discussing limits of society’s authority over the individual, Mill gives the example of religious groups who could gain the majority in government and by doing so becoming a potential threat to the liberties of other individuals.

“Wherever the Puritans have been sufficiently powerful, as in New England, and in Great Britain at the time of the Commonwealth, they have endeavored, with considerable success, to put down all public, and nearly all private, amusements: especially music, dancing, public games, or other assemblages for purposes of diversion, and the theatre. There are still in this country large bodies of persons by whose notions of morality and religion these recreations are condemned; and those persons belonging chiefly to the middle class, who are the ascendant power in the present social and political condition of the kingdom, it is by no means impossible that persons of these sentiments may at some time or other command a majority in Parliament. How will the remaining portion of the community like to have the amusements that shall be permitted to them regulated by the religious and moral sentiments of the stricter Calvinists and Methodists? Would they not, with considerable peremptoriness, desire these intrusively pious members of society to mind their own business? This is precisely what should be said to every government and every public, who have the pretension that no person shall enjoy any pleasure which they think wrong. But if the principle of the pretension be admitted, no one can reasonably object to its being acted on in the sense of the majority, or other preponderating power in the country; and all persons must be ready to conform to the idea of a Christian commonwealth, as understood by the early settlers in New England, if a religious profession similar to theirs should ever succeed in regaining its lost ground, as religions supposed to be declining have so often been known to do.”<sup>24</sup>

This is a fundamental question because the possibility of exercising choice is a crucial element of liberal society based on individuality. Illiberal groups who impose their views on the rest of society or practice their customs within their group limit an individual’s choice, thereby keeping individuals from developing their own individuality and, on aggregate, undermining the whole liberal society. “Human faculties of perception,

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<sup>22</sup> John Stuart Mill. *On Liberty*. In Mary Warnock eds *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Essay on Bentham*. (Glasgow: Collins. Fount Paperbacks, 1982), 185.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 186-187.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 218-19.

judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom makes no choice.”<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, the suppression of one group by another group will lead to conflict that results in decay and stagnation of the whole society.<sup>26</sup> As the progress of society is ideal, then dominance of one group over others that results in conflict can be avoided in societies where truly representative liberal democracy is supreme.<sup>27</sup> For Mill, the representative government is the best form of government from the point of view of human progress, but in order to maintain such liberal democracy,<sup>28</sup> government has actively promote the underlying principles of liberal society. Mill makes it clear by saying that "...the most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves."<sup>29</sup>

Representative government is also best form of government in utilizing the intelligence of people.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the government can utilize the very intelligence that the government has the mission to promote. Such approach leads to circular self-fulfilling process in society. If the core value is individual as a progressive being then such aim is only achievable in society where individuals can exercise their choice and are not suppressed by illiberal groups. This works best in political framework organized on the principles of representative government. In order to maintain this liberal framework, government has to promote its principles and educate people. Obviously, the Millian

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<sup>25</sup> John Stuart Mill. *On Liberty*. In Mary Warnock eds Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Essay on Bentham. (Glasgow: Collins. Fount Paperbacks, 1982), 187.

<sup>26</sup> John Stuart Mill. *Considerations on Representative Government* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1862), 162-164.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 64-65, 80.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 39

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 42-43

solution is to liberalize parts of society that do not follow liberal principles by using liberal state paternalism.<sup>31</sup>

Most importantly, in emphasizing individuality and the importance of choice<sup>32</sup> Millian comprehensive liberalism can lead to a backlash against pluralist society because this comprehensive doctrine is not necessarily shared by all groups in society. The conflicts among different comprehensive views will emerge – especially if one view tries to dominate another. “Given this picture of natural order, diversity, rather than conformity, is not a moral prescription, as Mill thought, one option among others. It is a natural necessity for each distinct entity to try to preserve its distinctiveness for as long as it can, and for this reason conflicts are at all times to be expected in the history of individuals, of social groups, and of nations, as their paths intersect. There is no end to conflict within and around the civil order,” writes Stuart Hampshire.<sup>33</sup>

A society organized according to the Millian view of liberalism requires all of its members to accept comprehensive liberalism. It asks its members to exercise choice, regardless of what their comprehensive views may be. Certain groups in this society may not accept the comprehensive view of liberalism, preferring to follow customs instead of exercising choice as progressive individuals. If liberal society goes too far in its efforts to “liberalize” illiberal groups, then there is a possibility that these groups may use the political mechanism provided by society or alternative methods to make a liberal society significantly less liberal or to abandon liberal organizing principles entirely.

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<sup>31</sup> John Gray. *Mill on Liberty: A Defence* (New York: Routledge, 1983), 90-103.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 186-187.

<sup>33</sup> Stuart Hampshire. *Justice is Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 39.

The interaction between liberal society and illiberal groups in a liberal society on the basis of Millian theories can be illustrated by using a game theoretic framework. In simple terms, this interaction is best characterized by the well-known game of the prisoner's dilemma.<sup>34</sup> There are two actors: Liberal Society and Illiberal Groups.<sup>35</sup> They face two possible strategies: 1) Compromise, or 2) Deviate (not to compromise). If the liberal society decides to compromise with illiberal groups by creating some exceptions, it certainly becomes less liberal according to the doctrine of comprehensive liberalism. Of course, if an illiberal group gives up some of its principles to compromise with liberal society, then it becomes more liberal (less illiberal). Hence, the payoff for compromising and deviating are rated on a scale of 1 to 4, where 4 is the best and 1 is the worst. This illustrative game can be written out as follows.

**Table 1. Cooperation Game (Prisoner's dilemma)<sup>36</sup>**

		<b>Liberal</b>	<b>Society</b>
<b>Illiberal</b>		<u>COMPROMISE</u>	<u>DEVIATE</u>
<b>Groups</b>	<u>COMPROMISE</u>	3, 3	4, 1
	<u>DEVIATE</u>	1, 4	<b>2, 2</b>

Payoffs: (Liberal Society, Illiberal Groups)

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Prisoner's Dilemma game, see H. Scott Bierman and Luis Fernandez, *Game Theory with Economic Applications* (New York, Addison-Wesley: 1998), 10, 17. 218-220

<sup>35</sup> I use the term illiberal groups not illiberal group because the interaction is not necessarily between one group and liberal society. The classification Illiberal Groups consists of many different illiberal groups. This does not imply they share the same aim or have somehow aggregated their demands by creating an effective mechanism for coordination. However, their individual actions toward liberal society may be very similar despite lack of coordinated activity. Hence, their aggregate action is a result of unintended consequences of their actions. For instance, if government tries to impose the doctrine of comprehensive liberalism by using public policy, then many different groups – regardless of their nature and aims – who are not guided in their everyday actions by liberal principles, may feel threatened.

<sup>36</sup> Constructed on the basis of the Prisoner's Dilemma game presented by: Richard Little, *International regimes*, in *the Globalization of World Politics* edited by John Baylis and Steve Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 309.

Liberal society is better off (gains 4) and illiberal groups worse off (gain 1) if illiberal groups compromise and liberal society does not compromise. Liberal society is worse off and illiberal groups better off if liberal society compromises but illiberal society deviates. On the aggregate (liberal society + illiberal groups) will be best off if both liberal society and illiberal groups compromise. However, none of the outcomes indicated above are *nash equilibria* in this game and therefore are not realistic outcomes in this game. Nash equilibrium is (deviate, deviate), which implies that both illiberal groups and liberal society will decide to deviate instead of compromising. This leads to a suboptimal outcome (2,2). In other words, efforts to impose a comprehensive liberalism throughout society may lead to an anti-liberal society backlash from illiberal groups, and liberal society's best response to this is to deviate -- not compromise.

## **V. Political Liberalism of Rawls**

Rawls makes a distinction between comprehensive liberalism and political liberalism. He acknowledges that liberalism as a comprehensive doctrine favors individuality and autonomy over community and associations.<sup>37</sup> He argues that his concept of political liberalism is neutral toward the aims of different comprehensive views in society.<sup>38</sup> However, his view does not imply procedural neutrality, because the public policies of society are based on the framework of political liberalism.<sup>39</sup> Rawlsian political liberalism has clear advantages over comprehensive liberalism, because "As a political conception it aims to be the focus of an overlapping consensus....It seeks common ground – or if one

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<sup>37</sup> John Rawls, *Justice As Fairness* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 153.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 192.



prefers, neutral ground – given the fact of pluralism.”<sup>40</sup> Rawls points out that his concept allows those who would like to withdraw from modern life to do so as long as they honor the political arrangement of liberal society.<sup>41</sup> For example, he discusses the example of children’s education and the requirements imposed by the state. Comprehensive liberalism as followed by Kant and Mill will lead to a state requirement to teach values that foster autonomy and individuality. Rawlsian liberalism requires only that children know their political rights that allow them to “be fully cooperating members of society.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, the conflict between illiberal groups, such as some religious sects, and liberal society is less likely as the claims of society toward those groups are limited to the political sphere.

The Rawlsian approach, with its withdrawal from other spheres and by limiting liberalism to political arrangement, is more likely to create conditions in which the probability of potential backlash is minimal. The idea of overlapping consensus includes reasonable pluralism.<sup>43</sup> Citizens of a liberal society may have different comprehensive views or conceptions, but this does not necessarily mean they cannot agree on the basic political arrangements of a society. This political arrangement is effective in absorbing or avoiding potential backlash, because it does not require all citizens to agree on particular comprehensive views, but rather on a particular political arrangement that benefits all member of society.

John Gray argues that the Rawlsian contractarian framework of liberal society, which is “authentically individualist”, is closer to classical liberalism than the “moral

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> John Rawls. *Justice As Fairness* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 157.

<sup>42</sup> John Rawls. *Justice As Fairness* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 156

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 32.

collectivism of Mill's utilitarianism."<sup>44</sup> Gray points out that the Rawlsian approach "despite its egalitarian orientation, had many links with classical concerns for the priority of individual liberty within a rule-governed constitutional order."<sup>45</sup> Hence, on this pluralists vs. rationalists divide in liberal doctrine, the Rawlsian approach is in many ways closer to the ideas of Hayek than those of Mill. Certainly, Rawlsian social contract is much more extensive than the Hayekian minimal government. But in essence, the degree of pluralism afforded by the Rawlsian approach is much higher than in the Millian approach. Rawls could be seen as a middle-way between hyper-pluralism and rationalism.

This more limited pluralism, on the one hand, and absence of Millian rationalism, on the other hand, offers a plausible framework for dealing with a backlash in liberal society. Interaction between illiberal groups and liberal society can be characterized in the Rawlsian framework as the Battle of Sexes game.<sup>46</sup> In the traditional battle of sexes game a couple faces a choice whether to spend their holiday in a city or in the mountains, whereas in the analogous game based on Rawlsian framework, liberal society and illiberal groups face a choice of living in either a more comprehensively liberal or less comprehensively liberal society. Like a couple, they are better off by coordinating their choices and compromising. As Liberalism used in this game (table 2 and table 3) is defined as comprehensive liberalism, they can find a compromise in political realm by excluding other spheres of life. In this game (table 2 and table 3) use of comprehensive liberalism means that a more liberal society is closer to the Millian model and a less liberal society is closer to the Hayekian pluralist approach.

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<sup>44</sup> John Gray, *Liberalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 1986), 55.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>46</sup> For a detailed discussion of battle of sexes game see H. Scott Bierman and Luis Fernandez, *Game Theory With Economic Applications* ( New York, Addison-Wesley: 1998), 17, 218-220.

In Table 2, below, 4 indicates the best possible outcome and 1 the worst possible outcome. It is clear that uncoordinated strategies (More Liberalism, Less Liberalism) and (Less Liberalism, More Liberalism) lead to lower payoffs for both parties. Nash equilibria of the game are (More Liberalism, More Liberalism) and (Less Liberalism, Less Liberalism). In other words, liberal society would prefer that all groups within it be liberal. However, a smaller degree of comprehensive liberalism would be more advantageous for liberal society than a situation of constant un-coordination with illiberal groups, because the latter would lead to backlash against liberal society. Illiberal groups would prefer to have a smaller degree of comprehensive liberalism but would prefer to live in a liberal society with a higher degree of comprehensive liberalism to a situation where lack of coordination will lead to suppression of their activities.

**Table 2. Coordination Game (Based on Battle of Sexes)<sup>47</sup>**

		<b>Liberal</b>	
		<b>Society</b>	<b>Society</b>
		More liberalism	Less liberalism
<b>Illiberal</b>	More liberalism	<b>4, 3</b>	1, 1
	Less liberalism	2, 2	<b>3, 4</b>

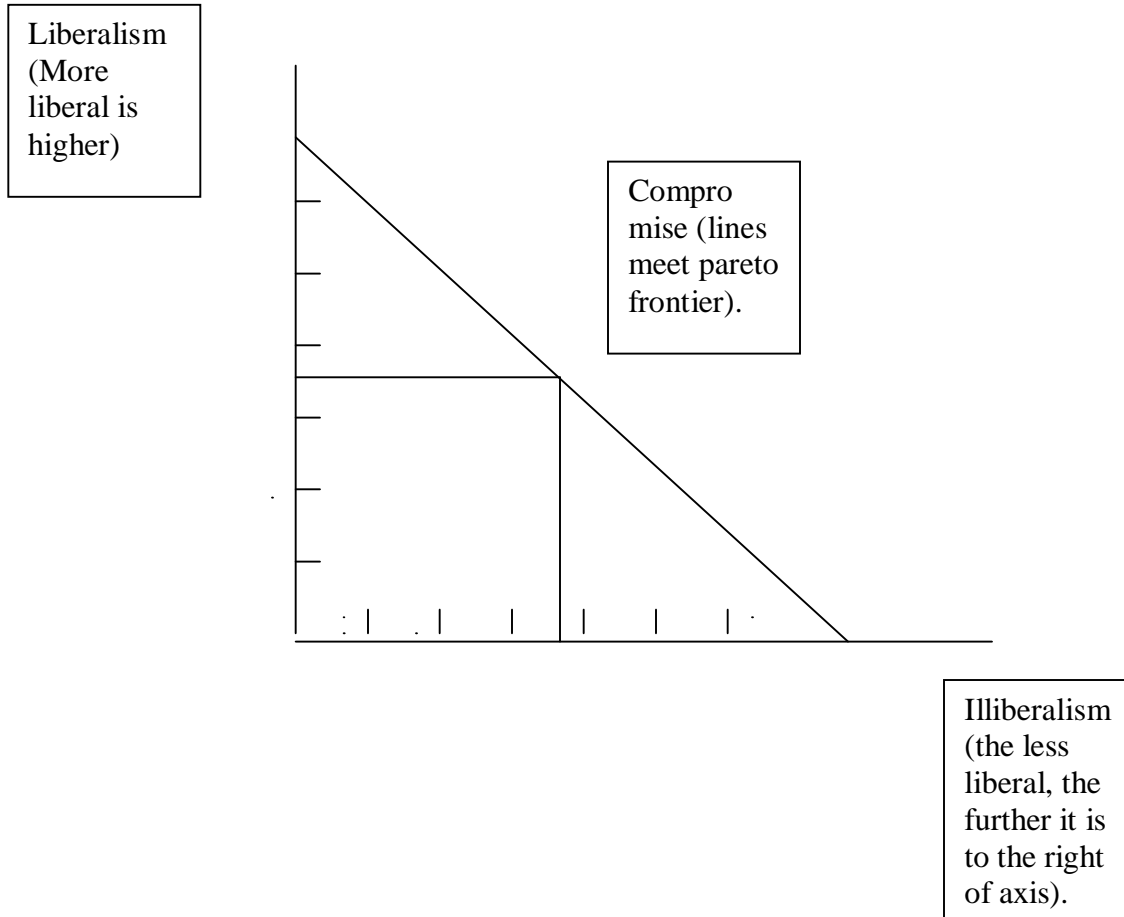
Payoffs: (for Liberal Society, Illiberal Groups)

The area of compromise between degrees of liberalism is mapped out in Table 3. It demonstrates that somewhere between 3 and 4 both groups can find a satisfying payoff, that could be 3, 5 for both of them or 3,1 for illiberal groups and 3,9 for liberal society, depending on their bargaining positions. This area between 3 and 4 represents the Rawlsian “overlapping consensus.” Both actors can agree that society will be guided on the basis of principles of political liberalism with reasonable pluralism. Illiberal groups

<sup>47</sup> Constructed on the basis of the battle of sexes game presented by: Richard Little, International regimes, in *The Globalization of World Politics* edited by John Baylis and Steve Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 312.

do not have to become small liberal democracies but can exist within a liberal society as long as they follow the liberal principles of polity.

**Table 3. The Pareto frontier of coordination game.**



Once a compromise has been achieved between liberal society and illiberal groups on the basis of the Rawlsian framework, it is obvious that the probability of backlash is minimal. Illiberal groups realize they are better off following the principles of liberalism in the political life of society as opposed to being in conflict with liberal society. At the same time, illiberal groups are given a high degree of flexibility in their

activities outside the political realm. Liberal society realizes that coordinating with illiberal groups and not imposing a high degree of comprehensive liberalism is better because otherwise a backlash could emerge to undermine the liberal society.

Coordination makes liberal principles in political life sustainable.

Certainly, the Rawlsian approach can be criticized on the grounds that drawing such lines between comprehensive and political liberalism is difficult in the everyday political and social life of society. Precisely because of this difficulty, current liberal societies experience many conflicts between liberal society and illiberal groups within this society. Stuart Hampshire points out that Rawlsian principles are expected to be rationally chosen within liberal society and be independent of conceptions of good but this is "harmony within the liberal stockade."<sup>48</sup> "Someone whose conception of good and evil is founded on a supernatural authority, which represents any tolerance of contrary moral view as evil, will not, for example, accept the primacy of liberty," writes Hampshire.<sup>49</sup> This implies that Rawlsian political liberalism may prove to be too comprehensive for some illiberal groups. Rawls assumes that reasonable people from illiberal groups can compromise within principles of political liberalism. However, this "legitimation pool" is biased towards liberal principles and unreasonable people who are excluded from the pool are declared unreasonable from liberal perspective.<sup>50</sup> State coercion can be used against unreasonable.

This is true, but at least within liberal society most illiberal groups may prefer existence to non-existence. Alternatives to Rawlsian political liberalism may also lead to

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<sup>48</sup> Stuart Hampshire. *Justice is Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 23.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Marilyn Friedman. "John Rawls and the Political Coercion of Unreasonable People". In Victoria Davion and Clark Wolf eds. *The Idea of Political Liberalism. Essays on Rawls* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000) 16-33.

the non-existence of illiberal groups. Comprehensive liberalism implemented by liberal paternalist state will not allow illiberal groups to operate if their operating principles and views conflict that of comprehensive liberalism. In pluralist liberalism, it is not clear which illiberal group will be most successful in blocking liberal policies and imposing its views on society. Dominance of one illiberal group may mean that views of other illiberal groups will be subject to same faith as in comprehensively liberal society.

Most importantly, seeing Rawlsian political liberalism as the best potential way for absorbing backlash does imply that one recipe exists for all liberal societies; rather, it demonstrates that there are incentives for both liberal society and illiberal groups to reach a compromise within the overlapping consensus. The precise balance in this compromise depends on the particulars of each society. Identifying potential conflicts and solving them within this consensus is part of maintaining liberal society and absorbing backlash. In this sense, accepting the principles of political liberalism is not asking individuals and groups to forget who they are and cease to exist as community<sup>51</sup>. Up to a certain degree, self-definition by opposition fits into the framework – at least to the greater extent than in Millian framework. But these principles do offer a realistic framework and procedure for conflict resolution, while recognizing that such framework is not completely unbiased. However, such framework is less likely to being subject to contributing to the backlash against liberalism as in the case of Millian comprehensive liberalism or abuse as in the case of pluralist liberalism.

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<sup>51</sup> Stuart Hampshire points out that the asking to accept liberal principles is equivalent to some groups of asking them to forget their identity. Also, he correctly points out that groups and individuals may primarily define themselves as in opposition to something (another group, liberal principles et al). For more elaborate discussion, see Stuart Hampshire. *Justice is Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 26.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Liberal society can face a backlash against its foundational principles, and this is not simply a theoretical possibility – empirical evidence can be found in history as well as in the current situation faced by liberal societies. This real possibility leads to the question of what kind of framework for liberal society is most efficient in dealing with the potential backlash. Rationalist and pluralist approaches within liberal doctrine are crucial when analyzing the ability of liberal society to avoid or absorb backlash against its founding principles.

The high degree of pluralism as proposed by many liberal thinkers cannot avoid backlash and also has tremendous difficulties absorbing it. Such an extremely pluralist liberal society may become self-destructive because illiberal groups may exploit the pluralist framework in a way that makes maintaining pluralist liberal society impossible. On the other hand, the rationalist approach attempting to impose liberalism as a comprehensive doctrine throughout the liberal society may lead to backlash as well. John Stuart Mill and his comprehensive liberalism with its emphasis on individual choice and autonomy may lead to a Prisoner's Dilemma type of situation as a result of interactions between illiberal groups and liberal society. Efforts to liberalize illiberal groups may backfire, on the aggregate causing society to be in a much worse position because of this conflict.

The political liberalism of John Rawls offers a plausible compromise between rationalist and pluralist approaches in liberalism in regard to avoiding and absorbing backlash against liberalism from illiberal groups. The Rawlsian idea of overlapping consensus that is limited to political liberalism, not comprehensive liberalism, and

reasonable pluralism indicate a possibility for achieving compromise between illiberal groups and liberal society. The interactions of these two groups are characterized by the Battle of the Sexes game, where both parties gain by coordinating their activities and finding a compromise. Most importantly, the reached compromise is sustainable because it is limited to the political life – does not apply to activities outside of the political realm.

This paper demonstrates that liberal normative theories have great importance in finding solutions to some of the crucial questions faced by liberal societies. Furthermore, it contributes to the debates within liberal tradition by showing that the pluralist and rationalist divide within liberalism is an important starting point for analyzing the question of backlash against liberalism. In addition, it becomes clear that the conventional view of dividing liberal doctrines into libertarian and welfare liberals is not so crucial for analyzing how liberal frameworks deal with backlash. Similarities between the approaches of Rawls and Hayek to the issue are greater than those between Mill and Rawls.