This stands in stark contrast with the earlier classical liberals, for whom the liberal state is as minimal as possible, guaranteeing only the bare minimum of national security and personal freedom in the ‘negative’ sense of the term – as noted by Isaiah Berlin.

Following the fall of communism, Francis Fukuyama argued that political development had reached its end point in the establishment of liberal democracy:

“We are witnessing the end of history as such: that is, the endpoint of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” – Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man

However, this diagnosis now seems incorrect, with the rise of totalitarianism in Russia, the emergence of religious fundamentalism in the Middle East, the growth of the Sanders and Corbyn movements in the US and UK, and the increasing influence of the socially conservative alt-right

1.4 CORE THEMES – THE PRIMACY OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Liberalism is, in a sense, the ideology of the industrialised West

Liberal thinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, influenced by an Enlightenment belief in universal reason, subscribed to a foundationist form of liberalism, establishing fundamental values and championing a vision of human flourishing or excellence – usually linked to autonomy

This form of liberalism was boldly universalist

During the twentieth century, however, it became common to present liberalism in morally neutral terms, reflected in the belief that priority is given to ‘the right’ over ‘the good’

From this perspective, liberalism is not simply an ideology that is about what is politically good and bad, but rather a sort of meta-ideology, which offers concepts – with a degree of impartiality – to set down the grounds upon which political and ideological debate may take place

Nevertheless, while liberalism is characterised by a belief in openness, debate, pluralism and self-determination, it certainly carries a powerful moral thrust – this moral thrust is captured in its commitment to a distinctive set of values and beliefs:

- The individual
- Freedom
- Reason
- Justice
- Toleration

1.4.1 The individual

In the modern age, the idea of the individual is so commonplace that its political significance is often ignored entirely

In the feudal period, there was little idea of individuals having unique identities or interests; instead they were viewed as a member of the social group to which they belonged

However, the advent of market-based societies vastly increased the degree of choice that people experienced – in terms of consumption habits, labour, and lifestyle choices – and this led to an ideological acceptance, within liberalism, of the ability of individuals to determine their own identity and have their own interests
