

## **Unit 1: Ruth Sandwell: Introduction / Define liberalism. / Describe the connections between liberalism, and modernity and modernization. / What are the connections between liberalism and the state?**

**Q: Introduction**

**A:** My name's Ruth Sandwell, and I teach at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. And I'm a historian by training, but I also do quite a bit of work on not just the history of education, which of course, I do teach that, but I also work in history, teaching and learning. So kind of how do we learn history, how do we teach history. So that's the kind of two different divisions of my work. As a historian, I've been a historian of education, as I said, and my background's actually in the history of rural Canada and the history of the family.

**Q: Define Liberalism.**

**A:** So liberalism is a form of governance or a form of being as an individual in society that makes certain assumptions about what people are for and what people are and what their nature is. And in that sense, it's a hegemonic force in that we completely take for granted the particularities of the rules that liberalism involves. So, for example, a big part of liberalism, as the term is used now, and I'll just say parenthetically that the meaning of liberalism has changed over time, it's very dynamic now. It means different things in the United States than it does in Canada. It means different things in Europe. It meant different things in Britain in the 19th century than it means in Canada today and neoliberalism is different from liberalism. But I'm not going to get into all of that, I'm just going to say that generally speaking, liberalism refers to a way of being where the individual is really central, as opposed to in other times and in other cultures. Families, for example, are at the heart of society or a larger village-like group or a nomadic group that involves family and non-family, but within liberalism, the individual is seen to have a prime place. And what's so important for the individual is a kind of, what's known as the maximization of self-interest. The philosophy or the theory behind liberalism says that what everybody most wants is to maximize their own self-interest and they can do that in selfish, narrow ways or they can do that in what are called enlightened ways, which have to do with more long-term strategic benefits. So you might think, "Okay, as an individual, I'll just go and attack everybody weaker than me because I can maximize my own self-

interest." But, in fact, that actually doesn't work in the long run because if everybody's attacking each other then you, too, might be attacked and besides, sometimes some good things can come in the long term for cooperating, for example. But the belief is that most people, really what they want is to maximize their own self-interest. And they do that in a variety of socially acceptable ways or what's come to be socially acceptable.

**Q: Describe the connections between liberalism, and modernity and modernization.**

**A:** Well, the question of the relationship between liberalism and modernity is very, very interesting and it's a subject of many, many discussions, of not just historians, but also sociologists and also philosophers and anybody who cares about people in society. And economists as well have a lot to say about that. In Canada, until quite recently, most historians would've said that-- they wouldn't have called it liberalism. They would've just said like the modern world or urbanization or some of the other words that fill in for that, would associate liberalism with the changes that occurred in the late 19th century. And those are changes to do with industrialization and urbanization and not so often talked about are the restructuring of Canada's economy as a result of contributing to those changes of industrialization and urbanization. So for the first time, with industrialization, you have an economy that's not primarily based on people living on their own land and getting most of their energy, particularly food energy from the land. Because, of course, in urbanization, there's a small space with a lot of people living on it. That's not been possible for most of history because people need actually quite a lot of land to get the resources that they need to live. So a family probably would need one to five acres if they were just doing all the work themselves to get the food, to get the fuel, for heating and cooking and all of those things. What urbanization brought about was sort of a crushing of people into much smaller spaces. I would argue that that was made possible by fossil fuels, the new forms of energy and hydroelectricity, which allowed people to get energy from elsewhere in a concentrated form and bring it into their own homes in cities and towns. So in Canada, those changes are widely believed to have happened or occurred in the late 19th century. My own work as a rural historian suggests that those changes came, the change to urbanization and industrialization came much, much later to Canada. Nineteen forty-one was the census year where more people, for the very first time ever in Canadian history, more people were living in towns and cities with more than 1,000 people in it. Before 1941, the vast majority of people were living in towns of 1,000 or in rural areas. Even by 1961, most people were still living-- 1961, for

the first time, people were living in communities smaller than 5,000. When historians often talk about the 1870's or the 1890's or the early 21st century as being a time when most Canadians became urban and industrialized, it's simply not true. So the relationship to liberalism of urbanization and industrialization are rooted in the different kinds of social relations people have to each other when you're living in a place where you don't have direct access to the natural bounty of the land or water. So there have to be more complicated systems of organizing people in order to deal with the fact that you have many, many people who need to be fed. They need to be housed. They need to have work to do. So under liberalism, what gradually, gradually emerged through the 19th century was a way of thinking about governance, a way of thinking about individuals that didn't have to do with, say in Canada, with something else in addition to families living on a farm, working together, getting some of their food from the land, taking that, selling some things, getting a little bit of money. So that's sort of one kind of political economy. Under liberalism, liberalism is not a set of governance. Let's just say it's a set of beliefs about how people can live together and work together inside a political economy, that is politics and economics, to have a functioning society. So liberalism, and again, the term is very, very slippery, but basically under liberalism, people put the individual ahead of the family, this is the theory, of course, it's not always the practice, and people work individually and then live together in much larger spaces and more concentrated spaces.

**Q: What are the connections between Liberalism and the state?**

A: Liberalism involves an idea of the relationship between people, individuals, and the larger collectivities or structures that we live inside. Liberalism is usually attached to another word, which is liberal democracies, which suggests and means, actually doesn't just imply it, it means that people have some control over the systems within which they live. So in a liberal democracy, we as individuals have a vote. We don't just have to vote with our employer or with our father or with our brother. We can vote as individuals to elect somebody who can make decisions on our behalf. We don't vote on everything that happens, but we vote to have someone represent us. And somebody else makes decisions and groups, like the parliament, government, make decisions on our behalf, but the deal is we get to have some say in the rules by which we agree to be governed. So liberalism assumes that as individuals, that's the best place to make that decision, rather than the neighborhood. So we make those decisions as individuals, but they have to do with collective decision-making, at some level. Economically,

liberalism usually refers to the fact that it's the markets that determine how economies work. This ties in really deeply with the idea of people act on the basis of self-interest. That's one pillar of the set of beliefs. Another one is that economies sort themselves out. They sort themselves out naturally. For example, if people like to eat ice cream really a lot, then somebody will see a market and will start making a lot of ice cream and that ice cream that used to be very rare and very, very expensive will become much less costly because it will be made in bigger quantities and more people will buy it, the price will come down and it's win-win for everybody. The company or corporation will make its money and that will be great, and the people will have their need for ice cream being met. That's kind of a liberal market theory. Many, many countries, including Canada, have historically tempered with that; have decided we can't leave everything up to the state. For example, if there are poor people who don't have enough to eat, the capitalist and liberal capitalist formations don't necessarily meet the needs of the poor people. And, in fact, a lot of people historically suffered tremendously in the Industrial Revolution towards the end of the 19th century in Britain, the first country to industrialize. Precisely because the government-- because the other part of this is that under liberalism, governments are not seen as-- they're seen as meddling or interfering if they say, no, we're going to have a policy that we're going to tax the population, and they're going to give us money. We're going to use that money to create things for the public good, like programs providing free milk to school children or we're going to create standards for road building and railways that are safe rather than dangerous. So the kind of liberalism that we've had in Canada, and indeed everywhere, in Europe in particular and North America, has been tempered by this idea that, yes, for most things, let's just let the market click on and it will do its thing, that will ultimately work in the best interest of the most people. But we need what's come to be called sort of a social safety net for the areas that are too important or simply don't fit with that model of liberalism.