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**Justification and Limits of State Coercion in Liberal  
Democracies:  
Reconciling Binding Welfare State Policies and a Reformed Classical  
Liberalism**

*Dissertation Thesis Abstract – English*

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## Abstract

In this thesis I defend the claim that classical liberalism has the capacity to justify meritocratic state policies that promote greater equality of opportunity. Correspondingly, I adopt an approach uncommon among scholars following the tradition of classical liberalism, given that I conclude with a position that is more frequently associated with the postulates of social welfare egalitarians, such as publicly funded higher education. This strategy serves as a reply to contemporary critiques of liberal democracies and implies that liberalism is endowed with the tools to address the flaws its own (neoliberal) manifestation has brought about. Skyrocketing socio-economic inequalities as well as the marketization trend which, among other things, crowds-out the traditional values of higher education and corrupts a public institution crucial for social mobility into a privilege of plutocratic elites, are just two examples.

To support this argument, I discuss several consecutive claims: Firstly, despite its currently observable flaws, classical liberalism and, by extension, liberal democracy should be regarded as a valuable ideology that ought to be *amended*, rather than *discarded* inconsiderately in favor of an alternative framework. Secondly, classical liberalism entails meritocracy as a system governing the principles of just distributions. However, Western democracies hardly live up to their meritocratic promise: I argue that they suffer from both inherent problems of meritocratic ideology (a system that, *by definition*, produces winners, *and* losers), and from the lack of underlying equality of opportunity. This nexus of the abovementioned interrelated arguments culminates in the main conclusion of the thesis: If classical liberalism as a valuable political framework worth preserving entails meritocracy, and meritocracy entails substantial equality of opportunity, then state interventionism aimed at promoting a more ‘even playing field’ is not only justified on the liberal grounds but a condition *sine qua non* of the conceptual consistency and political plausibility of classical liberalism.

Although a myriad of corresponding meritocratically motivated state policies in pursuit of greater equality of opportunity can be imagined, this thesis focusses specifically on the expansion of publicly funded higher education, since colleges and universities are frequently described as ‘the great equalizer’ with the capacity to disrupt intergenerational reproduction of hereditary socio-economic advantages and, instead, enable social mobility. Thus, the crux of this thesis lies in the claim that classical liberalism as the foundation of liberal democracies that includes safeguards against *excessive* state interventionism can be preserved without relinquishing the hope that their contemporary flaws can be addressed, and substantial changes can be achieved from within their own principles.

## **Keywords**

Autonomy, Coercion, Individualism, (In-)equality, Justice, Liberalism, Marketization, Meritocracy, Paternalism, Welfare