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Apr 19, 2018

Does Liberalism Have a Future? *Or, Why the Future of Progress Lies in the Past*

They're coming in thick and fast these days. Laments for the death of liberalism. So much is obvious: liberalism is failing across the globe, seemingly impotent to prevent people from fleeing into the arms of strongmen, authoritarians, and kleptocrats. Nation after nation. Dominoes. The inconvenient truth is that liberalism seems to have little left to offer people that they want anymore — and so people are angrily, bitterly withdrawing consent from it.

So a more instructive question is: does liberalism have a future? That is, can it offer people something that they want again, if they don't want what it offers them now? What is that something?

To answer my tiny question, we'll go backwards to go forwards.

To my mind, liberalism — its essence, history, origin — is made of three intertwined ideas. First, that every life holds within it a kind of immeasurable possibility — we don't know who tomorrow's Einsteins or Hawkings are. Second, because of the first, every life is inherently worthy, to a precisely equal degree — no person matters any more less than any other, and that is the fundamental principles on which institutions must be build. Third, the fundamental purpose, the job, challenge, and task of human organizations, whether countries, cities, companies, or governments — is to lift up each and every life as high as they can, never to pull them down. In that way, real prosperity results.

Possibility. Equality. Dignity

They're the three principles of the real thing, genuine liberalism, from Aristotle through the Enlightenment to Mill, Bentham, and Keynes. Now. Take a second to take all that in. And I think you will wonder something like: "Dude!! That sounds precisely nothing like liberalism today!"

You're right.

Liberalism today has decayed so far, so much, that it seems to have nothing to with these three ideas — but with their opposites: stagnation, inequality, and indignity. It's about "free markets" and "no government intervention", about replacing democracy with capitalism, about eroding and shredding social contracts, about taking dignity, purpose,

and meaning away from people — not endowing them with it. Those are the principles of neoliberalism — but it's instructive to see just how far they diverge from the real thing, liberalism as it was made through history — and as it should be today.

Genuine liberalism was revolutionary — and might still be radical today, but we will get to that — because those three principles, equality, possibility, and dignity, strike a balance between many things, and that balance historically yielded better lives than the extremes. Individual and collective. Material and spiritual. Essential and existential. Social and economic. Freedom and responsibility. And so on. But neoliberalism seems to have forgotten all this. It does not balance anything. It is a raw, aggressive kind of individual economic materialism, insisting on a narrow, absolutist definition of freedom, “choosing” flavours of toothpaste at Walmart — but not having healthcare. In that sense, the sense of balance between extremes, which structure our lives, it is barely liberalism at all — it is the perversion of it. There's not an iota of possibility, equality, or dignity in it.

So liberalism is only present in the world today in a kind of degenerate form. A counterfeit, a shallow illusion, of the real thing. Of course we can never live up to ideals — we can only try — but in the case of genuine liberalism versus neoliberalism, the divergence between ideal form and degeneration is so wide that it's fair to say the founding ideas, insights, purposes, and meanings of “liberalism” have been left behind entirely, and all that's left is what is easy, expedient, and convenient — freedom as buying stuff, life as work, citizenship as consumption, meaning as status, purpose as money. The origin, purpose, meaning, the great truths at liberalism's heart — they've all been forgotten.

To make all this really clear, I want to contrast it with conservatism. Remember the three fundamental principles of liberalism? Possibility, equality, and dignity? Conservatism denies each one. It believes that only a rare few lives hold possibility — others are destined to be merely average, and most to fail — and therefore indignity, not dignity, is what people deserve. The question is then what predestines peoples — and there are only three answers: the gods, blood, or tribe. Because it believes some are inherently worthier than others, conservatism must find ways to ration resources to those worthy few — hence, systems of nobility and so on evolve, which rarely ever change. People are told to hew to their places in hierarchies — places which they will never have any power to alter or change, because they were born into that caste, role, level, stratum of society.

In this deep and profound way, conservatism is at root fundamentally incompatible with three things, which make up modern life. Democracy. Capitalism. And socialism, too — as in public goods like healthcare, transport, media, education. If people are born into hierarchies which can never change, who needs democracy? If I know what you will be, why should I ever invest in you? And why should I do business with you if you are from the wrong caste or tribe? That is why societies which are arch-conservative find it impossible to move into modernity, to grow and develop — think of Iran, Turkey, or

Russia.

Liberalism does have a future. But it's future is not trucking, bartering, compromising its way towards conservatism. That way lies a politics in which democracy, peace, and progress become impossible. Nor is it — as American pundits appear to want to do forever — advocate and glorify neoliberalism, just like Soviet intellectuals praising the glories of communism even while the walls fell.

The future of liberalism lies in the past of liberalism. The ancient past, and the classical past — but not the modern past. The three great principles which animated it throughout history. Possibility. Equality. Dignity. With those, perhaps, social contracts can be crafted that people consent to again. Perhaps through those we can rebuild broken institutions — from GDP to bottom lines to the rule of law. We can reorient institutions, from governments to corporations to cities. Towards what? Better lives. Lives rich in meaning, purpose, opportunity, happiness, security, truth, beauty, fairness.

But without offering people better lives again, instead of stagnating economies, fracturing societies, shattered democracies, and pundits happily praising it all as a job well done, this much is blindingly clear: liberalism won't have the future it could have had. It will be one of history's great tragedies — a might have been.

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April 2018

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Comment by Dennis Sutton – In his “Age of Anger,” Pankaj Mishra wrote: “A religious or medieval society was one in which the social, political and economic order seemed unchangeable, and the poor and the oppressed attributed their suffering either to fortuitous happenings — ill luck, bad health, unjust rulers — or to the will of God. The idea that suffering could be relieved, and happiness engineered, by men radically changing the social order belongs to the eighteenth century.”

And Richard Rorty in his “Achieving Our Country” thought that the Old Democrat Left — the Reformist Left — had died in the 1960's when the New Left took it's place to fight the Cold War and, by extension Vietnam. Since Lincoln's Gettysburg Address until then there was a pride instilled by Walt Whitman and John Dewey that, Rorty says, "was ubiquitous on the American left prior to the Vietnam War"? It was the sort of pride that "is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement."