



Politics

Liberalism and the Threats It Faces

12/10/2020 · 5 comments · 6 minute read · Victor Menaldo



Liberal democracy is under threat. Over the last decade, a democratic recession has swept across the world, as once liberal democracies like Turkey, Poland, Hungary, India and the Philippines flirt with virulent illiberalism and former democracies, such as Venezuela and Russia, have devolved into outright authoritarianism.

In the United States, liberalism has been attacked by President Trump in countless forms, including ham-fisted attempts to goad foreign governments into interfering in the upcoming election, harassment of the media, threats of drastic budget cuts to the post office in the middle of a pandemic in which voting by mail has become an insurance policy against mass disenfranchisement, calls to supporters to vote twice and rampant interference with the Department of Justice. The latest transgression is Trump's refusal to promise that he will accept

the results of the presidential election and his baseless accusations that the election will be rigged against him.

Liberalism has also been under attack by some on the left. There have been campaigns to bully and intimidate: on college campuses, in particular, people have tried to silence, humiliate and expel or fire students and professors who have said the wrong thing or, worse, offered principled opposition against the new ideological orthodoxies. Cancel culture is a very real problem.

These attacks on liberalism are bad for our society, minorities and progressive causes in general. Liberalism is the best path forward for addressing our problems and there is nothing wrong with liberalism that a recommitment to liberal principles cannot fix. Contrary to the broadsides launched against liberalism by avant-garde schools of thought that aver that things like philosophy, history and science are constructs created by white men for white men, liberalism belongs to everybody and is good for everyone—especially the marginalized. In fact, our capacity for liberalism sets us apart from other species. It is an ongoing project that has been molded as much by our ancestors who left Africa 50,000 years ago as by dead white men from Enlightenment era Western Europe.

Before the agricultural revolution, when people lived in hunter gatherer societies, they had to find ways to coordinate, cooperate, share, compromise and make collective decisions. This required deliberation and debate, hallmarks of liberalism. The ancient Greeks invented democracy, valorized reason and practiced rudimentary forms of science. They were not Europeans in the modern sense (their DNA can be traced to Iran, Egypt and Turkey). The Roman Empire, which included politicians and scholars from North Africa and the Middle East, recognized key liberal tenets. The Muslim caliphates of Islam's golden age allowed religious tolerance to flourish and furnished women with significant

rights, including in the economic realm. Liberalism is the political basis of the modern world and has been embraced by governments and cultures worldwide. Its avatars include Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Robert Moses, John Lewis, Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama.

Liberalism is the idea that all individuals are born free, equal and worthy of respect and that governments should be limited in their power and accountable to their citizens. Liberalism lionizes facts, logic and evidence. It is the idea that the pursuit of democracy, human rights and science can lead to genuine social progress. Liberalism is expressed as a set of values, rights and institutions that go beyond partisanship and ideology. It is about pluralism, granting people the benefit of the doubt and freedom of conscience and expression. It does not condone intolerance and persecution. Liberalism allows us to be held accountable without destroying each other. It espouses mutual tolerance and forbearance. It accepts that there can be no utopian postliberal society, in which one side finally vanquishes their political and cultural nemeses and can finally stop having to engage with that vile other who stands in their way. Without liberalism, you get endless show trials and purity contests. You get a feral struggle for power that culminates in totalitarianism. History is replete with examples: from the Communist Revolutions that swept over Russia, China and Cuba to the Baath Party's reign of terror in the Middle East during the 1960s and 70s.

Liberalism recognizes our limitations, while making us better. Human beings can be petty, corrupt and hypocritical. We can also be self-righteous and dogmatic, if not fanatical. Nobody is immune from these flaws. Liberalism does not ask us to be perfectly virtuous—which is impossible and, in any event, does not do justice to the full range of human experience and emotion. It realizes that orthodoxy and fanaticism undermine the possibility of a full intellectual and moral journey.

It forces us to listen, be humble and empathetic, even though the human default is to be self-righteously convinced of our own moral and intellectual superiority.

Liberalism helps us transcend our pettiness, hypocrisy and vindictiveness because it gives everyone standing, legitimacy and worth. It is vested in equality and does not allow you to proclaim that you are too smart or too righteous to listen to others. It does not allow you to dismiss other people as evil, stupid or wrong.

In Mexico, criminal gangs and drug lords predate on the less fortunate, shaking people down for every penny they have (for example, avocado farmers in Michoacán have been forced to leave their land fallow and fled to the US); they kidnap and murder children; they rape, murder and steal. They kill journalists with impunity. This is also happening in Central America and parts of South America. It is one of the reasons behind the major migrations to the United States that took place in 2018–19.

The reason immigrants continue to come to the US is because they are seeking a better life and the country, for all its flaws, is still a beacon of hope and opportunity. The American dream still matters to immigrants. They believe in it. So do I.

Other liberal democracies, such as Sweden, Botswana and Chile, are governed by the rule of law and have well-functioning, regulated markets, generate consistent economic growth and distribute it relatively equitably. Their systems lead to educated, healthy, wealthy and happy citizens. Their people live beyond hardscrabble subsistence, and their children grow up to be statesmen, scientists and respected businesswomen. They also enjoy the personal security and leisure time required to indulge in artistic expression and engage in philanthropy. They

do not live in constant fear of starvation, violence or persecution. Their children do not become warlords.

Like other liberal democracies, our country's promise and progress have been marked by the expansion of liberty, equality and justice. That's because liberalism offers special protections to the weak. The strong don't necessarily need legal or cultural protections around free speech, freedom of assembly and due process because they're already protected by their power and wealth. They don't need protest and dissent to advance their interests. Minorities and poor people have always sought the ability to speak out and organize to fight oppression. There was no real freedom of speech or assembly in the pre-Civil War slaveholding South and Southwest. There was no freedom of expression or assembly for African Americans during the Jim Crow era. There was no freedom of expression and assembly for Native Americans on the frontier during western expansion. There was no freedom of expression and assembly for Mexican-Americans when the Texas Rangers massacred them in Porvenir, Texas. There was no tolerance for anti-interventionist views in 1917 in the run up to World War I. There were limits on free speech during the 1950s, which led to the firing of heterodox professors during the McCarthy era. There was little tolerance for anti-war views during the early years of the Vietnam conflict.

We are all linked in this country. We need to respect each other. We need to view each other as equally legitimate interlocutors and give each other the benefit of the doubt. We each have to find a way to recommit to this American experiment in liberalism—for as flawed and treacherous as it has been for many of us, it's far better than any of its alternatives. And it belongs to all of us.

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Victor Menaldo is a professor at the University of Washington, co-founder of the UW Forum on Political Economy and an avowed liberal. He researches and teaches on topics such as capitalism and industrialization, liberal democracy, technology and innovation and the political economy of development.

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Victor Menaldo 

13/10/2020 at 5:57 am

Thanks so much for your very kind words, John. I very much appreciate them. You might be interested in a cognate podcast I recorded on liberalism, science and academic freedom:

<https://sites.uw.edu/uwpoliticeconomy/2020/10/12/political-economy-forum-podcast-6-misconceptions-about-liberalism-academic-freedom-and-science/>

and one on liberal democracy versus populism:

<https://sites.uw.edu/uwpoliticeconomy/2020/09/25/pe-forum-podcast-episode-5-populism-vs-liberal-democracy/>

Reply

Anonymous

13/10/2020 at 4:14 am

A very fine essay sir.

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Reply

Victor Menaldo 

13/10/2020 at 4:12 am

Thanks, John. Appreciate your feedback! I was referring to Robert (Bob) Moses, the civil rights leader:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_Moses_\(activist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_Moses_(activist))

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Reply

John Shea

13/10/2020 at 4:17 am

I'm happy to hear that, Victor, and thanks for your response and Wikipedia link. I learn something new everyday!

John Shea

13/10/2020 at 4:04 am

Interesting, though it all depends what one means by "Liberalism". For example, ROBERT MOSES a liberal avatar!? The ultimate unelected authoritarian bureaucrat who would pave over Heaven itself, given half a chance!

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