

The end of liberalism

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In recent days we've seen inspiring demands for liberty from the oppressed citizens of Iran. Our situation in the West today seems the opposite: too much ill-used liberty combined with a soft authoritarianism that we have largely welcomed. We buy what we want, throw away what we no longer desire, and allow the debt to accumulate. We enjoy Caligulaesque sexual liberty but no longer marry nor have children. We eat until we are obese, legalise drugs that take the edge off, consume a degraded popular culture that leaves us stupefied, and alter our brainscapes through unceasing consumption of online ephemera. Amid these seemingly unlimited personal choices, we can see the growth of an encompassing state and transnational institutions that make innumerable decisions in politics and economics over which average citizens exercise no control. If this is the form of 'liberty' that protesters in Iran aspire to achieve, then any liberation is likely to prove Pyrrhic.

In a world longing for liberty, advanced western liberalism seems to have reached a dead-end. Having promised liberation from any constraint that is not chosen by the consent of the individual, we have created nations of individualists who are now responsible to no-one in particular, but simultaneously subjects of an all-encompassing state and international order. That liberalism has succeeded. It has also visibly failed. Western liberal democracies are in a state of internal crisis: by every measure, they are wealthy, powerful, and unchallenged by any ideological contender. But an internal rot has spread as its citizens feel at once powerless amid their autonomy. Liberalism has failed because liberalism has succeeded.

How can we understand this paradox? The answer lies at the root of liberal philosophy, an ideology that sought to remake the world in its image. Liberal philosophy begins with the belief that humans are by nature free and independent. Liberal theory posits that this imaginary condition helps to reveal human nature prior to the conventions of human society, it establishes the aspirational norm for humans in society, and it becomes the main aim and of government and society to establish the conditions for the realisation of such liberated creatures. A vast and encroaching political and social architecture is required to establish the conditions for such liberated people, freeing them from bonds of family, community, church, culture, and nation. The state and market together are deployed to replace actual bonds with depersonalised mechanisms that leave people at once free yet increasingly powerless. Family life is displaced by calls to individual authenticity backstopped by a welfare state that will take care of you, cradle to grave. Schooling that reinforces the formation of character is replaced with an education in non-judgmentalism, deracination and 'critical thinking' without content. Cultures must be liquefied in the name of diversity. Religious belief is weakened by appeals to individual conscience and toleration: ancient calls to self-discipline and self-limitation redescribed as 'hatred' and 'bigotry'. Local markets are displaced in preference to a single, world-straddling market. Borders are effectively erased in the name of openness. Liberal humanity achieves perfect freedom, yet experiences this condition as bondage to forces that can no longer be governed, and which have no regard for individual dignity and self-determination.

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Not yet thirty years after the supposed 'end of history', the western liberal nations are in internal disarray. Liberalism is being rejected in the name of liberty. Whether the 'inevitability' of the

dissolution of national sovereignty, the globalisation of the economy, the extension of the sexual revolution to the choosing of one's gender, the dissolution of cultural norms and religious roots as a precondition of individual liberty – we are witnessing an uprising among average citizens outside the corridors of power that rejects the mantle of inevitability, asserting instead the prospects of various forms of self-government. In England, the nation that created modern liberalism – born of the thought first of Thomas Hobbes, then John Locke and John Stuart Mill – the apparent unhindered path to the dissolution of national sovereignty and a globalised politics and economics was rejected by approximately half the nation. In the first nation to embrace the liberal experiment, the nomination and then improbable election of Donald J. Trump similarly shattered the view that history had a 'side' and its outcome was inevitable.

Defenders of the liberal regime are today the reactionaries: defenders of a dying regime, fighting with every weapon in their rhetorical and increasingly physical arsenal. What was once admired as 'democracy' is now 'populism', 'nationalism', or, of course, 'fascism'. The longstanding liberal mistrust of democracy has re-appeared, with some thinkers – like John Stuart Mill long ago – calling outright for the limitation on democratic decisions that elicits decisions that the 'epistocrats' disapprove. The enforcement of speech and thought codes in the schools, on college campuses, at workplaces, and in the public square seek to function in the role of the censors of old, maintaining an order that increasingly relies on sheer force and threat of bankruptcy or imprisonment to achieve obeisance.

But if inspired by an admirable rejection of liberal illiberalism, ought those who aspire to genuine human freedom place their hope in the populist uprisings occurring in Britain, America, and elsewhere across Europe? Having disassembled the cultural norms that once might have governed and directed such uprisings, its denizens are drawn too often to uncultured iconoclasts, leaders who assert strength without concomitant calls to self-governance. The kinds of elites that might once have offered a moderating and elevating voice to the popular yearning for self-determination are scant in evidence, with the schools and universities today having produced a different leadership class that regards such yearnings with horror and disdain. We have a liberal elite without a populace, and a populace without a moderating elite. Whether a post-liberal world yet-to-be born will be one we celebrate or lament rests on the implausible possibility of a better people calling for better leaders, or better leaders shaping a more refined populace. We have not reached the end of history. We are approaching the end of liberalism.

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