

# Liberalisms: The Challenges Ahead

Ghia Nodia

Estoril, 26 June 2023

For the purpose of this paper, I will define liberalism very broadly so that it includes moderate social democrats, libertarians, liberal conservatives, and anybody who had been considered mainstream in Western liberal democracies since WW2. It is beyond doubt that the last one or two decades have been a period of the crisis of liberalism in this broad sense.

I know this has been done many times, but I will list major indicators of the crisis that I think are the most important (1) weakening of the post-WW2 political systems in the “free world” based on at least tacit liberal consensus between center-left and center-right parties; forces of illiberal populism have dented this consensus and have gained some traction in western democracies; (2) the global trend towards the decline of liberal regimes around the world as measured by different democracy ratings. We usually call this “the decline of democracy”, but arguably, this decline has been more pronounced with regards to the liberal component of the liberal democracy; (3) Further decline of liberal ideas in the intellectual and creative classes in and outside the West. It is not “cool” to be a liberal. This is not a new problem: Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, many if not most influential thinkers in the West tended to be anti-liberal. However, there is an important difference in degree: if we take American universities now, most basic liberal values such as freedom of speech are openly attacked, and the atmosphere of censorship and self-censorship strengthens.

All this makes liberals gloomy and with a good reason. However, we should not underestimate the effective strength of liberalism as well. Anti-liberals attack liberals because they see them as the dominant class, the global aristocracy. The discourse of “global liberal elites” includes a lot of exaggeration, not to speak of outlandish conspiracy theories, but critics have a point. In the 1990s, we had what one might call a “Fukuyamian moment” when liberalism appeared to enjoy a full normative hegemony, certainly in the West and many places beyond. Despite important setbacks, liberalism is still dominant in many ways. Liberal principles continue to guide Western political systems; after almost twenty years of decline, no major established democracy has perished. In the wake of the election of Donald Trump for the US presidency in 2016, influential scholars were predicting the imminent death of leading democracies; none of this materialized. The most discussed casualty of the present illiberal wave is Hungary, which had been considered a young but

already consolidated democracy in the early 2000s but is not a full democracy anymore. This should be a matter of concern, but the scope of failure cannot be compared to the fate of Italy, Germany, or Spain in the 1920s and 1930s. Patrick Deneen, a leading conservative critic of liberalism, may aspire to a “Regime Change”, implying overcoming liberal democracy, but the fact of the matter is that the liberal regime still stands.

As concerns the global geopolitical level, the liberal West is still stronger, and more capable of coordinated political action than forces of the mostly anti-liberal Rest, even though the gap in power and wealth has narrowed quite a lot since the 1990s.

I did not mention all this to argue that we liberals should not be concerned too much. No, the dynamics are negative, and we should try to figure out what should be done to change that. The point I am trying to make is that at this point, the core of the problem is not that anti-liberal forces are too active, aggressive, and powerful, but that the liberals are being confused and indecisive. Respectively, I don't see any other recipe for success but liberals being brave, persistent, and wise in defending basic liberal norms and institutions.

One of the precursors of the crisis has been that the public in the West started to take the prevalence of liberal norms and institutions for granted. In this sense, the root of the current crisis was, at least in part, the success of liberalism. The Western public needed strong wake-up calls to understand that liberal order requires constant vigilance and fight, sometimes even with the force of arms. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has become the most dramatic of such calls; the reaction to it from the Ukrainian people and its friends in the West gives ground to some optimism, as it has led to rejecting false excessively optimistic assumptions and galvanized consolidation of forces around support for liberal values and institutions. But this is not sufficient.

Against this background, I will share two observations. One is related to challenges to liberalism in the West, another – to the status of liberal order on the global level.

I will pursue a popular comparison of the current troubles of liberalism with the situation in Europe in the 1930s. Objectively speaking, this time the situation is less dramatic. In the 1930s, there were fewer democracies, and some of them were still young and fragile. Some of them, like those in Germany, Italy, and Spain, failed to withstand the pressure and died. Moreover, the geopolitical balance of power was in favor of anti-liberals, and democracies in France and Czechoslovakia perished as a result of military aggression. Eventually, the liberal or free world was saved due to two factors:

one was that the two main enemies of liberalism, the fascists and the communists, exhausted each other in a war of mutual destruction; secondly, the US directly intervened militarily and changed the balance of power.

Now the situation is qualitatively different: there are more democracies, and the existing liberal regimes have deeper roots. As said, no major casualties among them so far. The most important similarity, though, is that liberals are under attack from the right and the left, and they are confused about what to do.

One attack is from the illiberal right, something that is broadly called “nationalist populism”. Another is from the illiberal left, which one might call neo-Marxist Wokism. Calling the former “fascist” and the latter “communist” may be polemical exaggerations, but there are true similarities in both cases. Most importantly, now as then, liberal-minded people cannot agree on which of the two threats is worse.

Most people I know consider the national populists, or, in the US, the “Trumpists”, a bigger threat. They have a point: after all, after Trump lost the presidential elections in 2020, his supporters did not accept the results without providing evidence of fraud and stormed the Capitol. They have thus presented themselves as a direct threat to democracy. But there are other liberals who think that the extreme wokist Left is a larger threat; the wokists have succeeded in enforcing the regime of intellectual censorship or self-censorship on the academe, a large part of the media, and even the corporate world, and declared free speech and presumption of innocence obsolete right-wing values, just like Leninists or Maoists would do.

I will not engage in a debate about which of the two threats is indeed greater because I really don't know. The lesson of history is that sometimes, underestimated threats prove greater than people initially thought exactly because they were underestimated. The key is to recognize that the sustainability of the liberal order depends on the consensus of the centre: the liberal left and the liberal right should agree that rejecting illiberal fringes unequivocally is in their mutual interest. This is the sort of consensus that we truly need to rebuild, as the title of this conference suggests.

But this is not what I see happening. Many reasonable people fail to clearly distance themselves from either of the two illiberal fringes. I suppose they are afraid to lose allies while fighting what each of them considers the main threat. This is extremely dangerous.

My second observation concerns the status of liberalism on the global level. First, we should recognize that, while liberal values are universal in their

substance, historically, both the liberal theory and the liberal order have originated in the West, and the real commitment to liberal norms still comes from the West. Maybe, it would be better if forces of liberalism and illiberalism were spread more evenly across the globe, but things are the way they are.

Western liberals often find it awkward to mention the Western roots of universalist liberalism, much less to analyze the implications of this. But coming as I am from the very periphery of Europe, I may allow myself to be more straightforward on this issue.

This effective and perceived linkage between the liberal order and the West is a huge problem because the image of liberalism has been merged with the record of Western imperial domination over the Rest. Just stating yet again that liberal ideas are universal in their substance is not a sufficient rejoinder to this view. Christianity and Islam are also universalist in their aspirations, but in fact, they are not universal, but rather associated with certain cultures and peoples.

The perceived linkage between liberalism and Western domination is not historically groundless. 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western imperialism did legitimize itself by claiming a *mission civilatrice*, which was a self-imposed task to spread progressive liberal values and institutions. The West was partly successful in that, but it is paying the price now. The movement of anti-colonialism was largely based on the Western idea of self-determination, but the linkage between Western imperialism and the liberal theory, perceived or real, has prepared a ground for making anti-colonialism anti-liberal as well. Whatever the intentions of Edward Said, the father of the postcolonial theory, the proliferation of his theory as an ideology of anti-westernism has a strong anti-liberal tilt to it because one can hardly reject the modern West without rejecting Western liberalism.

The ongoing Russian war has underscored this problem. Whatever Putin's true intentions might be, he presents the war as the war against the West, and Russia as the avant-garde of the global anti-colonial war against Western liberal domination. He may not prevail on the Ukrainian battlefield, but he has been fairly successful in convincing a large part of the non-western world that he is their champion in standing up to the domineering West. That may explain the troubling reality that the moral consensus in support of the Ukrainian case is mainly limited to the West, with some notable exceptions.

The core of this argument is that the claim to the supremacy of liberal values over illiberal ones is presumed to imply the supremacy of Western civilization over other civilizations and cultures. This perception is not easy to overcome because there is a kernel of truth in it. Charles Taylor may be one of

the first Western liberals who described the dilemma. He did so while dealing with issues of multiculturalism in Western societies, but his logic could be extended to the relations between the liberal West and the not-so-liberal Rest.

It is obvious to liberals, as Taylor highlighted, that any individual, whatever his or her cultural background, deserves equal recognition. However, because individuals care for their cultural identities, a view has come to be widely shared that the multiplicity of cultures should be also celebrated and that one ought to respect the right of every individual or group to demonstrate their commitment to their cultural practices. If this is what multiculturalism is about, we can say that it has become part and parcel of the liberal tradition, or as Nathan Glazer put it, “We are all multiculturalists now”.

However, multiculturalism as it is practiced now, tends to extend this claim to equal worth to the *substance* of every culture, which in practice means sacralizing every social practice if it is presented as part of culture. However, such sacralization puts liberals in trouble, because every culture may include extremely illiberal norms and practices. Nevertheless, one is not allowed to criticize them, because being part of “culture” – at least, of a minority culture – makes them immune from liberal criticism. Hence, ideologically rigid versions of Western multiculturalism have become endorsements of illiberal practices when exercised by minorities; any criticism of such practices risks inviting attacks under banners of “cultural racism”, or, in other contexts, as expressions of postcolonial arrogance. Interestingly, this sacralization of culture has become an issue on which the illiberal left and the illiberal right sometimes converge.

What is the way out of this? Again, liberals should have the courage of their convictions and be resilient to the ideological blackmail coming from identity politics. Racism, past or present, excesses of colonialism, and slavery should be condemned without qualifications and excuses, but liberals should not shy away from celebrating their core values, as well as from recognizing the historical Western roots of these values without failing to stress their universalist nature. It should be made crystal clear that not only such an admission does not denigrate anybody, but it is the true ground for recognizing the equal worth of any human anywhere. Colonialism would have never been truly rejected without liberal norms spreading worldwide.