

Illiberal Progressivism and the Renewal of Democratic Politics

Dr Matt Beech

Reader in Politics & Director of the Centre for British Politics, University of Hull (UK)

IES Senior Fellow, UC Berkeley (USA)

The future of liberalism is uncertain. What passes for 'liberalism' in the Anglosphere has evolved, in large measure, into illiberal progressivism. Put slightly differently, left liberals and social democrats must contend for their authentic traditions. Such a recovery – if and when it occurs – would surely benefit the particular appeal of left liberal and social democratic political parties and their election campaigns in competitive politics. But more importantly for the renewal of liberal democracy, it will serve the common good by renewing civic values (i.e. free speech, toleration and civilized discourse) which undergird open and free societies. These values have been challenged and weakened by forms of Marxist critique (Critical Theory and its subject-specific off-shoots) have seeped into progressive politics and have been weaved into the Culture Wars. And authentic liberalism has been the primary casualty.

Left liberals and social democrats need to bring to mind previous generations of noble reformers within their traditions. And borrow from the past the requisite grammar; the language to sufficiently convey that which needs reform, but doing so in a manner which preserves things of permanent value. In particular, the dignity of the individual citizen; the centrality of the family; love of one's nation; and, above all, liberty of thought, speech, and expression. Politics reframed in this way – old-fashioned and rooted in the principles of non-conformist Dissent – would likely yield a harvest of political speech and wider public debate that could renew democratic institutions. And the enemies of liberalism, whether

Cultural Marxists (on the Left) or ethno-nationalists (on the Right), will find their arsenal of weapons increasingly ineffective, and their resources of resentment, envy and bitterness, gradually diminished. A resurgent authentic liberalism of the centre-left can work not merely for the interests of party members and inclined voters, but for democrats everywhere. Because, after all, countries within a civilization, influence each other. Sometimes overtly and other times subtly and incrementally. The dialogue of participants at the Estoril Forums, over many years, are proof of this.

In a forthcoming essay I argue that orthodox conservatives must recover the same liberal traditions (Beech, 2024). This does not mean adopting left liberal or social democratic economic or social policies. It does mean returning to the aforementioned liberal principles and to oppose identity politics and the claims of the ideology of Critical Social Justice. In essence, for orthodox conservatives, the project must similarly exorcise progressivism from their speeches, manifestoes, and platforms. If both great parliamentary traditions - left liberal/social democratic and conservative - can recover liberalism (properly understood) the true liberty derived from our Christian inheritance, predicated upon the doctrine of the *imago Deo*, will aid the renewal of politics within Western, democratic nations.

If the recovery of liberalism (properly understood) is a necessary project for the meaningful renewal of democratic politics, then bridging the intergenerational divide within Western society is an equally urgent mission. *But what is the actual problem?* In short, the problem is a significant moral divergence between individuals who speak the same language, inhabit the same territory, and who are living at the same time. When survey data from the UK is mapped onto the World Values Survey, one observation is that whilst the UK has become more liberal over the recent past, a generational divide exists on most major questions

(Duffy et al, 2023). The cause is not immediately obvious and it is problematic to aver a single factor. The echoes of Christendom have become fainter in each passing generation. And with it, the diminution of Christian practice and morality. This is a necessary explanatory factor, but not a sufficient one as the immediate post-war generation was relatively Godless. Another catalyzing phenomenon, which might explain the difficulty that extant generations have hearing and understanding one another, is the social disruption and atomization wrought by rapid technological change. Today, instantaneous, virtual connectedness is normative for vast swathes of disparate, young individuals. When these youths are simultaneously largely university educated (particularly in the humanities and social sciences), their capacity for illiberalism soars. These types of graduates have disproportionate influence online and in the creative industries. They tend to be unrooted, unmarried and much less encumbered by traditional conceptions of responsibility, let alone being accountable to an absolute moral arbiter. Consequently, in Western societies the idea of youth has been extended and goes hand in hand with the veneration of the *liberated individual*. And so, notions of duty have, to some extent, evolved. There exists a strong sense of duty by such graduates to the planet; to animals; and to minority groups; as well as a duty in acknowledging one's entrenched, structural privilege and confessing the possible sins of distant relatives that we have never known.

And because the young tend to lean-left in majorities - usually until marriage, parenthood and property-ownership - the current mode of capitalism, especially in the Anglosphere, facilitates prolonged adolescence. This has a range of negative familial, social and economic externalities. But, when a large swathe of citizens has little prospect to grow in responsibility and develop into civic maturity, (in large measure due to a lack of viable role models i.e. fathers), and become susceptible to utopian diagnoses and prescriptions (often

inculcated at institutions of higher education), the political result is the illiberalism of progressivism. This is a chief threat to democratic renewal of Western nations. *Precisamos de liberalismo para todos.*

Bibliography

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