

## Liberalism and the Challenge of Populism

Alan S. Kahan

Today liberalism faces a global challenge from populism. To successfully meet this challenge, liberals must return to certain features of liberalism common in the nineteenth century but largely absent since WWII. Some liberals' exclusive focus on economics has left many people out in the cold, and even political liberalism does not suffice to warm the hearts of those culturally alienated by a liberal perspective. Liberalism needs to add a moral and religious appeal, returning to the historical three pillars of liberal argument, freedom, markets, and morals, which fortified liberalism during the nineteenth century. Liberals must deploy political, economic, and above all moral and religious arguments to defeat populism. Where populists exclude people, liberals must make clear they include everyone – even populists.

Throughout the world today, populism is on the march, and liberalism is in retreat. In Finland, with arguably the world's best educational system and a highly developed welfare state, the populist Finns Party recently entered the government. In the United States, the populist Donald Trump is the once and perhaps future President. In Latin America, Brazil has provided the spectacle of the right-populist Bolsonaro government being succeeded by the left-populist Lula da Silva. Populism has become the voice of a worldwide cultural alienation from the globalized, cosmopolitan, liberal "elite", a reaction which takes both left-wing and right-wing forms, depending on place and circumstance. Together the many different populisms form an overlapping illiberal consensus, dedicated to the destruction of the liberal political, economic, and, above all, moral order - or rather, amoral disorder.

The populist attack on immoral/amoral liberalism has many roots. Some arise from traditional religion, while others stem from deeply-held nationalist and communitarian allegiances. More nourishment for populism comes from the resentments of those who feel left behind, often people from the rural areas and small towns that American liberals call fly-over country, the places where the fast trains don't stop in Europe. Significantly, populists call these places the heartland. Once there was a place called "Middle America", and American politicians of both major parties strove to win its votes. This place no longer exists – usage of the phrase has plummeted, as Google Ngram tells us.

To regain the ground liberalism has lost, liberals must return to their roots. What all liberalisms have had in common, the defining feature of liberalism, is the search for a society where none need be afraid. Freedom from fear is the most basic freedom: if we are afraid, we are not free. My recent book, *Freedom from Fear: An Incomplete History of Liberalism* (Princeton, 2023), explores the different fears that have chiefly concerned liberalism over time, and the means liberals have found to combat them. The sequence is instructive for the contemporary liberal struggle with populism.

The proto-liberals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were concerned with despotic monarchies and terrorist religions. After the American and French Revolutions, without altogether forgetting their first fears (liberalism grows like an oyster, by accretion: one layer of fear never entirely covering past fears), liberals changed their focus to averting both revolutions and reactions, the "Scylla and Charybdis" that threatened terror on either side. In the fin de siècle, roughly the period after 1873, liberals focussed on a new fear, the fear of poverty: instead of being afraid of the poor, so often the source of revolutions (urban workers) or reaction (rural peasants), liberals saw poverty as something that threatened the freedom of the poor and subjected them to coercion.

After World War I, a third fear arose for liberals: totalitarianism. Fascism and communism presented liberals with new terrors. Today liberals face a fourth wave of fear, populism.

The first wave of liberalism, liberalism 1.0, responded to the threat of revolution and reaction by building political, economic, and moral bulwarks. They wrote constitutions and created representative governments, they freed markets and provided rules for them to work by, and they provided moral and religious justifications for their project. Nineteenth-century liberals appealed to utilitarian and material improvement that followed from adopting liberal views, while simultaneously arguing that liberal freedom provided the best means of perfecting human character and even the best environment for saving souls. Representative figures of the first wave of liberalism include Kant, Madison, Constant, Macaulay, Tocqueville, and J. S. Mill.

The second wave of liberalism, Liberalism 2.0, saw that in a fin de siècle world wealthier than ever before, the existence of large masses of people in extreme poverty was no longer inevitable. Something could be done to relieve their fears, while at the same time making them less fearsome. Many liberals, the “modern liberals”, invoked the state’s help in this endeavour. Other liberals feared that using the state to help the poor would only create a new bureaucratic despotism. These soon began to call themselves “classical liberals”. Both groups continued, for the most part, to rely on all three liberal pillars of freedom, markets, and morals to justify their arguments, although there were a few exceptions, as there had always been. Leading modern liberals include Jane Addams, L. T. Hobhouse, and Léon Bourgeois. A. V. Dicey is the prototypical classical liberal of the period.

The third wave of liberalism, Liberalism 3.0 was faced by World War, Depression, fascism and communism. Liberals responded with a call to re-found liberalism based on rejecting the dogmas of the past, whether of the modern or the classical liberals. They overwhelmingly chose to defend both a social safety net and a new appreciation for the importance of pluralism. Leading figures of the first generation of third-wave figures in the 1930s were Friedrich Hayek, Isaiah Berlin, and the Ordoliberal group. But beginning in the 1950s, while still seeing totalitarianism as the enemy, liberals increasingly began to abandon the three-pillared arguments they had previously used to defend liberalism. In particular, moral or religious arguments for liberalism became scarce. Instead, the “End of Ideology” movement preferred technical tinkering, either with political institutions or economic policies, and saw passionate commitment to any form of ideology as a threat. In the late twentieth century, as the understanding of totalitarianism became simultaneously broader and more vague (Hitler and Stalin were no longer around to concentrate the mind), the egalitarian liberalism associated with John Rawls, the libertarianism of Robert Nozick, and the neoliberalism of Milton Friedman continued to make little or no use of moral/religious arguments. At most the moral/religious pillar was reduced to a thin shadow of its former self, and even the political pillar was largely ignored by Nozick and Friedman.

There were historical reasons for this. After WWII, for all practical purposes liberals no longer had any enemies on the right, because illiberal conservatives found themselves forced to ally with the dominant liberals to fight communism. In the absence of any challenge from the right, liberals saw the remaining opposition to liberalism as political and still more as purely economic. A materialistic liberal equivalent of vulgar Marxism became widespread, from Rawls to Friedman. The leading liberalisms of the late twentieth century gave very little attention to moral or religious issues. Libertarians thought such matters were none of their business. Rawls at first excluded moral commitments from his theory of justice, and then later limited liberal virtues to a narrow focus on civility and reciprocity. Meanwhile, neoliberals like Milton Friedman reduced liberalism to a prescription for economic progress and consumer choice, with no concern for moral progress and little or none for political freedom.

All this left twenty-first century liberals in a poor position to respond to the moral/cultural concerns of populism. They were out of practice at taking such arguments seriously. This was very different from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Whether one thinks of Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, or Alexis de Tocqueville, the mainstream, canonical figures of early liberalism made strong arguments about how liberalism contributed to making people *better*, not just better-off, how liberalism was necessary for human moral and even religious perfection, not just material prosperity, and about the need to create a liberal culture, not just liberal political and economic structures. They were perfectionists as much as they were utilitarians. It was clear to them that a liberalism devoid of moral/religious arguments alongside political and economic ones would be unconvincing and unsatisfactory. They did not demand allegiance to one specific religion or morality – they were pluralists, as Isaiah Berlin put it. But their pluralism did not prevent them from holding and preaching strong moral views about how people ought to live their lives – without forcing them to live in any one way. This was crucial to their success.

Populists are not pluralists, but they are very much moralists. To protect pluralism liberals need to become moralists again. Pluralism without perfectionism produces populism. It encourages the creation of a front of all the illiberal moralities, an overlapping illiberal consensus, against the supposed amorality or immorality of liberalism.

This is the heart of the populist community. This illiberal culture and morality is incarnated in the one view that the many sorts of populist have in common: that only some of the people are really “the people”. Those who are not do not count: rootless cosmopolitans, atheists, homosexuals, those of incorrect ethnic background; above all and everywhere migrants. Their votes don’t really count either, whatever the law might say. This is why populists think that that their views are always those of the true majority, the true people, the real Americans or Poles or Bolivians, not the counterfeits, who may have white skins in Bolivia or dark ones in the United States. By contrast, liberalism seeks to build a society in which no one need be afraid. Populists are fundamentally illiberal because they always want certain to people to be afraid, because excluding them is central to their moral vision of the world.

That is not how populists see it, of course. From their own perspective, they are the ones with reason to fear liberalism, because the globalized, cosmopolitan, open liberal world gives them many reasons to be afraid and no reason to hope for a better future. The illiberal democrats of the world strive against the evil liberal elite, which they believe is out to destroy their values. What is worse, the liberal elite does so in the name of an anything-goes pluralism that makes many people feel that no moral compass is left by which to steer their lives. Human nature abhors a moral void, which populism has rushed to fill.

Populism is the spokesperson for the cultural alienation felt by so many around the globe. Whether they fear for their nation, their ethnicity, their culture, their religion, or their trade, to name only a few of the fears that motivate people to vote for populist solutions, the culturally alienated have united in a new illiberal consensus. This is the problem a Liberalism 4.0 will have to solve.

Up to now, however, liberals have mostly reacted to this situation with at best an offer to write a check to the victims of foreign imports. More often they have merely shown contempt for those who ought to recognize that they are on the wrong side of history, and get over it. Thus the shock and horror at the malodorous views of the “deplorables” expressed by the American presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in 2020, in the course of losing an election to the populist Donald Trump. Many American liberals winced at her comments. Few if any actually thought they were wrong – or had any better response to give.

If liberals are to successfully combat the populism and build Liberalism 4.0, they must return to their nineteenth-century roots and once more take moral commitments seriously. This will mean finding ways to combat illiberalism on its own moral and even religious turf. Liberals must have arguments to make about the moral preconditions of the good life, and a vision of the good life that is more than purely materialistic. And it must be a vision accessible to those who prefer to remain in the heartland rather than take the next plane or train out of fly-over country. Liberalism must offer populists means of moral perfection that can be pursued in Peoria as well as in Paris.

This point would have been familiar to Tocqueville, who was not shy about talking about the need to pursue moral greatness in democratic societies, and who made the case that for a liberal comprehensive moral understanding of the world. A few late twentieth-century liberals began to receive the message. As the English philosopher Bernard Williams put it, "Liberals will have to advance to the stronger views that have been part of their Enlightenment legacy, which claim the absolute value of individual autonomy and self-determination against the values of traditionalist cultural homogeneity".<sup>1</sup>

This is not to suggest that liberalism will ever be able to eliminate populism, or any of the elements of the overlapping illiberal consensus opposing liberalism in the twenty-first century. The illiberal will be with us always, as they always have been. It was not by eliminating religious fanaticism that proto-liberals put an end to the Wars of Religion; not by eliminating revolutionaries or reactionaries that the first wave of liberals created liberal governments in the nineteenth century; not by eradicating poverty that the second wave of liberalism overcame the social problems of the fin de siècle. The de facto elimination of totalitarianism in the second half of the twentieth century may be a bad model for twenty-first century liberals: it required enormous bloodshed on the way to absolute victory. Piecemeal, partial solutions to populist cultural alienation may be the only ones available to making Peoria feel less deprived by New York, Poitiers less excluded by Paris.

Finding grounds to make a sufficient number of populists feel sufficiently included to support or tolerate a liberal society is an urgent task. It will be the job of twenty-first century liberals to figure out how. In doing so, they would do well to look to the moral/religious arguments of nineteenth-century liberals for inspiration, and return to making argument based on the three pillars of freedom, markets, and morals. Only thus can we make progress towards a truly liberal society.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Princeton, 2005), 137.