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Conclusion: Liberty after Liberalism

LIBERALISM has failed because liberalism has succeeded. As it becomes fully itself, it generates endemic pathologies more rapidly and pervasively than it is able to produce Band-aids and veils to cover them. The result is the systemic rolling blackouts in electoral politics, governance, and economics, the loss of confidence and even belief in legitimacy among the citizenry, that accumulate not as separable and discrete problems to be solved within the liberal frame but as deeply interconnected crises of legitimacy and a portent of liberalism's end times.

The narrowing of our political horizons has rendered us incapable of considering that what we face today is not a set of discrete problems solvable by liberal tools but a systemic challenge arising from pervasive invisible ideology. The problem is not in just one program or application but in the

CONCLUSION

operating system itself. It is almost impossible for us to conceive that we are in the midst of a legitimization crisis in which our deepest systemic assumptions are subject to dissolution.

The “Noble Lie” of liberalism is shattering because it continues to be believed and defended by those who benefit from it, while it is increasingly seen as a lie, and not an especially noble one, by the new servant class that liberalism has produced. Discontent is growing among those who are told by their leaders that their policies will benefit them, even as liberalism remains an article of ardent faith among those who ought to be best positioned to comprehend its true nature. But liberalism’s apologists regard pervasive discontent, political dysfunction, economic inequality, civic disconnection, and populist rejection as accidental problems disconnected from systemic causes, because their self-deception is generated by enormous reservoirs of self-interest in the maintenance of the present system. This divide will only widen, the crises will become more pronounced, the political duct tape and economic spray paint will increasingly fail to keep the house standing. The end of liberalism is in sight.

This denouement might take one of two forms. In the first instance, one can envision the perpetuation of a political system called “liberalism” that, becoming fully itself, operates in forms opposite to its purported claims about liberty, equality, justice, and opportunity. Contemporary liberalism will increasingly resort to imposing the liberal order by fiat—especially in the form of the administrative state run by a small minority who increasingly disdain democracy. End runs around democratic and populist discontent have become the norm, and backstopping the liberal order is the ever more vis-

CONCLUSION

ible power of a massive “deep state,” with extensive powers of surveillance, legal mandate, police power, and administrative control. These methods will continue to be deployed despite liberalism’s claim to rest on consent and popular support. Such a conclusion is paradoxical, not unlike Tocqueville’s conclusion in *Democracy in America*, in which he envisions democracy culminating in a new form of despotism.

But the instabilities that surely would accompany this outcome suggest a second possible denouement—the end of liberalism and its replacement by another regime. Most people envisioning such scenarios rightly warn of the likely viciousness of any successor regime, and close to hand are the examples of the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the rise of fascism, and Russia’s brief flirtation with liberalism before the imposition of communism. While these brutal and failed examples suggest that such possibilities are unlikely to generate widespread enthusiasm even in a postliberal age, some form of populist nationalist authoritarianism or military autocracy seems altogether plausible as an answer to the anger and fear of a postliberal citizenry.

While growing discontent in Western liberal democracies suggests that either outcome is a realistic possibility, neither is to be wished for in the form it is likely to take. Yet the failure of liberalism itself invites this outcome, even as the unwillingness of liberalism’s defenders to perceive their own complicity in fostering widespread discontent among their fellow citizens only makes such a lamentable outcome more likely. Liberalism’s defenders today regard their discontented countrymen as backward and recidivist, often attributing to them the most vicious motivations: racism, narrow

CONCLUSION

sectarianism, or bigotry, depending upon the issue at hand. To the extent that liberalism regards itself as a self-healing, perpetual political machine, it remains almost unthinkable for its apologists to grasp that its failure may lead to its replacement by a cruel and vicious successor. No serious effort to conceive a humane postliberal alternative is likely to emerge from the rear-guard defenders of a declining regime.

AFTER LIBERALISM

Imagining a humane alternative to either liberalocratic despotism or the rigid and potentially cruel authoritarian regime that may replace it seems at best a parlor game, at worst a fool's errand. Yet engaging in the activity once central to political philosophy—the negotiation between the utopian and realistic, begun by Plato in the *Republic*—remains essential if the grimmer scenarios of a life after liberalism are to be avoided, and something potentially better brought into being. If today only the barest outlines may be discerned amid a landscape so completely shaped by our liberal age, tentative first steps are required. The destination is unknown and unforeseeable, and the journey will probably require generations to complete.

I conclude by taking three of those initial steps.

- First, the achievements of liberalism must be acknowledged, and the desire to “return” to a preliberal age must be eschewed. We must build upon those achievements while abandoning the foundational reasons for its failures. There can be no going back, only forward.

CONCLUSION

- Second, we must outgrow the age of ideology. Of the three great modern ideologies, only the oldest and most resilient remains, but liberals mistook the fall of its competitors for the end of history rather than the pyrrhic victory it really was. The gap between liberalism's claims about itself and the lived reality of the citizenry widens to the point that the lie can no longer be accepted. Instead of trying to conceive a replacement ideology (or returning to some updated version of an alternative, such as a renascent Marxism), we should focus on developing practices that foster new forms of culture, household economics, and polis life.
- Third, from the cauldron of such experience and practice, a better theory of politics and society might ultimately emerge. Such a theory must eschew liberalism's ideological dimensions yet be cognizant of its achievements and the rightful demands it makes—particularly for justice and dignity. The outlines of such a theory are already discernible, guided by liberalism's own retention of essential concepts from a preliberal age—especially that of liberty—and reinforced by experience and practice essential for a humane life. This first step toward a new theory is the most tentative, but it faces in a confident direction, given the perpetual appeal of certain basic political ideals that have been present in the Western tradition since antiquity.

CONCLUSION

NO RETURN

Like all human projects, liberalism is not without its achievements. Living within its cave, liberal humanity has been too self-congratulatory about its successes; hence the need to show in these pages its deeper costs. But if we hope to create a humane postliberal future, we cannot pretend that the age of liberalism did not happen or that its basic contours can simply be jettisoned in some sort of restoration of an idyllic preliberal age. That age never existed—though, at the same time, the past can and ought to instruct as we move forward toward new possibilities. Any steps toward a postliberal age must begin with a sympathetic appreciation of liberalism's appeal and an effort to realize the admirable ideals that liberalism often only promised.

While liberalism pretended to be a wholly new edifice that rejected the political architecture of all previous ages, it naturally drew upon long developments from antiquity to the late Middle Ages. A significant part of its appeal was not that it was something wholly new but that it drew upon deep reservoirs of belief and commitment. Ancient political philosophy was especially devoted to the question of how best to avoid the rise of tyranny, and how best to achieve the conditions of political liberty and self-governance. The basic terms that inform our political tradition—liberty, equality, dignity, justice, constitutionalism—are of ancient pedigree. The advent of Christianity, and its development in the now largely neglected political philosophy of the Middle Ages, emphasized the dignity of the individual, the concept of the person, the existence of rights and corresponding duties, the para-

CONCLUSION

mount importance of civil society and a multiplicity of associations, and the concept of limited government as the best means of forestalling the inevitable human temptation toward tyranny. Liberalism's most basic appeal was not its rejection of the past but its reliance upon basic concepts that were foundational to the Western political identity.

The architects of liberalism embraced the language and terms of the classical and Christian traditions even as they transformed both meaning and practice. They especially rejected the classical and Christian understanding of human beings as fundamentally relational creatures—"social and political animals"—and proposed that liberty, rights, and justice could best be achieved by radically redefining human nature. The result was an advance in rendering the political longings of the intellectual West vastly more accessible and popular, but at the cost of establishing a political world that undermined those ideals. Liberalism's break with the past was founded on a false anthropology; yet at the same time, those ideals have been rendered more universal and secure in significant part through the growing discontent with liberalism's failure to realize them.

A vast disconnect once existed between the philosophy of the West and its practices. The ideals of liberty, equality, and justice coexisted with extensive practices of slavery, bondage, inequality, disregard for the contributions of women, and arbitrary forms of hierarchy and application of law. Liberalism was a sign of the profound success of the West's most fundamental philosophical commitments, a manifestation of a widespread demand that daily practices should more closely conform to ideals.

CONCLUSION

Yet while advancing these ideals, liberalism ultimately betrayed them through its disfiguring conception of human nature and the politics, economics, education, and application of technology that resulted from it. Today, as in past centuries, a vast disconnect exists between our stated ideals and our practices, but unlike past eras, the ideological nature of liberalism makes our current disconnection difficult to perceive, because now the failure to achieve those ideals is endemic to liberalism itself. The word “freedom” is embraced as the fundamental commitment of our age, but in vast swaths of life, freedom seems to recede—many citizens, for instance, believe they have little actual control over or voice in their government. Motivation by many voters in advanced democracies reflects not the confident belief that their voice is being heard, but the conviction that their vote is against a system that no longer recognizes the claim to self-rule. At the same time, freedom in areas such as consumer choice expands exponentially, leading many to take on too much debt to feed ultimately unfulfillable cravings. We effectively possess little self-government, either as citizens over our leaders or as individuals over our appetites. Citizens under liberalism are assured of our civic potency while experiencing political weakness and engaging in infinite acts of choice that are only deeper expressions of thralldom. We have endless choices of the kind of car to drive but few options over whether we will spend large parts of our lives in soul-deadening boredom within them. All the while, liberalism claims that we are free, and in spite of pervasive misgivings and growing discontent, we believe in an equivalence of word and deed.

Part of moving toward a postliberal age is recognizing that while liberalism’s initial appeal was premised upon lauda-

CONCLUSION

tory aspirations, its successes have often been based on a disfigurement of those aspirations. Its defenders often point to the liberation of women from conditions of inequality as a significant example of liberalism's success, and regard any critique of liberalism as a proposal to thrust women back into preliberal bondage. Yet the main practical achievement of this liberation of women has been to move many of them into the workforce of market capitalism, a condition that traditionalists like Wendell Berry as well as Marxist political theorists like Nancy Fraser regard as a highly dubious form of liberation.¹ All but forgotten are arguments, such as those made in the early Republic, that liberty consists of independence from the arbitrariness not only of a king but of an employer. Today we consider the paramount sign of the liberation of women to be their growing emancipation from their biology, which frees them to serve a different, disembodied body—"corporate" America—and participate in an economic order that effectively obviates any actual political liberty. Liberalism posits that freeing women from the household is tantamount to liberation, but it effectively puts women and men alike into a far more encompassing bondage.

Liberalism arose by appeal to an ennobling set of political ideals and yet realized new and comprehensive forms of degradation. Put less charitably, the architects of liberalism intentionally appropriated widely shared political ideals and subverted them to the advantage of those most capable of benefiting from new definitions of liberty, democracy, and republicanism.² Building on liberalism's successes means recognizing both the legitimacy of its initial appeal and the deeper reasons for its failure. It means offering actual human liberty

CONCLUSION

in the form of both civic and individual self-rule, not the ersatz version that combines systemic powerlessness with the illusion of autonomy in the form of consumerist and sexual license. Liberalism was both a boon and a catastrophe for the ideals of the West, perhaps a necessary step whose failures, false promises, and unfulfilled longings will lead us to something better.

THE END OF IDEOLOGY

Liberalism was launched with the claim that it would “take men as they are,” grounding a new politics upon a clear-sighted realism about human nature. Yet its claims about humans “as they are” were premised upon the fiction of radically autonomous humans in a State of Nature. The political, social, and economic order shaped around this disfigured view of human nature succeeded in remaking people in this image, but the project had the predictable effect of liberating them from the reality of relational life. Liberalism has always been animated by a vision of how humans “ought” to live, but it masked these normative commitments in the guise of neutrality. Like its competitor ideologies, it called forth a massive political and economic apparatus to fulfill its vision—in the process both reshaping and damaging humanity. A more humane politics must avoid the temptation to replace one ideology with another. Politics and human community must percolate from the bottom up, from experience and practice.

One of liberalism’s most damaging fictions was the theory of consent, an imaginary scenario in which autonomous, rational calculators formed an abstract contract to establish a

CONCLUSION

government whose sole purpose was to “secure rights.” This view of consent relegated all “unchosen” forms of society and relationships to the category of “arbitrary” and thus suspect if not illegitimate. Liberalism today has successfully expanded itself from a political project to a social and even familial one, acting most often as solvent upon all social bonds. Yet as liberalism faces more challenging frontiers—especially those religious institutions that fundamentally reject liberal premises—we witness an increasingly visible and active government advancing its project through efforts to control religious and familial practice and belief.³

Liberalism takes the fundamental position that “consent” to any relationship or bond can be given only when people are completely and perfectly autonomous and individual. Only then are they able to consciously and purposefully engage in forms of utilitarian relationality, and also thereby capable of remaking such bonds when they prove to be unsatisfactory. I recall a chilling conversation when I was teaching at Princeton University about a book that had recently appeared about the Amish. We were discussing the practice of Rumspringa—literally, “running around”—a mandatory time of separation of young adults from the community during which they partake of the offerings of modern liberal society.⁴ The period of separation lasts usually about a year, at the end of which the young person must choose between the two worlds. An overwhelming number, approaching 90 percent, choose to return to be baptized and to accept norms and strictures of their community that forbid further enjoyment of the pleasure of liberal society. Some of my former colleagues took this as a sign that these young people were in fact not “choosing” as

CONCLUSION

free individuals. One said, "We will have to consider ways of freeing them." Perfect liberal consent requires perfectly liberated individuals, and the evidence that Amish youth were responding to the pull of family, community, and tradition marked them as unfree.

Liberalism renders such ties suspect while papering over the ways in which it has shaped its own youth to adopt a particular form of life, set of beliefs, and worldview; these are never subject to appraisal by any standards outside liberalism itself. The traditional culture of the Amish (one can also think of other examples) gives its young a choice about whether they will remain within that culture, but only one option is seen as an exercise of choice. Acquiescence to liberalism, however unreflective, is "tacit consent," yet membership in a traditional community is "oppression" or "false consciousness."

Under this double standard, religious, cultural, and familial membership is an accident of birth. Yet for modern humanity in the advanced West and increasingly the world, liberalism is equally an unwitting inheritance, and any alternatives are seen as deeply suspect and probably in need of liberal intervention. Liberalism further overlooks the way that culture itself is a deeper form of consent. Culture and tradition are the result of accumulations of practice and experience that generations have willingly accrued and passed along as a gift to future generations. This inheritance is the result of a deeper freedom, the freedom of intergenerational interactions with the world and one another. It is the consequence of collected practice, and succeeding generations may alter it if their experience and practices lead to different conclusions.

CONCLUSION

The sustenance of existing cultural and religious practices and the building of new communities will require far more conscientiousness than the passive acquiescence now fostered toward liberalism itself. It is an irony (and arguably a benefit of a liberal age) that today it is liberalism itself that silently shapes an unreflective population, and that the development of new cultures is what requires conscious effort, deliberation, reflectiveness, and consent. This is true especially for religious communities in an age in which liberalism has become increasingly hostile to self-imposed limitations and strictures that it finds abhorrent, particularly, but not only, in the domain of personal and sexual autonomy—a stance that many see as betrayal of liberalism rather than its culmination. But this very conflict, by showing the lengths to which liberalism will go to reshape the world in its own image, shows the need for alternative communities and new cultures that will live outside the gathering wreckage of liberalism's twilight years.

THE ADVENT OF POSTLIBERAL PRACTICE AND TOWARD A NEW BIRTH OF THEORY

Already there is evidence of growing hunger for an organic alternative to the cold, bureaucratic, and mechanized world liberalism offers. While especially evident in the remnants of orthodox religious traditions—not only in self-contained communities like the Amish but increasingly in growing international movements of Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and others—there is also growing interest in proposals for a “Benedict Option,” most interestingly proposed and explored in the book of that name by Rod Dreher.⁵ The building up of

CONCLUSION

practices of care, patience, humility, reverence, respect, and modesty is also evident among people of no particular religious belief, homesteaders and “radical homemakers” who—like their religious counterparts—are seeking within households and local communities and marketplaces to rediscover old practices, and create new ones, that foster new forms of culture that liberalism otherwise seeks to eviscerate.⁶

Often called a counterculture, such efforts should better understand themselves as a counter-anticulture. Building a culture in the midst of today’s anticulture is a profound challenge because of the flattened cultural wasteland produced by modern liberalism, as well as its jealous hostility to competitors. A culture is built from the bottom up, and like an organism, it maintains its DNA by passing itself on to subsequent generations. A self-conscious effort to build a new culture exists in basic contradiction to more organic origins and development of cultural practice. Yet the unique context of liberalism’s blighted cultural landscape demands something new. Ironically, given the default choice-based philosophy that liberalism has bequeathed to us, what might someday become a nonvoluntarist cultural landscape must be born out of voluntarist intentions, plans, and actions.

Such efforts should focus on building practices that sustain culture within communities, the fostering of household economics, and “polis life,” or forms of self-governance that arise from shared civic participation. All such practices arise from local settings that resist the abstraction and depersonalization of liberalism, and from which habits of memory and mutual obligation arise. While culture is cultivated and passed on in the most immediate way in households, it is developed

CONCLUSION

in and through a community of families and centers especially on rituals surrounding birth, coming of age, marriage, and death. Culture takes into account local circumstances, often drawing sustenance and inspiration from facts of local geography and history. It passes memory down through generations via story and song, not the sort packaged in Hollywood or on Madison Avenue, but arising from voices in particular places. And as the word suggests, it is nearly always linked to “cult,” understanding the local to be bound to and ultimately an expression of the universal and eternal, the divine and sublime. Such practices give rise to the only real form of diversity, a variety of cultures that is multiple yet grounded in human truths that are transcultural and hence capable of being celebrated by many peoples.

A counter-anticulture also requires developing economic practices centered on “household economics,” namely, economic habits that are developed to support the flourishing of households but which in turn seek to transform the household into a small economy. Utility and ease must be rejected in preference to practices of local knowledge and virtuosity. The ability to do and make things for oneself—to provision one’s own household through the work of one’s own and one’s children’s hands—should be prized above consumption and waste. The skills of building, fixing, cooking, planting, preserving, and composting not only undergird the independence and integrity of the home but develop practices and skills that are the basic sources of culture and a shared civic life. They teach each generation the demands, gifts, and limits of nature; human participation in and celebration of natural rhythms and patterns; and independence from the

CONCLUSION

culture-destroying ignorance and laziness induced by the ersatz freedom of the modern market.

Along with the arts of household economics is the greater challenge of minimizing one's participation in the abstract and depersonalizing nature of the modern economy. The skills and dispositions gained in the household should be extended to an economy of households, in which friendships, places, and histories are relevant considerations in economic transactions. An economy that prizes facelessness fosters citizens who cannot see, hear, or speak properly about critical relationships to one another and to the world. Our economy encourages a pervasive ignorance about the sources and destinies of the goods we buy and use, and this ignorance in turn promotes indifference amid an orgy of consumption. Like liberal politics, the economy promotes a concern solely for the short term, hence narrows our temporal horizon to exclude knowledge of the past and concern for the future. Such an economy creates debtors who live for the present, confident that the future will take care of itself while consuming the goods of the earth today in ways that make it less likely that that future ever exists. Local markets, by contrast, foster relations built over time and in place, and necessarily point us beyond individual calculation. Sellers and buyers make their exchanges with an awareness of how their relationships help build a better community, aware that some profit will be reinvested at home for the benefit of friends, neighbors, and generations yet unborn.

A greater emphasis upon household economics and local exchange must be accompanied by greater political self-governance. Today we measure political health by the

CONCLUSION

percentage of the voting-age population that actually votes, and while this percentage has grown in the past few elections, even this supposed sign of civic health hovers between 50 and 60 percent. Yet the national obsession with presidential electoral politics and the reduction of political conversation and debate to issues arising in the federal government are signs more of civic dis-ease than of health. Politics is reduced largely to a spectator sport, marketed and packaged as a distraction for a passive population. Elections provide the appearance of self-governance but mainly function to satiate any residual civic impulse before we return to our lives as employees and consumers.

When Tocqueville visited America in the late 1820s, he marveled at Americans' political do-it-yourself spirit. Unlike his fellow Frenchmen, who were passively acquiescent to a centralized aristocratic order, Americans would readily gather in local settings to solve problems. In the process they learned the "arts of association." They were largely indifferent to the distant central government, which then exercised relatively few powers. Local township government, Tocqueville wrote, was the "schoolhouse of democracy," and he praised the commitment of citizens to secure the goods of common life not only for the ends they achieved but for the habits and practices they fostered and the beneficial changes they wrought on citizens themselves. The greatest benefit of civic participation, he argued, was not its effects in the world, but those on the relations among people engaged in civic life: "Citizens who are bound to take part in public affairs must turn from the private interests and occasionally take a look at something other than themselves. As soon as common affairs are treated

CONCLUSION

in common, each man notices that he is not as independent of his fellows as he used to suppose and that to get their help he must often offer his aid to them.”⁷

For a time, such practices will be developed within intentional communities that will benefit from the openness of liberal society. They will be regarded as “options” within the liberal frame, and while suspect in the broader culture, largely permitted to exist so long as they are nonthreatening to the liberal order’s main business. Yet it is likely from the lessons learned within these communities that a viable postliberal political theory will arise, one that begins with fundamentally different anthropological assumptions not arising from a supposed state of nature or concluding with a world-straddling state and market, but instead building on the fact of human relationality, sociability, and the learned ability to sacrifice one’s narrow personal interest not to abstract humanity, but for the sake of other humans. With the demise of the liberal order, such countercultures will come to be seen not as “options” but as necessities.

Still, the impulse to devise a new and better political theory in the wake of liberalism’s simultaneous triumph and demise is a temptation that must be resisted. The search for a comprehensive theory is what gave rise to liberalism and successor ideologies in the first place. Calls for restoration of culture and the liberal arts, restraints upon individualism and statism, and limits upon liberalism’s technology will no doubt prompt suspicious questions. Demands will be made for comprehensive assurances that inequalities and injustices arising from racial, sexual, and ethnic prejudice be preemptively forestalled and that local autocracies or theocracies be legally

CONCLUSION

prevented. Such demands have always contributed to the extension of liberal hegemony, accompanied by simultaneous self-congratulation that we are freer and more equal than ever, even as we are more subject to the expansion of both the state and market, and less in control of our fate.

By now we should entertain the possibility that liberalism continues to expand its global dominion by deepening inequality and constraining liberty in the name of securing their opposite. Perhaps there is another way, starting with the efforts of people of goodwill to form distinctive countercultural communities in ways distinct from the deracinated and depersonalized form of life that liberalism seems above all to foster. As the culmination of liberalism becomes more fully visible, as its endemic failures throw more people into economic, social, and familial instability and uncertainty, as the institutions of civil society are increasingly seen to have been hollowed out in the name of individual liberation, and as we discover that our state of ever-perfected liberty leaves us, as Tocqueville predicted, both “independent and weak,” such communities of practice will increasingly be seen as lighthouses and field hospitals to those who might once have regarded them as peculiar and suspect. From the work and example of alternative forms of community, ultimately a different experience of political life might arise, grounded in the actual practice and mutual education of shared self-rule.

What we need today are practices fostered in local settings, focused on the creation of new and viable cultures, economics grounded in virtuosity within households, and the creation of civic polis life. Not a better theory, but better practices. Such a condition and differing philosophy that it

CONCLUSION

encourage might finally be worthy of the name “liberal.” After a five hundred–year philosophical experiment that has now run its course, the way is clear to building anew and better. The greatest proof of human freedom today lies in our ability to imagine, and build, liberty after liberalism.