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Our Weimar Moment, Part Three

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These considerations seem to argue for some type of social-democratic ideal perhaps along Scandinavian lines. This, of course, is not a sure bet. Capital of its very nature will seek to subvert and destroy mixed economies of the social democratic type because it cannot internalize the notion of limit. As such regimes cannot exist without capital they will always be forced to accede to its demands, particularly in a globalized context. Given this a rapprochement between Capital and xenophobic nationalism, Fascism in other words, seems like a strangely logical if, finally, contradictory choice.¹

For those who receive none of the benefits of globalism but bear most of its burdens it may well be a compelling choice. I should point out that in the context of declining public trust in institutions Fascist style myths of national redemption are fatally tempting. Of course neo-liberalism has laid the groundwork for this with its mania for privatizing public assets, often at low cost. These measures, along with ‘austerity’ budgets reduce the efficacy of institutions which can then be portrayed as inept and beyond reform by those who want to profit from their sale.

In this the neo-liberals make strange bedfellows with many radicals who also call for the dismantling of state institutions like the police and military: essentially, both groups take as their target the modern state which one sees as oppressive of economic enterprise and the other sees as oppressive of racial, class and gender difference. Battered from all sides of the political spectrum it is little wonder the state is now an object of general suspicion and contempt. It is little wonder people seek solutions that are radical though radical need not always (or indeed ever) equal progressive.²

Here, however, let me address something I think is a crucial error. We are hearing more and more of the ‘weakness of liberalism’ with the disturbing implication that we need something *less* rather than *more* liberal to deal with our current crisis. This argument, as it always has, runs like this. Liberalism is committed to the notion of pure tolerance and is thus incapable of opposing the rising tide of extremism. A commitment to pure liberalism will thus destroy

¹ In Nazi Germany this contradiction was only resolved by the personality cult of Adolf Hitler to whom, finally, the German nation and all the institutions it contained became expendable. The interests of Capital, the Army and so on were sacrificed to a war of national suicide of which the charisma and will of the fuhrer was the only binding principle. That this will was fundamentally nihilistic is shown by the fanatical orders of Hitler’s last days, orders only subverted by the intervention of Albert Speer.

² The easy convergence of these two positions should give us pause. That extremists of the alt-right and anti-fascist radicals on the left closely resemble each other is something readily discerned by anyone not an alt-right extremist and anti-fascist radical leftist. I do not simply refer to their unbending dogmatism or their penchant for reflexive verbal aggression and *ad hominem* attacks. I refer to the deeper truth that both groups are fundamentally Gnostic/Manichean in outlook. They are the lone voices of reason and integrity in an utterly corrupt world where public institutions need to be smashed instead of reformed and armies and police replaced with private militias culled from the remnant of the saints. In other words, to use a theological vocabulary, their outlook is sectarian not catholic (political errors are often secular transcriptions of theological ones). Indeed, one is reminded of Hegel’s claim that ‘absolute freedom’ finds its logical fulfilment in murderous acts of political terror: “Universal freedom can thus produce neither a positive achievement nor a deed, there is left for it only negative action; it is merely the rage and fury of destruction.” (*The Phenomenology of Mind*, 604).

liberalism altogether as extremists will use the cover of bourgeois civil rights to subvert the state. This is backed, again as always, with the argument *ad Hitleram*.

Exactly as the Weimar Republic was ‘too free’ so we are ‘too free’. If only, the argument goes, the Weimar state had been less tolerant and liberal force could have been used to stop the spread of Nazi ideology.³ Thus, we too, if we are too ‘liberal’, will meet the same fate. This argument is surely balderdash. Firstly, what was it that rendered Nazi ideology a fringe phenomenon for the second half of the 20th century? Why was it that for so many decades, fascism was the preserve of isolated cranks, street thugs and lunatics? Clearly because the post war liberal consensus I have referred to above had widespread support. When did Fascism re-emerge as an option? Precisely when pro-market ideology succeeded in destroying that consensus.

It is simply wrong that Fascism has re-emerged because of excessive liberalism: Fascism re-emerged when liberalism was subverted, when liberals themselves sold out their principles to the emerging class of financiers, speculators and media barons. What is more, this is yet another argument curiously appropriated from the far right: it has been the insistent claim of right wing Islamophobes that ‘Liberalism’ is unsustainable because it entails the tolerance of “Islamists” and those feckless voices on the ‘left’ who undermine the West’s will to fight with their constant critiques of colonial oppression and craven apologies for acts of terror.

Indeed, I find it odd that a rhetorical ploy used so often on the right has now been picked up by the left apparently without anyone noticing. How many times have we been told by Bushes, Blairs and others that opposition to some foreign intervention was ‘appeasement’ because some foreign leader was the next ‘Hitler’? I certainly do think Trump represents a form of Fascism (as I explained above) but it is well to remember that Trump is NOT Hitler. For one thing his movement has nothing like the ideological coherence of the Nazi Party (as noted above) nor has he anything like the shrewdness or determination or even basic competence of its leader. He also leads a country that has a long tradition of anti-authoritarian politics and (for now at least) some functioning checks and balances.

This is important for two reasons. Firstly, the Hitler comparison creates the perception of an emergency to which any response is in principle justified: what would one *not* do to stop the next holocaust? Secondly, this response closes off an important discussion. If the problem with Trump is that he is Hitler then it follows that his supporters are the new Nazis: this dehumanizes them and renders their concerns moot. Politically this is disastrous for many (though not all) Trump supporters are legitimately upset about the failures of the neo-Liberal order. Fascism does not flourish in a vacuum and Trumpism is not reducible to slow witted

³ The ‘liberal’ character of the Weimar Republic should not be exaggerated, at least in this respect. As the Munich *putsch* illustrates attempts *were* made to suppress Nazism both by direct force and the banning of Nazi publications. These ultimately failed because a divided judiciary and army (many of whom were sympathetic to nationalism) were unable or unwilling to back up the fledgling Republic. (see Spielvogel, 36-39) Even so, as George Blum notes: “As economic conditions improved after the mid-1920’s, following a currency reform and the infusion of foreign credits, the prospects of parliamentary democracy were much enhanced. It is quite likely that it would have survived in Germany and Nazism would have remained a boisterous fringe movement if the chaos of the Great Depression had not cut short economic prosperity and social stability.” (8) Perhaps it is not free speech we should avoid but depressions.

people deciding to be jerks. Identifying and allaying these underlying anxieties and tensions is the real work of anti-fascists though it involves less than exhilarating things like humility and listening to others.⁴

Getting this balance right is crucial for the stakes are high. I believe what is at stake is a crucial component of the modern project. I believe that there is more to the idea of globalism than the ghastly parody of the Washington Consensus. I believe the ideal of a catholic and universal human society is a necessary moral challenge and a marvelous opportunity for human growth. Are we really better off retreating into the parochialism of pre-modern societies? Are we better off fearing and scapegoating the other? Are we better off with the old national rivalries and their attendant violence?

I say this in full awareness that supra-national institutions in the past have taken oppressive and imperial forms (such as the Romans and Ottomans or the modern imperialisms of the Americans and British). If there is something to be saved from the ideologies that drove those societies, it is the idea of universality: not of a universal military or commercial hegemony as in the past but of a moral society of all humans. To use Kant's phrase there is a Kingdom of Ends that is unlimited in scope and illimitable in principle. We now know, due the simple fact of global communications, that the other is not a monster or if he is a monster, is no more a monster than we are capable of being. We have no need to engage in speculation like a Medieval person would have to concerning distant folk such as the Moors.

Given modern technology the other is among us whether we will it or no. The universal society is a simple *fact* however much we try to deny the moral implications of it. It is a fact that confronts us every day in the form of the world wide web. To use the language of Marx the material conditions of society *already point* to the necessity of a universal community! This is reflected even in demographics: no western society currently has any future that does not involve an infusion of workers and consumers from other societies. Moreover, the many people in the west who *do* benefit from our current economic system will not easily forego new opportunities for consumption: having tried sushi they will not go back to meat and potatoes grown locally.

Lest both my right and left leaning colleagues sniff at the superficiality of the dining classes with their pumpkin lattes and craft beers let me say that there are many who enjoy the liberty

⁴ Exemplary in this respect is Arlie Russell Hochschild: "The Ecstatic Edge of Politics: Sociology and Donald Trump" (http://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/attach/journals/nov16csfeature_0.pdf). Changing the narrative of Trump voters requires understanding the narrative of Trump voters. Russell Hochschild points out that this narrative is theological at base and very deeply embedded in the thought forms of American Protestantism (688). Appeals to reason will not affect it. Immiserated whites who abandon myth for reason will live in the exact same devastated communities as before and their view of them will only be that much bleaker. If Trump's base is to be cracked by a progressive political party, incentives will need to be offered to his supporters to trade their despairing 'deep story' for a more hopeful narrative. Clinton lost to Trump because she did not offer such an incentive in material, moral or indeed any other form. No doubt she could not make such an offer loudly and publicly without offending the corporate donor class, which is most likely why she did not even campaign in the rust belt states that cost her the election.

of *cultural* contacts with other parts of the globe who will not give this up either. In other words, every western society contains a *cosmopolitan impulse* which will have at least some say in any proposed future and these people wish no return to the pristine purity of square dancing and tractor pulls. I do not mean to be flippant here: in small ways as well as in large we are coming to the understanding of Terence that nothing human is alien. This is the ideal that was once embodied in the old notion of *Romanitas* and persists though the imperial days of Rome are long gone.

It is well to remember that the first wave of political innovation in the West was the revived imperium of Charlemagne, a distant ancestor of our current European Union. Western culture at its best (as opposed to its worst) has *never* been about elevating the parochial for its own sake. Almost from the beginning (in spite of its wonderful and lively vernacular literatures) it employed the *lingua franca* of Latin as the universal norm of cultural discourse. This idea of universalism always has and always will meet resistance for openness entails risk and universalist ideals noble in conception have often disgraced themselves in practice. The temptation to turn our backs on this tradition are thus ever present. Yet those on the far right who trumpet 'European identity' while betraying everything good that Europe has ever accomplished not only deny the evident social facts of our world but its deepest moral potential as well.

Practically this means working to strengthen such international institutions as now exist and create new ones that can exercise some control over the flow of capital and enforce common labor and environmental standards. This means, and my right leaning readers will not like this, that I am indeed a globalist. As the ravages of unrestrained capitalism and environmental degradation are a global problem they call forth a global solution.

Similarly, my anarchist readers will also be displeased for I do not envisage the dissolution of the nation state but rather international agreements that will strengthen it as there is little way to enforce common international standards that bypasses national sovereignty. What, for instance, if trade deals between nations were used to buttress labor and environmental standards rather than subvert them? What if corporations that roam the globe looking for the weakest regulations and most immiserated workers were simply shut out of their own markets by newly empowered national governments?⁵

Both right and left envisage a world of spontaneously self-organizing social systems. The first group tell us that these are markets which if left to their own devices will slowly but surely solve all problems. The second group envisage workers organizing into guild like social collectives which can meet all basic needs on a purely local level. Both of these notions belong in the realm of utopian fiction. As Plato long ago pointed out classes emerge from any complex social order: antagonism and difference are grounded in the ineradicable particularity of human experience.

⁵ Is it inherently irrational to suggest that countries which try undercut other countries by slashing worker's rights and throwing out health and safety regulations should simply be excluded from trading blocs that agree to enforce common standards in such matters? Corporations, of course, can impose no discipline on *themselves* in such matters but might they become so worried about the prospects of global capitalism that, like addicts, they agree to have their hands tied by the state?

The individual does not merge directly with the collective but must be disciplined by the mediating power of civic institutions to regard the freedom of the other as her own. In other words, evil will always emerge as individuals absolutize their differences and the state (in whatever form it takes) is required to contain and harness these conflicts for good.⁶ This banal fact of human experience has long been enshrined in religious and mythic conceptions such as the fall from paradise.

To put it bluntly, the communes envisaged by the anarchists and syndicalists (or any other form of social organization that assumes a direct harmony of interests between human beings) will last as long as it takes for the first love triangle to emerge: for the first individual to oppose absolutely his subjectivity to another (as in the story of Cain and Abel). On this point at least the existentialist tradition (think of Dostoevsky's underground man) has a much firmer grasp on reality than the Marxist as it recognizes the necessity of evil and conflict for the emergence of freedom.⁷

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““We Made a Devil's Bargain”: Fmr. President Clinton Apologizes for Trade Policies that Destroyed Haitian Rice Farming” (<https://www.democracynow.org/2010/4/1/>)

⁶ It is difficult to know why anyone would assume otherwise. The impression Marx leaves is that in a society without class conflict the individuality of each will fall into immediate harmony with the individuality of all which might, for all one knows, be true if it were not that class conflict is just one subset of conflict in general. People on the same side in the class war are quite capable of utter viciousness to each other as anyone can confirm by hanging around Socialists (or workers for that matter) for any length of time. I have spoken elsewhere of the grave loss to self-knowledge that comes from the occlusion of the theological tradition. This is a case in point: without the myth of the fall people have lost a powerful skeptical check on their motives and can, with fatal ease, identify their basest impulses with their highest and most noble aspirations. It is noteworthy that original sin is probably the least popular Christian doctrine though it is the only one capable of 100% empirical confirmation.

⁷ And here I must register my fundamental criticism of Marx (at least the utopian Marx) and the point on which he has failed to heed his teacher Hegel. Total freedom can only take the form of absolute tyranny. Thus it is not in fact an accident that Marx, who gives us a wonderful vision of the possibilities of human freedom (see Eagleton, 19-23), has given us also a formula for abject tyranny. Marx of course recognizes dialectical opposition as central to history. This is what the history of class struggle is all about. However, the notion that these tensions will directly resolve themselves once the capitalist state is overthrown is both forlorn and dangerous. Forlorn because it cannot happen (differentiation will inevitably occur) and dangerous because once the ‘individual’ has been reconciled to the ‘collective’ any further assertion of personal will or individuality will simply be a falling off from the good and an object of immediate suppression. The final state can allow no real opposition or difference to emerge as the historical problem will be, supposedly, solved. This is Blake’s warning about the ‘religious’ who seek to dissolve the tensions of history into a bland unity. (MHH 16, 10) This is also the price paid for historicizing a religious symbol (the millennium and the kingdom of God) and attempting to make of it a literal reality. Thus, the utopian strain in Marx should at very least be an object of reserve and skepticism: it is no longer possible to separate the hope of Utopian thinking from the specter of mass murder.

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