

The Ebb of the Old Liberal Order and the Horizon of New Possibilities for Freedom

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It is not an easy task to explain to my North American friends that there is an ideological project that terms itself “illiberalism,” championed by Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán and other notorious European autocrats such as Matteo Salvini, Marine le Pen, and Jarosław Kaczyński, which stands *for the opposite of what the declaredly left anti-liberalism advocates*. It is conservative; it opposes migration, racial and cultural diversity, gender equality and diversity; it is populist, embracing strong and authoritarian leaders. This type of illiberalism, which is not typical of Eastern and Central Europe alone but has also taken hold in the west of the continent too,¹ dismisses values such as freedom of the press, freedom of expression, and academic autonomy as values a true democracy can and should do without. The illiberals uphold democracy as a political form devoid of liberal values. The “illiberal democracy”² repositions liberalism in the past, and by doing so it also frequently uses a language indistinguishable from that of the left critique of “global neoliberalism.” European leaders of this stripe were staunch supporters of Donald Trump. One of their intellectual figureheads is the French philosopher and journalist, often identified as fascist, Alain de Benoist, who, in his latest book, *Contre le libéralisme*,³ mobilizes Marx next to the likes of Julius Evola and Alexandr Dugin in virtue of a takedown of global (neo)liberalism.

It is never an easy task to paint this entire picture, in its rich complexity, to my left-wing North American friends and colleagues because they too have long despised “liberalism,” a supposed *ethos*

rather than a political doctrine itself. Certainly, liberal political theories have been subject to their critique as well; however, in such discussions too, I have noticed, the target is essentially the presumed *ethos* rather than the argument of liberalism. The *ethos* is habitually identified in rhetorical tropes that betray a bourgeois reason – spontaneously equated with liberal – whereas the “academic discussion” comes down to some references to the famous critiques from the 1990s of Kant’s autonomous reason and also to economic reductionism. I am speaking of personal exchanges here and cannot quote, but I mention them to illustrate conversations that might be familiar to the reader as well.

Certainly, these North American friends of mine do not see their illiberalism as anything of the sort described at the beginning of the present paper – so they start searching for different denominations for a political project that has defined its purpose and named itself “illiberal.” Those who would want to successfully oppose the autocrats have therefore found themselves bereft of a language to do so, since defending freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and individual freedoms suppressed by authoritarian rule sounds like a very liberal thing to do. Matters become more complicated when one takes into consideration the fact that the far right have made appeals to freedom of expression too – even though, paradoxically, only to attack liberalism, and, by so doing, attacking the left for being guilty of liberalism.

I was born and grew up in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, and as a high school student in the mid-1980s I became habituated to identifying liberation or true human liberty with the true communism my former country failed to realize, even by the admission of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia itself. As soon as the former Eastern Bloc in Europe, including the non-aligned Yugoslavia, was “liberated” from communism, our own Marxist voices, including those critical of the ruling doctrine, and the practice too, simply vanished. Admittedly, we were ashamed of Marxism’s failure. In perfect coincidence with this rising shame, we were also immediately exposed to a proper Europeanization – through the EU accession processes – and thus we embraced Western academia too, and ever so eagerly.

We, the failed communist societies, admitted our moral defeat and conceded to the call-out of the post-Marxists such as Alasdair MacIntyre: “Marxism had failed morally,” apparently more so than the West. MacIntyre’s critical project seems to rely on all but Marxism:

Aristotle, Nietzsche, and very little – if any – Marx or Marxism, whereas his main charge against it is that it has remained “too liberal.” Therefore, when it comes to the admission of Marxism’s failure, there is an overlooked misunderstanding between us in the East and the “post”-Marxists of the West. Whereas we in the East believed for so long that we had failed because of the “bureaucratized and alienated state” and its suppression of the freedom of expression – its totalitarianism, put simply – MacIntyre and his acolytes accuse our former political system/s of the opposite, of being too liberal.

Let us note that MacIntyre’s premise is not entirely derived from the assumption that the mode of production had not moved away substantially from the liberal model (through wage labour and commodity production, for example). His reprimand is that the underlying reason for Marxism’s failure is that the *ethos* of the former communist states, its morality, has “remained too liberal.”⁴ Apparently, it is insufficient totalitarianism that has led communism to its “moral failure” (rather than a historic failure related to the mode of production). Sadly, the Anglo-American interpretation of Marxism’s failure, declared almost simultaneously with Fukuyama’s declaration of the end of history, has become the paradigm of the global “radical left” critique of liberalism – based on very little Marx and lots of Aristotle, as well as very little political economy and lots of ethics and morality.⁵

Then again, Marx and Engels emphasized repeatedly that communism was not about any form of morality, but rather about the social organization, cultural transformation, and perhaps moral revalorization that would ensue from an economy that would not be based on wage labour, as Takahisa Oishi demonstrates in his meticulous exegesis of Marx’s original text, reconstructing a unity of a rather fragmented argument.⁶ The following statement could not be more unequivocal:

The communists do not preach *morality* at all, as Stirner does so extensively. They do not put to people the moral demand: love one another, do not be egoists, etc.; on the contrary, they are very well aware that egoism, just as much as selflessness, is in definite circumstances a necessary form of the self-assertion of individuals. Hence, the communists by no means want, as Saint Max believes ... to do away with the “private individual” for the sake of the “general,” selfless man.⁷

Oishi's reading of Marx on the subject of morality being one of the materializations – in the form of social relations – of the different modes of production leads to the conclusion that it is the socialist economic foundation composed of “associations of individual workers”⁸ that provides the basis for a possible new ethics. This thesis is further explored by Igor Shoikhedbrod in his 2019 publication which proffers an important addition and further corroboration to Oishi's main thesis.⁹ It is important to note that Oishi undertakes the painstaking task of distinguishing Marx's enunciations and arguments from those present in Engel's interpretations and offers the following formulaic summarization:

The French version begins with “the capitalist mode of production and of appropriation that corresponds to it is ...” and omits the “free workers.” The present German and the English versions were rewritten or modified by Engels. As far as we can distinguish a mode of appropriation from its basis and understand it in its context, we cannot agree with Dühring more: “individual private property (as founded on the labour of its proprietor)” is negated by “capitalist private property (which rests on the exploitation of alien, but formally free labour),” and then by “individual property (on the basis of ... cooperation and the free workers” possession in common of the land and the means of production produced by labour itself)” = “social property.” Let us formulate this and compare it with that of Engels:

Marx: individual property = social property ≠ common property

*Engels: individual property ≠ social property = common property.*¹⁰

Oishi's philological and philosophical reconstruction of Marx's argument seems to me, as someone who was born and reached adulthood in Yugoslavia, more in tune with what I remember my former country set as its horizon and where our collective post-communist self feels, at least predominantly, to have failed. In other words, more liberty would have been considered as bringing us closer to the communist ideal through the form of self-management characteristic of the latest stage of Yugoslavia's economic development. Such spontaneous interpretation or reminiscence on my part would be in line with Paulin Clochec's brilliant analysis of “Marx's liberalism,” which

manages to demonstrate that what Marx sought to accomplish through his critique of (bourgeois) liberalism was full radicalization of the most basic tenet of the liberal ideal, that of liberty embodied by individuals and collectives in an inextricable manner.¹¹

The very possibility of criticizing “liberalism” and “liberal values” while having different and even opposing referents in mind speaks to the fact that the notion is multifaceted and embedded in different political doctrines. For example, Viktor Orbán’s attack on academic liberties because they are “unpatriotic,” “sponsored by George Soros,” and “seeking to undermine European civilization” is incomparable with the Western progressive left’s critique of liberalism, which seeks to radicalize individual gendered and multicultural self-expression. Returning to Marxism, let us note that what Marx and his disciples have been tackling all along is the possibility of imagining freedom, liberties, and arguably rights (as well as *das Recht* as in rule of law) in communism as well as engaging in a critique of bourgeois liberalism. It seems as if Marxist scholarship has been able to conceive of some generic notions of freedom, liberty, and a sublated (*aufgehoben*) version of liberalism, emerging from the contradictions of capitalism and bourgeois society in a dialectical and historically determined manner. If such a generalization is inapplicable to the entire legacy – or to all of the legacies – of Marxism, it certainly is, I would argue, applicable to Marx’s own writings. I am basing this argument not only on the convincing exegeses of authors such as Oishi and Clochec, but also on Marx’s oeuvre itself, in particular *On the Jewish Question*, *The Holy Family* (co-written with Engels), and *Grundrisse*, among others.

We are thus brought to the matter at hand and its context at the turn of the third decade of the twenty-first century: in an era of rising “illiberalisms” (of different sorts, as I tried to illustrate here in my opening paragraphs), and possible further suspension of rights due to the prolonged COVID pandemic and/or the recovery from it, are we not faced with the challenge of defending some very generic freedoms such as the freedom to move? How are we to do so beyond the already irreparable language of liberalism? Can we speak a new language of freedom and of specific yet rather generic liberties? And is it possible to do so by way of discarding the entire history of liberalism and its fundamental concepts?

To be clear, I am not advocating unreasonable defiance of pandemic containment control. I am not saying that we should put our right to freely displace our bodies and enjoy social and physical interaction

above the collective health – my warning is that the pandemic may be abused in order to limit some of said basic and apparently generic forms of freedom. In fact, warnings of abuse of the pandemic for a democratic backsliding and imposition of authoritarian rule were sounded as early as the spring of 2020.¹² We could say, therefore, that there is a twofold pressing reason to invent a language of freedom that will transcend the confines of liberal traditions, both their affirmations and their critiques as aspects of the same historical given. Furthermore, Marx’s radicalization of the “liberal core” found in the discussions of the Young Hegelians, when taken beyond the bourgeois status quo and its material-economic foundation, provides the means for it, as demonstrated by Clochec.¹³

In order for such a radicalization of the concept to take place, one ought to create the conditions for the first prerequisite – the transformation of the mode of production, whereby the means of production would be seized by *associations of individual producers*. If, at the present point in time, such a possibility seems utopian, let us recall that Marx himself argued that associations of free producers could appear within the capitalist model. Namely, in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx states that “individual private property” is “the foundation of small-scale industry, and small-scale industry is a necessary condition for the development of social production and of the free individuality of the worker himself.”¹⁴ The expansion of the small-scale industry of associations of free workers would deepen the capitalist contradiction and ultimately lead to its resolution and to a transformation of the political-economic paradigm. Such very material freedom is premised on mere physical freedom of movement and the establishment of social relations. In order to achieve such freedom in our emerging post-COVID world dominated by a variety of illiberalisms, we must re-establish Marx’s critique of the division between the bourgeois state and civil society, which amounts to the state’s alienation from its citizens (who are relegated to the apolitical or post-political civil society).¹⁵ The split at issue – and the problem of the alienated and alienating state – can be overcome by the social relations ensuing from the free producers’ associations developing into more than a mere technology of “administering things” (Engels)¹⁶ that submits to society as a self-management system of all socio-economic relations rather than the modern State.¹⁷

It is a historical struggle, but I see no reason to view historical transformations and progressions as necessarily linear. Therefore,

reclaiming a language of liberty in the face of rising authoritarianisms and the transformation of the mode of production could take place by following the laws of both “synchrony and diachrony,”¹⁸ as Claude Lévi-Strauss put it. If the present paradigm is in crisis and the germs of new possibilities emerge from its very entropy, islands of potential exist on the economic plane as well as the plane of social relations, both of them seen as unequivocally material.

NOTES

- 1 Consider the success of the new left parties, the populists, sovereigntist euro-skeptic parties in the 2019 European parliamentary elections.
- 2 Not in the sense used by Fareed Zakaria in his 1997 piece for *Foreign Affairs*, but rather in the sense given to it by Viktor Orbán in his speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp, Website of the Hungarian Government (29 July 2018), available at <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-29th-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp>, accessed on 11 April 2020.
- 3 Alain de Benoist, *Contre le libéralisme* (Monaco: Le Rocher, 2019).
- 4 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984; London: Duckworth, 1985), 2nd edition, ix–x.
- 5 Kelvin Knight, “The Ethical Post-Marxism of Alasdair MacIntyre,” in *Marxism, the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Mark Cowling and Paul Reynolds (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Publishers, 2000), 74–96.
- 6 Takahisa Oishi, *The Unknown Marx: Reconstructing a Unified Perspective* (London: Pluto Press in Association with Takushoku Univeristy in Tokyo, 2000), 154–64.
- 7 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *German Ideology in Collected Works*, trans. Richard Dixon et al., 50 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1979–2004), 5–24.
- 8 Karl Marx, “Capital and Labor,” in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin: Dietz, 1972). Thus individual property is re-established, but on the basis of the achievements of the modern mode of production. So we have an association of free workers who possess in common the land and the means of production produced by labour itself. Oishi’s translation; quotation is borrowed from Takahisa Oishi, *The Unknown Marx*, 157.

- 9 Igor Shoikhedbrod, *Revisiting Marx's Critique of Liberalism: Rethinking Justice, Legality and Rights* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
- 10 Oishi, *The Unknown Marx*, 156. (My emphasis in *italic*, in order to distinguish visually the formulaic statements, following the visual emphasis in the original, accomplished through line spacing.)
- 11 Paulin Clochec, "Le libéralisme de Marx," *Actuel Marx* 2, no. 56 (2014): 109–23.
- 12 Amanda B. Edgell, Anna Lührmann, and Seraphine F. Maerz, "Policy Brief No. #23: Pandemic Backsliding: Does Covid-19 Put Democracy at Risk?," *V-Dem Institute/Variety of Democracy Institute, Department of Political Science*, Gothenburg, Sweden, 2020, https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/52/eb/52eb913a-b1ad-4e55-9b4b-3710ff70d1bf/pb_23.pdf; Florian Bieber et al., "Policy Brief: The Western Balkans in Times of the Global Pandemic," *Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group*, April 2020, <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BiEPAG-Policy-Brief-The-Western-Balkans-in-Times-of-the-Global-Pandemic.pdf>.
- 13 Clochec, "Le libéralisme de Marx," 118–23.
- 14 Karl Marx (1976), *Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Group, 1976), 927.
- 15 Clochec, «Le libéralisme de Marx,» 115.
- 16 Frederick Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," in *Collected Works*, ed. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, trans. Richard Dixon et al., 50 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1979–2004), 24–321.
- 17 Marx, *Capital*, 927.
- 18 Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Letchworth: Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd, 1966), 63–71.