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RETHINKING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: PRELUDE TO TOTALITARIANISM

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Abstract

In the long course of human evolution and political experimentation, liberal democracy, especially after the events of 1989, has come to be seen as the best political system. In fact, we seemed to have reached the only system compatible with liberty, after the dreadful experiences of Communist and Nazi totalitarianism, and its twin in the economic realm - capitalism. But is liberalism really conducive to freedom? I argue that evil – or totalitarianism – arises from the combination of both the Platonic and Augustinian views: ignorance of values and the pursuit of one's egotistic desires. Evil has an essentially private nature. In this sense, totalitarianism may arise from a utilitarian culture that sees people – or some forms of knowledge – as worthless and disposable objects.

Key words: liberalism; freedom; values; totalitarianism

INTRODUCTION: THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

In the long course of human evolution and political experimentation, liberal democracy, especially after the events of 1989, has come to be seen as the best political system, or, at least, as Winston Churchill put it, "the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time"[1]. In fact, we seem to have reached the so-called *end of history* and of all ideologies. By portraying itself as the only valid way of thinking, what this language entails is, in fact, the obliteration of alternative modes of thinking, and thus the effective dominance of this particular ideology. The effect of this mechanics is self-evident: the persistence of one particular form of thinking self-reproduces and, through repetition, generates its own legitimacy. Tocqueville (2006) has brilliantly described its essence: in a democratic society, where the passion for equality is the prevalent and irresistible dogma, all people have to work, which means that all live in a state of perpetual agitation. This state of affairs is simply incompatible with contemplation and its ultimate end – the search for truth – if by no other reason than that thinking requires time, something which is lacking in such societies. In other words, democracies have no leisure class, precisely that which has traditionally dedicated itself to these matters. In the absence of theoretical concerns, people turn to their material well-being and live for the

[1] From a House of Commons speech on November 11, 1947.

present, a context in which science comes to exist not *per se*, but only possesses a utilitarian rationale that merely conceives of its immediate and practical application.

This prevalence of the economy, of the technical sphere, and the advent of a *government of things*, instead of a *government of men*, seems to be intimately connected with a qualitative change which took place in the 16th century, namely, the Reformation. The most important break in Western unity was especially espoused by the most economically developed areas, by those most favoured by natural resources and by the wealthiest towns of the Holy Roman Empire; in one word, by the bourgeois way of life. The emphasis on earthly salvation through work and *economic rationalism*, as Max Weber (2001) put it, instead of after-life salvation, and the rejection of transcendentalism, seems to compose a materialistic picture duly incompatible with the spiritual and ascetic essence of Christianity. Once implemented, this system tends to develop a legitimacy that increases in proportion to its stability.

These "ethical maxims", having penetrated the cultural realm, gave rise to an ideological foundation – liberalism –, traceable to the writings of John Locke, and later continued by Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant and David Hume. John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* were as much a reaction against Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarch* and Stuart absolutism as they were a eulogy of Whig interests, associated with emergent industrial lobbies and wealthy merchants. Hence his fierce defence of the doctrine of unalienable natural rights - individual liberty, life, property - that constituted the inviolable private sphere of a civil society, conceived as a domain in which there could be no state interference. The cornerstone of his theoretical edifice lay in the social compact, based on consent and choice, as the means to create a body politic. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he proposed the famous *tabula rasa* doctrine, arguing that there are no innate universal moral notions – speculative and practical principles – in the human mind. Rather, moral principles, along with faith and revelation, require reasoning and discourse, in order that their truth is discovered. In fact, all knowledge begins with experience, through the senses, and must be made dependent on the end one wants to achieve. Among the ideas which are received from sensation and reflection are pain and pleasure, in reference to which good and evil can be measured. Hence, that which is called good is that which is apt to cause or increase pleasure, or diminish pain. Evil, on the contrary, is that which is apt to produce or increase any pain, or diminish any pleasure in us. Happiness consists in the maximum pleasure we are capable of, and misery the maximum pain[2]. Hence, principles such as virtue are generally approved, not because they are innate, but because they are profitable to each individual.

It was with Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* that freedom decisively acquired its markedly economic tone. For him, people's actions are guided by the utilitarian consideration of self-interest, in a supposedly well ordered competitive system, guided by an *invisible hand*. Jeremy Bentham was responsible for the doctrine of utilitarianism as such. As for Locke, for Bentham pain and pleasure are the sovereign masters which decide what we ought to do and determine right and wrong. Based on these foundations, the principle of utility "approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question." (Bentham 1823, Chapter 1). The final goal of the system thus created is felicity, by the hands of reason and law. In fact, the principle of utility, as the

[2] Utilitarianism then has its true foundations in Locke.

true source of morality, is aimed not only at individual action, but also at government action. The individual is the best judge of his own utility, due to man's reasonable nature. In this sense, the art of directing a man's own actions is named private ethics, or art of self-government and the sum of the interests of the several members who compose the community forms the interest of that community. The art of directing people's actions to happiness and augmenting it through the law is called the art of government. In this context, punishment, which is an evil in itself, should only be admitted if it can exclude some greater evil.

John Stuart Mill elaborated on the concept of utilitarianism, considering general happiness as a moral standard and the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions. It is anchored on the natural social feelings of mankind, and is, for that reason, the most important and desirable end. Money, fame and power are components of happiness. Hence, the best government is that which is most conducive to progress. Mill mitigates this understanding of utilitarianism, by advocating the superiority of intellectual and moral pleasures, with a view to a "higher mode of existence," reflecting the distinctive human faculty of reason (Mill 2004, Chapter II). Here resides the justification for the absolute sphere of human sovereignty in matters of lifestyle, inner consciousness, personal conduct and opinion - and hence unhindered individualism[3] -, in which the state has no power to intervene, even with an ethical purpose, to restore moral standards – the "despotism of custom" –, save in those cases where the aim is to prevent harm done to others. In his view, liberty is the only trustworthy source of improvement. Thus, each individual, bringing with him an endless diversity of experiences, is a possible independent centre of improvement.

The role of the state, in this context, should be that of a central depository, circulator and diffuser of these experiments. Immanuel Kant's philosophy rests on an optimistic view of the human condition, based on the assumption that men are originally predisposed to good and able to perfect themselves. Hence, morality can be built on the postulation that man is a free agent who can bind himself through reason alone to laws, therefore not needing either religion or any other incentive than the law to apprehend and do his duty. Right and wrong are determined solely by reason. In this context, the categorical imperative is that which represents an action as necessary in and of itself, being able to ignore all ends. There is only one categorical imperative: "Act so that the maxim of thy will can always at the same time hold good as a principle of universal legislation" (Kant 2004, book I, chapter I, VII). Thus, what each of us calls good must be desired by all rational men, which means that a universal kingdom of ends can be conceived, binding all rational beings by common laws. The final outcome will be that each one of us will treat others, in every case, as an end, and never as a means.

For David Hume, knowledge comes from experience, through the senses. This is the case of morality, which depends on subjective perceptions and appetites. Thus, good and evil can be distinguished according to the impressions they produce: if the impression is agreeable, then something is good; if, on the contrary, the impression is uneasy, we are in the presence of evil. There are, therefore, no objective moral standards. Similarly, justice does not exist per se, but rather arises artificially from education and human convention to remedy some inconveniences such as selfishness and lack of generosity. From then on, the

[3] In *On Liberty*, Mill argues that liberty consists in doing what one desires and that the individual is unaccountable to society for his actions.

pursuit of happiness - traceable to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* - for the greater number and avoidance of pain as the only ends of human action were to be considered as the guidelines for all moral considerations, capable of defining good and evil, instead of considering an action good in and of itself. This view, which can be best described as a revival of sophism, has come to dominate the political and philosophical debate and was translated into neoliberalism, drawing mainly from the works of Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman. The view also gave birth to the doctrine of state neutrality that emerged in the 1970's, which regards the liberal state as one that does not impose upon its citizens or favour any definition of the good, leaving people free to pursue their own private moral conceptions.

This regression from the public sphere - the sphere of freedom *par excellence* - to the despotism of the household can only be looked at with great concern. In fact, when private interests take over public life and governments start acting as companies - privatizing public utilities and welfare, marketizing health services, social insurance and pensions, promoting competition between universities, introducing private sector forms of management into public service, treating citizens as clients - that is, as mere providers of goods and services, politics will be built "on the basis of private law" (Schmitt 1988, 31) and the common good becomes a sum of private interests. In the impossibility of 'linking the individuals' responsibilities and obligations to a well defined political order (…), the very possibility of politics is put into question' (Wagner 1995, 261 quoted in Habermas 2000, 88). For economy, as Hannah Arendt (1990, 215) mentions, can never decide "which form of government is better; tyranny or a free republic." Because the two spheres, the economic and the political one, have divergent goals, and once politics is evicted by the market, democratic decisions lose credibility, given that money can be neither democratised nor held accountable (Habermas 2000, 74), and citizenship is converted into plain "ratification of decisions or consumption of services," (Hawkings 1991, 82). At the same time, representation fails and elections turn into a simple appointment of agents and delegates of interest groups. The reduction of freedom to such a "*diminished normative*" (Habermas 2000, 97) conception - the economic rationality of the consumer, who has replaced the citizen - puts aside the moral component that is supposed to underlie public space, built on the idea of reciprocity associated with the *categorical imperative* - or with the *general will* -, in which the citizen comes to participate on an equal basis in the *polis*, a possibility immediately denied by the market, which merely "reproduces - and augments - the comparative advantages, *previously established*, of enterprises, of the domestic and of people" (Habermas 2000, 98). The people, by definition a public law concept, dilutes into a shapeless mass of isolated individuals incapable of being held accountable. For liberalism, by reducing the role of the state and by making the private sphere the only domain where freedom could be maintained, has shielded the citizens from the public realm. Liberal morality is reduced solely to the endeavour of preserving oneself as the first and only basis of virtue. However, as Hannah Arendt (1968, 36) noted, "nothing proved easier to destroy than the privacy and private morality of people who thought of nothing but safeguarding their private lives."

BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

The relativism that ultimately springs from egalitarianism, in that all opinions are alike in dignity, even wrong ones, as Mill argued, can be best summarised in Rousseau's *volonté de tous*, a sum of individual private and egoistic wills from which no general will can ever emerge. St. Augustine (2005, Book XII, Chapter 7) reinforces the private nature of evil, which arises when man starts focusing on the lower goods, to satisfy his egotistic interests. Reason cannot be the measure of morality, as Kant wanted, for, as Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 69) claim, "Reason is the organ of calculation, of planning; *it is neutral with regard to ends*; its element is coordination". Nietzsche's superman, someone capable of creating values ex-nihilo, tries to replicate Kant's categorical imperative[4]. This is the problem with liberals: trying to create values ex-nihilo.

The full implications of these doctrines are not, as a matter of fact, liberation from state tyranny, but rather from traditionally accepted and established known values, as Socrates inaugurated them - it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong -, then their subversion and, finally, their destruction. Values thus became "social commodities that have no significance of their own but, like other commodities, exist only in the ever-changing relativity of social linkages and commerce" (Arendt 2006a, 32).

Ultimately, this extreme mutability seems to be intimately connected with utilitarianism, a process in a strict dialectical relation with scientism, the new religion associated with economic progress, by which humanity has reached the end point of the eschatological interpretation of history of which Auguste Comte spoke - the scientific or positive stage -, having successfully abandoned the theological and the metaphysical stages.

Here lies precisely the explanation for the replacement of one God by another. In fact, faith in progress rests on the fact that it is more readily accessible to all, saints and sinners, and hence more egalitarian and consistent with the spirit of democratic morality. In addition, it reflects the abandonment of the uncertainty of faith in a hereafter, which may not exist, to embrace a more certain man-made world. The killing of God, the one thing that ultimately ensures the stability and immutability of all things human, comes, in this respect, as the necessary prerequisite for the inversion of known values and the advent of ever-changeable sets of new ones. In fact, once God is killed, in a first stage values still exist, but not their ultimate source – call it God or natural law – and, once their guarantor is not there any longer, those values completely disappear.

In effect, what this continuous change means is that "the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed" (Arendt 2006a, 252-254). After the killing of God, as Montesquieu (1914, book XIX, chapter 16) had noticed; only customs – *les moeurs*, the morality of every civilization – could prevent the moral and spiritual breakdown of Western culture. But, contrary to what he noticed – that the decline begins with unlawfulness, either when the laws are abused by the government or when the authority of the law's source becomes doubtful and questionable (Ibid, book VIII, chapter 8) –, it is not the corruption of the laws that leads to decay but rather, as Plato noted, that corrupt mores encroach upon the laws and transform them. In a context in which freedom becomes a means, and not an end, and is replaced by free will, the arbitrariness of isolated individuals reigns supreme.

[4] I am indebted to Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 90) for this equation.

Since the absolute barrier that once separated good from evil was blurred by relativism, indifference becomes the prevalent feature of democratic societies. From indifference, the leap to scepticism is only a very short one, and an even shorter one to nihilism.

The attempt at a new beginning by man alone, through secularisation, which has been the driving force behind all modern revolutions - all openly atheist -, could only have one outcome: tyranny. The full implications of such a conception showed to what extent the demiurge - the superman of which Nietzsche spoke, in an attempt at imitating divine art, an apocryphal manifestation of God - hadn't liberated himself from the political order which he ruled, but, as Locke (1764) had anticipated, from natural, and hence, divine law, to which he had been subjected prior to the Modern Age, having tried to create a secular religion and thus tried to find "within the political realm itself, a fully satisfactory substitute for the lost religious sanction of secular authority." (Arendt 1990, 158) Modern times have indeed become a witness to the most unacceptable crossing of ethical boundaries, having reached its height in the open criminality of totalitarian regimes - it is well known that the elite formations of the Nazi party were organized after the model of criminal gangs and trained to commit mass murder, while criminals received a fairly better treatment in concentration camps than totally innocent people -, but not solely confined to them. The events in former Yugoslavia or Rwanda fully demonstrate that totalitarian solutions are here to stay and can indeed be extraordinarily popular.

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

And if moral virtues remain in us through education and habit, as Aristotle (Nichomachean Ethics, book II, chapter 1) noted, the greatest danger lies in that 'no one who spent his life among rascals without knowing anybody else could have a concept of virtue' (Kant quoted in Arendt 2003, 61) - when all references have been eliminated. In the end, the last resort will be human nature.

From lack of moral standards, emerges a particular type of citizenship: apathetic, passive and unenlightened[5] and thus incapable of adequately choosing its representatives. This fact is particularly disturbing in a system which was meant to rely on a high degree of discernment on the part of its people. In a context in which individuals lack time and thus proper knowledge to effectively participate in the *res publica*, state power is bound to grow. More so when people are willing to lose their freedom, in the name of safety, as the current crisis has proved, with the rise of the far right all over Europe. This thought is particularly troubling and aggravated in our time, marked by the "ethos" of the market and by the "transformation of the world into industry" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 29):

> The danger of the corpse factories and holes of oblivion is that today, with populations and homelessness everywhere on the increase, masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous if we continue to think of our world in utilitarian terms. Political, social and economic events everywhere are in a silent conspiracy with totalitarian instruments devised for making men superfluous. (…) Totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong

[5] The relationship between morality and the improvement of citizenship was clearly perceived by the Classical world, from Socrates to Cicero.

> temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man. (Arendt 1968, 157)

Mass murder in the political sphere merely emulates mass production in the economic realm. People are judged by their market value. Reified, people become eventually obsolete and thus disposable. As things, human beings can be used and manipulated. In this utilitarian world, ideas, religions, ideologies are of interest "only insofar as they increase or decrease the survival prospects of the human species on the earth or within the universe" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 185). In the end, the origins of such concepts must reside in the utilitarian formula that obliterates meaning and purpose and blurs the difference between means and ends.

If "all of European history through many centuries had taught people to judge each political action by its *cui bono* and all political events by their particular underlying interests," (Arendt 1968, 46) in the absence of values, what can be the boundaries to political violence? A nihilist society, however committed to science, can only have totalitarianism as its final destination. Totalitarianism, then, does not proceed from ignorance. And from this cycle there seems to be no escape: "whatever the punishment, once a specific crime has appeared for the first time, its reappearance is more likely than its initial emergence could ever have been." (Arendt 2006b, 273) There is indeed a strikingly frightening similarity between democracy and totalitarianism, in that the former paves the way for the latter.[6] One needs only to compare the brilliant studies conducted by Tocqueville and Hannah Arendt - *Democracy in America* and *Totalitarianism* - to understand the meaning of such an affirmation. Once the difference between right and wrong is no more[7] – and then we will have attained what Plato saw as the cause of evil: ignorance –, men relapse into a Hobbesian state of nature since the instinct of self-preservation prevails when each one of us does what he wants[8], paving the way for the utmost perversity and fully demonstrating its consequences once such men reach government, as Plato (Book VIII) noticed. The ultimate perversion is the trivialisation of all feelings which ennoble and elevate the human condition - love, friendship, loyalty. And this development proves how easily modernity has destroyed both man's ability to think - and especially to reflect on himself - and his practical reason,[9] the one faculty on which Liberal philosophy rests, by trusting human nature. Hitler's election is the living proof. Action alone determines the nature of the moral person and not intention, as Aristotle (Nichomachean Ethics, Book III, chapter IV) noted.

[6] Twenty-five centuries ago, Plato noted how democracies inevitably degenerate into tyrannies.
[7] This blurring does not apply anymore, as Kant thought, when [Man] is conscious of the moral law but has nevertheless adopted into his maxim the (occasional) deviation therefrom. (Kant 1996, Book One, III)
[8] "Abundance needs no law, and civilization's accusation of anarchy sounds almost like a denunciation of abundance (…). (…) it is the lack of contact between the cave dwellers which is the true reason for the absence of objective laws…". (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 50-51)
[9] Kant had stated that the will is the faculty of choosing only that which reason recognises as good.

CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR THE DEFINITION OF A COMMON GOOD?

When wrong actions are dismissed as normal and acceptable and even criminality goes unpunished, reversing legality, as Plato (Book VIII) noted, even in the eyes of intelligent people,

> there is usually more involved than just nonsense. There exists in our society a widespread fear of judging that has nothing whatever to do with the biblical 'judge not, that ye be not judged' (…). For behind the unwillingness to judge lurks the suspicion that no one is a free agent, and hence the doubt that anyone is responsible or could be expected to answer for what he has done. (Arendt 2003, 19)

Actually, the refusal to obey the law or to render it effective finds its cause also in this attempt of man to become *causa sui*. The tragedy is that, ultimately, punishment has always come as the last resort to make people obey moral standards which were always thought to be self-evident; as history has shown, "natural law itself needed divine sanction to become binding for men." (Arendt 1990, 191) With the loss of the "restricting limitations which protected its boundaries, freedom became helpless, defenceless" (Arendt 1954) and thus ready to be destroyed. People have to be forced to be free, as Rousseau would put it. In this sense, the Christian faculty of forgiveness has no applicability in relation to the "sins" committed in the political domain. For "it is the grandeur of court proceedings that even a cog can become a person again." (Arendt 2003, 148)

In this context, "the boundaries of positive laws are for the political existence of man what memory is for his historical existence: the guarantee of the pre-existence of a common world, the reality of some continuity which transcends the individual life span of each generation" (Arendt 1968, 163), that is, only "in the body of positive laws of each country do the *ius naturale* or the Commandments of God achieve their political reality" (Ibid, 162). Between the strong and the weak, it is freedom that oppresses, while the law liberates (Henri Lacordaire) and the role of the Constitution is that of limiting power, so that we won't have a government of men, but a government of laws (Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, book V, chapter X). Indeed, that means the rejection of the social compact on which liberalism is based for

> a state exists for the sake of a good life, and not for the sake of life only. (…) Whence it may be further inferred that virtue must be the care of a state which is truly so called, and not merely enjoys the name: for without this end the community becomes a mere alliance which differs only in place from alliances of which the members live apart; and law is only a convention, 'a surety to one another of justice,' as the sophist Lycophron says, and has no real power to make the citizen good and just. (Aristotle, *Politics*, Book III)

This presupposes a common ethical understanding of society and its values; in other words, striking an agreement about the definition of "positive liberty". In order that freedom survive, relativism cannot be condoned, especially that which, in the name of freedom, can put an end to it, under the presupposition that the responsibilities associated with government will ultimately operate a transformation on radical political elements. As history has shown, when the nature of these elements is such that it is incompatible with the respect for the rules of the game, freedom will always be the weakest element, proving that it is necessary "to dissolve the sophistic-dialectical interpretations of politics which are all

based on the superstition that something good might result from evil" (Arendt 1968, 140), for "those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil" (Arendt 2003, 36). Because at the basis of freedom stand moral and ethical values; freedom is not devoid of substance. Additionally, our system of justice, our laws, our institutions, what is criminalised or not, are based on moral conceptions. Hence,

> A democratic government is not supposed to become an accomplice in its own overthrow by letting Gnostic movements grow prodigiously in the shelter of a muddy interpretation of civil rights; and if through inadvertence such a movement has grown to the danger point of capturing existential representation by the famous legality of 'popular elections', a democratic government is not supposed to bow to the 'will of the people' but to put down the danger by force and, if necessary, to break the letter of the constitution in order to save its spirit. (Voegelin 1987, 144)

As Voegelin (1991, 86) notes elsewhere, "While … might does not make right, it is unfortunately equally true that it makes an order, and that without it an order can be neither created nor maintained." These are issues we would like to forget because they point to the authoritarian origin of politics. In fact, the advent of totalitarian regimes seems to have inaugurated a political era of all or nothing, in which, as Arendt (1968, 141) explains, all means an undetermined infinity of forms of human living-together and nothing the inevitable doom of human beings, in an ultimate confrontation between good and evil in which war appears as catharsis, a last possibility for humanity to be born anew (Hesse 1999), when, having reached his lowest point, man is confronted with his bestial condition. In the impossibility of a return to God, "death is the greatest evil; and if life cannot be ordered through orientation of the soul toward a *summum bonum*, order will have to be motivated by fear of the *summum malum*." (Voegelin 1987, 182)

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