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LIBERALISM AND THE LEGITIMATION OF NATION-STATES:

AN HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

The ideological cement of the capitalist world-economy from 1789 to 1989 was liberalism (along with its correlative, albeit not derived, partner, scientism). The dates are quite precise. The French Revolution marks the entry onto the world political scene of liberalism as a significant ideological option. The fall of the Communisms in 1989 marks its exit.

The plausibility of these statements hinges, of course, on what we believe to be the essence of liberalism. Dictionaries are of little help in deciding this, and the library of books on liberalism not much more, for *liberalism* has been a rubber term. It is not merely that it has had many definitions; this is normal for any important political concept. It is that these definitions have varied so extensively that the term has been given directly opposite meanings. To take only the most current and obvious of examples, while Presidents Reagan and Bush fulminated against liberalism in their political diatribes in the United States, they were quite frequently referred to in European writings as "neoliberals."

To be sure, some would say that this linguistic reversal comes from the fact that we ought to regard political liberalism and economic liberalism as two separate intellectual positions, or even two separate streams of thought. How is it, then, that we have used the same word for both? And what are we to do with the category of cultural liberalism? Are countercultural hippies liberals? Are libertarians liberals? One could go on; there would be no point. This explanation of linguistic confusion is far too easy an out, since in fact liberalism has always expressed itself in all arenas of human activity. If the term liberalism is to be intelligently used, we must locate its core.

Liberalism must be situated in its historical context, and that context, I contend, is bounded by the dates 1789 to 1989. I am

interested in liberalism as an ideology and use ideology to mean a comprehensive, long-term political agenda intended to mobilize large numbers of people. In this sense, as I have argued previously,¹⁵ ideologies were neither needed nor possible before the transformation of the geoculture of the capitalist world-economy that was brought about by the French Revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath.

Prior to the French Revolution, the dominant Weltanschauung of the capitalist world-economy, as of other historical systems, was the normality of political stability. Sovereignty resided in the ruler, and the ruler's right to govern derived from some set of regulations concerning the acquisition of power, usually inheritance. Rulers were of course frequently challenged and even overthrown, but the replacement rulers always preached the same belief in the normality of stability. Political change was exceptional, to be justified exceptionally; when it occurred, it was not thought to set a precedent for further change.

The upheaval launched by the French Revolution—an upheaval felt all over Europe and beyond—transformed this mentality. The people had become the sovereign. All the efforts of the “reactionaries” from 1815 to 1848 would make little dent on the new mentalities. After 1848, no one would even seriously try again,¹⁶ at least until today. Indeed, change—all kinds of change, including political change—had become “normal.” It is precisely because this worldview took hold so rapidly that ideologies arose. They were the political agendas to be pursued *in the light of the normality of political change* and the correlative belief in popular sovereignty.

It was logical that conservatism would be the first response. Two of the classic works that are today considered progenitors of conservative thought, *Considérations sur la France* (1789) by Joseph de Maistre, and *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) by Edmund Burke, were written in the very heat of the first days of the revolution. In general, opponents of the French Revolution argued that only social ills could result from legitimating the normality of change. Yet they soon realized that an intransigent position had become socially impossible. During the period 1789 to 1848, there was an evolution of the conservative

position from one of total rejection of the new Weltanschauung to what might be called the dominant conservative ideology of the past 150 years: “normal” change ought to be as slow as possible and ought to be encouraged only when carefully justified as necessary to prevent the greater breakdown of social order.

Liberalism was the ideological response to conservatism. The very term *liberal* (in noun form), as we know, emerged only in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Generally speaking, in the period before 1848, there was a blurred field of persons who overtly (or covertly, in the case of the English) supported the ideals of the French Revolution. The field included persons with such diverse labels as republicans, radicals, Jacobins, social reformers, socialists, and liberals.¹⁷

In the world revolution of 1848, there were really only two camps, the Party of Order and the Party of Movement, representing, respectively, conservative and liberal ideology, or, if one wishes to use another terminology with origins in the French Revolution, the Right and the Left. It was only after 1848 that socialism emerged as a truly distinctive ideology different from, and opposed to, liberalism. The world-system then entered into the period of the trimodal ideological spectrum with which we are all familiar. Liberalism came to represent the center of the political hemicycle and thus came into the position of occupying center stage as well (to shift metaphors slightly, but deliberately).

The essential distinction between liberalism and socialism, at the moment of disjuncture between the two streams, was not over the desirability or even the inevitability of change (or progress). As a matter of fact, this view of change formed their common trunk. The difference was, rather, ideological; that is, the difference was one of political agenda. Liberals believed that the course of social amelioration was, or ought to be, a steady one, based on both a rational assessment made by specialists of existing problems and a continuing conscious attempt by political leaders, in the light of that assessment, to introduce intelligent social reforms. The agenda of the socialists was fueled by skepticism over whether reformists could accomplish significant change through intelligent good will and largely on their own. Socialists wished to go further faster,

and argued that without considerable popular pressure the process would not result in progress. Progress was inevitable only because popular pressure was inevitable. The specialists by themselves were impotent.

The world revolution of 1848 was a turning point in the political strategies of all three ideological currents. From the failures of 1848 the socialists learned that it was doubtful that anything much could be accomplished by relying either on spontaneous political uprising or communitarian withdrawal. State structures were too strong, and repression was too easy and too efficacious. It was only after 1848 that socialists began seriously to organize parties, trade unions, and workers' organizations in general, with an eye on long-term political conquest of the state structures. In this post-1848 period the two-stage socialist strategy was born. This strategy was common to the two main wings of the socialist movement, the Second International Social-Democrats and the Third International Communists, that would later emerge. The two stages were quite simple: first, obtain state power; second, use the state power to transform the society (or arrive at socialism).

The conservatives also learned a lesson from 1848. Workers' insurrections had become a real political possibility, and, while they were put down with comparative ease in 1848, the future was more cloudy. Furthermore, conservatives noticed that social revolutions and nationalist revolutions, while not at all the same thing, might develop a dangerous tendency to overlap and to reinforce each other on the world-systemic stage. It followed that something concrete had to be done to avert such uprisings at a point in time earlier than the uprisings themselves. This something might be called the construction of more integrated national societies.

If one looks carefully at these new socialist and conservative strategies, each in effect was coming closer to the liberal notion of ongoing, managed, rational normal change. What was liberal strategy at this time? The liberals were groping with two main ideas as the keys to managed, rational, normal change. The principal problem, it was plain for everyone to see, was that the industrialization of Western Europe and North America involved a

necessary process of urbanization and long-term transformation of previously rural populations into an urban proletariat.¹⁸ The socialists proposed to organize this proletariat, and it was clear already from what had happened in the 1830s and 1840s that they were organizable.

The solution that liberalism could offer to this danger to social order, and therefore to rational social development, was to make concessions to the working classes: some participation in political power, and some share of the surplus value. The problem, however, was how to give the working classes enough to make them hesitate to be disruptive, but not so much as to threaten seriously the ceaseless and expanding accumulation of capital that was the *raison d'être* of the capitalist world-economy and the prime consideration of the ruling strata.

What one can say about Liberals between 1848 and 1914—capital "L" Liberals being the political incarnation of small "l" liberalism as an ideology—is that they dithered for all that time, never quite sure how daring to be, never quite knowing how many concessions were too much, or how few were too little. The political result of the dithering was that the political ball was taken away from capital "L" Liberals as part of the process in which small "l" liberalism triumphed definitely as the dominant ideology of the world-system.¹⁹

What occurred from 1848 to 1914 was doubly curious. First, the practitioners of all three ideologies turned from a theoretical antistate position to one of seeking to strengthen and reinforce in practice the state structures in multiple ways. Second, the liberal strategy was in fact put into effect by the combined effort of conservatives and socialists.

The shift from ruler to people as the locus of theoretical sovereignty had opened the question of whether any particular state reflected the people's will. This was the existential basis of the classic antinomy—state versus society—that so dominated nineteenth-century political theory. There could be no doubt that the logic of popular sovereignty meant that one was obliged to favor society over state in any conflict. Society and the people's will were in effect synonymous. It is indeed a measure of the degree to

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which popular sovereignty was (implicitly and explicitly) accepted by all three ideological streams that they all claimed to defend primarily the interests of society, and invoked, therefore, hostility toward the state.

Of course, the three schools of thought offered different explanations for hostility to the state. For conservatives, the state seemed to be an actor of the present that, if it took any innovative positions, would be going against the traditional bastions of society and social order—the family, the community, the Church, and, of course, the monarchy. The presence of the monarchy on this list was itself a tacit admission of the dominance of the concept of popular sovereignty; if a king were truly sovereign, he would be able to legislate in the present. Indeed, the opposition of the Legitimists to Louis XVIII, not to speak of their opposition to Louis-Philippe, was based precisely on this premise.²⁰ The Legitimists saw these two kings, by virtue of their acceptance of the concept of the Charter, as having yielded to the thesis that the state could legislate against tradition. Hence, in the name of the traditional authority of the king, they opposed the contemporary real authority of the king and the state.

The theoretical hostility of liberalism to the state is so fundamental that most writers regard the defining characteristic of liberalism to be the night-watchman doctrine of the state. The presumed *mot d'ordre* is laissez-faire. There is no doubt that liberal ideologists and politicians have spoken regularly and frequently on the importance of removing the state's hand from the market, and quite often, but perhaps less frequently, of keeping the state from impinging upon decision making in the social arena. The reification of the individual, and the view that the sovereign people is composed of individuals with "inalienable rights," constitute the foundation of this deep suspicion of the state.

Finally, we know that socialists of all persuasions found their justification in the needs and will of society, against what they considered the oppressive (and class-biased) actions of the state. Yet, it is equally crucial to note, all three ideologies pushed *in practice* toward that real increase in state power and efficacy in decision making and intrusiveness that has been the historical

trajectory of the modern world-system in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It is commonplace that socialist ideology in practice led to the reinforcement of state structures. The *Communist Manifesto* is quite specific in this regard:

We have seen . . . that the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to establish democracy.

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class, and to increase the total of productive force as rapidly as possible.

Furthermore, on the road to the "first step," the *Manifesto* adds: "The Communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class." This latter intention translated itself in the actions not only of Marxist social-democratic parties but also of non-Marxist socialists (such as the Labour Party): a constant pressure for state intervention to regulate conditions of the workplace, the establishment by the state of income transfer structures, and both the legalization and the legitimation by the state of working-class organizational activities.

Were conservatives less likely to support in practice an expansion of the role of the state? We may leave aside the historic link of conservative political forces with landed proprietors and their consequent defense of varieties of state protection of agrarian interests, which had been inherited from earlier times. In their response to the new industrialism and its social consequences, did conservatives feel the state should play no role in counteracting what they saw as social disintegration? Of course not. Lord Cecil expressed with prudence the heart of the conservative ideology toward the state: "[A]s long as State action does not involve what is unjust or oppressive, it cannot be said that the

principles of Conservatism are hostile to it."²¹ The conservative problem was very simple. To get society nearer to the social order they found preferable, especially given the post-1789 rapid evolution of societal structures, they needed the intervention of the state.²²

As for liberals, have they ever taken the night-watchman state concept seriously, as opposed to rhetorically? Have they not from the beginning instead viewed the state as the optimal instrument of rationality? Was this not the essence of Jeremy Bentham's philosophic radicalism?²³ Did John Stuart Mill, epitome of liberal thought, argue differently? In Great Britain, at the very moment that the liberals sought to get the state out of agricultural protectionism they simultaneously sought to get the state into factory legislation. It is L. T. Hobhouse who, in my view, summarized best the actual practice of liberals concerning the state:

It appears then that the true distinction is not between self-regulating and other-regulating actions, but between coercive and noncoercive actions. The function of State coercion is to overcome individual coercion, and, of course, coercion exercised by any association of individuals within the State.²⁴

This convergence of the three ideologies on the reinforcement of state structures is what eliminated a separate political role for capital "L" Liberals. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the conservatives became liberal-conservatives and the socialists became liberal-socialists. What place was there, then, for liberal-liberals?

The evolving political reality is quite visible not merely in the evolution of the rhetoric but also in the political process itself. The liberal objective of increasing political participation of the working classes pointed toward universal suffrage. The liberal objective of allowing workers' participation in the distribution of surplus value pointed toward the welfare state. Yet the greatest breakthroughs in these two fields—which served as models for all of Europe—were the doing of two "enlightened Conservatives,"

Disraeli and Bismarck. It was they who were willing to make the great leap that the Liberals never dared to make.

No doubt, the enlightened conservatives made the leap under socialist pressure. The working classes demanded the suffrage, and they demanded the benefits we today call the welfare state. Had they never demanded these changes, it is unlikely the conservatives would have conceded them. To tame the working classes, the enlightened conservatives pushed for timely concessions, since this would integrate and deradicalize the proletariat. It is an historic irony that socialist tactics fed into this correct perception of the enlightened conservatives.

A final liberal theme was implemented by their rivals. The liberals were the first to attempt to realize popular sovereignty via the building of a national spirit. Conservatives and socialists were in theory more recalcitrant. The nation was not a traditional conservative communal category, and the socialists affected an anti-nationalist internationalism. In theory, only the liberals saw the nation as the appropriate summation of individual wills.

Yet, as the nineteenth century progressed, it was the conservatives who seized the banners of patriotism and imperialism. It was the socialists, moreover, who first and most effectively integrated the "outlying" zones into their respective nation-states. Witness the strength of the British Labour Party in Wales and Scotland, the strength of French socialists in Occitania, and the strength of Italian socialists in the south. The nationalism of the socialist parties was finally confessed and confirmed by their rallying to the flags in August 1914. The European working classes rewarded with their loyalty the liberal states that had made concessions to them. They legitimated their states.

As Schapiro says, "when the nineteenth century ended historically in 1914, liberalism had become the accepted way of political life in Europe."²⁵ But Liberal parties were dying out. The core countries of the capitalist world-economy were all moving toward a de facto ideological split: on the one side were liberal-conservatives and on the other liberal-socialists. This split was usually reflected, more or less directly, in the party structures.

The liberal agenda had achieved a great success. The working

classes of the core countries had indeed been integrated into the ongoing national political process in such a way that they posed no threat to the functioning of the capitalist world-economy. Of course this refers only to the working classes of the core countries. The First World War reopened the whole question on a world scale, where the whole scenario would be repeated.

On a world scale, conservatives were back to their pre-1848 position. Imperial rule of the lands of others was considered beneficent for the natives and desirable both for world society and for the particular metropole. Furthermore, there was no reason why it should ever end. Empire in the conservative vision was eternal, at least for barbarous zones. Should there be any doubt about this, we need merely to refer to the concept of class-C mandates in the League of Nations structure.

Socialist ideology as antiliberalism was renewed by the Russian Revolution and the construction of Marxism-Leninism as a new political agenda. The heart of Leninism was the denunciation of other social-democrats for having become liberal-socialists, and hence for no longer being antisystemic. This perception, as we have argued, was quite correct. Leninism was therefore basically a call for the return to the original socialist agenda—going further faster by using popular pressure in the process of inevitable social change. This was translated concretely into a set of revolutionary tactics espoused by the Third International and incarnated by the “Twenty-One Demands.”

Liberalism, having largely lost its political function as an autonomous political grouping on the national scene of the core countries, renewed its role as the expression of an agenda for dealing with the popular classes of the noncore countries, what today we call the South. Its heralds were first Woodrow Wilson and then Franklin Roosevelt. Wilson and Roosevelt took the two main proposals of mid-nineteenth-century liberals—universal suffrage and the welfare state—and adapted them to the world level.

Wilson’s call for the self-determination of nations was the world equivalent of suffrage. As every individual should have an equal vote within states, so every state should be sovereign and equal in the world polity. Roosevelt renewed this call during the Second

World War and added to it the need for what would come to be called the “economic development of underdeveloped countries,” to be furthered by “technical assistance” and “aid.” This was intended to be the functional equivalent on the world scene of the welfare state, an attempt to achieve a partial and limited redistribution of surplus value, now *world* surplus value.

History would now repeat itself more or less. The liberals proclaimed the agenda, but they dithered. The agenda was finally implemented by a coalescence of socialist popular pressure (primarily the national liberation movements) and the bold leaps of enlightened conservatives like, for example, de Gaulle. In the process, from 1917 to the 1960s, the conservatives were transformed into liberal-conservatives on the world scene. They embraced the need for decolonization and “development.” It was Harold Macmillan who lectured the South African parliament in 1960 on bending with “the wind of change.” Meanwhile, the Leninists were transformed into liberal-socialists, a process culminating in Gorbachev, but one that had already started with Stalin and Mao Zedong. There were two crucial elements in the deradicalization of Leninism: the acceptance of the objective of socialism within one country, defining it as a catching-up industrialization; and the search for national power and advantage within the interstate system.

Thus, both conservatives and socialists accepted the world-scale liberal agenda of self-determination (also called national liberation) and economic development (sometimes called construction of socialism). However, on a world scale, the liberal agenda could not possibly have had the same success it had had on a national scale in the core countries in the 1848 to 1914 period, and even more in the period following the end of the Second World War. And this for two reasons.

First, it was not possible on a world scale to provide the third element in the national “historic compromises”—national solidarity—that had held in check the class struggle. This third element had provided the final seal to the national liberal programs of suffrage and the welfare state in Western Europe and North America. A world nationalism is precisely theoretically

impossible, since there is no one against whom to profess it.²⁶ Second, however, and more important, the transfer of income involved in instituting the welfare state in core countries was possible because the total sum thereby transferred was not so large as to threaten the accumulation of capital on a world scale. This would not be true were the transfers to be replicated worldwide, especially given the inherently polarizing nature of capitalist accumulation.

Some time was to pass before the reality of the impossibility of closing the North-South gap on a world scale fully entered the consciousness of people around the world. Indeed, the post-1945 period initially created an aura of optimism that was very bracing. Worldwide decolonialization, plus the incredible expansion of the world-economy and its dribble-down benefits, led to the flourishing of a rosy vision of reformist transformation (all the sweeter in that revolutionary rhetoric masked the reformist tactics). It is crucial to see that, in this period, the so-called socialist bloc served as the fig leaf of world capitalism by containing intemperate discontent and holding out the promise, in Khrushchev's unforgettable words, that "we will bury you."

In the 1960s, triumphalism still prevented a sober assessment of capitalist reality. The world revolution of 1968, for all its euphoria, intruded the first note of realism. The world revolution of 1968 continued for two decades, we shall argue, culminating in the collapse of the Communists in 1989. On a world-historical stage, 1968 and 1989 constituted a single grand event.²⁷ The meaning of this event is the disintegration of liberal ideology, the end of a two-century era.

What was the note of reality that 1968 intruded? It was exactly the theme we are arguing here, that the history of the world-system for more than a century had been the history of the triumph of liberal ideology and that the Old Left antisystemic movements had become what I have been calling "liberal-socialists." The revolutionaries of 1968 presented the first serious intellectual challenge to the trimodal model of ideology—conservative, liberal, and socialist—by insisting that it was liberalism alone that was being preached, and that it was liberalism that was the "problem."

Ironically, the first consequence of this break in the legitimacy of the liberal consensus was the seeming revival of both conservative and socialist ideologies. All of a sudden, neoconservative ideologues seemed to attract a serious audience, as did neosocialist ones (for example, the numerous Maoist sects of the 1970s). The effervescence of 1968 soon died down and was repressed. Yet the Humpty Dumpty of a liberal consensus could not be put together again. Furthermore, the times were against liberal optimism. The world-economy entered the long B-phase of stagnation that began in 1967–1973 and is not yet completed. This is not the place to review in detail the economic history of the world-system in the 1970s and 1980s—the oil shock and the consequent recentralization of capital, the debt crisis first of the Third World (plus the socialist bloc), then of the United States, and the shift of capital from productive enterprises to financial speculation.

The cumulative effect of the shock of the 1968 revolution, plus the very negative consequences of the long downturn in the world-economy for over two-thirds of the countries of the world, had an immense impact on the mentalities of the world's peoples. In the 1960s, optimism reigned so high that the United Nations proclaimed that the 1970s would be the "Development Decade." It turned out to be exactly the opposite. For most of the Third World, it was a period of retrocession. One by one, states succumbed to the reality that the gap would not be closed in any foreseeable future. State policies concentrated on begging, borrowing, and stealing to keep budgets from collapse.

The general economic difficulties were even a bigger blow ideologically than they were economically or politically. Hardest hit were those who preached the ideology of liberal reformism most loudly—first the radical national liberation movements, then the so-called Communist regimes. Today in many (perhaps most) of these countries, the slogans of the free market are on everyone's lips. Yet these are slogans of desperation. Few really believe (or will believe for very long) that this will make much difference, and those few are likely to be disappointed. Rather, there has been a tacit claim on world sympathy and charity and, as we well know, such claims have rarely had serious historical consequences.

The politicians and publicists of the core countries are so bemused by their own rhetoric that they believe that something called Communism has collapsed, and seem blind to the fact that it is the liberal promise that has collapsed. The consequences will not take long to be upon us, for liberalism as an ideology in fact depended on an "enlightened" (as opposed to a cramped) view of the interests of the upper strata. This, in turn, depended on pressure from popular forces that was both strong and tamed in form. Such contained pressure in turn depended on the credibility of the process for the lower strata. It is intermeshed. If you lose credibility, you lose pressure in a tamed form. If you lose pressure in a tamed form, you lose the readiness for concessions from the upper strata.

A certain set of ideologies formed on the ground of the new mentalities created by the French Revolution. The world revolution of 1848 set in motion an historical process that led to the triumph of liberalism as an ideology and the integration of the working classes. The First World War renewed the issue on a world scale. The process was repeated but could not be fulfilled. The world revolution of 1968 unraveled the ideological consensus, and the twenty years that followed saw the undoing of the credibility of liberalism, of which the collapse of the Communisms in 1989 was the culmination.

We have entered a new era in terms of mentalities. On the one hand, there is the passionate call for democracy. This call is not a fulfillment of liberalism, however, but its rejection. It is a statement that the present world-system is undemocratic because economic well-being is not equally shared, because political power is not in fact equally shared. Social disintegration, not progressive change, is now coming to be seen as normal. Further, when there is social disintegration, people look for protection.

As people once turned to the state to secure change, they are now turning to group solidarities (all kinds of groups) to provide protection. This is a different ball game altogether. How it will be played over the next fifty years or so is very unsure, both because we haven't seen how it works and because the possible fluctuations of a disintegrating world-system are very great. We shall

surely not be able to navigate this period very well if we are unclear about the fact that none of the ideologies—that is, the agendas for political action—that have governed our actions for the last two hundred years are very serviceable for the coming period.

The Persian Gulf crisis marked the onset of the new world disorder. Disorder is not necessarily worse (or better) than order. However, it requires a different mode of action and reaction. It is scarcely sensible to call it order, or the triumph of liberalism, which is the same thing.