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JENNIFER PITTS

Domenico Losurdo

LIBERALISM

A counter-history

Translated by Gregory Elliott
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How, and why, then, should we tell the history of liberalism today?

Liberalism is, for better and worse, the dominant ideology in the post-Cold War global north, defining political argument across much of the political spectrum. In its incarnation as neoliberalism, it has justified the political and economic restructuring of societies on every continent, with often dire effects. If its origins lie in the very particular conditions of the industrializing societies of early modern north-west Europe, it has always been formulated in universal terms and entertained universal ambitions. Self-declared advocates continue to try to locate the philosophical core of the liberal tradition, though the liberalism they defend tends to be more chastened and tentative than the old triumphant model, if still defiant in the face of denigration from the Right. In this vein, Alan Wolfe, in *The Future of Liberalism* (2009), called liberalism a “set of dispositions toward the world” rather than a collection of abstract propositions or policy positions, and the dispositions he emphasized are generous ones: a sympathy for equality, an inclination to deliberate, a commitment to tolerance, and an appreciation for openness. Liberalism’s long complicity with empire went unmentioned; and as for the notorious acceptance of slavery by iconic liberal figures like Thomas Jefferson, Wolfe settled for the claim that in the eighteenth century, the goal of equality was “so lofty that it never came down to earth”. Wolfe’s portrait of liberalism has a clear ideological purpose: to galvanize support for political positions he fears are under threat in the United States, such as the separation of Church and State, or openness to immigration (and assimilation of immigrants).

In a book first published in Italian in 2005, the philosopher Domenico Losurdo set out to discredit such apologies, scrutinizing, he claims, “not liberal thought in its abstract purity”, but liberalism’s uglier “concrete reality”: the disturbing prejudices held by liberal thinkers and the coercive practices of liberal states. For Losurdo, support for chattel slavery was not only typical of liberalism, it epitomized the patterns of hierarchy, exclusion and domination that lie at liberalism’s core. Far from being an ideology of emancipation, he argues, liberalism has always been deeply invested in drawing a sharp division between us and them, between what he calls the sacred and the profane, or the community of the free (the propertied, the civilized) and those they see as little better than beasts or inert nature (whether chattel slaves, Native Americans, or the poor). Liberalism, in his view, is above all an ideology of the privileged that justifies their own freedom and their domination and exclusion of the many beyond the pale. Occa-

sionally it involves rearguard actions when some among the privileged grudgingly grant “concessions” to the excluded multitudes: emancipation, civil rights, the vote. He reduces any philosophical or ideological disagreements among liberals to divisions between those in the privileged group who feel “forced” to make these concessions, and the even more reactionary “intransigent sectors” who consider them a “scandal”. The idea that liberals may be committed in principle (even if ambivalently or anxiously) to equality or to the political and social emancipation of subjugated groups would seem, in his view, to be either naivety or cant.

Liberalism: *A counter-history* is a book of wide reference and real erudition, and it is altogether convincing on the history of nineteenth-century liberals’ ideological support for European imperialism. Losurdo also rightly suggests that the relative equality among whites in colonial America fed on the exclusion of blacks and Native Americans, a theme powerfully developed by Aziz Rana in *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (2010). Yet Losurdo’s interpretative posture is often extravagantly ungenerous. (He is fortunate in his translator: Gregory Elliott, the author of books on socialism and Marxist thought, has rendered Losurdo’s Italian elegantly, as well as the many French quotations, though the use of “redskin” as the term of choice for Native Americans or American Indians is a bit jarring.) Losurdo’s approach, too often tendentious and moralizing, is more “counter” than history, for little changes in this story. Liberals, from Locke through the Victorians and into the twentieth century, are always bent on excluding and dehumanizing those they see as the uncivilized (slaves, “redskins”, the poor). Losurdo strings together passages from disparate thinkers to construct “liberal” positions in favour of eugenicism, punitive workhouses and the extermination of Native Americans. These passages are often duly dismaying: Bentham’s authoritarian streak is on chilling display in his argument for “pauper management improved”; Tocqueville is shockingly ruthless in his calls for war on Algerian villagers.

But this is a history as partial as any apology. On any given topic, Losurdo presents the most unsavoury positions as liberal by marshalling damning evidence from thinkers as diverse as Locke, Burke, Bentham, Disraeli, Bismarck and General Sherman: anyone who ever identified himself as liberal or might with any plausibility at all be seen as a member of a liberal tradition, even one constructed long after his death. (Perhaps tellingly, there are almost no women in the book: Germaine de Staël and Hannah Arendt alone come in for passing mentions.) John C. Calhoun, the South Carolina defender of slavery and states’ rights, represents one major liberal view on slavery; Burke the liberal response to the French Revolution. Some exemplars can only at a stretch be conceived as liberals at all: Andrew Fletcher, the Scot who called for enslaving the working poor; Bernard Mandeville, the English satirist who

excoriated charity schools on the grounds that the poor must be kept ignorant if they were diligently and cheerfully to supply the labour needed to support a leisured class; or Francis Hutcheson, the moral philosopher and hostile critic of Mandeville, who had little to say about politics but did approve slavery as a last-resort punishment for “idle vagrants”. All three, like many of the figures treated in the book, lived well before “liberal” became a recognizable label of political identification. Losurdo’s main argument for including them seems to be that they were not “isolated” figures in societies he deems liberal, namely Britain after the Glorious Revolution, and America.

But Losurdo is at his most misleading in his accusations that various more conventional liberals (John Locke, Adam Smith, Abbé Sieyès) contributed to the “de-humanization” of European wage-labourers. In many of the passages he cites, these thinkers were criticizing the conditions of society – hunger, absence of education, mind-numbing drudgery – that prevent labourers from developing their equal natural capacities for reason and moral imagination. Some of their responses were not as humane or progressive as we might like: Locke’s solution for the problem of chronic hunger among the children of the unemployed was to create “working-schools” for children aged three to fourteen, where bakers would bring parish-provided bread every day, but where any training was solely vocational and the proceeds of the children’s labour went to offset the cost of feeding them. But Smith, who comes in equally for Losurdo’s abuse for noting that repetitive factory labour renders workers “stupid and ignorant”, made that point in order to insist that governments should counteract this tendency with robust education for the poor, paid for almost entirely by the public (he thought a small fee affordable by poor families would interest them in their children’s education). Instruction was to include reading, arithmetic and the basic principles of geometry and mechanics, “the necessary introduction to the most sublime as well as to the most useful sciences”. If the emerging social orders that were immiserizing and degrading the working poor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can be described as liberal, some of the sharpest critics of these conditions and the tragedy of their consequences for vast portions of society were precisely these liberal thinkers.

Losurdo asks his readers to judge the liberalism of various figures. Who is “more liberal”: Locke and John C. Calhoun, who defended slavery (to different extents)? Or Smith, who denounced slavery but noted that it is more easily abolished under despotism than representative government, and so, according to Losurdo, “in at least one concrete instance, expressed his preference for ‘despotic government’”? (In fact, Smith didn’t express a preference so much as describe a paradox.) Similarly, “we are obliged to ask” whether Abraham Lincoln, with his suspension of habeas corpus, was more liberal than were Northerners pleading for compromise, or indeed than his Southern adversaries with their passionate defence of their freedoms. But we are not so obliged, for these are the wrong questions to be asking. Losurdo’s necessarily inconclusive litmus tests prove nothing except that no one he

labels liberal meets his test of moral or ideological purity. He does hive off the category of "radical", which seems to capture those who do pass the test: Condorcet, supporters of the Haitian revolution, Simón Bolívar and other Latin Americans committed to the political equality of all races. But Bolívar was no less "liberal" for distancing himself from US policies of slavery and racial hierarchy: he can equally be seen on the contrary as offering an alternative and less hypocritical liberalism.

It would be possible to counter Losurdo's many damning statements by liberals in support of slavery and empire, and against laws protecting workers or giving them the vote, with equally liberal passages taking different positions on these questions: Burke calling for Catholic emancipation in Ireland; Smith approving wage regulations as long as they are in favour of workers and not employers; John Stuart Mill demanding working-class and women's suffrage and supporting trade unions. What would be the point? What are we trying to understand when we seek to give an account of a liberal position on a given issue, or to narrate histories of liberalism? And what would a history of liberalism look like that was neither vindication nor hatchet job?

We might return to the idea of liberalism as a set of characteristic dispositions, and ask in a more critical vein what sorts of arguments or policies have tended to emerge from these inclinations under various historical circum-

stances. What have been liberals' recurrent preoccupations? What sorts of apparent inconsistencies have they habitually betrayed, and what do these tell us about liberal commitments? When are seeming inconsistencies evidence of hypocrisy or a self-interested refusal to extend privileges claimed on behalf of one group to others? When do they reveal unexamined cultural prejudices, or racism? When do they point to other, perhaps unacknowledged but no less characteristic, liberal dispositions?

It's not clear that a unified story can be told about all of this. Jefferson's agonized, if perhaps cowardly, recognition of slavery's inconsistency with his belief in the self-evident truth of human equality differed radically from Calhoun's pugnacious defence of the "peculiar institution" as civilizing and beneficent and not "in the slightest degree inconsistent with the highest and purest principles of freedom". Mill and Tocqueville both supported European colonial rule with considerable enthusiasm. But where Mill did so with blithe confidence in colonial officials' basic good intentions and the ultimately happy effects of empire, Tocqueville recognized that colonial rule impoverished and "barbarized" its subjects rather than civilized them, but embraced the project all the same, impressed by the "grandeur" of empire and convinced that France's international reputation and power required colonies.

At the same time, the often enthusiastic support among nineteenth-century liberals for European imperial rule over the non-

European world betrays habitual liberal postures or dispositions that are ignored in the standard encomiums. Liberals have shared a tendency to self-congratulation; a habitual conviction that their own culturally particular beliefs, values and practices are universally valid; a tendency to regard those who disagree with them not simply as wrong (much less merely as different) but also as retrograde or irrational. These tendencies have marked not just liberalism at the peak of formal empire but also later incarnations: modernization theory of the post-war period; the neo-liberal Washington Consensus.

But liberalism has encompassed other tendencies, too: an inclination to self-criticism, an alertness to the unintended consequences of human actions and a wariness about the exercise of power, a belief that everyone is the best judge of his or her own interests, desires and life-projects. If many Europeans, liberals and others, have denigrated non-Europeans as savages or children, others equally "liberal" attacked precisely such views as presumptuous and deluded. Ever alert to hypocrisy and self-delusion, Samuel Johnson condemned the "English barbarians" in the West Indies whose actions proved that "however absurd and foolish, however wicked and injurious", the idea that the native peoples were little better than beasts "still continues to prevail". He pointed out that "Europeans have scarcely visited any coast but to gratify avarice, and extend corruption; to arrogate dominion without right, and practise

cruelty without incentive", and he toasted "the next insurrection of the Negroes in the West Indies". Burke strove for years to convince the British public that "our distressed fellow-citizens in India" did not live "in a degraded, servile state", but had laws and rights like Europeans. Smith lamented that Europeans had such disproportionate force at their disposal that they "were enabled to commit with impunity every sort of injustice in those remote countries". He had little faith in voluntary reform and thought that the only hope was a greater "equality of courage and force which, by inspiring mutual fear, can alone overawe the injustice of independent nations into some sort of respect for the rights of one another". All were struck by the tendency of the powerful to assume their own moral superiority. Too many liberals, convinced of the rightness of their views and seduced by their own power, have succumbed to that temptation. It is the signature vice of the imperial liberal, but not, perhaps, liberalism's unavoidable fate.

Domenico Losurdo, who professes to abhor the posture of superiority he sees in liberalism, is himself persistently superior towards the authors he discusses. Rather than acknowledging the complexity of the dilemmas his figures faced, their ambivalence, internal disagreements, and compromises, he reduces the history of liberalism to a rogues' gallery of racists and authoritarians. In doing so he closes off more fruitful critical approaches to the history of liberalism.

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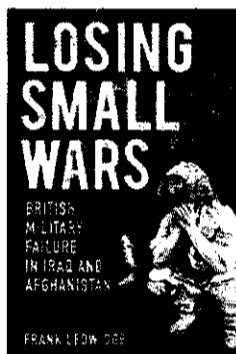
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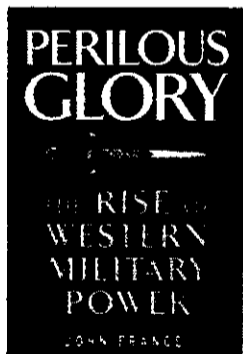
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