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## America's 'Liberalism' & Other Inhumane Styles of Governance at Home and Internationally



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### The Psycho-Politics of Geopolitical Depression

It should not be all about Trump, although his election in 2016 as U.S. president is symptomatic of a menacing national tailspin. This downward political drift in the United States, not only imperils Americans, but threatens the world with multiple catastrophes, the most worrisome of which involves Trump's double embrace of nuclearism and climate denialism. Unfortunately at present, the U.S. global role cannot be easily replaced, although it always had its serious problematic aspects and should not be sentimentalized,

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not least of which were associated with its many often crude military and paramilitary efforts to block the tide of progressive empowerment in the post-colonial world: first, as the global guardian of capitalism, and later, as the self-anointed bearer of human rights and democracy for the benefit of the world's unenlightened and often shackled masses. As disturbing, has been the American leading role in the emergence and evolution of nuclearism and its foot-dragging bipartisan responses to ecological challenges.

During the early post-Cold War presidencies of George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, Washington was busy promoting the expansion of 'market-based constitutionalism' as supposedly leading the whole world to a bright global future, but such plans backfired badly, especially in the testing grounds of the Middle East, where intervention produced neither democracy nor order, but gave rise to turmoil, violence, and suffering that disrupted the lives of the peoples of the region. These democratizing 'crusades' were carried out beneath banners proclaiming 'enlargement' (the expansion of democratic forms of governance to additional countries) and 'democracy promotion' (induced by regime-changing military interventions and coercive diplomacy).

Democracy as a term of art included the affirmation of property rights and market fundamentalism.

Trump comes along, building upon this inherited warrior phase of triumphalist global leadership that was a legacy of the Cold War, dramatized by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting supposed geopolitical vacuum. The United States sought to fill this vacuum, including an ideological arrogance that underpinned its shameless reliance upon the most powerful military machine in history to get its way all over the planet, thereby forfeiting the opportunity to strengthen international law and UN as well as eliminate nuclear weaponry. Seemingly more benignly the American leadership role also strongly reflected its globally endorsed popular culture in dress, music, and food as well as appreciated for its encouragement of cooperative arrangements, the constitutional atmosphere of diversity and governmental moderation in the American heartland, and consumerist conceptions of human happiness.

Trump's diplomacy defiantly turns its back on this softer, gentler (albeit nevertheless deficient) profile of American leadership. The United States is now becoming a country that bargains, intimidates, even bullies to gain every possible advantage in its international dealings, whether at the UN, in trade negotiations, or in an array of bilateral and regional dealings concerning global warming and security policy, with almost every international dealing being converted into a demeaning win/lose transaction. Trump's antiquated bluster

about 'America, First' has stripped away the earlier more mellow and selectively constructive win/win claims of 'America, Liberal Global Leader.' By turning away from this earlier brand of self-interested 'liberal internationalism' the U.S. is losing many of these benefits that often accrued from international cooperation and win/win understandings of 21<sup>st</sup> century statecraft, at least as conducted within the structural and ideological boundaries of neoliberal globalization and the geopolitical management of global security.

More concretely, Trump's presidency has so far meant a record military budget, relaxed rules of military engagement, geopolitical militarism, irresponsible regional coercive diplomacy, a regressive view that the UN is worthless except as an enemy-bashing venue, a negative assessment of multilateral treaties promoting a cooperative approach to climate change and international trade, as well as a hawkish approach to nuclear weaponry that features bravado, exhibits unilateralism, and in the end, employs on hard power and irresponsible threats to achieve goals formerly often pursued by *liberal international* global leadership. Without exaggerating the benefits and contributions of liberal internationalism, it did give science and rationality their due, was willing to help *at the margins* those suffering from slow and uneven economic and social development, and relied on international cooperation through lawmaking and the UN to the extent *feasible*, which was always less than what was *necessary* and *desirable*, but at least, not taking such a cynical and materialist view of the feasible as to create a condition of policy paralysis on urgent issues of global scope (e.g. climate change, nuclearism, migration).

Trump's ideological prism, which is alarmingly similar to that of the many other leaders throughout the world who have recently been leaning further and further rightwards. The internal politics of many states has turned toward chauvinistic and mean-spirited forms of autocratic nationalism, while cooperation in meeting common global challenges has almost disappeared. Instead of hope and progress, the collective consciousness of humanity is mired in despair and denial, and what is more, the dialectics of history seem to be slumbering, with elites and even counter-elites afraid of utopias on the basis of a widespread (mis)reading of 20<sup>th</sup> century political experience, seemingly entrapped in cages constructed by predatory capitalism and rapacious militarism, designed to render futile visions of change adapted to the realities of present and emergent historical circumstances. Inside these capitalist and militarist boxes there is no oxygen to sustain liberating moral, political, and cultural imaginings. Trump is not only a distasteful and dangerously dysfunctional leader of the most powerful and influential political actor in the

world. He is also a terrifying metaphor of an anachronistic world order stuck in the thick mud of mindlessness when it comes to fashioning transformative responses to fundamental challenges to the ways our political, economic, and spiritual life have been organized in the modern era of territorial sovereign states.

### **America's 'Liberalism' Observed**

In American political discourse the word 'liberal' denotes someone who is devoted to humane values, supports such civil society actors as Human Rights Watch and Planned Parenthood, hopes that U.S. foreign policy generally conforms to international law and be quietly respectful of the UN (while coping skillfully with its alleged anti-Israel bias), is rabidly anti-Trump, but considered Sanders either an unrealistic or undesirable alternative to Clinton, and currently hopes for that the 2020 presidential contender will be chosen from familiar, seasoned sources, which means Joe Biden, or if not, then Sherrod Brown or Corey Booker (Senators from Ohio and New Jersey). This kind of 'liberal' thinking scoffs at the idea of Oprah or Michelle Obama as credible candidates supposedly because they lack political experience, but actually because they do not project an identity associated with the Democratic Party organizational nexus. Such liberals support Israel, despite some misgivings about the expansion of settlements and Netanyahu's style of leadership, and continue to believe that America occupies the high moral ground in international relations due to its support of 'human rights' (as understood as limited to social and political rights) and its constitutionalism and relatively open society at home.

In my view, such a conception of liberalism if more correctly understood as 'illiberal' in its essence under present world historical circumstances, at least in its American usage. The European usage of 'liberal' is centered on affirming a market-based economy of capitalism as preferable to the sort of state-managed economy attributed to socialism, and little else. In this sense, the U.S. remains truly liberal, but this is not the main valence of the term in its American usage, which is as a term of opprobrium in the hands of Republicans who brand their Democratic opponents as 'liberals,' which is then falsely conflated with 'left' politics, and even 'socialism.' Remember that George H.W. Bush resorted to villifying his Democratic opponent, Michael Dukakis, by identifying him with the American Civil Liberties Union, which he associated with being 'in left field.'

More recently, the Trump base characterizes the Obama presidency as 'leftist' and 'socialist,' which is inaccurate and confusing. At most, on issue of domestic concern its policies could be characterized as 'liberal' or centrist, with no structural critique of capitalism or the American global imperial role. 'Conservative,' 'American,' 'Nationalist,'

and 'Patriotic' are asserted as alternatives to what is being opposed. Part of this word game is to conflate 'liberal' with 'left' or 'socialist,' thereby depriving either term of any kind of usable meaning.

Such ideological and polemical labeling practices are confusing and wrong, muddling political categories. To be *genuinely* left in American politics means to care for the poor and homeless, and not be primarily preoccupied with the setbacks endured by the middle classes. It means to be skeptical of the Democratic Party establishment, and to favor 'outliers' as challengers on the national level at least as radical as Bernie Sanders or at least as humane and amateurish as Oprah Winfrey. Above all it means to be a harsh critic of Wall Street at home and neoliberal globalization as *structurally* predatory and ecologically hazardous. It also means anti-militarism, opposition to Washington's 'special relationships' with Israel and Saudi Arabia, and a rejection of America's role as the prime guardian of the established global order on the basis of its military prowess, specifically, its worldwide naval, space, and paramilitary and covert 'full-spectrum dominance' as deployed so as to project devastating destructive capabilities throughout the entire planet.

In effect, by this critique, the American liberal is more accurately regarded and sensitively perceived as mainly 'illiberal.' Why? Because insisting on swimming in the mainstream when it comes to political choices, reluctant to criticize Wall Street or world trade and investment arrangements, and above all else, reducing 'human rights' to civil and political rights, while disregarding 'economic, social, and cultural rights,' is to endorse, at least tacitly, an illegitimate status quo if assessed on the basis of widely shared ethical principles.

Such self-induced partial blindness allows 'liberals' to view Israel as 'the only democratic state' in the Middle East or to regard the United States to be the embodiment of democracy (with Trump and Trumpism viewed as a pathological and temporary deviation) despite millions mired in extreme poverty and homelessness, that is, by treating economic, social, and cultural rights as if they do not exist. Such 'liberals' continue to complain invidiously about the lack of freedom of expression and dissent in such countries as China, Vietnam, and Turkey while overlooking the extraordinary achievements of these countries if social and economic rights are taken into account, especially with respect to lifting tens of millions from poverty by deliberate action and in a short time. In other words, addressing the needs of the poor is excluded from relevance when viewing the human rights record of a country, which makes a country like Turkey that has done a great deal to alleviate mass poverty of its bottom 30% no different from Egypt than has next to nothing

when it comes to human rights. It is not a matter of ignoring failures with regard to political and civil rights, but rather of disregarding success and failure when it comes to economic, social, and cultural rights. It might also be noted that the practical benefits of achievements in civil and political rights are of primary benefit to no more than 10% of the population, while economic, social, and cultural rights, even in the most affluent countries, are of relevance to at least a majority of the population, and generally an even larger proportion.

Even if this discriminatory treatment of human rights were to be overcome, and the economic deprivations endured by the poor were to be included in templates of appraisal, I would still not be willing to join the ranks of American liberals, at least not ideologically, although lots of opportunity for common cause might exist on matters of race, gender, and governmental abridgement of citizen rights. Liberalism is structure-blind when it comes to transformative change for either of two reasons: the conviction that the American political system can only get things done by working within the established order or the firm belief that the established order in the country (and the world) is to be preferred over any plausible alternative. This reminds me of the person who drops a diamond ring in the middle of a dark street and then confines his search to the irrelevant corner where there the light happens to be shining brightly.

In my view, we cannot hope to address challenges of class, militarism, and sustainability without structural change, and the emergence of a truly *radical humanism* dedicated to the emergence of an *ecological civilization* that evolves on the basis of the equal dignity and entitlement of individuals and groups throughout the entire world. In other words, given the historical situation, the alternative to this kind of planetary radicalism is denial and despair. That is why I would not be an American liberal even if liberals were to shed their current 'illiberal' ways of seeing and being. At the same time, such a refocusing of political outlook entails the replacement of balance of power or Westphalian realism with some version of what Jerry Brown decades ago called 'planetary realism.'

Yet progressives have their own blind spots. To denote the rise of Trump and Trumpism as 'fascism' is premature, at best, and alarmist at worst. There are plenty of reasons to complain about the failure of the leadership to denounce white supremacists or to show respect for dissenting views, but to equate such behavior with fascism is not too much different from branding the Obama presidency as 'socialist.' There are tendencies on the right and left that if continued and intensified, could lead in these feared directions, but there are many reasons to doubt that such political extremism is the real objective of the

varying forces vying for political control in the United States at the present time. The two sets of concerns are not symmetrical. A socialist future for the country seems desirable, if feasible, while for fascism, even its current glimmerings are undesirable. Of course, this is an expression of opinion reflecting an acceptance of a humanist ethos of being-in-the-world.

### **The End of American Democracy**

There is a rather prescient article in the current issue of *The Atlantic* (March 2018, 80-87) written by Yascha Mounk, bearing the provocative title “America is Not a Democracy.” Mounk relies on recent empirical surveys of political effectiveness in political arenas to suggest results that are ‘shocking’ if appraised by reference to democratic myths about government of, by, and for the people of the country. What counts, according to Mounk, are “economic elites and special interest groups” (82) that can get what they want at least half of the time and stop what they don’t want nearly always. In contrast, the people, including mass-based public interest groups, have virtually zero influence on the policy process, and hence the conclusion, America is no longer democratic.

In Mounk’s words: “across a range of issues, public policy does not reflect the preferences of the majority of Americans. If it did, the country would look radically different: Marijuana would be legal and campaign contributions more tightly regulated; paid parental leave would be the law of the land and public colleges free; the minimum wage would be higher and gun control much stricter; abortions would be more accessible in the early stages of pregnancy and illegal in the third trimester.”(82) All in all, such a listing of issues does make the case, especially if combined with the commodification of the electoral process, that America should no longer be considered a democratic states even if it maintains the rituals, and some of the practices of a genuine democracy—elections, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression.

Many, including Mounk, acknowledge that from the beginning the distinctive American undertaking was to establish a ‘republic,’ not a ‘democracy.’ As we all know, the founders were protective of slavery and property holders, opposed to women’s suffrage, and fearful of political majorities and special interests, degraded as ‘the mob’ and ‘factionalism.’ Yet little by little, with the American Civil War as one turning point and the New Deal as another, the legitimating foundation of the American system changed its foundational identity, increasingly resting its credibility on the quality of its ‘democratic’ credentials. Reforms associated with ending slavery and later challenging ‘Jim Crow’ racism, through the support of civil rights, by giving women the vote and more recently

validating claims to equality and accepting the need for adequate protection against harassment, and moving toward a safety net for the very poor and vulnerable were undertaken in the spirit of fulfilling the democratic mandate.

When it comes to social, economic, and cultural concerns, the U.S. leadership, personified by Trump and reinforced by the Trumpism of the Republican Party, the situation is even more grim than frustrating what Rousseau called ‘the general will.’ Anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim policies are openly espoused and enacted by the Executive Branch and Congress to the outer limits of what the courts, themselves being transformed to endorse the agenda of the right-leaning authoritarian state. Perhaps, even more revealing is the resolve of the Trump administration to save federal monies by cutting programs associated with the very poor. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), lending necessary food assistance to as many as 41 million Americans, known popularly as ‘food stamps’ is illustrative.

Although the government spent about \$70 billion on SNAP in 2017 this was less than 2% of the \$4 trillion federal budget on SNAP, and yet the Trump administration wants to cut coverage by nearly 30% over the course of the next decade and reconstitute the program in ways that harm the self-esteem and dignity of recipients.

The overseas record of the United States has inflicted death on millions of vulnerable people since the end of World War II, as well as sacrificed hundreds of thousands American on various foreign killing fields, including those maimed, inwardly militarized and suicidal, and otherwise damaged mentally and physically. And for what? The Vietnam War experience should have enabled the Pentagon planners to learn from failure and defeat that military intervention in the non-Western world has lost most of its agency in the post-colonial world. This American learning disability is exhibited by the repetition of failure and defeat, most notably in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the human losses were great and the strategic outcome eroded further American legitimacy as global leader and manager of global security.

In a notable article, Matthew Stevenson summarizes the persisting significance of the Vietnam War in the period since 1945: “The Vietnam War and the history that followed exposed the myth of America’s persistent claim to unique power and virtue. Despite our awesome military, we are not invincible. Despite our vast wealth, we have gaping inequalities. Despite our professed desire for global peace and human rights, since World War II we have aggressively intervened with armed force far more than any nation on earth. Despite our claim to have the highest regard for human life, we have killed,



wounded, and uprooted many millions of people, and unnecessarily sacrificed many of our own.” [[“Why Vietnam Still Matters: an American Reckoning,”](#) *CounterPunch*, Feb. 23, 2018, the first of an eight-part article, highly recommended.]

### **Where Next?**

For those seeking justice, a hopeful future, humane governance, and the cultural worldview of an ecological civilization globally, nationally, and locally, it is vital to acknowledge and recognize that we currently living in a lamentable period in human history with storm clouds hovering over every horizon in sight.

The American scene has hardly ever been worse. A president that bluffs about engaging in nuclear war and seems never more comfortable than busy bullying yesterday’s associate or getting high on a string of belligerent tweets. And if Trump would mercifully move on, we are left with Pence, a sober evangelical who will walk the plank to enact the Republican miscreant agenda. And if Pence would also favor us with disappearance, the stage is left free for Paul Ryan to walk upon, a dour architect of a meanly reconstituted American reality along the dystopian lines of hierarchy and domination that Ayn Rand depicted in *Fountainhead*. There is a there there where angels fear to tread.

Maybe there is enough wakefulness in the country that the Republicans will suffer a humbling defeat in the 2018 midterm elections. Maybe the youth of the country will march and issue demands, and not get tired, insisting on a Democratic Party that can be trusted with the nation’s future, and is not beholden to Wall Street, the Pentagon, and Israel. Symbolically and substantively this means a rejection of Joe Biden and Corey Booker as Democratic standard bearers. If fresh faces with fresh ideas do not take over the reins of power in Washington, we will do not better that gain a brief respite from Trump and Trumpish but the Doomsday Clock will keep clicking!

And even if the miraculous happened, and the Republican menace was somehow superseded, we would likely be left with the problems posed by the liberal establishment once reinstated in control of governmental practice. There would be no political energy directed toward nuclear disarmament, transforming predatory capitalism, and creating conditions whereby everyone residing in this richest of countries could look forward to a life where health care, education, shelter, and food were universally available, where international law genuinely guided foreign policy on matters of war and peace, and where ecological sensitivity was treated as the essence of 21<sup>st</sup> sovereignty. To address global migration patterns, walls and harsh exclusion would be replaced by direct attention to the removal of root causes explaining why people take the drastic step of uprooting

themselves from what is familiar and usually deeply cherished for reasons of familiarity, memory, and sacred tradition.