

# **When Liberalism Goes Terribly Wrong (Alternatively – When Populism Swings Left)**

By

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I couldn't decide how best to title today's sermon. On the one hand, I want to make the point, even as a devoted liberal myself, that liberalism has sometimes resulted in terrible cruelties and long-lasting injustices, which means it can do so again. But on the other hand, it isn't liberal ideas that lead to such miserable outcomes but populism and the tyranny of the masses that often goes along with it. The cause of all social injustice is a collective sense of self-righteousness, just as the solution is always the collective will to change how society behaves toward those it has previously discriminated against. Society must come to see that it has been wrong. So, both titles get at the heart of what I want to talk about; that liberalism can sometimes go terribly wrong, and that this happens when a liberal belief or goal is embraced by the masses who may pursue its ends with self-righteous ferocity—when, that is, populism swings left.

I'll begin by making my case for liberalism. The root of this word, *libertas*, means freedom, and a devotion to the principle of freedom is at the heart of what it means to be liberal. It is rooted in ancient Greek thought which manifested in their early and imperfect attempts to establish democratic societies. Democracy, from the Greek words, *demos*, meaning "people," and *kratos*, meaning "force" or "power," refers to government empowered by the people. However imperfect Greek democracies were, this concept was among those that inspired Renaissance thinking beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and was finally put into practice during the Enlightenment, resulting in what we might call the Age of Democracy we are in today. Today, 57 percent of the 167 countries on Earth are democracies, imperfect unions as they may be. That's 97 countries, which is a lot, especially considering there were only eleven democracies less than a century ago, in 1941.

But today there are signs that our global democracies are in trouble; the key indicators being the erosion of effective governance, of fair and credible elections, of judicial independence and integrity, and of individual freedom of expression and assembly. Here in the U.S., which has been called the greatest democracy on earth, we have seen the constitutional right to an abortion removed by a Supreme Court that is extremely partisan in its decisions and makeup, the same court that just effectively said a President is immune from prosecution for any crimes committed while in office, including Trump's direct and very public role in attempting to violently overthrow the result of a national election and kill the Vice President. We have recently witnessed college students protesting the unabated killing of Palestinian civilians in Gaza having all been lumped together as antisemitic in news reports and arrested *en masse*.

Yet, we can see from these few examples that these outcomes are not because liberalism has failed us but because we have failed liberalism by not living up to its high calling. Our liberal principles, rooted in the rational and naturalist thinking of the early Greek philosophers and rediscovered during the Renaissance, later became the motivation of the Enlightenment thinkers who summarized them as human dignity, freedom, reason, and tolerance. When, as a society, we have committed ourselves to these values, humanity has flourished. When we turn away from them, human society, along with its democracies, degrade, degrading all of humanity in the process.

It might surprise you to hear me claim that most people in the world today are liberal. We all believe in the principles I've outlined, or, at least, like to believe and says that we do. Since 1993, even Russia—governed by an authoritarian dictator—holds elections and claims to be a democracy. Today our liberal ideals are humanity's ideals, even if we don't perfectly live up to them. As our famous humanist minister, John Dietrich, said in his 1926 sermon on liberalism, "There is an occasional person who glories in his conservatism; but the majority of people are proudest when they are recognized as liberals."

Nowadays, the term "liberal" is not so popular a label, but most people still claim to believe in liberal values. Those who now proudly call themselves "conservative" are really neoliberals who have taken the idea of freedom to such an extreme that they want to be free of government rules or regulations. They want to be free of taxes. They want to be free to exploit and destroy the environment. They want to be free to force others to do what they believe in. They want to be free to own whatever kind of weapons they wish, no matter how many people are killed by them.

Unitarian Universalism may have just abandoned its seven principles, but Republican Speaker of the House Mike Johnson still has what he calls conservatism's seven core principles, which include Individual Freedom, Limited Government, the Rule of Law, and Human Dignity—all of which are liberal principles. But if you read his description of what these principles mean to him, you'll find that these freedoms are reserved for those who think just like him, which means he's not committed to freedom for all, but to freedom for himself and for those who think like him.

Regarding human dignity, for instance, Johnson says, "A just government protects life, honors marriage and family as the primary institutions of a healthy society, and embraces the vital cultural influences of religion and morality. Public policy should always encourage education and emphasize the virtue of hard work as a pathway out of poverty, while public assistance programs should be reserved only for those who are truly in need." Thus, he reserves dignity for those who adhere to his conservative antiabortion-traditional family- theocratic-society that is without social programs for the poor. Having, thus, outlined his expectation, Johnson concludes with, "In America everyone who plays by the rules should get a fair shot." We can presume this means those who don't play by *his* rules don't get a fair shot. That's not a commitment to freedom and human dignity, it is a commitment to his own self-righteous beliefs.

Still, almost everyone in the world today claims to share our liberal values—particularly its emphasis on free societies and individual freedom—including conservatives who claim to loathe the word liberal, dictators like Vladimir Putin, and some individuals, groups, and organizations that openly claim to be liberal but are incredibly intolerant and unjust toward those they disagree with. This is because they may share our liberal goals, but they do not share our liberal values. But liberalism is not an ideal we seek; it is a way of living. It is not where we arrive, but the path we take. It is not enough to merely work for justice if we are not also living justly.

Such liberal Enlightenment thinking, especially its desire for freedom and democracy in response to inequality and monarchy, inspired the French Revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although the fundamental liberal ethic had already been set by Kant at the start of that century—*no person should be used as a means to somebody else's ends, but should be considered an end within*

*themselves*—it was the French philosopher Voltaire who added “the pursuit of happiness and rights to life, liberty, and property”<sup>1</sup> to liberal nomenclature. It was Voltaire who said, “To be free, to have none but equals, that's the true life, the natural life of man.”<sup>2</sup>

But if it were the ideals of those like Voltaire that inspired the French Revolution, it were those of Jean-Jacque Rousseau that turned it towards its dark and infamous end. At the time, there were no democracies in the world and Enlightenment thinkers argued over how a government prioritizing the rights and welfare of its citizens ought to be ruled, resulting in three main opinions—the *parliamentary*, the *royalist*, and the *republic*. The latter representative option is the type of democratic government we tout today, which Winston Churchill called “the worst form of Government except for all the rest.” But a democratic society that does not adhere to constitutional guarantees regarding the rights and freedoms of all its citizens, makes it easy for populism and majority rule to emerge and be just as tyrannical as any kind of monarchy or aristocracy ever was.

When revolutions turn into revolts, the worst kinds of cruelties and injustices can follow, which was precisely what happened toward the end of the French Revolution. By then the revolutionaries were not as inspired by the liberal principles articulated so beautifully by Voltaire as they were those of Jean-Jaques Russeau who wrote, “Whoever refuses to obey the general will, will be forced to do so by the entire body, this means merely that [they] will be forced to be free.”<sup>3</sup> Imagine a revolution in which the revolutionaries felt justified in forcing other to be free and you can imagine the kinds of horrors that follow.

Russeau rejected Enlightenment reason in favor of feeling and intuition, and he didn't believe humanity should advance and improve but return to what he imagined was a more natural and primitive state, that of the “noble savage,” as he put it. Toward the end of the French Revolution, as the government was being refashioned, its liberal victors produced the magnificent *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (1789). It had seventeen articles stating that people are born free and equal, have equality in the eyes of the law, the presumption of innocence until proven guilty, free expression and speech, and other liberal ideals. But, as philosopher Stephen Hicks explains, the liberals who produced these articles were “no match of the vigor of the most radical members of the revolution,”<sup>4</sup> the Jacobins, a group of extremists named after a French monastery. Hicks says the Jacobins “were explicitly disciples of Russeau,” whom they considered the “teacher of mankind.”<sup>5</sup> Under the Jacobins, he says, “the revolution became more radical and more violent ... The guillotine was busy as the radicals ruthlessly killed nobles, priest, and just about anyone whose politics was suspect. ‘We must not only punish traitors,’ urged St. Just, ‘but all people who are not enthusiastic.’<sup>6</sup>

After establishing their “Revolutionary Tribunal” in 1793, four years of brutal massacres began, resulting in thousands of deaths. It was the Jacobin, Maximilien Robespierre, who led this Reign of Terror and delivered the likes of King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette to the guillotine. During this period the great American revolutionary Thomas Paine, the only American revolutionary to have gone to France to support its revolution, was imprisoned by the Jacobins for protesting these executions and convincing many they should be exiled instead. But once Robespierre came to power near the end of the year, he had Paine arrested as a traitor. Were it not for the eleventh-hour

intervention of Ambassador James Monroe, Paine himself would have been beheaded. I wonder if these were the events philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was thinking of when he wrote that “Liberal institutions cease to be liberal as soon as they are attained: later on, there are no worse and no more thorough injurers of freedom than liberal institutions.”<sup>7</sup>

The motives of the French revolutionaries, like those of most revolutionaries, are often more complex and less pure than the annals of history leave us to believe. Some may be fighting in the hope of personal gain, not for the greater good. They are fighting, that is, for selfish reasons, often only to seize authority for themselves. In his book, *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm distinguishes between the true revolutionary and the ordinary rebel, a distinction that is difficult to make because they often fight side-by-side in the same struggle. But true revolutionaries are fighting for everyone, including those they oppose, which is why Thomas Paine, respecting the right to life and human dignity, favored exile to execution. But “A rebel,” Fromm says, “is one who wants to overthrow authority because of his resentment and, as a result, to make himself the authority in place of the one he has overthrown. And very often, at the very moment when he reaches his aim, he makes friends with the very authority he was fighting so bitterly before.”<sup>8</sup> This is why Thomas Paine was the only American revolutionary to go to France, because the American Revolutionaries, upon defeating the English, quickly sided with England as the French began fighting the British Empire (among others) for theirs.

Populist sentiments may lead many to join liberal movements in order to obtain a particular goal, but this doesn't mean they are committed to the kinds of liberal values demonstrated by Thomas Paine and betrayed by the Jacobins. This was the case with the worldwide labor movement that began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The IWW (Industrial Workers of the World), also called Wobblies, pushed back against the capitalist economics that made a handful of business tycoons wealthy while their workers were always on the brink of financial ruin. Many, if not most, of them, put their hope in an untried economic theory put forward by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels—*Marxism*, also known as Socialism and Communism. Coincidentally, just yesterday I discovered a magazine at the bookstore called *Jacobin*. A description says, “*Jacobin* is a leading voice of the American left, offering socialist perspectives on politics, economics, and culture.” This is why liberalism, to this day, is often conflated with socialism, even though its principles are just as compatible with free market economics—Capitalism. It's just that liberals, who invented democracy, more fundamentally believe in government, especially that it must exist to protect and promote the rights and welfare of its citizens by passing laws and regulations to protect them from the greed and exploitation of others, including corporations and industry.

The point here is that the Industrial Workers of the World united for what was a just cause, giving workers fair treatment, a living wage, and allowing them to be the primary beneficiaries of their own efforts. But just as soon as some of them came to power in Russia, during the Bolshevik revolution, and were able to put Marxist theory into practice, its members became as cruel and authoritarian as those they deposed, if not worse, resulting in one of the worst and longest lasting authoritarian societies in history. This is so because the Bolsheviks weren't really committed to liberal values like freedom, equality, and justice, but simply wanted to be the ones in power. Just as

Rousseau claimed was possible, they “forced people to be free.” As Fromm once complained was true of Americans, the Bolsheviks believed “Equality today means ‘sameness,’ rather than oneness.”<sup>9</sup> And so everyone had to live the same, dress the same, eat the same, have the same, and, above all, think and speak the same, even if it meant they were all equally miserable. For the creation of this perfectly controlled and engineered society resulted in the starvation of millions of ordinary Russians, along with imprisoning, exiling, or executing their intellectuals. In France it was the Reign of Terror, in Russia, the Red Terror.

Repeatedly we have seen this happen after revolutions meant to liberate ordinary people only worsened their plight. The Chinese Cultural Revolution, between 1966 and 1976, saw widespread persecution of intellectuals, teachers, and professionals accused of being counter-revolutionary or bourgeois, which was preceded by the, so called, Great Leap Forward, involving communist policies that resulted in famine and millions of deaths. Today China still has one of the worst human rights records on Earth.

The Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, led by Pol Pot, between 1975 and 1979, sought to create an agrarian utopia by eradicating urban society, capitalism, and intellectual influence. It resulted in intellectuals, professionals, teachers, and even those just wearing glasses (simply for looking smart), being targeted for imprisonment, torture, and execution. It remains one of the most extreme examples of intellectual persecution and revolutionary-driven famine in modern history.

There are other examples, but I’ve said enough to make the point, that sometimes liberalism goes terrible wrong, especially when its causes become popular. When this occurs, liberal movements, institutions, and revolutions may be driven by self-righteousness rather than motivated by a sincere and devout commitment to the freedoms, welfare, and progress of humanity.

Of course, I bring all of this up now because many of our liberal institutions and movements today have been overtaken by populists who don’t genuinely share our commitment or our liberal values, rooted in our first value, the inherent worth and dignity of every person—friend or foe. To maintain such dignity, we must further commit to the principles of reason, freedom, and tolerance. Today, even our own religion, once the most Liberal religion ever, has abandoned these principles, adopting instead a list of ill-defined words, none of which are freedom, reason, tolerance, dignity, democracy, independence, or the like.

During a recent statement the UU Association president, who was appointed, not elected, was asked about the abandonment of our first principle. She responded that, “[the] language of the inherent worth and dignity of every person comes from Immanuel Kant, the literal father of modern racism.” She implied, that is, that human dignity itself must, therefore, be racist (which is really bad logic). This comes on the heels of other such statements from the UUA, calling individualism an error and calling upon us to “decenter individual dignity.” And while it does not compare to what happened to the intellections in France, Russia, Cambodia, China, and the like, half the ministers ever to have been excommunicated from the UUA since its formation in 1961, have been so during just the past four years, with the new charge of bullying, or something like it, which essentially means we’ve openly disagreed with those who have taken over our religion in the name of justice, but who are now acting like authoritarian and intolerant dictators.

But this isn't about the UUA, nor even the popular woke movement that has successfully captured our liberal religion. Nor is it meant to be about anything in the past. It's really meant to be about those of us who call ourselves liberal and claim to be committed to our liberal principles—human dignity, reason, freedom, and tolerance (no matter how else we might frame them). It's about keeping a scrutinizing and watchful eye on ourselves. Are we really committed to liberalism, or simply to outcomes that best serve us? Are we revolutionaries or rebels. Are we selfless or self-righteous? Liberal movements have proven throughout history and to this day to easily become shallow populist movements that end badly. Let these examples serve always to remind us that liberalism isn't about where we're going, but how we choose to get there. That's the kind of free society we need and ought to promote, no matter how popular or unpopular saying so might be.

<sup>1</sup> Cranston, Maurice, *Philosophers and Pamphleteers: Political Theorists of the Enlightenment*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY 1986, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> Hicks, Stephen R.C., *Explaining Postmodernism*, Ockham's Razor Publishing, 2004, 2018, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *Twilight of the Idols*.

<sup>8</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, The Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1966, p. 140.]

<sup>9</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, (Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956), 12.