

TWO LIBERALISMS OF FEAR

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THE ROOT OF LIBERAL THINKING is not in the love of freedom, nor in the hope of progress, but in fear—the fear of other human beings and of the injuries they do one another in wars and civil wars. A liberal project that seeks to diminish the fear that humans evoke in one another is open and provisional in its judgments as to the institutions that best moderate the irremovable risk of social and political violence. It does not imagine that any one regime is the only legitimate form of rule for all humankind, and it does not assess political regimes by the degree to which they conform to any doctrine of universal human rights or theory of justice. It rejects the view—which in the United States is treated as an axiom of political discourse—that democratic institutions are the only basis for legitimate government. It views democracy as only one among a range of legitimate regimes in the late modern world and does not subscribe to the Enlightenment hope—revived recently by Francis Fukuyama—that peoples everywhere will converge on democracy as a political ideal.

The original and best exemplar of this liberalism of fear is Thomas Hobbes. In Hobbes, the principal obstacle to human well being is war. Wars arising between practitioners of different religions are to be feared the most. They are the most destructive of the human

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good and generate a war of all against all in which no sovereign power exists to keep the peace.

Writing in a time of religious civil wars, Hobbes was clear that, aside from the human passion of vainglory or pride, the chief impediment to a *modus vivendi* was the claim to truth in matters of faith. On no account should the sovereign make or act upon any such claim. The sovereign does not hold to any worldview but seeks to craft terms of peaceful coexistence among the divergent worldviews that society harbors. Here the liberal project is not a plan for universal progress, but a search for peace. In this liberalism of fear, the institutions of the state are not what is most terrifying. What is most to be feared is the condition of anarchy in which human life is ruled by the *summum malum*—death at the hands of one's fellows. A liberal state is one that aims to deliver its subjects from this evil. Today, there will be many who deny that such a project could embody liberal thought in any of its many varieties. Yet a reasonable argument can be made that *this* liberalism of fear is, in fact, liberalism in its most primordial form.

Such a liberalism of fear may seem to late moderns unambitious and timid, lacking in noble hopes for the species. For that very reason, it is the liberalism that speaks most cogently and urgently to us, that addresses the needs of a time whose ruling project is peaceful coexistence among diverse and potentially antagonistic communities and regimes. This Hobbesian liberalism of fear is inherently tolerant of diversity in politics and communities, because of its indifference to private belief. The authority of a Hobbesian state does not derive from its embodying any doctrine or creed, but only from its efficacy in promoting peace. In early modern times, this meant ruling without partisan regard to the religious beliefs of subjects. A Hobbesian state is not bound to attempt to disestablish or to privatize religious practice.

In a late modern context, the Hobbesian indifference to private belief has an application to ideological commitments. In our historical context, a Hobbesian state does not make allegiance to political author-

ity conditional on subscription to any creed. A peace-making state can hope to command the allegiance of the religious and the irreligious, those who share Enlightenment hopes and those who do not. It can be accepted as legitimate by communities and cultural traditions that are not, and will never be, “liberal.” The original liberalism of fear does not aim to subject the late modern world to democratic institutions. It recognizes a democratic regime as one among many devices, potential and actual, for containing and moderating conflict, but it denies that democracy has any universal authority.

Hobbes’s liberalism of fear can be contrasted sharply with a second fearful liberalism—the anti-statist liberalism, grounded in theories of universal human rights or justice, which is the ruling orthodoxy of contemporary political philosophy. Nearly all liberal theory today is a program for limiting the state. Yet, in the conditions of late modern societies, anti-statist liberalism is bound to issue in a significant enhancement of the state’s most purely repressive functions—without, however, significantly enhancing the security of the citizenry. Conversely, regimes that aim for peace and are not burdened by an agenda of anti-statism may be better able to assure their subjects security without enhancing the state’s repressive role. The demonization of the state may have been unavoidable during the totalitarian period that spanned much of this century. As we near the century’s end, it has become unreasonable.

This second liberalism of fear—the liberalism of Rawls, Dworkin, Nozick, Hayek, and many others—which is a liberalism of fear of the state, does not serve our needs in a time in which the state is a desperately fragile and often inefficacious institution. The state must be rehabilitated as an instrument of individual well being and the common good. We must not look to the institutions of the state for universal rights, strong communities, or moral regeneration. To do so risks some of the worst evils of the age. Neither should we regard it with such suspicion that we strive to limit it by foolish doctrines of minimum government. We must rehabilitate the state as a protective institution. This rehabilitation, Hobbesian liberalism, duly amended, may be able to achieve.

Hobbesian Liberalism vs. Liberal Imperialism

Hobbes's liberalism of fear rejects, as anachronistic and indefensible, the Enlightenment philosophy in which *we* are the *telos* of history. Perceiving the dilemmas of modernity from a standpoint near the beginning of the modern age as acutely as Weber and Nietzsche did towards its end, Hobbes remains an instructive critic of the conception of progress with which liberal thought came later to be identified. Hobbes's thought shares with that of other early modern, proto-Enlightenment thinkers, such as Spinoza, an underestimation of the cultural variability of human motives; lacks altogether the insight of Herder that individual well being requires participation in strong communities; and shares with later Enlightenment thinkers, such as Hume, the illusion that civilized human beings have everywhere the same values.

Even so, unlike later liberal theory, Hobbes's thought is not committed, essentially and inescapably, to the "hubristic" and dangerous project of deploying the power of the state to promote a universal civilization. It sees the institutions of the state as indispensable—variable and alterable instruments for the achievement of security against the chief evils of human life. In this Hobbesian account, the state is not the embodiment of a civil religion or a philosophy of history, nor the vehicle of a project of world-transformation, nor a means of recovering a lost cultural unity, but rather an artifice whose purpose is peace.

Hobbesian liberalism rejects the other liberalism of fear—the dominant liberalism of our time, which responds to evidence of deep cultural differences in the relations of liberal democracies with nonliberal regimes and a fundamentalist reassertion of "Western values" and which understands the state as a vehicle for the defense of these threatened values. At present, liberal political philosophy in all its standard varieties is fundamentalist in style and apologetic in strategy. Its goal is a transcendental deduction of western institutions as the only legitimate form of government.

The political consensus, which conventional liberal political philosophy articulates, asserts the universal authority of liberal human rights, individualist ethical life, and (more often than not) free market capitalism. In the context of international relations, it is a late blossoming species of liberal imperialism. It is a triumphal reassertion of the western project at just the historical moment when non-Occidental peoples are demonstrating that westernization and modernization are not one and the same, but different and sometimes conflicting paths of development. In domestic political practice in the United States, this other liberalism of fear is a *project of return*—an attempt to recover “traditional values,” forms of family life, of law, and of national sovereignty that belong to early rather than late modernity.

If the Hobbesian liberalism of fear can reasonably claim a universal root in the generic human evil of civil war, this latter-day liberalism of fear is evidently an historically highly specific phenomenon. Its aggressive affirmation of universality ties and dates it irrevocably to the loss of American ideological identity that has followed the Soviet collapse.

The fearful reality that the dominant contemporary liberalism screens from the perceptions of western societies is the polycentric diversity of the post-totalitarian world. In the late modern world all western ideologies are of declining global significance, and western institutions no longer function as the cutting edge of modernity. Indeed, for parts of the world—the societies of East Asia, for example—further westernization could mean a retreat from late modernity. The perception that this other liberalism of fear is meant to occlude is a perception of western decline.

If, in international relations, this other liberalism of fear is a reaction against the passing of western global hegemony, in domestic political life, it is an attempt to recover a national culture that has irretrievably vanished. That is the significance of the cultural preoccupation with relativism. The neoconservative discourse of “relativism” is not used to conduct a debate in moral philosophy.

“Relativism” signifies views of which neoconservatives disapprove in a dispute about American identity. This is a debate that has arisen with multiculturalism and the erosion of popular confidence in American exceptionalism. It is a local affair. The discourse of relativism is not a moment in the history of philosophy. It is an episode in the dissolution of American global hegemony.

The centrality and power in contemporary American political discourse and practice of this other liberalism of fear is a perilous dominance. No universalist political project can do without enemies. In an incorrigibly plural world, they are soon found. The imagined threat to “the West” emanating from Soviet Communism—itsself pre-eminently an artifact of western Enlightenment ideology—has been swiftly supplanted, in the writings of Samuel Huntington and elsewhere, by a discourse of “civilizational conflict.” Now, if it means anything, “civilizational conflict” means that cultural differences of themselves occasion war. Yet this is a dangerously unhistorical claim.

In the longer perspective of history, “multiculturalism” does not denote one moment in a local debate about American identity; it signifies the normal condition of humankind. Most polities of which there is historical record, and all empires, have been “multicultural,” and the destruction of multicultural human settlements in our century—such as the destruction of the city of Alexandria by Nasserist nationalism—has typically been the work of decidedly modernist nation-building movements. Huntington’s polemic against multiculturalism in the United States is not a contribution to historical inquiry or to political theory, but rather a move in a campaign to recover an early modern culture of nationhood that is foredoomed by the conditions of late modernity.

In this climate of debate, it is unsurprising that longer historical perspectives are foreshortened and distorted. The diverse cultural traditions of Confucianism, Islam, and Christianity—which until quite recently had coexisted for long periods in the Ottoman Empire, the Hapsburg Empire, and the British Raj—are perceived as inherently rivalrous. The very existence of cultures that have not

embraced westernization is perceived as a danger to peace, particularly if—like the present regime in mainland China—these cultures reject the universal authority of liberal rights. The existing reality in some East Asian contexts (such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Japan) of societies that have modernized without westernizing, that have matched or surpassed western levels of prosperity without importing an individualist culture of capitalism, and that have assured low levels of crime-related insecurity for their citizens without adopting a western culture of rights is comprehensively denied.

The most feared and repressed possibility is that these achievements were possible only because such countries have rejected or limited westernization. For if this possibility were allowed, the Enlightenment philosophy of history and the civil religion of American exceptionalism—in which the creation of wealth depends on institutions that embody a culture of individualism, progress, and rights—would be falsified. In domestic contexts, this other liberalism of fear is expressed in the poisonous politics of “family values,” in the atavistic legalist reduction of all policy issues to questions in the arbitration of (supposedly) Lockean rights, and in the recuperation of an early modern understanding of national sovereignty. This liberalism supports “welfare reform,” whose effect is social exclusion, and penal policies in which mass incarceration is adopted as a central institution of social control.

This other liberalism of fear cannot yield a *modus vivendi* of any kind in the late modern societies in which it has arisen. It is, on the contrary, an ideological rationale for social division and cultural warfare. The history of the abortion issue in the United States may be a marker for a future in which a legalist culture of unconditional rights becomes an arena of political conflict where compromise—and therefore politics, considered as an abatement of war—is impossible. Indeed, in its combustible fusion of a legalist culture of non-negotiable rights with a repressive culture of mass incarceration and radically exclusionary social policies, the new liberalism of fear is a recipe for low-intensity civil war.

Hobbes's Abstract Individualism and Anti-Political Liberalism

In our historical context, the Hobbesian liberalism of fear has many decisive advantages over the conventional liberal philosophies of the late modern period. Yet it cannot be adopted unamended. I will in the last section of this paper comment on the respects in which Hobbes's thought requires most radical revision. Here I note, first, that Hobbes's thought belongs to the early modern period in its abstract individualism and its proto-Enlightenment project of deriving political obligation from a rational choice of individual advantage. No doubt it is immeasurably closer to political realities than most subsequent liberalisms, but its individualist philosophical anthropology is ill suited to thinking about how communities and cultures can coexist in peace. As the author of one of the great neglected twentieth-century classics of political thought, *Crowds and Power*, has observed in a different work:

Hobbes explains everything through selfishness, and while knowing the crowd (he often mentions it) he really has nothing to say about it. My task, however, is to show how complex selfishness is: to show how what it controls does not belong to it, comes from other areas of human nature, the ones to which Hobbes is blind.¹

Second, Hobbes's thought has in common with the dominant Rawlsian liberalism of our time the illusion that the principal impediment to peace is the rivalrous diversity of individual purposes. The banal Rawlsian pluralism of individual life-plans, each expressing a specific conception of the good, lacks the stark realism of Hobbes's insistence on the insatiability of human desires, but these very different liberalisms share in common a neglect of rivalrous cultural identities as a cause of social conflict and—in the worst case—war. Rawls is right in seeing the liberal problematic as the

¹ Elias Canetti, *The Human Province* (London: Picador, 1986) 115-6.

search for peaceful coexistence that issued from the Wars of Religion and the Reformation, but he is mistaken in supposing that, in late modern conditions, peace can be pursued by relegating worldviews, conceptions of the good, and cultural identities to the sphere of voluntary association. Liberal institutions in which divisive commitments are privatized are successful as devices for promoting peace only when the background moral culture of society is already individualist. Where it is not—as in most of the world—the search for terms of peace leads not to liberal civil society, but to various kinds of pluralist institutions.

Third, Hobbes's seeming hope that a form of rule can be constructed in which *politics* has been marginalized links him with that tradition of legalist utopianism that has had so paralyzing an effect on liberal thought in our own time. Commonly, Hobbes is criticized for his illiberal unconcern with the limits of state power, and his apparent approval of tyranny, and it is true that we who know, as he could not, the evils that go with totalitarian states cannot rest content with his account of the sovereign's powers. What is wrong with Hobbesian thought is not, however, its neglect of constitutional limitations on governments, but its attempt to render political life redundant—a project it shares with today's anti-political liberalisms. In our conditions, peace cannot be the construction of a sovereign, if indeed any such thing still exists in late modern contexts; it must be an artifact of political activity. This is not to say that a *modus vivendi* can be achieved in the late modern world only through democratic institutions. It means that in societies that already possess a highly developed tradition of political activity, peace cannot be secured by trying to suppress politics.

In arguing that Hobbes's thought has an application to the conditions of late modernity, I am not meaning to pass over those aspects of Hobbesian liberalism that belong with a superseded Enlightenment project. Hobbes's Cartesian understanding of political reasoning, the unyielding universalism and individualism of his philosophical outlook, together with his conception of political obligation as arising from a calculus of rational advantage, all tie his

thought irrevocably to the Enlightenment project and cannot speak to us today. The aspect that does speak to us—that must inform the attempt to articulate a postliberal pluralism—aims to identify universal and generically human evils and understands political life as an enterprise of moderating and mitigating these evils. This aspect of Hobbes's thought is far removed from the unrestricted cultural relativism (such as Richard Rorty's) that animates most attempts at formulating a postmodern liberalism.

Prospects for a Postliberal, Postmodern Pluralism

Thinking about the future roles of the two liberalisms of fear begins with the recognition that there is no single trajectory of modernity on which diverse societies stand at earlier and later points. Our world contains pre-modern, early modern, late modern, and post-modern states.² In much of post-imperial Africa, in parts of post-communist Russia, and perhaps in some areas of China, there is nothing that resembles the institutions of a modern state. Economic and social life goes on, but in a context of near-anarchy where the protective functions of the state are lacking or are exercised by local military production centers.

The disappearance in many parts of the world of effective state institutions of any kind is one of the most important but least considered developments of the past decade. It represents an acceleration in the declining leverage of the modern state that has led prominent theorists of strategy to argue that along with the decline of the modern sovereign state, which was inaugurated with the treaty of Westphalia in 1648, we are now witnessing the disappearance of Clausewitzian war.³ Considered as military conflict conducted

² On this point, see Robert Cooper, *The Post-Modern State and the World Order* (London: Demos, 1996).

³ See Martin van Craveld, *On Future War* (London and Washington: Brassey's, 1991).

between agents of sovereign states, Clausewitzian war appears to have been largely supplanted by intractable low-intensity conflicts in which the principal actors are not states and their agents, but political organizations, clans, and ethnic groups. Clausewitzian war has not disappeared, as the Falklands War and the Gulf War testify, but the ability of states or associations of states to direct organized violence has declined dramatically in many parts of the world. The control of war, taken in modern times to be the central constitutive power of sovereign states, has slipped from states' grasp.

Where this has happened, the result has been the emergence of something not far from a Hobbesian state of nature. At the same time, late modern societies are imbued by post-military cultures. It is hard to mobilize democratic publics in support of any interventionist policy that threatens to be risky, costly, and protracted. In these circumstances, the anarchic, pre-modern conditions of some post-communist countries may persist indefinitely. Alternatively, these countries may attempt to reinvent their imperial traditions—an option particularly attractive in Russia, which has never been a modern nation-state. There is no reason to think that states in such circumstances will be forced towards modernity in their political institutions.

The first signs of postmodern political institutions are most clearly observable in Europe. The institutions of the European Union are not the institutions of a modern state writ large. The EU is not, and will not become, a modern federal state. It is an association of nation states that have embarked on a common project of shedding much of the sovereignty that distinguished the modern, “Westphalian” state. This project embodies the wager that nineteenth-century balance-of-power relations between the Union's nation-states can be rendered redundant in the context of the EU's common institutions.

The wager this project entails is on the possibility of enduring and stable political institutions that do not presuppose a common political culture and are not legitimated by a unifying ideology. This is the postmodern dimension of the European project. It is the attempt to found political institutions whose cultural identities are not sin-

gular, comprehensive, or exclusive (after the fashion of nineteenth-century nationalism and twentieth-century *weltanschauung*-states), but complex, plural, and overlapping.

This is *not* the project of privatizing cultural identity in the realm of voluntary association that is advanced in the standard liberalism of today. That project, in practice, can only entrench the dominant cultural identity of a generation or more ago. This project instead attempts to enable plural identities to find collective expression in overlapping political institutions. The institutions of the European Union constitute the single most convincing exemplar thus far of the postmodern project of founding political legitimacy not on a common national culture or on any universalist ideology, but on a common acceptance of cultural difference. In East Asia, the fascinating experiment that is underway in Singapore may amount to an exercise in postmodern state-building and the conditions of postmodernity may have been present for generations in Japan. There may be a future for postmodernity in East Asia by virtue of the fact that some of its diverse cultures have modernized very successfully without thereby accepting any Enlightenment ideology.

It is in this historical context that an amended Hobbesian liberalism of fear may be salient. The animating interest of European institutions, as they have developed over the past 30 years or so, is an interest in peaceful coexistence without loss of cultural diversity. This points to the first radical revision that is needed in the Hobbesian view—namely, an acknowledgment of the political relevance of the human need for strong and deep forms of common life. Hobbes's thought needs to be fertilized with the insights of Herder. The abridgment of Hobbesian individualism that this entails is plainly considerable and necessitates consideration of how participation in common cultural forms can find political expression.

The second large revision to the Hobbesian account is to provide for the permanent necessities of politics. Unlike later anti-political

liberals, Hobbes never supposed that the institution of law could secure the conditions of peace. Such an unreasonable optimism about law was alien to the spirit of his thought and foreign to his experience of the fragility of legal orders. Yet, aside from his insistence on the necessity of unfettered judgment by the sovereign, there is little in Hobbes's thought that acknowledges the role of political practice in negotiating the terms of peace—a lack that derives from its debts to an early modern rationalist project of conferring Cartesian certainty on thinking about politics. Hobbes's thought must be modified to accommodate Machiavelli's perception that politics is an ineradicable activity in common life.

This postmodern Hobbesian view does not hold that a condition of postmodernity is the fate of all societies. That is only the illusive Enlightenment idea of a universal history refracted through a late modern prism, a kind of Enlightenment fideism. It may well be that only a few societies will ever enter a postmodern condition, and that, even for them, it may not be irreversible. We need to learn to think of a world, integrated by innumerable economic and technological linkages, which nevertheless contains societies, cultures, and politics that are set on radically divergent developmental paths.

The alteration in thinking that goes with such a postmodern perspective is substantial and requires adopting an instrumental, rather than doctrinal, view of state and market institutions. At the same time, it means accepting that the institutions that best serve human needs will vary quite radically over time and in differing cultural contexts. This is partly because the role served by social institutions is never entirely instrumental; it is also always expressive. The cultural forms that economic and political institutions express are changeable, diverse, and complicated; and the development of social or political institutions does not conform to any universal laws. Much in the application of this Hobbesian view will depend on highly contingent circumstances. In our present historical context, however, the postmodern view I have sketched will tend to under-

mine the vast claims made on behalf of the social institutions of law and the market and to focus on the indispensable place of the state and of the practice of politics among the conditions of a peaceful *modus vivendi*.⁴

Postmodern Politics: Searching for a Modus Vivendi

An amended Hobbesian liberalism repudiates the Enlightenment expectation that the world's peoples and cultures will converge in a universal civilization and accepts cultural difference to be a permanent feature of the human condition. It conceives political life as the search, never completed, for a *modus vivendi* in which the human goods of cultural diversity can be harvested, while the unavoidable evils arising from the conflict of evils are tempered and moderated. Among the diverse and changeable forms that such a *modus vivendi* can take, democratic institutions are only one; they have no special privileges of the sort conferred on them in recent versions of the Enlightenment project.

The dominant fearful liberalism of today is part of the problem, not the solution. By making the legitimacy of political institutions dependent on ephemeral and contested ideologies—hubristic theories of rights and discredited Enlightenment expectations of a universal civilization—it works to exclude all those who do not subscribe to an early modern worldview in which these beliefs were central. For the majority of humankind today, such beliefs are not credible. Like all western secular faiths, they have a declining leverage on human allegiance throughout the world. The coming century may be no better, or even worse, than the one that is ending, but

⁴ I have considered what such a shift in our evaluation of state and market institutions might mean, primarily in the context of Britain today, in my monograph *After Social Democracy* (London: Demos, 1996) republished in my book *Endgames: Questions in Late Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997).

it will be profoundly different in that its central conflicts will not be family arguments amongst western political faiths.

For the United States, there is no alternative to liberal democracy. Its traditions and present circumstances do not allow the luxury, or tragedy, of radical political experiment. It would be alien to the spirit of the present argument to engage in prescription. But there are clear implications of the argument I have developed: the legalist cult of unconditional rights must be moderated; the suspicion of the state, and of politics, with which the current liberalism of fear is imbued is intemperate; and the evangelical faith in the free market as the only acceptable mode of economic organization is a danger both to domestic social peace and to international order. America's present public philosophy and policies need some large revisions.

The present argument suggests that more weight must be given to political practice, less to the arbitration of rights; more emphasis given to collective choices, and less to free markets. The faith that law can supplant the murky compromises of politics, that societies that lack a moral consensus can cohere through the practice of rights, that the legitimacy of a democratic state must depend on its embodying universal principles—these beliefs are poor guides to the world in which Americans, along with the rest of humankind, must henceforth live. Clearing away the debris of today's fearful liberalism may contribute modestly to the large changes in public philosophy and public policy that will be unavoidable in the United States in the coming years.