

The Future of Liberalism

All earlier civilizations perished, or at least reached a state of stagnation, long before they had attained the level of material development that modern European civilization has succeeded in achieving. Nations were destroyed by wars with foreign enemies as well as by internecine strife. Anarchy forced a retrogression in the division of labor; cities, commerce, and industry declined; and, with the decay of their economic foundations, intellectual and moral refinements had to give way to ignorance and brutality. The Europeans of the modern age have succeeded in intensifying the social bonds among individuals and nations much more strongly than was ever the case before in history. This was an achievement of the ideology of liberalism, which, from the end of the seventeenth century, was elaborated with ever increasing clarity and precision and continually gained in influence over men's minds. Liberalism and capitalism created the foundations on which are based all the marvels characteristic of our modern way of life.

Now our civilization is beginning to scent a whiff of death in the air. Dilettantes loudly proclaim that all civilizations, including our own, must perish: this is an inexorable law. Europe's final hour has come, warn these prophets of doom, and they find credence. An autumnal mood is perceptibly beginning to set in everywhere.

But modern civilization will not perish unless it does so by its own act of self-destruction. No external enemy can destroy

The Future of Liberalism

it the way the Spaniards once destroyed the civilization of the Aztecs, for no one on earth can match his strength against the standard-bearers of modern civilization. Only inner enemies can threaten it. It can come to an end only if the ideas of liberalism are supplanted by an antiliberal ideology hostile to social cooperation.

There has come to be a growing realization that material progress is possible only in a liberal, capitalist society. Even if this point is not expressly conceded by the antiliberal, it is fully acknowledged indirectly in the panegyrics extolling the idea of stability and a state of rest.

The material advances of recent generations, it is said, have, of course, been really very agreeable and beneficial. Now, however, it is time to call a halt. The frantic hustle and bustle of modern capitalism must make way for tranquil contemplation. One must acquire time for self-communion, and so another economic system must take the place of capitalism, one that is not always restlessly chasing after novelties and innovations. The romantic looks back nostalgically to the economic conditions of the Middle Ages—not to the Middle Ages as they actually were, but to an image of them constructed by his fancy without any counterpart in historical reality. Or he turns his gaze upon the Orient—again not, of course, the real Orient, but a dream-vision of his phantasm. How happy men were without modern technology and modern cultural How could we ever have renounced this paradise so light-mindedly?

Whoever preaches the return to simple forms of the economic organization of society ought to keep in mind that only our type of economic system offers the possibility of supporting in the style to which we have become accustomed today the number of people who now populate the earth. A return to the Middle Ages means the extermination of many hundreds of millions of people. The friends of stability and rest, it is true, say that one by no means has to go as far as that. It suffices to hold fast to what has already been achieved and to forgo further advances.

Those who extol the state of rest and stable equilibrium forget that there is in man, in so far as he is a thinking being, an

The Future of Liberalism

inherent desire for the improvement of his material condition. This impulse cannot be eradicated; it is the motive power of all human action. If one prevents a man from working for the good of society while at the same time providing for the satisfaction of his own needs, then only one way remains open to him: to make himself richer and others poorer by the violent oppression and spoliation of his fellow men.

It is true that all this straining and struggling to increase their standard of living does not make men any happier. Nevertheless, it is in the nature of man continually to strive for an improvement in his material condition. If he is forbidden the satisfaction of this aspiration, he becomes dull and brutish. The masses will not listen to exhortations to be moderate and contented; it may be that the philosophers who preach such admonitions are laboring under a serious self-delusion. If one tells people that their fathers had it much worse, they answer that they do not know why they should not have it still better.

Now, whether it is good or bad, whether it receives the sanction of the moral censor or not, it is certain that men always strive for an improvement in their conditions and always will. This is man's inescapable destiny. The restlessness and inquietude of modern man is a stirring of the mind, the nerves, and the senses. One can as easily restore to him the innocence of childhood as lead him back to the passivity of past periods of human history.

But, after all, what is being offered in return for the renunciation of further material progress? Happiness and contentment, inner harmony and peace will not be created simply because people are no longer intent on further improvement in the satisfaction of their needs. Soured by resentment, the literati imagine that poverty and the absence of wants create especially favorable conditions for the development of man's spiritual capacities, but this is nonsense. In discussing these questions, one should avoid euphemisms and call things by their right names. Modern wealth expresses itself above all in the cult of the body: hygiene, cleanliness, sport. Today still the luxury of the well-to-do—no longer, perhaps, in the United States, but everywhere else—these will come within the reach of everyone in the not too distant

The Future of Liberalism

future if economic development progresses as it has hitherto. Is it thought that man's inner life is in any way furthered by excluding the masses from the attainment of the level of physical culture that the well-to-do already enjoy? Is happiness to be found in the unkempt body?

To the panegyrists of the Middle Ages one can only answer that we know nothing about whether the medieval man felt happier than the modern man. But we may leave it to those who hold up the mode of life of the Orientals as a model for us to answer the question whether Asia is really the paradise that they describe it as.

The fulsome praise of the stationary economy as a social ideal is the last remaining argument that the enemies of liberalism have to fall back upon in order to justify their doctrines. Let us keep clearly in mind, however, that the starting-point of their critique was that liberalism and capitalism impede the development of productive forces, that they are responsible for the poverty of the masses. The opponents of liberalism have alleged that what they are aiming at is a social order that could create more wealth than the one they are attacking. And now, driven to the wall by the counterattack of economics and sociology, they must concede that only capitalism and liberalism, only private property and the unhampered activity of entrepreneurs, can guarantee the highest productivity of human labor.

It is often maintained that what divides present-day political parties is a basic opposition in their ultimate philosophical commitments that cannot be settled by rational argument. The discussion of these antagonisms must therefore necessarily prove fruitless. Each side will remain unshaken in its conviction because the latter is based on a comprehensive world view that cannot be altered by any considerations proposed by the reason. The ultimate ends toward which men strive are diverse. Hence, it is altogether out of the question that men aiming at these diverse ends could agree on a uniform procedure.

Nothing is more absurd than this belief. Aside from the few consistent ascetics, who seek to divest life of all its external trappings and who finally succeed in attaining to a state of

The Future of Liberalism

renunciation of all desire and action and, indeed, of self-annihilation, all men of the white race, however diverse may be their views on supernatural matters, agree in preferring a social system in which labor is more productive to one in which it is less productive. Even those who believe that an ever progressing improvement in the satisfaction of human wants does no good and that it would be better if we produced fewer material goods—though it is doubtful whether the number of those who are sincerely of this opinion is very large—would not wish that the same amount of labor should result in fewer goods. At most, they would wish that there should be less labor and consequently less production, but not that the same amount of labor should produce less.

The political antagonisms of today are not controversies over ultimate questions of philosophy, but opposing answers to the question how a goal that all acknowledge as legitimate can be achieved most quickly and with the least sacrifice. This goal, at which all men aim, is the best possible satisfaction of human wants; it is prosperity and abundance. Of course, this is not all that men aspire to, but it is all that they can expect to attain by resort to external means and by way of social cooperation. The inner blessings—happiness, peace of mind, exaltation—must be sought by each man within himself alone.

Liberalism is no religion, no world view, no party of special interests. It is no religion because it demands neither faith nor devotion, because there is nothing mystical about it, and because it has no dogmas. It is no world view because it does not try to explain the cosmos and because it says nothing and does not seek to say anything about the meaning and purpose of human existence. It is no party of special interests because it does not provide or seek to provide any special advantage whatsoever to any individual or any group. It is something entirely different. It is an ideology, a doctrine of the mutual relationship among the members of society and, at the same time, the application of this doctrine to the conduct of men in actual society. It promises nothing that exceeds what can be accomplished in society and through society. It seeks to give men only one thing, the peaceful,

The Future of Liberalism

undisturbed development of material well-being for all, in order thereby to shield them from the external causes of pain and suffering as far as it lies within the power of social institutions to do so at all. To diminish suffering, to increase happiness: that is its aim.

No sect and no political party has believed that it could afford to forgo advancing its cause by appealing to men's senses. Rhetorical bombast, music and song resound, banners wave, flowers and colors serve as symbols, and the leaders seek to attach their followers to their own person. Liberalism has nothing to do with all this. It has no party flower and no party color, no party song and no party idols, no symbols and no slogans. It has the substance and the arguments. These must lead it to victory.