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The Imperial Present: Liberalism has Always been Conservative

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What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in the air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era.

— J. M. Coetzee, 1982¹

The orthodox wisdom of the last century holds that empire is a deeply conservative project of economic expansion, power and control bound up with a social civilisational mission. Certainly, the recrudescence of US imperial ambition in the early years of the twenty-first century is widely associated with the rise of neoconservatism, whereas the ubiquitous postcolonial sentiment of recent decades since the middle of last century is seen as a symptom of progressive liberalism standing against empire. But as Uday Mehta² has reminded us in his review of nineteenth-century British imperial thought, empire is equally if not predominantly an economic and civilisational project of liberal capitalism, and so it is no accident that the present imperial phase is associated with neoliberalism as much as neoconservatism. Thus, in pursuit of inspiration, lineage, and historical support, George Bush attempted to vindicate his warring in Iraq and Afghanistan by harking back again and again to the great liberal icon, Woodrow Wilson. How, therefore, are we to explain this anomaly of an apparently conservative project of empire performed in terms of the best liberal tradition?

One possibility might be to explain the resort to liberalism as purely opportunistic. Many latter-day liberals have made exactly this point concerning Bush's repeated references to Wilson (and Franklin Roosevelt), but this

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explanation fails to explain why 'neoliberalism' is today so iconic of conservatism. A second approach might be to recognise the anomaly as given but remain focused on the work of opposing, questioning, debating or hand wringing about the war. A third response might investigate the anomaly for itself, to question the apparent paradigm that spawns such an anomaly in the first place. How reasonable is it to treat conservative as a synonym for the political right and to equate liberalism with the political left? What are the origins of this distinction?

Liberalism in the United States during the twentieth century did indeed position itself as a left-of-centre and progressive social alternative to conservatism, and this is the most immediate source of the equation of liberal with left. But if we look beyond the United States and before the twentieth century, that particular historical geography of liberalism seems itself anomalous. Eighteenth-century liberalism was undoubtedly progressive in many respects. It represented a challenge to monarchical power, provided an ideological buttress for the capitalist revolt against feudalism, and helped frame an institutional alternative to the absolutist state. 'Liberal', after all, was a self-description for those fighting for liberty against the social servitude of the past. But that which is progressive in one era can become oppressive in another, and post-eighteenth-century liberalism guided the solidification and expansion of a capitalist market, mounted a spirited ideological apology for capitalism, and informed the legal and political systems through which the capitalist social economy developed. No longer a challenge to the status quo, a victorious liberalism *became* the status quo in the nineteenth century, an elaborate apology for the exploitative and oppressive social relations so definitive of capitalism.

This helps to explain why Liberal political parties throughout the world do not at all fit a left-wing mould. Winston Churchill, that reactionary Billy-goat gruff of the British Empire, flitted easily between the Liberals of Lloyd George and the Tories. Before renewing itself as the Liberal Democratic Party in the late 1980s, the British Liberals were for the most part rurally based and conservative, at least vis-à-vis the social democratic Labour Party. Likewise, the liberal party of Australia is thoroughly conservative and a vocal supporter of the Iraq War, while the Canadian Liberals are at best centrist, with social democrats to their left. From the late nineteenth century onward, several generations of self-described liberals led most of the Latin American republics for longer or shorter spells. Like Porfirio Diaz, for example, the Mexican President from 1876 to 1880 and from 1884 to 1911, these men were certainly reformers, but they were more committed to renovating national capitalisms and ridding the economic system of its feudal remnants than they were to liberty, democracy or redistributing land. Theirs was a class-driven, elitist and often dictatorial liberalism. By 1915 the revolt by other liberal factions in Mexico, but also by Villa and Zapata, against the

ruling liberal oligarchy, drew an invading force from that northern liberal, Woodrow Wilson, who secured the oil port of Veracruz for US trade.

So in the face of this history, how are we to explain the anomalous equation of liberalism with the left? The answer seems to lie in the anomalous political history of the United States itself, especially in the early twentieth century. In the period from the late 1800s to the 1930s, a range of political revolts stirred people around the world: union organising, anti-colonial and nationalist struggles, the suffragist movement, anarchist and anti-racist revolts, and many more. These culminated with the Russian revolution in 1917 which both exploded socialist sentiment around the world (and not a few shorter and more localised revolutions) and spread class fear among the bourgeoisie. To different degrees in different places, the state response was variously oppressive and ameliorative. The ameliorative response in many places, framed amidst struggles against and by the state, led to the establishment of social democratic parties around the world as well as other radical political parties which participated in the parliamentary and other institutions of bourgeois democracy while arguing for various kinds of class realignment and a broader sharing of social power. These parties were certainly opposed, sometimes violently, by elites and states, but they were nonetheless absorbed into the liberal institutions that already existed but which they simultaneously changed in the process.

What made the United States exceptional was that a social democratic party never became institutionalised. Its highpoint came in 1912 when Eugene Debs of the Socialist Party won a million votes, some 6% of the presidential election against Wilson, who remained in the presidency through 1920. The failure of social democracy in the US was not simply some allergy by workers, radicals or other social malcontents to socialism, nor even simply the result of intense nationalism, but also a question of violent repression. The patrician presbyterian Wilson was vigorously anti-union and indifferent to civil rights, tolerating with equanimity the earliest signs of post-World War I racism and its lynching spree. While he grudgingly granted limited female suffrage, his administration arrested and jailed an estimated 16,000 socialists, anarchists, workers, anti-war activists, and communists (including Debs), incarcerated many without charges, and deported hundreds of 'enemies of the state' to Russia. His so-called Palmer Raids were especially brutal and destructive of any and all human rights. His liberal rhetoric supported 'self-determination' for colonial subjects but in practice he refused even to meet with anti-colonial organisers – for example, the IRA and Ho-Chi Minh – and famously disparaged Haitians: 'Imagine that! Niggers speaking French!' This from the icon of twentieth-century liberalism in the US.

The contemporary point should not be missed that one can therefore better understand George Bush's affinity with this particular predecessor, but the larger point is that the violent repression of social democracy in the United States in these decades was largely successful, and it had

significant implications for liberalism. Liberalism was in effect enlisted to perform the work done elsewhere by social democracy,³ especially with the Republican interregnum of the 1920s. It was pressed into service as a prophylactic against the class-threat of communism. But in performing this role in the United States, liberalism was itself pulled to the left in a way rarely experienced in the rest of the world, and it took on a specifically national, even nationalist American, character. One finds hints of this recognition in the work of political theorists Louis Hartz (1955) who, in the midst of the Cold War, observed that ‘Americanism brings McCarthyism together with Wilson.’⁴

Latin American leftists who critically deployed the term ‘neoliberalism’ in the 1970s clearly recognised the conservatism that has marked liberalism since the nineteenth century, as indeed did those such as Friedrich von Hayek who decades earlier explicitly applied that label to themselves as a reaction against 1930s Keynesianism. Today it is possible to see that thanks to the rise of neoliberalism itself and the globalisation of media, a quite anomalous US experience of liberalism has been globalised into a near-general definition. So much so that the messianic civilisational rhetoric of liberalism is arguably more ubiquitous today than at any time since the Second World War. In this context, the rhetoric of democracy and freedom (individual and market varieties) deployed by successive US administrations, but most sharply by the Bush administration, has to be understood as simultaneously consistent with long-term liberalism and at the same time an extraordinary threat: ‘You are going to get freedom, as we define it, whether you like it or not,’ is the message to anyone caught in the cross-sites of imperial ambition. Seen this way, the elixir of economic class interest and civilisational mission that entwine in the imperial present⁵ represent a powerful continuity not just with US history but with the long defunct British Empire too.

NOTES

1. J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (New York: Penguin 1982).
2. U. S. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999).
3. L. Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World 1955).
4. N. Smith, *The Endgame of Globalization* (New York: Routledge 2005).
5. c.f. D. Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2004).