

BEYOND HAGIOGRAPHY OF LIBERALISM

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Abstract

This paper purports to explore and highlight the ideological nature of liberalism. Its main contention is that the liberal tradition, far from being a bearer of universal freedoms and rights, was a racially and spatially delimited worldview which tended to create a ‘master race democracy’ at the expense of Indigenous populations of Americas, African slaves, servants of metropolitan cities, and native populations of colonized countries. It highlights the paradox at the heart of liberal ideology: chattel slavery, colonialism and liberalism were born at the same time. The countries where liberal revolutions took place were also the countries that were dependant on slavery, colonialism, and imperial exploitation of the non-Euro-American world. It makes a case for a mature critique of liberalism so as to go beyond hagiographic studies of liberal political tradition that usually permeate the mainstream scholarship on liberalism. It is only by recognizing its limitations that we can use its positive force to make the world a better place to live in.

Keywords: Liberalism, Hagiography, Colonialism, Race, Ideology.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Francis Fukuyama declared the “end of history” and the ultimate victory of liberalism in both political and economic fields. Free market capitalism and liberal democracy, argued Fukuyama, marked the end point of humanity’s socio-political evolution, and liberalism became the dominant ideological god at whose altar paying homage became an important exercise in the mainstream culture and academics. Everybody from politicians to academicians began to remind us again and again that liberalism as an ideology has always been a bearer of universal freedoms. The liberal definitions of liberalism are almost always self-congratulatory, frequently consisting of a list of items that are taken to be the defining characteristics of this political tradition. Respect for the individual, democracy, tolerance, human rights, scepticism and reason, we are frequently reminded, have always been the core values of liberal tradition. In the mainstream political domain the historical rise of this political ideology is presented as a linear movement from tyranny to liberty and freedom. The focus is always on an unalloyed progress from despotism and political slavery to individual rights and freedom for all irrespective of religion, colour, race, class, gender and nationality. Allegiance to liberalism became a badge of legitimacy and any opposition to it began to be construed as a sign of political immaturity and indifference to human dignity. There are a very few voices in the academic fields which have diverged from the mainstream constructions of liberalism and have provided a critique of it. One such critical intervention in the discussions on

liberal ideology is *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (London: Verso, 2011) written by Domenico Losurdo, an Italian philosopher of great repute, and translated by Gregory Elliott.

In order to understand the historical rise to domination of the liberal ideology, Losurdo argues that one should first bid “farewell to hagiography” (301) that has dominated the mainstream scholarship on liberalism and which has always tended to present liberalism uncritically as an ideology of universal freedoms and rights. In contrast to hagiographical studies of liberalism, Losurdo’s main thesis is that liberalism from its very inception was characterized by “exclusion clauses” (181) and by “a tangle of emancipation and dis-emancipation” (301) that excluded the rest of humanity from the “community of free” (309). Losurdo makes it very clear that one cannot understand this political tradition in its totality simply with reference to the proclaimed normative commitments of liberal figures like John Lock, George Washington, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville and Adam Smith (all supporters of slavery, colonialism and imperialism) without also taking into consideration the concrete social and political relations that liberalism actually established and found expression in. He draws our attention to aspects that have been largely and unjustly ignored in the mainstream scholarship: the attitudes of liberals towards slavery, Native Americans (Indians), natives of colonies, and servants in the metropolitan centres. Losurdo focuses on the overall socio-political reality that emerged at the planetary level in the wake of liberalism in order to deconstruct its highly flattering view of itself. By maintaining that liberalism basically created a “master race democracy” (108) in the metropolitan centres and perpetuated slavery, racism, colonialism, and imperial relations in the rest of the world, Losurdo shows that the history of liberalism as a political movement is a history not just of liberty and political rights but also of genocides, coercive expropriation, violence, racism and exploitation. Losurdo’s methodology throughout has been to focus on this darker side of the history of liberalism because it is this angle of history that is consistently put under the rug to write self-congratulatory assessments of liberalism.

Losurdo begins by asking “what is liberalism” and whether a person like John C. Calhoun, an eminent statesman and vice president of the United States in the mid nineteenth century, can be called a liberal. Calhoun, like Lock, Jefferson, Paine and other proponents of liberal tradition, rallied against absolute governments and the concentration of power and sang odes to individual liberty. He criticized extensive power and defended minority rights, and proposed “a periodic reversal of roles in the relationship between governors and governed” (1). Here we have all the salient features of liberal thought. But on the other hand, Calhoun “declared slavery to be a ‘positive good’ that civilization could not possibly renounce” (1). He repeatedly denounced the critics of the enslavement of the blacks as ‘blind fanatics’ and maintained that slaves are a form of property legitimized and guaranteed by the Constitution. Clearly blacks were not among the minorities defended by Calhoun. The same was his attitude towards Native Americans (Indians) and the indigenous populations of other European colonies. To quote Losurdo at length, “In fact, in their case, tolerance and the spirit of compromise seem to turn into their opposite: if fanaticism actually succeeded in its mad project of abolishing slavery, what would follow would be ‘extinction of one or the other race’. And given the concrete balance of forces in the United States, it was not difficult to imagine which of the two would succumb: blacks could only survive on condition of being slaves” (2). Clearly, one can see the contradiction at the heart of liberal tradition: on the one hand, celebration of freedom and liberty for spatially and racially delimited “community of free”, and, and on the other hand, slavery, racism and exploitative colonial relations for the communities of unfree. All the writers, philosophers and statesmen who usually are associated with the origins of liberal political tradition are characterized by this

peculiar tangle of love of liberty for the community of free and legitimation or revindication of slavery and exploitative socio-political relations. It is this contradiction and paradox at the heart of liberal tradition that Losurdo explores and digs deep in this book.

Losurdo goes further to point out that if we reject the idea that Calhoun was a liberal, on account of his support for the institution of slavery, then “why should we continue to dignify John Lock with the title of father of liberalism?” (3). The English Philosopher to whom all the succeeding generations of liberals have been paying homage “regarded slavery in the colonies as self evident and indisputable, and personally contributed to the legal formalization of the institution in Carolina” (3). Though Lock inveighed against the political ‘slavery’ that absolute monarchy sought to impose on the community of free in the metropolitan center and on the members of community of free in the colonies, he helped draft a “constitutional provision according to which ‘every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his Negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever’. Lock was the last major philosopher to seek a justification for absolute and perpetual slavery” (3). The same paradox is found in J S Mill, another exponent of liberal political ideology. Mill justified slavery and colonialism by asserting west’s despotism over ‘races’ that he considered ‘under age’ or ‘savage tribes’. “In Mill’s view, any means were licit for those who took on the task of educating ‘savage tribes’; slavery was sometimes a mandatory stage for inducing them to work and making them useful to civilization and progress” (32).

A similar paradox emerges when one considers the relationship between liberalism and colonialism. Almost all the liberal Euro-American states were engaged in territorial conquests and colonial expeditions. Indeed colonialism reached its apogee with the diffusion and consolidation of liberalism across Europe in the late 19th century. The spread of liberal doctrine seems to have been deeply connected with the practice of invasion, conquest, violent subjection and domination of foreign peoples. African continent was ravaged; Africans were enslaved, indigenous populations of Americas, Australia and New Zealand were subjected to extermination and genocide, and Asian civilizations were subjugated at a time when liberal political tradition was becoming a dominant ideology in Europe and the United States. Just as in the case of slavery colonial expansionism in the liberal period was closely intertwined with an ideology of racial supremacy which often took murderous forms. The victory of the American Revolution for example was followed by accelerated seizure of land from Native Americans on the part of white settlers – a process of territorial expansion that involved not just expropriation and expulsion but organised and deliberate massacre too. This was justified with reference to the alleged inferiority of ‘Indian’ peoples – branded as ‘savages’, ‘barbarians’ and ‘wild beasts’.

One of the best points of Losurdo’s thesis is that liberalism on its own did not extend the liberal freedoms and liberty to the peoples outside the boundary of “the community of free”. Rather, it was the “struggle for recognition” (181) launched by the excluded sections of society in the metropolitan centres and by the colonized peoples in the colonies that increasingly transformed liberalism from without and compelled it to redraw the line of division between the ‘community of free’ and the excluded. However, liberals did not respond to these socio-political struggles with sympathy. Extending social, political and economic rights beyond the ‘community of free’ to the poor, slaves and colonized was construed by liberals as intolerable because, according to them, the demand ran counter to the ‘natural’ order ordained by God.

After keeping Losurdo’s damning critique of Western liberalism in mind it becomes easy to understand how George Bushes, Barack Obamas and Benjamin Netanyahus of our time can sing odes to human rights, democracy and freedom on the one hand, and on the other hand, pursue

imperial policies that are destroying countries and societies across the globe. This explains why is it possible for a Madeline Albright, a woman charged with the job of bringing ‘democracy’ to ‘despotic’ countries in the Middle East, as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations in 1996 can say without a blink of eye that “We think the price is worth it” referring to the death by U.S sanctions of half a million innocent Iraqi children. Losurdo’s magnificent book helps us understand that when leaders and ideologues of Euro-American imperial powers talk of ‘human rights’, ‘liberty’, ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ they refer mainly to the racially, ethnically and spatially delimited ‘community of free’ that excludes the rest of humanity from even being considered human.

Authors Note:

1. All references in this paper are to Domenico Losurdo’s *Liberalism: A Counter History* (London: Verso, 2011), Translated by Gregory Elliott.
2. An earlier version of this paper was earlier published in a news paper, *The Kashmir Reader*, on Saturday, 20 December 2014.