

THE MAZE OF LIFE STYLES*

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This essay looks at the frustrations and challenges facing a pluralistic society in the context of general liberal institutions, such as democracy, the market and the rules and regulations that underwrite personal autonomy. It is the author's opinion that the principal challenge to such a pluralistic society, a society which owes its origin to liberal institutions, is a personal one and is related to the many life styles that are made possible in such a society. Liberal institutions open numerous possibilities for living in very different ways, so that the problem here is caused not by a lack of them but an excess. Our greatest risk lies in being transformed into a pluralistic organism, incapable of giving shape to our impulses. The cultural weakness of the present time is not due to its emptiness but to our difficulties in confronting excesses.

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I

For a long time Western man has lived between nostalgia for a world that has been lost and hope for a paradise that appears to be within reach. This looking towards the past and the future has been especially intense in Chile and Latin America¹.

The idea of an original state which destroys itself is common in all nostalgia for the past: because History appears and breaks up the order and equilibrium of the world, because of our propensity for choosing the bad as revealed in the Old Testament, because of the idea that an imperfect society has corrupted the untamed, the good, the naive and the innocent, as in Romanticism or, as in the case of Latin America, native races, and finally because of a sudden anthropological slide into decadence, as postulated by Nietzsche, or more moderately, Gehlen.

In contrast with the sadness that this lost past provokes, if we look towards other currents of ideas we find that they place before us a future utopia in which a perfect community can be attained through political action. This last point is eminently modern. In the great mediaeval order of things, when it was considered that the state had been reached where Nature and Reason were as one, everything that was needed to be known could be found in the Classics or in the writings of the fathers of the Church.

Only in the Modern Age do we assume the radical notion of History as a process of development and associate it with the idea of untiring progress towards living together in a state of perfection, an idea which is preached in all revolutionary Utopias. The article of Isaiah Berlin's, which I recommended you to read before this talk,² explains brilliantly the rise and fall of this utopian belief, which does not happen because of a distinctive effort of personal transcendence, like religion, to overcome the miseries of this life but rather from collective self improvement through the action of institutions.

The characteristic that these great political projects have in common is precisely that impulse that moves them to action. Without any deep motivation, created by the dream of making a world that is both just and perfect, the great social and political movements of our time would never

¹ Jorge Larraín makes an erudite journey around Latin American self perceptions in "The Latin American Identity. Theory and History" in *Estudios Públicos* 55 (Winter 1994)

² Isaiah Berlin "The decadence of utopian ideas in the West" in *Estudios Públicos* 53 (Summer 1994). An excellent selection of essays on the history of ideas can be found in "Contra la corriente" (Mexico 1983 - orig publ. 1979)

have taken shape. It was under the banner of those magnificent ideals Liberty, Equality and Fraternity that Robespierre concluded that Terror is a duty of the State.

Without the passion of the Communist Manifesto, i.e. only having written the abstract and rational *Das Kapital*, Marx would have found it difficult to have achieved the decisive political influence he has had throughout much of this century. The total power concept of the Fascist state would have been purely nihilistic from the beginning, if it had not had the idea of total mobilising the people in search of a common identity, under which any differences between individuals was both extraneous and worthless (i.e. without the ethical support that came in a large part from conservative intellectuals like Ernst Junger and Carl Schmidt). And, closer to home, the military regime in Chile, given its characteristics, would have become a mere replica of the innumerable dictatorships which have taken power on the continent if it had not been impelled to push forward the country's development.

To aspire to their goal modern utopias depend on the rare mixture of a world without conflict harnessed to an inexorable technology, all of this motivated by an urgent desire to do something. It is precisely this urgent desire that contains an intrinsic contradiction: romantic dreams like the utopias of Marxism and 20th century Nationalism, are derived from gigantic machines of power, which supposedly emphasise technical efficiency as the way to lead men to utopia and which in many ways (and not fortuitously) come near to the original state, which was once lost, of harmony and prosperity.

II

It is difficult to know in what proportion either the positive acceptance of the value of the individual or the simple breakdown of utopias have influenced contemporary liberal institutions, like political democracy, the respect for life and other personal guarantees and the development of market economies.

The only thing certain is how early on the critics of liberal institutions positioned themselves to offer advice about limits on institutions like representative government. "Who would give their life for a President ?" the old French monarchists used to ask with conspicuous irony. To their German neighbours, the figure of the monarch was capable of provoking a profound and disturbing emotion which can only be lived through a

feeling of belonging and identifying with a living organism, that mobilises and protects, and that eventually becomes the nation. Thus, Von Gierke, one of the most influential jurists of the age, could write in 1914, at the beginning of the Great War, of the following experience that he had undergone in his youth:

“One day in July 1870, when the Kaiser was returning from Ems having received the French declaration of war, I was in Berlin, in Unter den Linden, and I experienced a revelation. The national spirit, in whose invisible reality I had believed for a long time, appeared to me in the flesh. In the crowd that had congregated I saw only a part of it. It was in the noise of the masses and even more in their respectful silence where I heard its powerful voice. I felt as though it had invaded my very being and was shaking me apart inside. I understood that this force was stirring everyone in the same way, and I had the silent conviction that souls were opening themselves to souls and fusing with each other. It was not the unanimity that creates a common language in individuals moved by the same feelings. It was the knowledge that we were all one, our essential beings had joined together, as if a wholeness had sprung out of such creative abundance. For a moment it seemed as though my individual self had been almost extinguished. The sublime “I” of the national community had taken exclusive possession of the consciences of its members. Faith made it a certainty: I had seen the National Spirit !”³.

Democracy, on the contrary, is discredited by its critics as being the scene of little power struggles, in which horizons are generally lost: in short, like a legal technique that lacks material content (C. Schmitt). It is accepted in the manner of an order which does not demand positive commitment, because it is based on pure tolerance (i.e. on scepticism as to what is deemed correct) and which, because of that, finds it difficult to provide the certainties that man, being a weak human being, longs for, especially when he feels a crisis coming. There is nothing heroic underlying Democracy: there is no social plan for mobilising people through the intensity of their emotions. In fact when something like that happens in a democracy, it is usually safe to say that a major political crisis is just around the corner.

Similarly the more intimate idea of personal liberty is equally fragile. Dostoevsky’s *Grand Inquisitor*, an old expert in what motivates humans, warns Christ that his offer of liberty is too heavy a burden for pusillanimous

³ O. von Gierke “Der Tag, III”, quoted by H. Hattenhauer in “Fundamental concepts of law” (1987)

beings, who are ready to give themselves, body and soul, to anyone who is capable of taking them under their wing. That grey faceless person, moulded that way by servitude, who appears in the totalitarian anti-utopias of Huxley and Orwell, lacks all freedom, but is also divested of all responsibility. In the Inquisitor's view, apart from the context, this image is not so far from that of the self-satisfied member of the middle class, who amuses himself by watching how his peers lose their dignity for the sake of a few dollars on a television show.

This is the risk that is run when a demotivated society becomes so domesticated that liberty loses its meaning and is only accepted as a verbal technique, among others, to fabricate happiness.

Democracy, the market and the laws that underwrite personal liberties can neither guarantee results nor promise them. Because of this several writers have imagined them as being typical institutions of our time, by reason of their function in respect to a complex society, which cannot not be understood just in terms of an hierarchical order of wealth and values.⁴ They are institutions with procedures that limit themselves to opening up possibilities and which, because of these possibilities, can be experienced in very different ways.

It can be shown, from a pessimistic point of view, that a democratic system in itself does not transform the culture of a country and its citizens: that the market cannot guarantee that the people themselves take care of their rights and that the independence of the judiciary is not in itself a guarantee that we can take our own moral esteem for granted.

In other words, liberal institutions can continue to co-exist in an atmosphere that is both intellectual and authoritarian, where the hope is that responsibility for the lives of the citizens will be assumed by others. Or they can be based on a general indifference towards what is valuable, as a consequence of which any stirrings of unease that might disturb the torpor produced by an increasingly "kitsch" culture disappear over the horizon.

III

Today, more than ever before, it seems reasonable to have a justification of liberal institutions, like that undertaken by Isaiah Ber-

⁴ N. Luhmann "Grudrechte als Institution" (Berlin 1965) and "Zweckbegriff und Systemrationalität" (Frankfurt 1968)

lin.⁵ The intellectual decadence of utopias and the experience of its effects politically, economically and culturally together with the desolation that it leaves in the soul and the body of society show the advantages of accepting “the basic machinery of institutions designed so as people can avoid doing too much damage to themselves”.

This is hardly the same as “a passionate battle cry to inspire men to sacrifice and martyrdom and to do heroic deeds”. However the aim of avoiding destruction without heroics or pillage is enough, as the awesome evidence of history shows: in particular in the history of great ideas.

From all this there springs a doubt that is the reverse of the one that comes along with major disasters. Is this aversion to risk-taking sufficient to justify the way in which we live ?. With this question we go back to the tremendous difference in the motivation (or to the amount of vibes around, as the youth of today put it) that utopian ideas or religious fundamentalism discharge, on the one hand, and liberal ways of living together discharge on the other.

Democracy’s objective, as Popper and Hayek showed, is not to express a general will (i.e. the people as one, which is expressed in pure nationalism) but to establish a mechanism based on trial and error, which allows bad or sterile governments to be dissolved and others that could be better to continue. Personal freedom does not necessarily exclude the commonplace, but it does avoid the idea of the police being used as the main instrument of persuasion, while the idea of the market does not necessarily guarantee that the culture of the stereotyped smile replaces grey for rosy or magenta.

Obviously all of this produces a sense of uneasiness, especially in those who are not disposed to put up with a feeling of insecurity and who are more inclined to accept the idea that customs should be imposed by force, like the idea of imposing a curfew to safeguard the morals of the country as someone suggested recently in a letter published in one of the capital’s newspapers. Similarly there are those on the left who are still perturbed by the disappearance of great abstract ideals and fail to recognise any values at all within the texture of the growing complexity of today’s society.

⁵ This interpretation moves away from the theory of the incommensurability of life styles which John Gray infers from Berlin’s work. According to this doctrine it would not be possible to conceive a rule which would allow preferences between different concepts in the world. Each one of these has its own way of looking at things and would therefore be impervious to reasoning outside its own terms of reference. Thus a system starting from the idea of liberty would represent an option which it could only justify itself. As a consequence any attempt to establish a system of preferences would be bound to fail (J. Gray “Isaiah Berlin”. London 1995)

There is also another attitude which is demonstrated just as frequently and which Robert Musil describes with analytical precision in his great novel about contemporary man. Ulrich is a professional and brilliant individual, whose attitude is one of taking sides, of observing ironically what goes on around him, who is confused with all the coming and going of opportunities and who is incapable of deciding his own destiny. He is the inhabitant of an absent country who has to be tough enough to restrain all the different spirits that live together inside him (A. Gehlen) but who lacks that internal structure that gives one something which we call personality. It is easy to recognise oneself in this type of person who shows a beautiful and strong outward appearance, but who is both soft and defenceless inside.

The prognostications for our times are consistent with these frustrations: the end of custom and tradition which upsets conservatives, a loss of emphasis on the social side replaced by more on the economic which worries the intellectuals and the religious or simply the destructive cynicism of those who have won and those who are playing to win. Is this a definitive judgement on liberal institutions ?.

IV

What is certain that political democracy, constitutional rights and even the market do not betray our ancient feelings of belonging: on the contrary, they are institutions that guarantee our individuality like never before in history.

This raises completely new personal challenges. Above all, in the realm of ideas it entails rescuing the ethical dimension of freedom. What is already certain is that liberty, by stimulating wealth creation, is also, because of this, useful in improving personal welfare. Nevertheless, although liberty can be valued because of its efficiency, this interpretation takes the attention away from its more personal dimension- "what a difficult burden autonomy is for beings who are carved from such twisted wood as men" (Kant).

At bottom, liberal institutions make a pluralistic society possible, a society whose major problem is excess. In order to live well in such a society it becomes inevitable that we may opt for relatively limited life styles, in spite of the maze of different paths that are open to us. The pluralism of institutions threatens to penetrate our very personality: our greatest risk is to transform ourselves into a type of organism that is incapable of giving shape to its impulses. The maxim which immediately

brings this premise to mind is Wittgenstein's- "my life consists of the fact that I need certain things to be content". It is true to say that although there are worrying signs around, there are also others that give an indication of something new happening on a more personal scale. I should like to demonstrate this by referring to the recent trilogy of films from Kieslovski. *Blue, White and Red*, colours of the abstract ideals of French tradition- Liberty, Equality and Fraternity- appear here in a reflection on the motivations and values of real human beings, people whose life is a maze of movement, of comings and goings, of anxiety and hope, of stupidity and lucidity. If the Borgian image of the maze evokes the disorientation of being lost in life, of finding oneself caught between dilemmas that lead off in all directions, it also expresses the restless search for a prize which is both cold and aloof.

The problem is that different principles are acting simultaneously in our daily life, a life from which at the same time we demand unceasing satisfaction. Our lives are overburdened with values and to a great extent therein lies our difficulty. The demands made on the relationship between couples (the general use of this term is, by definition, symptomatic in itself) are greater than ever before: women have to be affectionate, interesting and good mothers and fathers have to dedicate themselves to their children much more than simply disciplining them. More than ever people are looking to religion for hope while, on the other hand, the world of today seems to personify the description that Mephistopheles gave to Faust about himself: "I am the spirit that everyone doubts": more efficiency and satisfaction are being demanded at the same time from work: we live by moving ourselves rapidly around from place to place but at the cost of being exhausted from having to follow the hundreds of rules that stop us from being pushed around. Never before have so much affection, reciprocal consideration and rationality been demanded from us.

In the Christian tradition freedom is expressed by the fact that there are possibilities open to us for leading a good life but that we are in no way conditioned to leading it naturally. Liberal institutions make this ideal materialise: freedom appears as a condition so that we can define what we are and what we are not and how we include others in our lives.

At the same time, from a personal point of view, freedom is not made up of a little packet of our rights over others but rather is presented to us as a difficult test for human beings who are not naturally inclined to confront such a maze of challenges.

The greatest risk facing our society today is the unheralded aim of wanting everything in a society that on the one hand is eradicating hunger

and on the other is apparently opening limitless possibilities for living. Everything points to the fact that a certain amount of asceticism is indispensable today more than ever before to allow us to achieve to build a structure that puts things in order and to construct a project for life. The cultural weakness of the present does not lie in its emptiness but in our difficulties in confronting excesses. □

Translated by: John Bell