

The Collapse of Global Liberalism

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Last month we saw quite an unusual show at the Davos Forum. Since its inception in 1971, the Davos Forum has become known as a friendly gathering of Western leaders in Switzerland where many look forward to some winter sports. The 2026 Davos Forum, however, was marked by conflict. European leaders had become disturbed by President Trump's rhetoric relating to the potential takeover of Greenland by the United States. Greenland is, of course, Danish territory and so this would represent one NATO member taking territory from another under duress. European newspaper writers speculated on why the American President would do something so crass. Smarter observers noticed that perhaps the entire point of the Greenland saga was to fracture the Western alliance – an alliance that has become, in the eyes of many in Washington, a toxic relationship.

But there were also misperceptions on the other side of the Atlantic. The Greenland saga – together with the capture of President Maduro of Venezuela – led prominent American commentator Tucker Carlson to declare that the United States was moving out of its republican phase and into its imperial phase. This rhetoric, drawn from the history of Ancient Rome, has been in the ether of American conservative intellectual circles for a decade or more but recently it seems to have become something resembling conventional wisdom amongst the Washington intelligentsia. It is a misreading of what is going on. The United States has been in its imperial phase since

the end of the Cold War. Future historians will mark the end of the republican period of governance in that country to around the time of the Patriot Act, the sidelining of Congress and the concentration of military and geostrategic power in the Executive Branch of government. What we are seeing with the Greenland saga and with other, similar developments is the end of that imperial era: the beginning of the unwinding of the entire imperial structure – a set of phenomena, I should highlight, that was ably explained to Carlson last week when he interviewed the investor, Ray Dalio.

I will grant that even today this is a controversial opinion. If you log onto X, you will see the new imperial phase being celebrated. On my reading – and on Dalio's – that celebration is around a decade too late. But today's talk is not about the beginning of the end of America's imperial phase. It is about something far broader: the collapse of liberalism itself. America's imperial phase was, for historically contingent reasons related to developments in European politics in the 20th century, the nadir of liberalism as an ideology. Yet the ideology of liberalism is a much deeper phenomenon than anything to do with the United States – whether we talk about the American republic or the American empire. Both were embodiments of certain strains of liberalism – but liberalism here is what philosophers call the “necessary condition” while the structures of government that it found itself embodied in were mere contingencies.

To grasp at the root of liberalism we must go back few hundred years before the revolution of 1776 to the English Civil War and the publication of a text entitled “*Two Treatises of Government*” by an Englishman called John Locke.

The English Civil War was not, in fact, a civil war. It was a revolution. King Charles I lost his head. Oliver Cromwell created the position of Lord Protector for himself – what we

would today call 'dictator'. And the whole revolution was ideologically motivated by the Puritanism and Parliamentarianism of the Roundheads. Thirty-eight years after the revolution and twenty-nine years after the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy, John Locke published his now-famous work of political philosophy. Locke published it anonymously because he knew that people at the time would make a connection between the contents of the book and the revolution that had taken place a few decades earlier.

The so-called civil war and Locke's book were the first rumblings of a new political philosophy that would come to dominate political debate for the next 500 years: liberalism. What is liberalism? There is an old joke that if you ask five economists their opinion on an economic matter you will get six opinions. The same holds true for liberals. Nor is this simply about what some argue – not me, I should be clear – is the idiosyncratic use of the term in contemporary American political discourse. It is much deeper than that. Superficially there seems to be an enormous gap between a libertarian and a progressive liberal, for example. Deeper still, if you took a contemporary British liberal – say, a Liberal Democrat voter – and transported them back in time to the early-19th century, they would have very little in common with anyone but the most radical Whig politician.

I do not think that liberalism is as slippery a concept as it may at first appear, however. I think that all liberals share something in common: the hatred of what they see as arbitrary hierarchies. This is the core complaint of Cromwell and the Puritans against the Stuart monarchy and the Church of England: the powers that both these institutions wielded, according to the Puritans, were arbitrary. The position of the King in society was

based on an arbitrary custom that recognised the authority of the King. The Historical Episcopate of the Church of England – much less the Roman Catholic Church – was based on similarly arbitrary hierarchies, according to the Cromwellians. This is not to say that Cromwell and his followers rejected all hierarchies. They wanted hierarchies that they thought conformed to some sort of rationale – usually one based on some concept, explicit or implicit, of equality.

Of Locke's *Two Treatises*, the first one today goes largely unread. The second of the Two Treatises is the one that continues the basis for what we recognise to be liberal philosophy today – especially the idea of a social contract. The first of the Two Treatises, on the other hand, is an extended attack on the work of the Royalist philosopher Sir Robert Filmer, specifically the book *Patriarcha, or The Natural Power of Kings* which was likely drafted during the so-called English Civil War but published only after the Restoration. Filmer argued in favour of natural hierarchies. To do so he drew on the Bible – notably, mostly the Old Testament – but more importantly he used the power of analogy. The King, Filmer argued, ruled over his subjects as the father rules over the household – as Patriarch. The rights of Kings, like the rights of fathers, are natural rights – inscribed in the very nature of things.

Locke felt that he needed to refute these arguments before laying out his own theory of liberal government. Like the Puritans, Locke saw nothing natural about the powers of Kings and instead saw them as an arbitrary hierarchy. Locke, like Cromwell, saw it as his task to behead the King – but theoretically rather than physically. Filmer, on the other hand, warned that if you start by attacking the hierarchies of the monarchy as arbitrary

you would very soon start to see almost all the hierarchies in human society as arbitrary.

After the King loses his head, the father is next.

Standing here in 2026, after ten years of experiencing liberalism in arguably its most intense historical form, I ask you: who had the better argument? Locke, no doubt, would be shocked and confused with the contemporary transgender moment. Filmer, on the other hand, would likely laugh and say “I told you so” – he would get a second laugh if he was presented with the deconstructionist literature used to justify this movement which explicitly states that the goal is to attack arbitrary gender hierarchies and, I quote, “patriarchal norms”.

“But liberalism wasn’t always as extreme as this!” some might protest. A serious reading of the historical record shows that liberalism tends to go through fits and starts. It is not, as the Whig historians seem to think, a consistent push toward progress. The liberalism of the French Revolution, for example, was far more radical than anything seen in 19th century England or 1950s America. What accounts for this? I would argue that liberalism, to the extent it can function as a stable source of governance, is a parasitic ideology. In its purified form it is inherently destabilising – whether that destabilisation takes the form of transgender surgery on children or whether it involves a prostitute being crowned the Goddess of Reason in Notre Dame. But when it is welded onto the supposedly arbitrary hierarchies that actually undergird Western civilisation – which are handed down from Greece, Rome and Jerusalem – it can function for a time. I call this the difference between “hard” and “soft” liberalism.

But at the same time liberalism cannot help itself. It is an inherently revolutionary ideology. The soft liberal will inevitably give birth to the hard liberal. It is in the nature of

the ideology because the ideology itself is based on the tearing down of arbitrary hierarchies. But in the end, many hierarchies that appear arbitrary to liberals *are* natural and *are* required for society to function properly and for people to find their *eudaimonia*. For this reason, liberalism, as it spreads through society, can win in the short-term but never in the long-term.

Why then is global liberalism collapsing today? Part of it is due to the collapse of the American empire. After the end of the Cold War, very radical liberals took the reins of power in Washington. These people, the Baby Boomers, were hard liberals cast in the crucible of the radical social experiments of the 1960s and 1970s. Both left liberals and right liberals were affected by these social experiments – and so both became hard liberals, for all intents and purposes. When they got their hands on the levers of power they tried to spread this liberalism to the rest of the world. Being a revolutionary and proselytising ideology that has little objection to violence, liberalism's proponents are always tempted to spread its influence in the world. Fukuyama adhered to the view that the template for the End of History was created by Napoleon, after all – and Napoleon was no pacifist.

But the rest of the world did not want liberalism. I am not just talking about the Iraqis, although they certainly rejected it. I am talking about the Chinese, the Russians, the Indians, the Turks – all the old civilisations outside of Europe rejected liberalism. They found its precepts odd and its prescriptions dysfunctional. And so global liberalism collapsed for the simple reason that the non-liberal countries began to grow more powerful – militarily, economically, diplomatically – than the liberal countries.

At the same time, however, liberalism started to collapse domestically. Again, we need only reference the transgender moment. The average person, with a little conditioning, can be convinced of the ideas of even the radical feminists. But transgenderism is a bridge too far for most. A small minority of radical liberals will embrace it, no doubt. But if the average person is nodding along to the transgender craziness it is only because they are scared to do otherwise. When liberalism becomes absurd it inevitably becomes totalitarian. But since liberalism claims not to be authoritarian, much less totalitarian, once it moves in this direction it intellectually discredits itself. That is what we are seeing in the liberal countries today. And so, liberalism is collapsing globally and domestically at the same time – interestingly, for only partially related reasons.

What comes after liberalism? The subtitle of my book *The Collapse of Global Liberalism* is ‘And the Emergence of the Post Liberal World Order’. And while the book contains plenty in the way of concrete policy proposals, ultimately “postliberal” is a negative term that simply means “after liberalism”. It should mostly be thought of as an historical marking point much in the same way that American 19th century history is divided into “antebellum” and “postbellum”. But for a hint at what is coming after liberalism we simply need to turn to the countries that either never embraced it or which have tried it on and rejected it. They all share one thing in common: they are returning to their old civilisational norms. The Chinese are re-exploring their Confucian roots. The Russians are reverting to the aesthetics of Orthodox Christianity. The Indians are creating a Hindu nationalist state. And in Ankara, you can hear whispers of a return to the old Ottoman Empire as they discuss Muslim free trade zones and Sunni security alliances.

And so, the West has a choice to make: will it too return to its civilisational roots? My bet is that if it does not, it will collapse and be absorbed by other civilisations. It is starting to feel like that collapse is getting closer and closer, to the extent that some of us are starting to get a sense that it is breathing down our necks – although less so in central Europe than in elsewhere. Time is running out. It is up to the West to make a choice.