

George Orwell's Review of Mein Kampf

The political upheavals of 2016 have left western elites dumbfounded. After all we've done for them, they ask, how could people reject progress? Many people in the developed world are turning toward authoritarianism, closed markets and a renewed nationalism. Can you blame the elites for being shocked? Especially when these same people were so cloistered that they thought memes, inspirational platitudes, and celebrity endorsements would be enough to sustain the international liberal order?

By adopting a false sense of "progress," academics, policymakers, and the media forgot an essential truth: pluralism, openness, and trust don't always come naturally to human beings. This is especially true when people feel pressure from perceived threats, humiliations and symptoms of national decline. But this fact doesn't invalidate the open society. On the contrary, it's what makes it so important.

On a grand scale, the reasons for liberalism's crisis have been well documented. Here is just one example from Foreign Affairs, where Robin Niblett [writes](#) that,

"...over the past decade, buffeted by financial crises, populist insurgencies, and the resurgence of authoritarian powers, the liberal international order has stumbled. According to the political scientist Larry Diamond, since 2006, the world has entered a "democratic recession": the spread of individual freedom and democracy has come to a halt, if not retreated."

From the high-level vantage point of geopolitics, Niblett's piece provides an excellent summary. But while it's all fine and good to ruminate on root causes, we should also ask why

these triggers lead people to abandon the open society and adopt [the dictatorship mindset](#). We don't need to bankroll a psychologist's vacation home to figure this out. Rather, we can look to that all-time destroyer of illusions: George Orwell.

Orwell Faces an Unpleasant Fact

While working as a journalist during the Second World War, Orwell penned a [review](#) of Hitler's Mein Kampf. He begins by detailing the various political failures that allowed Hitler's rise to power, such as the cynical attitude among "the heavy industrialists, who saw in him the man who would smash the Socialists and Communists." But rather than stay at a safe, analytical distance from the subject, he reveals a truth that most bourgeois commentators would not dare even to whisper in polite company:

"Again, the situation in Germany, with its seven million unemployed, was obviously favourable for demagogues. But Hitler could not have succeeded against his many rivals if it had not been for the attraction of his own personality, which one can feel even in the clumsy writing of Mein Kampf, and which is no doubt overwhelming when one hears his speeches...The fact is that there is something deeply appealing about him."

As the generation who lived through it passes away, we lose touch with the animating forces of the 1930s. This gives us the luxury to think of it like a movie, with a plot we can interpret, create distance from and try to forget. We comfort ourselves with the false notion that only insane people can do terrible things, that the German people must have been under some mass hypnosis that allowed for Kristallnacht, Blitzkrieg and Auschwitz. Surely people could never see it as in their best interest to usher in (in Orwell's words) "a horrible brainless empire in which, essentially, nothing ever happens

except the training of young men for war and the endless breeding of fresh cannon-fodder." Finally, we desperately reassure ourselves that, "I would have acted differently."

But the reality is that, while we all have the potential to embrace our nobler impulses, we are still prone to a series of fears and prejudices, and are tempted to resort to violence to achieve glory, power, and revenge. The liberal order has only existed for a fraction of human history, and requires the right mix of economic growth, broadly shared prosperity, and strong democratic norms to sustain itself.

We should remember, of course, that the National Socialists never achieved a legal majority in the Reichstag, and that President Paul Von Hindenburg appointed Hitler Chancellor just as their share of the vote was declining. Still, enough Germans were willing to vote for and commit violent acts to support Hitler. Why is this? What space had Hitler filled that liberalism and social democracy left behind? Orwell goes on (emphasis my own):

"Certainly all "progressive" thought, has assumed tacitly that human beings desire nothing beyond ease, security and avoidance of pain. In such a view of life there is no room, for instance, for patriotism and military virtues. The Socialist who finds his children playing with soldiers is usually upset, but he is never able to think of a substitute for the soldiers; tin pacifists somehow won't do. Hitler, because in his own joyless mind he feels it with exceptional strength, knows that human beings don't only want comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene, birth-control and, in general, common sense; they also, at least intermittently, want struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags and loyalty-parades."

The ultimate challenge for liberalism then is to champion liberty, equality and fraternity (as voiced by the French

Third Republic), while recognizing that people aren't willing to totally discard those of labor, family and fatherland (summarized by a certain other French entity). Orwell, like many on the left, would say that liberalism is ill-equipped to fight for the former while stalling the rise of movements that champion the latter. But while Orwell certainly died a devoted socialist, he was self-critical enough to write 1984, in which he envisioned a world where his worldview could become so perverse as to betray itself. So our task then is to ask: How has liberalism betrayed itself?

Bombs, Snoops and Cronies

For the answer, we can zoom back out to Niblett's article. One clear area of overreach was the use of military intervention to expand and enforce the spread of the liberal order (again, emphasis my own):

"The United States has often acted unilaterally or selectively obeyed the rules of the international order it promotes. It invaded Iraq under a contested legal mandate, and the U.S. Congress has refused to ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, among numerous other multilateral conventions and treaties. And in 2011, the British, French, and U.S. governments stretched their mandate—granted by UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized all necessary measures to protect civilians in Libya—when they helped overthrow Libya's leader, Muammar al-Qaddafi. And various Western governments have condemned Russia and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for indiscriminately shelling civilians in Syria while simultaneously supporting Saudi Arabia's bloody campaign in Yemen."

Military interventions, besides the obvious bloodshed it creates abroad, necessitate more security and liberty-quashing directives at home. And this leads to another betrayal in the form of the expanding surveillance state that, while

exercising great power to limit freedom and privacy, has a dubious effect on stopping terrorism.

If defenders of the liberal order care about people living under authoritarian systems, as we should, we ought to remember that economics, not military action, often changes their lot for the better. After all, it was economic and cross-border cooperation with China that improved the lives of millions of Chinese citizens, even with the communist party still in power. Can you imagine if we had tried regime change there instead?

Speaking of economics, governments across the west have used their regulatory power ostensibly to create a “level playing field.” But in doing so, they often create laws that the most powerful firms take advantage of and benefit from, leading to consolidation and the revolving door between big business and the state. This, along with a horrendously complicated tax code, makes it very complicated for potential employers to create new opportunities for work. Those opportunities go elsewhere and portions of the working class in western nations suffer.

And thus those workers and other citizens think, “We’re sent to die in the wrong wars, spied on even when we don’t break the law, and the last factory just left my community. Screw this.” No amount of hashtags, pleading from rich celebrities, or insipid John Lennon lyrics will convince them otherwise.

What we need to do is declare that military interventionism, warrantless surveillance, and crony capitalism are contrary to classical liberal values, not products of them. And we can tell a fact-based story that the spread of free expression, market economics and representative limited government produces better outcomes than authoritarianism, protectionism and hardline nationalism. Perhaps more importantly, we should emphasize that these values need not come into conflict with other, more traditional ways of thinking. But so long as we

defer to celebrity culture, academia and governing institutions (e.g. the UN, the European Union) to make these arguments, they will continue to fall short.



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