



Republican liberty and the future of the centre-left

Michael Lind

The dominant tradition in popular politics is infused with the values of republican liberalism. The contemporary centre-left, influenced by a mix of residual Marxism and technocratic progressivism, has ceded this ground to conservatives and libertarians, losing elections and popular appeal in the process. A twenty-first century centre-left needs to reclaim the tradition of republican liberty as its own.

The centre-left in Europe and North America is in a state of political collapse and intellectual exhaustion. In recent elections the Labour party lost control of the British government to a centre-right coalition and in the US the Democrats lost the House of Representatives to a resurgent right. Parties of the right already ruled Germany, France and Italy. Even Sweden, long the flagship of social democracy, is now governed by conservatives.

The crumbling of social democratic parties on both sides of the Atlantic has much deeper causes than poor leadership or the voter discontent produced by the Great Recession. It is the culmination of trends going back to the unraveling of postwar social democratic settlements in the 1970s. In Europe and America alike, the industrial working class that supported midcentury social democracy has contracted, as a result of the offshoring of industry, productivity growth and the shift toward services in employment. When the postwar boom came to an end in the 1970s, Keynesian full employment and demand management policies appeared to be discredited. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and their counterparts in other countries led a counter-revolution which failed to shrink the size of the state but succeeded in deregulating the economy and marginalising social democrats.

The result was the “Third Way” movement on the centre-left, whose motto might have been: “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.” Bill Clinton’s New Democrats in the US and Tony Blair’s New Labour in Britain and their allies in continental Europe embraced kinder and gentler versions of conservative economics. They sought to win over professionals, managers and investors with centre-right economic views but liberal views on environmentalism, racial tolerance and sexual liberalism.

The neoliberal project was flawed from the beginning. It did little to help the growing and increasingly non-unionised service sector workforce. The neoliberal programme of taxing the rich in order to fund means-tested redistribution committed Third Way politicians to a growth model based on rising asset values and increasing concentration of wealth and income. But the simulacrum of prosperity disguised the design defects of neoliberalism until the global economy crashed in 2008.

Even as it failed to produce an equivalent to the sustained prosperity of the post-1945 social settlement, Third Way neoliberalism failed to consolidate new centre-left majorities and alienated the former centre-left base. In Europe, social democrats are losing voters to populist parties of the right, hard left socialist parties and the Greens. In the US, the first-past-the-post electoral system effectively bars the entry of third parties, so that working-class disaffection with the left has produced a growing number of non-aligned, alienated voters who swing between the two major parties.

In both Europe and America the centre-left has been crippled by the defection of the native white working class. In Britain, the per cent of the working class that voted Labour dropped from 56 per cent in 1970 to 33 per cent in 2010.¹ In the US, the Democrats lost the House of Representatives in the 2010 mid-terms in part because the Republican advantage over the Democrats among the men and women of the white working class, which includes four out of ten Americans, widened to 29 per cent.² The trend began in the 1960s and 1970s, and accelerated when Third Way neoliberals adopted a synthesis of moderate economic conservatism and social liberalism—the opposite of the blend of economic liberalism and moderate social traditionalism favored by white working class voters on both sides of the ocean.

As they ponder the future, social democrats increasingly agree that neoliberalism proved to be a dead end. But there is little agreement on where to go next. That is not surprising. The centre-left has always been a mix of distinct and sometimes conflicting traditions, both within particular countries and the trans-Atlantic community as a whole. Three traditions in particular inform today's centre-left: Post-Marxism, technocratic progressivism, and republican liberalism. Conservative parties in Europe and America owe much of their success to their ability to tap into the tradition of republican liberalism, which social democratic parties dominated by post-Marxism and technocratic progressivism have abandoned to their detriment.

Post-Marxism

By Post-Marxism I mean the strain of centre-left thought which has jettisoned some of the elements of Marxist ideology like the nationalisation of the means of production and the dialectic of history, while retaining other elements of the former faith.

One residue is a cosmopolitan suspicion of the nation-state as a barrier to the fraternity not only of the proletariat but of humanity. In his 1848 essay on free trade, Marx wrote that “the protective system of our day is conservative, while the free trade system is destructive. It breaks up old nationalities and pushes the antagonism of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie to the extreme point. In a word, the free trade system hastens the social revolution. It is in this revolutionary sense alone, gentlemen, that I vote in favour of free trade.” In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels sounded like enthusiasts for globalisation on the left, writing that capitalism has “given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country...In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations.” Some on the left who have lost their faith in socialism and revolution have kept their faith in internationalism and the idea of the free flow of capital, goods and labour across borders as a force driving progress and global unification. Far from being representing a capitulation to the right, such an intellectual move was always a possibility within the Marxist tradition itself.

Yet another legacy of Marxism among some on the centre-left is a residual economic determinism that treats political and moral values as derivative epiphenomena or disguises for material interests. For example, social democrats and liberals routinely complain that working class conservatives are voting against the only interests that count, their economic interests. They are accused of suffering from “false consciousness” because they do not obediently follow the lead of a left-intellectual “vanguard.” The idea that economic interests are, or should be, more important than moral values or cultural identity may be the most harmful assumption that the dying Marxist tradition has bequeathed to contemporary social democrats.

1. Peter Kellner, “The papers tell the story,” *Prospect*, November 2010, p.13.

2. Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin, “Job Loss and Liberal Apathy,” November 5, 2010.

Technocratic progressivism

Technocratic progressivism is the second of the three major traditions on the centre-left. It originated in German Idealism and was naturalised around 1900 in Britain by the New Liberalism and in the US by the pre-World War I Progressives. The very term Progressive is an English translation of the German *Fortschrittlich*.

In the technocratic progressive tradition, the agent of progress is not the industrial proletariat but the nonpartisan, enlightened bureaucracy—Hegel’s “universal class” which, alone among classes, is identified with the interests of the whole (a whole which may be the nation, a supra-national regional community like Europe, or the entire world). A disinterested mandarin of civil servants, judges and nonprofit professionals is supposed to employ social science to address political challenges, which are conceived of as discrete problems with pragmatic solutions. Government institutions should be designed to insulate the educated and impartial technocrats from the ignorant and emotional public, who should allow the do-gooders to do good to them without interference.

In its recent neoliberal version, technocratic progressivism has combined the thin conception of community found in the philosophy of liberal perfectionism with an economics based on the idea of market failure. Liberal perfectionism, with its origins in Kant, Humboldt and Mill, holds that the purpose of the state is to secure the conditions in which people can develop their individual personalities according to their own life projects. The theory of market failure limits the scope of government to supplementing competitive markets.³ Liberal perfectionism and neoclassical economics both assume that personal preferences exist independently of political life and are not to be questioned. There is no need for democracy in either conception, because a benign authoritarian state might be able to correct market failures or provide people with the means to pursue purely private projects as well a democratic republic can.

Technocratic progressives are right to insist that a large and competent government is necessary to provide public goods and economic security in a modern technological society. But a naïve faith that government can be entrusted to incorruptible experts has been a weakness in this tradition from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first. Technocratic progressives tend to dismiss criticisms of statism by referring to successful government programmes, downplaying or ignoring the danger that government will become tyrannical or corrupt.

Republican liberalism

Fear of tyranny and corruption is central to republican liberalism. In the British context, David Marquand describes republican liberalism as “democratic republicanism.”⁴ Of the three traditions that shape the centre-left, this has the least support among social democratic activists and thinkers but the greatest resonance with modern electorates in democracies on both sides of the Atlantic.

The struggle to control and channel all forms of arbitrary power—military, political and economic—is at the centre of the republican liberal tradition. With its talk of individual life projects, liberal perfectionism tends to trivialize politics by reducing it to the encouragement of personal tastes. Republican liberalism is individualist as well, but it is much less concerned with opportunities for self-expression than with preventing people from being murdered (the natural right to life), enslaved (the natural right to liberty) and starved (the natural right to property, including property in one’s labor).

3. John Kay argues that market failure progressivism is a variant of market fundamentalism. See John Kay, “Market Failure,” in Patrick Diamond and Roger Liddle, editors, *Beyond New Labour: The future of social democracy in Britain* (London: Politico’s, 2009), pp. 73-85

4. David Marquand, *Britain Since 1918: The Strange Career Of British Democracy*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008)

Natural rights are secured by a sovereign people, who create and replace governments as their agents. Republican liberalism does not necessarily require democratic government or national independence in all times and places. But its logic encourages high levels of political and economic equality among members of the sovereign people and the division of the world among self-governing peoples, identified in modern times with cultural nations rather than the cities of premodern republicanism.

These three political traditions might be reduced to two. The nineteenth century Hegelian tradition, with its roots in the Reformation and Romanticism, has Marxist socialism and technocratic progressivism as its two branches. What unites Post-Marxist leftism and progressivism, while dividing them from republican liberalism, is the nineteenth century combination of faith in social science with the idea that history is moving in a particular direction. John Gray has described the combination of scientism and teleology found in many modern movements as “positivism,” a form of secularised Christian providentialism.⁵

In that sense, Post-Marxism and technocratic progressivism are positivist ideologies. Republican liberalism is not. The republican tradition does not mandate a belief in the inevitable evolution of a world of democratic republics, even if such a hope has been shared by many republican liberals. On the contrary, as J.G.A. Pocock has shown, the republican tradition is haunted by the perception that genuine democratic republics are rare because they are difficult to establish and even harder to maintain.⁶

The right and republican liberalism

On both sides of the Atlantic, the tradition of republican liberalism or democratic republicanism is much stronger among ordinary people than among elites. Indeed, the right in Europe and the United States has owed its electoral success in the last few generations to its greater ability to speak the language of republican liberty.

The contemporary right in the West draws on offshoots of the republican liberal tradition, including classical liberalism, populism and nationalism. These were movements of the left in the nineteenth century. Of premodern versions of conservatism based on agrarianism, monarchism and clericalism, no trace remains. Margaret Thatcher showed the influence of republicanism by insisting that Parliament, not the monarchy, is the central British institution. Today’s French conservatives appeal to Jacobin conceptions of national cultural unity. Twenty-first century versions of the ultramontanists and the Camelots du Roi are nowhere to be found. Sweden’s far right party calls itself the Democrats. Austria has the Republikaner. America’s right-wing libertarians praise Tom Paine and Thomas Jefferson. Even the religious right in the US has more in common with the dissenting Protestant populism of William Jennings Bryan than with premodern notions of Christendom.

The contemporary right in both Europe and America has profited by exploiting traditional republican liberal concerns about tyranny, personal dependency and national self-determination. The right identifies tyranny with big government, the welfare state with personal dependency, and liberal internationalism with a sacrifice of national self-determination. All too often, social democrats from the Post-Marxist and progressive traditions appear to confirm the right’s accusations, when they defend government rather than popular sovereignty, dismiss concerns about the demoralising effects of means-tested welfare, and treat the nation-state as an anachronistic form of organisation which needs to be superseded by regional and global governance.

5. John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008)

6. J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 2003)

It is a fatal mistake for the centre-left to cede the tradition of republican liberalism to the right. A republican liberal centre-left would make concerns about tyranny, personal dependency and national self-determination central to its programme out of conviction, rather than as a poll-driven exercise in rebranding. And it would not hesitate to make common cause with republican liberals of the centre-right, against rivals from other traditions at both ends of the political spectrum.

The answers of a republican liberal left to the questions of tyranny, dependency and national self-determination would differ from those of the right—but they would also differ from those of the Post-Marxist left and the technocratic progressive left.

Against tyranny and dependency

Republican liberals of the left would reject the equation of tyranny with government by arguing that private power as well as public power can be tyrannical and must be balanced and regulated. They would reject the idea that government is legitimate only in cases of market failure by emphasising the prerogative of the sovereign people to organise the economy, by assigning functions to government, private enterprise, nonprofit enterprise, or the household as they see fit, in the interest of creating and preserving the economic and social preconditions for a flourishing democratic republic.

Tyranny can take the form of irksome meddling as well as brutal repression. Unlike Marxists and Post-Marxists and republican liberals, technocratic progressives have always been drawn to paternalistic social engineering schemes—the prohibition of alcohol and eugenics in the early twenty-first century, environmentally-sustainable lifestyles and anti-obesity crusading in the early twenty-first. The Third Way neoliberal project showed a particular interest in regulating the behavior of poor recipients of means-tested welfare benefits. Popular resentment of the “nanny state” has helped the right and hurt the left. Social democrats should concentrate on getting the basics of law and order and economic growth right. Many worthwhile reforms which do not belong in the platform of a centre-left party can be undertaken by single issue campaigns outside of the realm of party politics.

As Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner have argued, republican liberalism equates liberty with non-domination.⁷ Minimising the economic dependency of free individuals on the arbitrary power of others has been central to republican liberalism, from the days when it championed the yeoman farmer as an alternative to the tenant, serf or slave. For this reason, those on the centre-left in Europe and America influenced by republican liberal values have always preferred universal, contributory social insurance to means-tested social insurance. In the early twentieth century, American Progressives tended to oppose social insurance, preferring to dispatch upper-middle-class social workers to reform the manners of the poor. As Bo Rothstein as shown, there was a similar debate in Sweden between elite social engineers and farmer-labor populists.⁸ In Britain, the elimination of the humiliating stigma attached to means-tested poor relief was central to Beveridge’s program for universal social insurance, which influenced Franklin Roosevelt’s declaration of a “Second Bill of Rights.”

All too often the legitimate defense of widely-shared economic security by social democrats distracts the centre-left from providing or emphasising its own strategies for providing other kinds of security. One is physical security against foreign threats and crime. Another is what might be called “cultural security,” which involves respect for the cultures of national majorities as well as long-established or immigrant minorities. Unable to destroy, rather than slightly modify, popular economic security programs such as Social Security in the US and the National Health Service in Britain, parties of the right tend to claim that the centre-left is weak on the issues of physical security and cultural security.

7. Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford University Press, 2000); Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1998)

8. Bo Rothstein, *Just Institutions Matter: The Moral and Political Logic of the Universal Welfare State* (Cambridge University Press, 1998)

Changing the subject back to popular social insurance programmes is seldom an adequate response by the centre-left to such attacks.

Social democracy and the nation-state

Although they tend to promote the interests of finance and business, successful parties of the right in Europe and America appeal to the republican liberal conception of the sovereign people, identified with the nation. The tendency of leftists and liberals to denounce populism and nationalism as “fascism” is a Post-Marxist cliché, based on an erroneous Marxist interpretation of interwar fascism as an instrument of capitalism.

Parties and movements of the left reject popular nationalism at their peril. As George Orwell observed, “Patriotism is usually stronger than class-hatred, and always stronger than any kind of internationalism.”⁹

Fortunately the transatlantic center-left is heir to a rich tradition of liberal nationalist thought, in which the nation-state is viewed not as the weapon of a tribe or the tool of a class but as the institutional means of securing human rights and economic justice. In “Of Nationality” J.S. Mill set forth the classic republican liberal argument that in modern conditions democratic republicanism is most likely to succeed in a nation-state with a majority that shares a common sense of identity, which can be based on language, customs and values rather than common descent.¹⁰

Taking republican liberalism seriously would require European social democrats to take seriously the populist opposition in European nations to expansive versions of the “European project.” The British left in particular has always included its own Euroskeptics who have viewed first the European Community and then the European Union as elite projects dominated by multinational business and finance. Arguably the European Parliament was a mistake because, as Mill would have insisted, a polyglot Tower of Babel cannot function as a democratic legislature. The Greek crisis suggests that the project of creating a single market without a single government was flawed in its conception. A renewed republican liberalism of the left in Europe might favor selective integration, but might be inclined to promote intergovernmentalism rather than supra-nationalism and devise a centre-left version of de Gaulle’s Europe des patries.

On no issue are the failed parties of the trans-Atlantic center-left more distant from voters than on the subject of immigration. While xenophobic nativism is a genuine challenge, David Goodhart is correct to argue that it is a mistake for social democrats to treat all public concern about immigration as an expression of racism.¹¹ The tone-deafness of the left on this subject owes a lot to Post-Marxist suspicion of the nation-state and the desire of technocratic progressives to widen the scope of benevolent administration beyond the borders of the nation-state to the region and the world.

Support for immigration cannot be a first principle of a republican liberal left. Different countries have different needs, which may be served by high immigration—or none at all. If there is no duty to admit immigrants, then it follows that there can be no right of free emigration, because a right to emigrate would be pointless unless there are other countries which are bound by duty to accept the emigrant. This means that emigration to liberal countries cannot play a significant role in securing human rights, compared to the other methods traditionally favored by republican liberals: national secession to secure collective freedom against foreign tyranny, and local reform or revolution to secure individual freedom against local tyranny.

9. George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1941), p. 27.

10. J.S. Mill, “Of Nationality, as connected with Representative Government,” Chapter 16 of *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861).

11. David Goodhart, “National Anxieties,” *Prospect*, June 2006, pp. 30-35.

By the same logic, rights can never be secure if they are bestowed by outsiders who can just as easily withdraw them. For that reason, republican liberalism rejects ideas of “liberal imperialism” and “the responsibility to protect” of the kind invoked by some neoliberals during the Iraq War.

The next centre-left

The argument of this essay is that the crisis of the centre-left on both sides of the Atlantic cannot be solved by better branding or slightly different policy agendas. The centre-left needs to rethink what it stands for.

National differences notwithstanding, the dominant tradition in popular politics is infused with the values of republican liberalism, from the idea of human rights to the idea of national self-determination and popular sovereignty. Conservatives and libertarians have been more successful than social democrats in appealing to these values, mainly because the contemporary centre-left is influenced by a mix of residual Marxism and technocratic progressivism. Not only those two variants of nineteenth century Hegelian positivism but also the habits of thought and practice they produced need to be expunged from the twenty-first century centre-left.

Most of the traditional goals of European social democracy and American social democratic liberalism, such as the mixed economy, labour rights and policies to limit inequality, can be justified by appealing to the same republican liberal tradition that the right invokes. John Locke was a sophisticated mercantilist who argued for a natural right to public employment if no other jobs were available. Tom Paine argued for redistribution of assets on the basis of natural rights. Adam Smith and Thomas Jefferson believed that corporations were dangerous and in need of strict supervision. The centre-left is truer to the approach of great liberal thinkers than the libertarians and conservatives who frequently invoke their authority.

Under the name of social democracy or another name, the centre-left needs to reclaim the tradition of republican liberty as its own. Otherwise the twenty-first century will belong to its rivals.

Michael Lind is co-founder of the New America Foundation in Washington D.C. and director of its Economic Growth Program

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