

JAN ZIELONKA

COUNTER-  
REVOLUTION

Liberal Europe in Retreat

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## PROLOGUE

Several months after the fall of the Berlin Wall Ralf Dahrendorf wrote a book fashioned on Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.<sup>1</sup> Like Burke, he chose to put his analysis in the form of a letter to a gentleman in Warsaw.<sup>2</sup> The intention was to explain the extraordinary events taking place in Europe. Dahrendorf did not share Burke's liberal conservatism and his book does not read like Burke's political pamphlet. Dahrendorf tried to reflect calmly from his study at St Antony's College in Oxford on the implications of the turbulent period around 1989. He saw a liberal revolution evolving in Eastern Europe and he tried to identify opportunities that this revolution created as well as possible traps lying in its path.

**My book is written in the form of a letter to Ralf, my late German mentor.** It follows Dahrendorf's line by trying to reflect on the implications of the equally turbulent period three decades later. I see an illiberal counter-revolution developing in Europe and I aim to understand its roots and implications. Is Europe disintegrating? Can open society survive? How is the economic crisis to be overcome? Will Europeans feel secure again?

Although Dahrendorf's and my books are written in the same spirit and in the same location they are nevertheless quite different. I may well hold the title of Ralf Dahrendorf Professorial Fellow, but I am not Ralf Dahrendorf, of course. He grew up in fascist Germany; I grew up in communist Poland. His adult life witnessed states developing the welfare system, parliaments regulating markets, and the printed press being the key site of democratic discourse. My adult life witnessed states dismantling welfare systems, parliaments de-regulating markets,

and the internet being the key site of democratic discourse. Dahrendorf was a member of the political establishment ('albeit a maverick one'<sup>3</sup>): a German minister, a British Lord, and a European Commissioner. I also moved between different countries, but remained a kind of 'intellectual provocateur' with no political affiliations or functions.<sup>4</sup>

Most importantly, our books deal with opposite processes. His book talks about the revolution opening borders for people, ideas, and trade, about constructing the rule of law and democracy, about overcoming the ghosts of Westphalia in interstate relations, while my book talks about the counter-revolution destroying all that. His book is about extending the liberal project into Eastern Europe; my book is about the retreat of this project under pressure from anti-liberal insurgents all over the continent.

This is not a book on populism, however. This is a book about liberalism. Populism has become a favourite topic within liberal circles and no one has ever exposed populist deceptions and dangers better than liberal writers. Yet, liberals have proved better at finger-pointing than at self-reflection. They spend more time explaining the rise of populism than the fall of liberalism. They refuse to look in the mirror and recognize their own shortcomings, which led to the populist surge across the continent. My book intends to address this imbalance; this is a self-critical book by a lifelong liberal.

When Dahrendorf wrote his book there was a lot of confusion in Europe, but uncertainty was chiefly confined to its eastern part where the communist system had begun to crumble. Today, the entirety of Europe is in a state of confusion, with the liberal system beginning to crumble not just in Warsaw and Budapest, but also in London, Amsterdam, Madrid, Rome, Athens, and Paris. Europe's citizens feel insecure and angry. Their leaders look incompetent and dishonest. Their entrepreneurs seem frantic and distressed. Political violence is on the rise, chiefly because of terrorism, but not just. How is it possible that a peaceful, prosperous, and integrated continent is falling apart? Why did seemingly pragmatic Europeans embark on a journey into the unknown under populist banners? Why is Europe's economic



governance neither just nor effective? Who or what should be blamed? How shall we survive the current turmoil? And, most crucially, how is the pendulum of history to be reversed? These are the questions I will be wrestling with here.

My letter suggests that Europe and its liberal project need to be reinvented and recreated. There is no simple way back. Europe has failed to adjust to enormous geopolitical, economic, and technological changes that have swept the continent over the past three decades. European models of democracy, capitalism, and integration are not in sync with new complex networks of cities, bankers, terrorists, or migrants. Liberal values that made Europe thrive for many decades have been betrayed. The escalation of emotions, myths, and ordinary lies left little space for reason, deliberation, and conciliation.

Another ‘valley of tears’ is therefore ahead for Europeans, because I don’t think that either Chancellor Merkel or President Macron will single-handedly get Europe out of the current predicament. However, liberalism may be down, but it is not out. The neo-liberal detour has done much damage, but there is no reason to abandon some core liberal credos: rationality, liberty, individuality, controlled power, and progress. The counter-revolutionaries have made many gains by exploiting pathologies of the EU, liberal democracy, and the free market, but they lack a plausible programme of recovery and renewal.

Europe has many dark chapters in its history, but it also has bright ones showing a remarkable capacity for intellectual reflection, public deliberation, and institutional innovation. I strongly believe that the current European predicament could well turn into another wonderful renaissance, but this will require serious reflection on what went wrong. This letter attempts this reflection without prejudice and dread.

I am a political analyst, not a philosopher or historian. I try to understand how certain political ideas shape strategies of political and economic entrepreneurs. Typologies and the evolution of various liberal streams are better analysed somewhere else. Unlike most historians, I look back to understand, if not envisage, the future. By pointing to various novel features of democracy, economics, and

## PROLOGUE

communication I try to suggest a new liberal project for a continent challenged not only by the counter-revolutionary 'earthquake', but also by gradual technological, societal, and environmental processes. This letter is partly about modernity, connectivity, and digitalization. How is it possible to make states, cities, regions, and international organizations perform better in an ever more interdependent environment? How can transparency, accountability, and governmentality be enhanced in a Europe with 'fuzzy' borders? How shall citizens be protected from violence, exploitation, and climate change? How is the politics of fear to be replaced with the politics of hope? At times I may sound exceedingly gloomy in this letter, but I believe in a happy ending for Europe and even for liberals.

# 1

## FROM REVOLUTION TO COUNTER-REVOLUTION

Dear Ralf,

Several hours after the Brexit referendum results were announced students and tutors from your St Antony's College gathered in the European Studies Centre. Most of those present, a pretty international crowd, were depressed, some even had tears in their eyes. They could not believe that the majority of British voters opted for leaving the European Union. They could not understand why a mountain of rational arguments in support of the remain vote fell on deaf ears. Why was a vast body of statistical evidence showing the costs of leaving the EU ignored? How could seemingly pragmatic Brits refuse to trust them: the academics, the journalists, the experts? And why had shady politicians such as Nigel Farage, Andrea Leadsom, and Michael Gove prevailed over the winners of recent parliamentary elections, David Cameron and George Osborne? Most of these questions remained unanswered.

Just before the Brexit referendum I was in Italy where the Five-star movement led by a comedian, Beppe Grillo, won control over Rome and Turin in local elections. In Rome the social democratic administration has been accused by the Five-star movement of nepotism, incompetence, and corruption. The election results were an unexpected blow to the leader of the Democratic Party, Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. Stunned Italian commentators were bluntly told by Grillo: 'You are unable to comprehend the birth and rise of my movement because you are translating everything into your own language. You are simply cut off from reality.'<sup>1</sup> A few months later

Matteo Renzi stepped down as Prime Minister after failing to win a majority for his constitutional reforms in a referendum.

After the Brexit referendum I flew to Poland where opposition parties accused the winner of the previous year's elections of orchestrating a constitutional coup, paralyzing the judiciary system, and purging public media of suspected critics. 'I am not a dictator,' Jarosław Kaczyński told daily *Rzeczpospolita*. 'Poland is an example of democracy and an island of liberty in a world where freedom is in short supply.'<sup>2</sup>

What is going on? Who is wrong and who is right? How does one establish truth in this era of post-truth? Have European voters gone insane? Are Nigel Farage, Beppe Grillo, and Jarosław Kaczyński prophets or frauds? Do these three above-mentioned political experiences have something in common? Do they show a new development in European politics, and if so, how do we name it?<sup>3</sup> We clearly live in turbulent times with highly uncertain outcomes. Long-standing assumptions do not hold any longer. Symbolic politics has taken over from real politics. Everything seems possible at present. And yet, we need to make sense of the history rolling over Europe with a force and pace unknown since you wrote *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe* nearly three decades ago.

Let me return to your concerns and put the current developments in the context of the 1989 Revolution that you examined. I do so because I believe that we are witnessing a concerted effort to dismantle the system created after the fall of the Berlin Wall. We are witnessing a counter-revolution.

What happened in Great Britain on 23 June 2016 is only one of many episodes heralding the rise of a powerful movement aimed at destroying the narrative and order that dominated the entire continent after 1989. Under attack is not just the EU but also other symbols of the current order: liberal democracy and neo-liberal economics, migration and a multicultural society, historical 'truths' and political correctness, moderate political parties and mainstream media, cultural tolerance and religious neutrality. As the cited Italian, British, and Polish cases

show, there are local variations of this movement, but the common denominator is the rejection of people and institutions that have governed Europe in the last three decades. Moreover, let's not delude ourselves by pointing to the results of the 2017 elections in the Netherlands, France, and the United Kingdom. Mark Rutte, Emmanuel Macron, and Theresa May have embraced some of the counter-revolutionary rhetoric to win the popular vote. Rutte castigated migrants, Macron bashed traditional parties, and May embraced a hard Brexit. Can liberalism survive with so many illiberal ornaments? Should liberals rejoice because soft populists prevailed over hard ones? Even in prosperous and stable Germany, the right-wing nationalist Alternative for Germany (AfD) entered the Bundestag with nearly a hundred seats in the 2017 elections. Angela Merkel remained in power, but her party and social democratic allies suffered a historic defeat.

We should also consider the broader geopolitical context. Illiberal politicians are ruling with the voters' blessing in Europe's two largest neighbours, Turkey and Russia. The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America also has grave implications for the old continent. The US may well be separated from Europe by the Atlantic, but the US is a quintessential European power; no major decision is taken in Europe without America in mind. Donald Trump talks like many European counter-revolutionaries and when running for the presidency he was publicly endorsed by such prominent European insurgents as Marine Le Pen and Nigel Farage.

## The Meaning of Change

Why is this a counter-revolution? There are neither barricades raised on European streets nor sit-in strikes in factories. There is no particular ideology inspiring and uniting protest movements. There is much talk about anti-politics, but those who lead the protest create parties and try to win elections. Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that revolution or counter-revolution must always involve mass mobilizations and violence culminating on a certain date.

Communism collapsed with little if any violence. Poland's Solidarity movement was able to organize mass strikes in 1980, not a decade later. Change came chiefly through pacts between old and new elites and through elections. And yet it is hard to deny that this relatively peaceful process changed Europe beyond recognition. History did not end, but the old order has gradually been replaced by a new one. Although some of the former communists were able to stay in power, they were able to do so only after endorsing the new liberal order. This is why you rightly called it a revolution despite all qualifications. And, since you wrote your book in 1990, the revolution has greatly progressed.

The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia disintegrated, Germany has been reunited and the European Union as well as NATO have been vastly expanded. Western armies, laws, firms, and customs moved eastward. Many people enthusiastically welcomed new regimes in their territory, but some felt disadvantaged either because of their ethnic background (e.g. Russians in Latvia, Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina) or because they lacked adequate professional skills to function in the new competitive environment. A long-standing balance of power in Europe has been effectively reshuffled. Russia soon began to see herself as an underdog, but also France found herself in a weaker position vis-à-vis Germany than was the case before.

Geopolitical revolution has been followed by economic revolution. With the fall of communism some of its more universal ideals came under fire: collectivism, redistribution, social protection, and state intervention in the economy. This paved the way for neo-liberal economics to assume a dominant position throughout the entire continent, not just in Great Britain. Deregulation, marketization, and privatization became the order of the day even in states run by socialist parties. The private sector has subsequently expanded at the expense of the public sector. Markets and market-values moved into spheres that used to be the domain of the public sector in Europe such as health, education, public safety, environmental protection, and even national security. Social spending has been contained if not slashed altogether for certain disadvantaged groups. Even in countries

such as France or Spain, once home to powerful unions, less than 10 per cent of the workforce is unionized now. Membership of Poland's Solidarity trade union has fallen fivefold since 1989. Today less than 5 per cent of Poland's workforce is unionized.

Across Europe, politics was increasingly presented as an art of institutional engineering and not as an art of political bargaining between the elites and the electorate. More and more powers were delegated to non-majoritarian institutions—central banks, constitutional courts, regulatory agencies—to make sure that reason rather than passion guides political decisions. Politics giving in to public pressure was considered irresponsible if not dangerous. Majorities were said to spend money they didn't have, to discriminate against all kind of minorities, to support such ethically knotty causes as the death penalty or torture. Citizens were to be educated rather than listened to. The notion that public interests need to reflect public wishes has been questioned. Interests were said to be best identified by experts: generals, bankers, traders, lawyers, and, of course, leaders of the ruling parties.

The EU with its enlarged powers following the 1991 Maastricht Treaty has been a prototype of a non-majoritarian institution led by 'enlightened' experts largely independent from electoral pressures. True, the European Council consisted of democratically elected politicians, but the introduction of majority voting has made it difficult for member states to veto some decisions. In fact, national executives proved eager to bypass their respective parliaments by making decisions in the European Council.

Historians may question my periodization. Liberal ideals have influenced different generations of politicians since the Age of Enlightenment. Parties which formally called themselves liberal had more power before 1989 than after.<sup>4</sup> Neo-liberal economics had been on the rise in Western Europe for a number of years before the fall of the Berlin Wall. The liberal type of democracy was born in Eastern Europe in 1989, but in Western Europe it was born much earlier. That said, 1989 represented a symbolic triumph of liberal ideals. With the fall of the Berlin Wall liberalism became 'the only game in town'

across the entire continent. Post-communist states have become the most enthusiastic advocates of neo-liberal economics. They also embraced the process of European integration with the greatest fervour. Different streams of liberalism merged into a single pan-European ideological project; formerly distinct political groupings of the centre-left and centre-right have united under the liberal banner; the liberal order has been embraced in such distant geographic locations as Lisbon, Helsinki, and Bucharest. In this sense, the liberal revolution has indeed been built on the ruins of the Berlin Wall, even though history does not end or begin on any particular date.<sup>5</sup>

### Targets of Contestation

You, Ralf, may find my description of liberal rule over the past three decades too harsh and one-sided. Yet, unless you assume that the insurgents have divine powers of deception, it is hard to explain why voters began to desert the liberal cause.<sup>6</sup> Something must have gone very badly wrong, don't you think?

The legacy of the past three decades is not only negative, of course. The Soviet system was inefficient, unjust, and oppressive; there is no reason to be nostalgic about its demise. Neo-liberal economics proved able to generate growth and innovation. And the dangers of a majoritarian politics acting with no constitutional or fiscal constraints are real. Why should a government of the day be allowed to create debts that have to be repaid by the next generations of taxpayers? Its democratic mandate, however strong, relates to the current, not the future generation of electors. And if the winners of elections try to curb the rights of religious minorities or the rights of women, should this be allowed?

Even the opaque democracy in the EU can be defended. As Robert A. Dahl rightly argued, larger units are obviously further away from their citizens, but they are in a better position to cope with global pressures for the sake of their citizens. There is an important trade-off between citizens' participation and system effectiveness.<sup>7</sup>



However, this is a rather generous evaluation of the post-1989 order and does not take into account power politics. Each revolution produces winners and losers; the latter ought to be accommodated in some way or else they rebel. Satisfying losers is never easy. West Germany has invested a huge sum of money in East Germany, but despite all the investments some citizens in the eastern part are still resentful about the post-1989 changes. They may be free and affluent at present, but they feel like second-class German citizens. Clearly, accommodating losers is not only about money. Poland has grown more than any European country over the past decade, yet in 2015 the majority of Poland's electorate supported a counter-revolutionary party campaigning on an anti-liberal and anti-European ticket. They found the elite successfully ruling Poland more interested in the opinion of international rating agencies, foreign press, and European bureaucrats than in that of their own ordinary citizens. Warnings that this regime change would generate dire political and economic consequences were ignored.

Most other parts of Europe have not done so well economically as Germany and Poland, which obviously made it easier for the critics of the (neo-)liberal revolution to thrive. Consider, for instance, Hungary where the combination of weak state capacity, incompetent economics, and corruption paved the way for an authoritarian, if not autocratic, leader such as Viktor Orbán. Portugal, Greece, and Spain found themselves insolvent following the 2008 global financial crisis. With GDP plunging and unemployment sky-rocketing it was obviously impossible to keep everybody happy. Those dependent on the shrinking public provisions, those with no skills to compete in the market, or those squeezed by mobile migrant labour were ready to switch their vote to political entrepreneurs who opposed the dominant order. Even relatively affluent countries such as Italy, France, Austria, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland have found it difficult to avoid pressure coming from anti-establishment parties.

The Euro crisis and the subsequent refugee crisis demonstrated that the new order is less effective and liberal than claimed by its

proponents. 'Post-capitalism' and 'post-democracy' are clearly inferior to the original brand.<sup>8</sup> The two crises also highlighted the growing imbalances among individual states of Europe. There are not only creditor states and debtor states, but also decision-makers and decision-takers. Some even talk about a German (accidental) empire in Europe.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the two crises showed that European leaders are unable to reverse their course and adopt more effective actions. Strict rules of the Fiscal Compact Treaty left virtually no space for indebted countries to adjust their economic policies and there is no agreement on how to handle migration in a humane and effective manner.

The case of Greece is very illustrative here. Greece is no longer allowed to take sovereign socio-economic decisions, but the policies imposed on it by fellow Europeans are clearly not working. After three successive and expensive bailouts there is little hope that Greece will ever repay its debts. Nor is it credible to claim that Greece will effectively control its borders after numerous EU summits telling Greece what ought to be done. No wonder the handling of Greece has disappointed many Greeks whose views were ignored after the 2015 referendum and the 2014 elections. Frustrated also are the voters in countries effectively ruling Greece because they clearly are not getting proper returns on their investments.

When faced with the electoral pressure from the 'new kids on the block' the established right- and left-wing parties chose to jump into bed together rather than admitting past mistakes and reversing their policies. We witnessed such previously unimaginable alliances as those between the conservative New Democracy and socialist PASOK in Greece and between Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the post-communist Democratic Party in Italy. This only reinforced the impression that old ideological dividing lines are gone and have been replaced by a new (neo-)liberal notion of normality or, if you wish, rationality. The official narrative became black and white. The establishment insisted on continuing with projects that gave Europe 'prosperity and peace' and it accused critics of trying to undermine its noble efforts. Self-reflection, let alone self-criticism, have been missing.

The EU was proclaimed to be the engine of cooperation and those who criticized it were called agents of Putin. The fact that the EU has recently generated major conflicts by mishandling the Euro crisis, the refugee crisis, and to some extent also the crisis in Ukraine has been ignored or denied. Basic facets of neo-liberal economics were still treated as sacrosanct even though this type of economics contributed to the financial bubble of 2008 and caused hardship for millions of Europeans. Nor was there an acknowledgement that the existing system of parliamentary representation needs to be fundamentally rethought. Curbing the powers of central banks, constitutional courts, the EU, and other non-majoritarian institutions has not been seriously contemplated, let alone orchestrated by the mainstream parties.

With the passage of time, unsolved problems started to mount and the official rhetoric became more aggressive. Questioning the established taboos was portrayed as irresponsible if not insane. The rulers were prepared to offer some cosmetic concessions to an ever more desperate electorate, but so far no serious plan B has been proposed by the winners of the 1989 revolution. The electorate has been remarkably patient for some time, but it has slowly started to desert the established parties. This has opened a window of opportunity for alternative politicians. They have promised that a change of a government would mean a genuine change of policies if not the existing system altogether.

## The Counter-Revolutionary Insurgents

The counter-revolutionary politicians represent a very mixed bag. They include such diverse characters as Marine le Pen, Beppe Grillo, Matteo Salvini, Geert Wilders, Gerolf Annemans, Alice Weidel, Alexander Gauland, Christian Thulesen, Jimmie Akesson, Timo Soinini, Norbert Hofer, Nigel Farage, Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński, Robert Fico, Andrej Babis, Alexis Tsipras, and Pablo Iglesias. Their personal backgrounds and ideological roots are very different: from neo-fascist to neo-communist, from libertarian to conservative, from anti-austerity

to anti-Muslim, from nationalist to secessionist. Some are moderate, while others are hardliners. Those who managed to take control of their countries talk and act differently from those who are still campaigning from the sidelines. However, they all have one thing in common: they are against the order installed after the 1989 revolution. They attack not only those who ruled Europe after 1989, but also their key political projects: European integration, constitutional liberalism, and neo-liberal economics.

Migrants have been at the centre of political campaigns for most of the counter-revolutionary insurgents, because migrants represent a quintessential product of the post-1989 policy of opening borders, of protecting minorities, and of forging economic interdependence. Some of these politicians may well be racists,<sup>10</sup> but there is no evidence to suggest that xenophobia is the main reason for their anti-immigration stance. I consciously excluded from the above counter-revolutionary list of politicians those who are primarily driven by ethnic hatred, such as Ilias Panagiotaras of the Greek Golden Dawn Party and Gabor Vona of the Hungarian Jobbik Party.

Of course, throwing into one bag such diverse politicians as Jarosław Kaczyński and Alexis Tsipras is problematic. The former is ultra-conservative, while the latter is radically leftist. Kaczyński sees Russia as a threat, while Tsipras sees Russia as an ally. Kaczyński wants to soften the nasty edge of neo-liberalism, while Tsipras is fundamentally opposed to neo-liberal economics. Kaczyński would like the EU to be more detached and intergovernmental, while Tsipras would like the EU to be more compassionate and federal. Kaczyński is wholeheartedly against accepting refugees, while Tsipras is calling for a just and effective system of reallocation of refugees. And yet, it is difficult to deny that both Kaczyński and Tsipras loathe the elites that ruled their countries for the past decades and they both aspire to transform their respective countries in a fundamental way. They make concessions when pressed by such powerful figures as Angela Merkel or institutions such as the EU or the IMF, but this does not mean that they are giving up

their struggle for a fundamentally new regime in their respective countries.

The counter-revolutionary politicians are often called populist. This term is misleading and stigmatizing and fails to identify the key objective of these politicians, namely the abolition of the post-1989 order and replacement of the elites associated with this order. I find numerous statements of these politicians highly objectionable, but this does not mean that their critique of the current order is not valid, at least in some part. The ruling political and intellectual elite is all too keen to call all kinds of critique 'populist'.

Populists are said to propose simple solutions to complicated problems. However, there is nothing wrong with simple solutions if they are just, efficient, and adopted according to democratic procedures. The minimum wage and inheritance tax represent widely used, simple solutions for coping with complex inequality problems. Should they be called 'populist' and therefore abandoned? Populists are said to use moralistic rhetoric, make unrealistic promises, and launch unfair personal attacks on their opponents. Sadly, all these characteristics can be attributed to most current politicians and not just to the group discussed here. Ahead of all national elections politicians from different parties make empty social promises. Bombastic and moralistic rhetoric is also part of the liberal repertoire. Consider the 'axis of evil' rhetoric on the eve of the 2003 Iraq invasion. Smearing political foes is a routine part of all political campaigns. Consider the way the liberal intellectuals and politicians describe their 'populist' opponents. A meeting between Nigel Farage and Julian Assange in March 2017 was compared to a Hitler–Stalin pact by Nick Cohen in *The Guardian*.<sup>11</sup> Farage, according to Cohen, 'exploits chauvinism and plays on racial fears', while Assange 'provides support services to the gangster capitalists of the new Russian empire'. 'Extremes merge. Red bleeds into black,' concluded Cohen. I guess the author of this article sees himself not as a populist, but as a liberal.

Populists are said to overemphasize the cleavage between 'the elite' and 'the people'; the former is being demonized and the latter

idealized. In their view, politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people.<sup>12</sup> The people may not be as ‘pure’ and ‘sensible’ as populists claim; likewise, the elite may not be as ‘corrupted’ and ‘inefficient’ as they assert. Yet, the distinction between the people and the elite is quite legitimate, and democracy should make sure that the former have some control over the latter. This is not to endorse a plebiscitarian notion of democracy, but to argue for democracy that is responsive to electoral wishes and that gives the electorate meaningful means of changing the elites in power and their actual policies.

Margaret Canovan once pointed out that democracy has two facets: redemptive and pragmatic. The former sees the people as the only source of legitimate authority and promises salvation through the policy of popular mobilization. The latter sees democracy as a form of government with institutions limiting power and making it effective. Populists are trying to emphasize the former aspect and to exploit the gap between the promise and performance of democracy.<sup>13</sup> Is this such a deplorable strategy, I wonder.

Of course, much depends on the details. Populists often use an extremely hard language appealing to the dark side of human instincts in defiance of the recognized moral and political norms.<sup>14</sup> In fact, this is their purposeful strategy. Challenging the notion of established normality requires crossing the border of political correctness.<sup>15</sup> Liberals may find it morally disgraceful and aesthetically displeasing. They may portray ‘the ugly others’ as irresponsible and dangerous. I don’t deny that there are often legitimate grounds for such portrayals. Yet, those ‘others’ are increasingly more skilful at winning elections. As Simon Jenkins put it succinctly in the *Guardian*: ‘Those others are not “populist”—the latest buzzword of intellectual abuse—they are just popular.’<sup>16</sup> In the summer of 2017 the counter-revolutionary insurgents were already running a government in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Greece. They were part of a government in Finland, and were propping up a minority government in Denmark. In Italy the Five-star movement and in the Netherlands the Party for Freedom were the main opposition parties, while in France the ‘populist’

candidate came second in the presidential elections, defeating leaders of all other established parties. In Great Britain 'populists' were able to carry the day in the Brexit referendum and gained ground in both leading parties, Tories and Labour. In the Autumn of 2017, the Euro-sceptic ANO party of the billionaire Andrej Babis won the parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic, and the elections in Austria and Germany recorded notable achievements of right-wing 'populists' from the FPÖ and AfD parties.

The last case shows that the counter-revolutionary influence can hardly be measured by electoral performances only. They set the tone of the political discourse and establish which issues are debated; they give voice to people's anxieties and expose liberal flaws; they arouse the politics of fear, acrimony, and vengeance. Nigel Farage was not even able to win a seat in the British parliament, and yet it is hard to overestimate his impact on the result of the Brexit referendum. The fact that mainstream liberal parties in France were not able to put forward a strong enough candidate to challenge Marine Le Pen is also telling. I am happy to give Emmanuel Macron the benefit of the doubt, but he is still a rather mysterious political entrepreneur: an ex-banker rising to political prominence through the Socialist Party which he then betrayed to form his own political movement, *En Marche!* (Forward!), which he defines as neither left nor right.<sup>17</sup> When Macron won the Presidential election, Italian newspapers labelled him a savior of Europe, but several weeks later some of them accused him of declaring war on Italy and European principles. This is because Macron refused to help Italy cope with refugees, broke a deal with the Libyan rival leaders without consulting Italy, and nationalized a French shipyard to avoid an Italian take-over.

Self-proclaimed liberals have also progressively adopted rhetoric that resembles the populist one by any standards. This was most striking on the eve of the Dutch elections in 2017. In order to see off the threat of Geert Wilders, the Liberal Party (VVD) adopted 'a strategy that could have come from President Trump's playbook', to cite the *New York Times*.<sup>18</sup> In his victory speech the VVD leader, Mark Rutte,

declared that the Dutch voters had put a halt to ‘the wrong kind of populism’, implying that there is a good and a bad kind of populism, the former represented by himself, and the latter by Wilders.<sup>19</sup> VVD’s coalition partner, the Christian Democratic Party (CDA), has also entertained a nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric. In the new Dutch parliament, MPs representing hard and soft populist parties have an overwhelming majority. The Labour Party, which led the Dutch government for most of the past three decades, has seen its parliamentary representation virtually wiped out; they have only nine MPs now. In 2012 they won thirty-eight seats, in 1998 forty-five seats, and in 1989 forty-nine seats. A similar decline of the liberal left is progressing in many other countries of Europe. The most striking example is Poland where no single left-wing liberal was able to win a parliamentary seat in the 2015 elections.

Traditional parties, especially on the right, not only entertain illiberal rhetoric and policies, but they also form political alliances with those whom they call populists. This happened first in 2000 in Austria when the Austrian People’s Party formed a government with Jörg Haider’s Freedom Party of Austria. Silvio Berlusconi ruled Italy with the help of *Lega Nord* and after the 2015 elections the Finns Party entered coalition government with two centrist parties. These coalitions between soft and hard ‘populists’ have not led to the death of the latter, but blurred the difference between the two groups. Some soft populists became hard populists in time. Poland’s PiS party and Hungary’s Fidesz party are good examples. The Italian *Lega Nord* has been transformed from a soft populist separatist movement into a fully-fledged populist movement imitating the French *Front National*. That said, the main cleavage and contest in contemporary Europe is not between soft and hard populists. The real contest is between the winners of the post-1989 revolution and those who intend to topple them and dismantle the post-1989 system. The latter may well be ‘populist,’ they may form tactical alliances, they may be neo-nationalists or post-Marxists, but they are first of all counter-revolutionaries with a mission.

This probably also applies to Jeremy Corbyn, who took over the leadership from the liberal wing of the Labour party with a



programme reminiscent of the pre-1989 or even pre-1968 era. Corbyn has unmasked major flaws of the liberal revolution without questioning some of the core liberal principles. Tories and Blairites label Corbyn a populist, but his views on migration, minority rights, parliamentary democracy, and foreign intervention are less populist than those of his critics. Corbyn's programme may be unsuited for tackling modern transnational economics, but his focus on inequalities, workers' rights, and the predatory behaviour of financial services can hardly be called illiberal. One can even argue that Corbyn has shown traditional liberal parties the way to get out of the current gridlock. However, I should quickly add that Corbyn does not call himself a liberal and does not strive for a liberal renaissance. In this sense, he is a counter-revolutionary, albeit of a special kind.

### Identifying Priorities

Destroying the existing order is one thing and constructing a new one is another. Contemporary counter-revolutionary forces know better what they are against than what they are for. Details of their current agendas do not form a coherent whole, and they are pretty vague. Those who studied the party manifestos of counter-revolutionary movements concluded that they allow a lot of room for statements on everyday political matters that may not always be consistent with the mainstream party line.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, each of the counter-revolutionary movements has its own local priorities that would be difficult to bring into one line in a broader European context. Marine Le Pen works closely with Geert Wilders, for instance, but not with Jarosław Kaczyński, Nigel Farage, or Alexis Tsipras.

More crucially, the record of counter-revolutionary forces in office is disquieting, to put it mildly. In Poland the centre-right liberals from the PO party may well have failed to make the public media free from political interference, but the PiS counter-revolutionary party has transformed these media into a propaganda arm of its fundamentalist faction. The Greek counter-revolutionary Syriza party promised to

correct the wrongdoings of the past, but has instead attempted to introduce a media licensing law that would reward their political cronies. This attempt has been halted by the Greek constitutional court, something which could not happen in Poland where the PiS party paralysed the constitutional court immediately after coming to power. Both PiS in Poland and Syriza in Greece have also tried to appoint their political associates to all important (and even unimportant) positions within the civil service. They both tried to gain control of publicly owned enterprises and even private banks, albeit with no signs of reversing neo-liberal policies. Both PiS and Syriza progressively embraced a nationalist agenda blaming Europe for all their own shortcomings.

The counter-revolutionaries have not behaved any better in other countries. The Italian Five-star movement won the 2016 election for the city council in Rome, but the first few months of its reign was characterized by remarkable chaos and incompetence even by poor 'Roman' standards. Above all, there is a long, disturbing, and ever-growing list of autocratic policies by the Hungarian party Fidesz. Senator John McCain has even called their famous leader a 'neo-fascist dictator'.<sup>21</sup>

All these and other flaws of counter-revolutionary parties should not make the established parties complacent, however. There is hardly any evidence suggesting that the 'liberal' policies of the last two or three decades are back in vogue among Europe's electorate. If the established parties are able to hold onto power, it is because they progressively embraced illiberal rhetoric and policies.<sup>22</sup> True, Alexander Van der Bellen won the 2016 Austrian presidential elections without trying to water down the liberal agenda, but his uncompromising stance was uncommon and his victory was narrow and hard fought. One should also ask the question 'how could Norbert Hofer, a politician with an extreme-right background, be so close to the presidential office in one of the most affluent and stable European countries?' The counter-revolutionary forces are far from conquering the entire continent, but they are able to shape the public discourse and push the established parties into a frenzied retreat. This is not because

insurgents have an inspiring programme and charismatic leadership. This is chiefly because the liberals are doing so badly.

Have liberals lost the plot or is my description somewhat prejudiced? Perhaps I am too hard on liberals and too lenient on the counter-revolutionary forces. I am a convinced liberal like you, Ralf, and I am deeply concerned about the rise of illiberal politics. As a 'child' of the 1989 liberal revolution I do not want to see civil liberties being curbed again, the rule of law dismantled, media freedom strangled, and walls reappearing across the continent. That said, I am not interested in entertaining a nostalgia for the lost era of liberal glory. The proponents of the liberal propaganda of success ought to ask themselves a simple question: if the last three decades of liberal rule was such a great accomplishment, why have so many people started to hate liberals?

We need to understand what liberalism is and what it is not. We need to decide which streams of liberalism we want to refute and which to support. For the last three decades, liberalism was an ideology of power and empowering; everything was liberal in some sense; questioning liberal principles was uncommon; even former communists jumped on the liberal train together with ordinary opportunists hoping to advance their careers. I feel little in common with these liberal fellow travellers. I want to understand what we could have done better and I have no intention of concealing our mistakes. Only after serious self-reflection would we be able to conclude if liberalism is worth fighting for. This is in line with the famous imperative of Socrates, to 'know thyself'.

I have big problems with liberals castigating 'populists' and then behaving suspiciously similarly. I take issue with liberals switching from noble public schemes to backroom manipulation. You may say that I have a naive vision of politics. Does everyday politics not require compromises? Is it not better to support a lesser evil? My normative reply is as simple as the pragmatic one. Soft forms of 'populism' do not belong to the liberal repertoire, however defined, and they proved self-defeating in political practice. This does not mean that there is

only one sacred and non-negotiable dogma that we can proudly call liberalism. Nor does it mean that all varieties of liberalism are worth fighting for. This means only that bashing the counter-revolutionary forces on its own is not likely to lead to the liberal renaissance. If the counter-revolutionary forces are doing well because liberals are doing so poorly we need first of all to address the liberal failings. This letter is therefore about healing or re-inventing liberalism.

In 1963 Karl Popper, one of the leading liberal intellectuals, identified two contrasting attitudes in the field of politics:

The first is that of the politician who thinks that all he does is well done, and that none of our troubles are due to his mistakes, but, rather, to unavoidable misfortunes, or to the conspiracies of his opponents, who are bad men. The opposite attitude is that of the man who, aware of his fallibility, knows that he is bound to err; who is constantly on the watch for his own mistakes, because he knows that this is the only way to learn, and profit, from experience; and who hopes that his opponents, by their criticism, will help him discovering [sic] his mistakes.<sup>23</sup>

Popper found the latter attitude more appropriate for liberals like himself. I follow his dictum in this letter.

## WHY THEY HATE LIBERALS

**F**or liberals like you and me, Ralf, it is tempting to believe that liberalism is a force for good that the evil counter-revolutionaries are determined to destroy. Like all humans, we make mistakes and at times we fail to live up to our ideals. Yet, the comparison between us and our anti-liberal opponents seems crystal clear: we are rational, they are illogical if not crazy; we tell the truth, they tell lies; we offer progress, they offer destruction; we are open-minded, they are intolerant; we enhance freedom, they seek domination; we believe in laws and institutions, they are trying to get rid of them. If people support the counter-revolution they must be either brain-washed or mad.

This description is too biased, I fear. As intellectuals we should not entertain Manichean black and white thinking. As democrats we should not ridicule electoral choices. As public activists we should not delude ourselves that people will suddenly 'wake up' and rally behind us once again. Voters had legitimate reasons to desert liberal politicians and their parties. Yet, our liberal friends are more eager to engage in finger-pointing than to acknowledge their own shortcomings and mistakes. Have liberals betrayed their ideals, and if so, which ones and how? Are the deficiencies of liberalism accidental mistakes or structural flaws in the liberal doctrine? Perhaps some of the liberal principles proved unfeasible or even erroneous. Perhaps elitism, inequality, dysfunctional parliaments and European institutions, even hedonism and greed are the products of liberalism. Perhaps liberalism has a naive take on human predispositions and power politics. If some of this is correct we should say 'sorry' and apologize

for deceiving the electorate. Perhaps we should renounce liberalism altogether, or at least some of its aspects.

This negative narrative is probably too harsh, but we will know the answers to the preceding questions only after a serious self-critical, if not soul-searching, analysis. Our conclusions are not likely to be straightforward. This is partly because, as Michael Freedman pointed out, 'Liberalism supplies one of the numerous maps available as people attempt to navigate through their social and political environments.'<sup>1</sup> Socialism and conservatism offer competing but not mutually exclusive maps. Karl Popper's advocacy of 'piecemeal' rather than 'holistic social engineering' would be endorsed by most conservative politicians or people, for instance. Most liberals would affirm the socialist quest for progress and social justice. Leszek Kołakowski even proposed a *ménage à trois*—Conservative-Liberal-Socialism.<sup>2</sup>

This leads to another complication; liberalism does not represent a single coherent phenomenon as portrayed and demonized by its contemporary critics. To cite Martin Krygier, 'Liberalism is a broad church' with a long 'laundry list of "liberal" commitments'.<sup>3</sup> Krygier also talks about liberalism with adjectives.<sup>4</sup> Conservative liberals have little in common with social democratic ones; neo-liberals have been accused by classical liberals of usurping the term 'liberals' for a very narrow, and broadly conservative/capitalist, doctrine. Both Friedrich von Hayek and Karl Popper may well be seen as quintessential liberal thinkers, but their respective views are quite contrasting, as you rightly pointed out, Ralf.<sup>5</sup>

In short, when we talk about successes and failures of liberalism we need to specify which type of liberalism we are talking about. We should also distinguish between liberalism in government and liberalism in society. Institutional liberalism and liberal ideology or liberal cultural values are not the same. A distinction between liberalism as historical contingency and as recurring patterns of thought is also valid. The political map of liberalism is even more complicated. Some Dutch liberals consistently voted against the Liberal Party (VVD) and

in favour of the Green Party. They should not be held responsible for the VVD 'liberal' reign in the Netherlands over the past years.

Our purpose is not just to prove critics wrong, however, but to see whether liberal ideals cope well with societal and technological changes. Is liberalism suited to the digital age, global economics, and climate change? Can liberalism survive in the era of post-truth? Can reason prevail over nostalgia and emotions? Is enlightenment not a fairy tale?

Liberalism never aspired to know the way to Utopia. Yet, its ambition was to offer a practical guide for solving conflicts, facilitating development, generating innovation, and securing freedom and social justice. We need to establish whether this ambition is still attainable in the Europe of the twenty-first century. Our historical knowledge suggests that no theories and practices are timeless and immune to political turbulence. Why would liberalism fare any better, especially with no major adjustments?

## Ideology of Power

The word 'liberal' first took on a political meaning in Spain in the early nineteenth century and it has had many different incarnations since. Each of these emphasized different values and practices, but the key liberal principles are pretty straightforward and not contested by the vast majority of contemporary Europeans. Most Europeans believe in personal security, human independence, and individual liberty. They endorse democracy and the rule of law. They want the legal system to be impartial and democracy to be fair, tolerant, inclusive, restrained, and self-critical. True, liberals have always been accused of excessive individualism, rootlessness, permissiveness, materialism, and cosmopolitanism, yet this normative criticism did not arrest their rising popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, nor can it explain their current falling-out with voters. The most frequent explanation of the liberals' current distress is the neo-liberal turn: classical liberalism has been captured and perverted by neo-liberalism, it is argued.

George Soros is probably the most prominent advocate of this position, but I gather from your earlier writings, Ralf, that you would side with his analysis. As Soros, himself a successful financial gambler, put it:

The main enemy of the open society is no longer the communist but the capitalist threat... The doctrine of laissez-faire capitalism holds that the common good is best served by the uninhibited pursuit of self-interest. Unless it is tempered by the recognition of a common interest that ought to take precedence over particular interests, our present system—which, however imperfect, qualifies as an open society—is liable to break down... Too much competition and too little cooperation can cause intolerable inequities and instability.<sup>6</sup>

The question is: why was neo-liberalism able to prevail over other, more social, streams of liberalism? In the past, mainstream liberals like you, Ralf, believed in the provision of welfare and social justice. They emphasized the positive aspect of freedom (freedom to do something), and not just the negative one (freedom from something). They demanded public intervention on behalf of those deprived of liberty and dignity in various forms rather than on behalf of the fortunate few. What has happened to this egalitarian liberal stream? Has liberalism been hijacked by greedy bankers or was it an ideal breeding ground for self-indulgence?

Marxists believe in the latter; they have always thought that liberalism with a 'human face' is just a smokescreen for the capitalist system of exploitation.<sup>7</sup> They argue that the social market economy you were so fond of, Ralf, is an attempt to save capitalism from self-destruction. According to Marxists, the neo-liberal excesses have at last revealed the real nature of the system: 'the king is naked'.

This analysis is too crude and conspiratorial. In fact, even former Marxists within the counter-revolutionary movement such as Podemos or Syriza no longer cite their ideological masters. Yet, it is hard to deny that neo-liberal economics have generated winners and losers; the former represent a tiny minority and their prime source of income is rent from their vast assets. As Thomas Piketty convincingly argued:



Modern economic growth and the diffusion of knowledge have made it possible to avoid the Marxist apocalypse, but have not modified the deep structures of capital and inequality... When the rate of return on capital exceeds the rate of growth of output and income, as it did in the nineteenth century and seems quite likely to do again in the twenty-first, capitalism automatically generates arbitrary and unsustainable inequalities that radically undermines the meritocratic values on which democratic societies are based.<sup>8</sup>

The previous generation of liberals felt quite at ease with inequality; for them a more pressing social problem was poverty and dependence. They knew that economic competition would generate inequality, but they believed that competition would create enough prosperity to increase the welfare and personal security of all strata of society, including those at the bottom. Today we know that this was over-optimistic, to put it mildly.

It is fairly easy to blame neo-liberals for hijacking the liberal project, but I fear that this will not exonerate liberal politicians in the eyes of their voters. Communists in Eastern Europe also claimed that Marxism had been captured and perverted by the party apparatus led by such inadequate people as Brezhnev. Neither Marx nor Engels advocated invading Afghanistan, depriving workers of any genuine representation, tolerating rampant inequalities. Gorbachev tried to introduce communism with a 'human face'; he did not try to destroy the communist system. Yet, his efforts to reform communism proved futile if not counter-productive. People across Central and Eastern Europe had had enough of the regime systematically betraying its fundamental principles. Today, some elderly Marxists may have a feeling of *déjà vu*.

The second lesson from the Eastern European experience tells that revolutions or counter-revolutions are not just about economics, but also about regime change. As you argued, Ralf, the 1989 revolution was about democracy, security, Europe, borders, and culture, not just about bread and butter. People wanted to be governed by a different kind of politician. They resisted the ideology of power that purported to have 'correct' answers to all these important issues. I fear that the

situation today is similar. Since 1989 liberalism has not just been a widely used map to guide individuals, governments, and societies; it has become the official governmental map dictated by the liberal elite in power across Europe. Put differently, liberalism has become a comprehensive ideology of power: a set of values, a way of governing, and a cultural ethos. Today, the insurgents across Europe rebel against the entire liberal system. They do not distinguish between good and bad (or accidental) liberals, between genuine and sham liberal ideals, between familiar or alien cultural patterns. They want to get rid of the entire liberal package. Different liberal politicians, from the centre-left and the centre-right, are being smeared. A vicious campaign is being forged not only against neo-liberal economics, but also against liberal democratic constitutionalism, against the liberal notion of open borders, against directives coming from Brussels, even against manifestations of the liberal culture. Under the counter-revolutionary assault is feminism, multiculturalism, abortion, gay rights, and environmentalism. Poland's minister of foreign affairs from the counter-revolutionary PiS, Witold Waszczykowski, went as far as to mock publicly 'a world made up of cyclists and vegetarians, who only use renewable energy and fight all forms of religion'.<sup>9</sup>

The analogy with 1989 has its limits, however. In 1989 people wanted to embrace the Western type of liberalism, which was then seemingly kinder and more successful than is the case now. Democratic and economic experiments were few and they were quickly abandoned. Imitation was the rule of the game if only because accession to the EU demanded adoption of 20,000 laws and regulations cooked up in Brussels. Today, it is not clear what the counter-revolutionaries want to build on the remnants of the liberal international order. There is no attractive alternative in sight to be followed. Policy prescriptions of the insurgents are patchy and they vary widely. Putin's Russia or Xi's China may well offer financial help to some of the counter-revolutionaries, but they do not offer a governance model that is sufficiently appealing and suitable for cloning. Nor are they able to define the notions of legitimacy,

efficiency, and justice. In short, they lack the ideological power that liberalism possessed.

However, this ideological power has been a mixed blessing for liberalism. Liberalism is no longer an ideology of those oppressed by the state; it is an ideology of the state run by the mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties. Liberalism is not defending minorities against majorities; it is minorities—professional politicians, journalists, bankers, and jet-set experts—telling majorities what is best for them. By shifting ever more powers to non-majoritarian institutions, liberals have effectively deprived the electorate of a say on politics. By privatizing and deregulating the economic sector liberals have effectively prevented the electorate from changing the course of economic policies. Liberals have also spread, and some would say ‘imposed’, their atomistic model of society, their interpretation of history, their favourite films, even their dietary habits. It would be wrong to assume that all this was the function of commercial relations and the search for profits. From 1989 liberalism has been a comprehensive ‘bible’ on what is good or wrong in a society, not just a manual for making money. Liberalism defines a notion of what is rational and appropriate. Like all powerful ideologies liberalism is able to define the notion of normality. The counter-revolutionary politicians do not just oppose individual liberal policies, they defy the entire liberal logic. They try to introduce a new normal. They try to reject liberal truths.

### Post-Truth

These days the favourite liberal term for scoffing at counter-revolutionary forces is post-truth. ‘Populists’ are accused of twisting facts, manipulating statistical data, and lying. They are being blamed for playing on voters’ prejudices, sentiments, and emotions while ignoring evident truths and facts.

Liberals’ critiques are justified; counter-revolutionary politicians are indeed masters in entertaining post-truths. However, liberals crying foul has two limitations. It is hard to see the nascent era of post-truth

as the main reason for the liberals' electoral misfortunes, and liberals have made their own significant contribution to the spread of misinformation, sexed-up facts, political branding, and fake news. Tony Judt grasped well the atmosphere within liberal circles a few years ago: 'We all lie, they all lie, goes the reasoning. The question is: is he your liar or my liar?'<sup>10</sup>

Post-truth is not just about lying, which is as old as human communication. Nor is post-truth about dogmatism, self-confidence, and arrogance. Politicians, like theologians, tend to have 'the only correct view' on most things. Clearly, they cannot all be right. Post-truth is defined by the Oxford dictionaries as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.<sup>11</sup>

The word 'post-truth' can be traced back to as far as 1992, but I do not recall you ever using it, Ralf. This is probably because you disliked buzzwords, but also because Europe was somewhat different at the time of your major writings. In fact, documented usage of the term 'post-truth' increased dramatically only over the past two or three years; by 2,000 per cent in 2016 compared to 2015.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the causes of the problem are indeed two or three decades old and thus coincide with the triumphant liberal era. Some of the causes relate to the digital (technological) revolution, while others relate to the post-modern (cultural) revolution. The ever greater availability of statistical data, complexity of human transactions, plurality of opinions, and sophistication of communication channels are well-known implications of these revolutions. Liberals, unlike conservatives or communists, feel at ease within the new environment: they have always cherished pluralism, free speech, and free choice while refusing any simple truths and dogma. For most of them there is no one truth, but many truths, depending on the context and interpretation. Liberals have problems with those who claim a monopoly on objectivity and impartiality. For them the notion of what is just and fair can best be established through democratic bargaining along certain procedures, and not by reading the Bible or *Das Kapital*. The best science, in their view,

emerges from questioning the established truths and orthodoxies. All this is fine for you and me, Ralf, but it paves the way to post-truth: if there is no one single truth, how do we know whether our truths are better than those of the political adversaries? Are not truths with a better spin and PR likely to prevail? Will not those with connections and money try to impose their own truths on all of us?

These may sound like abstract philosophical questions, but they have been addressed by political and economic entrepreneurs in a quite pragmatic and, at times, ruthless fashion. Over the past several years we have experienced a proliferation of institutions gathering statistical data and the rise of the 'facts industry'.<sup>13</sup> Such entrepreneurs are able to sell their 'scientific' results directly to the masses with the help of smartphones and laptops. On Facebook, Twitter, or WhatsApp everybody can be a provider of facts and truths, but the competition requires sophisticated marketing skills, extensive PR, and effective spin. Each provider of new 'evidence' has to distinguish her or his truths from those provided by others. More often than not it pays to be outrageous rather than just objective or 'truthful'. We now have sites generating 'fake' news and those trying to counter them with true truths, so-called fact-checking sites. Most of these adversarial sites claim to use 'scientific' evidence.

'Consumers' of many competing, and often contrasting, facts and truths are increasingly confused, distrustful, and biased. They tend to form like-minded clusters; they trust only facts that support their personal views or feelings. Technology reinforces that kind of partisanship. Facebook's algorithms are designed to crowd their newsfeeds with content similar to material they previously 'liked' or shared. Thanks to such a 'filter bubble', xenophobes are most likely to see racist items, and probably think that their views are popular if not legitimate.

Liberals who have controlled most of Europe's governments over the past two or three decades have done little to arrest this trend. What's worse, they have regularly exploited opportunities created by the communicative chaos, and sometimes even purposefully

encouraged media decadence. 'Evidence-based' reasoning has notoriously been used and misused by liberals to justify governmental programmes and policies. Liberal politicians have relied heavily on PR agencies and spin doctors. Inconvenient facts are either removed from the political discourse or discredited by 'scientific' advisers on the governmental payroll. The most striking British examples concern the 'evidence' regarding the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the Brexit statistical scorecard foreseeing '£15bn tax rises, increase in fuel and alcohol duties and £15bn cuts to health, education and defence' if Britain leaves the EU.<sup>14</sup> In Italy the government employed numerous 'scientific' experts arguing that voting 'no' in the 2016 constitutional referendum would cause an immediate economic catastrophe, while in Poland the government effectively silenced environmentalists in order to protect its generous policy towards the mining industry. Similar examples abound in other countries. No wonder the counter-revolutionary politicians have adopted a similar tactic and often prove more skilful in generating cooked-up evidence supporting their own partisan, if not outrageous, positions. Predators feel at home in the jungle, don't they?

Not only liberal politicians, but also liberal intellectuals have made their contribution to the spread of post-truth. I don't have in mind those 'postmodern' social scientists insisting on personalized, relativized, subjective, and floating truths. I have in mind those intellectuals who intentionally present a one-sided picture of complex social and economic reality. Would you be able to explain, Ralf, why our liberal colleagues have articulated numerous theories of European integration and not a single theory of European disintegration? It is like studying peace without studying war; one may well prefer peace over war, but one cannot understand the former without comprehending the latter. Likewise, one cannot study democracy while ignoring autocracy. If one wants democracy to last, one needs to understand factors generating its opposite: autocracy. Yet, in European studies nobody ever attempted to talk about disintegration. Why was this so? I guess, some of us did not want to encourage the unwanted

scenario, while others feared losing EU funds. Whatever the answer, we lack much-needed knowledge on how to arrest disintegration and resist the Eurosceptics' propaganda.

It would be foolish to accuse liberals of failing to censor fake news and halting the spread of new communication technologies, yet some criticism of their positions is certainly justified. Had liberals led by example and refrained from generating their own semi-truths, they would be in a stronger position to counter the wave of fake news and other forms of distorted realities propagated by the opposite camp. Had liberals constructed rather than dismantled institutions aimed at guarding the accuracy of news reporting and preventing the misuse of statistical data, it would be harder for political demagogues to influence the general public. With no reliable referees or trusted gatekeepers the producers of fake news and virtual truths can only prosper. Had liberals refrained from confusing ideological myths with facts, the counter-revolutionary forces would have found it hard to propagate their own legends. Whether a country can or cannot afford more generous social policy, for instance, is not just a function of statistical facts but also of political choices. Much depends on one's conception of good and justice, not just on one's statistical skills. Yet, those suggesting a minimum wage or a bonus for an additional child are branded by (neo)liberals as irresponsible populists. As Andrew Calcutt concludes in his analysis of post-truth: 'Instead of blaming populism for enacting what we set in motion, it would be better to acknowledge our own shameful part in it.'<sup>15</sup>

### Lost in the Universe

In February 2017, Marine Le Pen told the cheering crowd in Lyon: 'The French have been dispossessed of their patriotism. They are suffering in silence from not being allowed to love their country.'<sup>16</sup> Such arguments are being echoed by counter-revolutionary forces across the entire continent. They point to two kinds of liberal failing. First, liberals are being blamed for embracing Europeanization and

globalization. Second, they are being accused of ignoring or even bashing patriotic feelings of belonging to a given nation. Both criticisms appeal to citizens who feel lost in the global liberal universe with no sense of community and protection. Supporters of Le Pen, Orbán, Farage, or Kaczyński believe that only nation-states can stand for their economic, cultural, and political rights and offer them a better future. Our liberal friends rightly dismiss such thoughts as naive and dangerous, yet they fail to offer a convincing, let alone appealing, vision of a global liberal society. This may explain their current political troubles, at least to some extent.

One does not have to be a xenophobic nationalist to see the liberal conception of society as vague and abstract. A respected body of liberal thinkers including Michael Walzer, Michael Sandel, Philip Selznick, and Charles Taylor have pointed to this 'liberal myopia', but with the advent of neo-liberal canons their concerns have been ignored by the mainstream liberal parties and media.<sup>17</sup> Communitarian liberals pointed out that mainstream liberalism pays special attention to individuals rather than communities, and these individuals are seen as free, tangential, and private—accepting communal obligations only in order to minimize their risks. Liberals have usually little time for family or religious bonds, national or ethnic history, corporate or class association. Some of these groups are even seen as a source of evil. Religious fundamentalism or ethnic fanaticism are not only illiberal and irrational, they have been responsible for violence and oppression. At best, liberals talk with empathy about individuals forming a civil society, that is, a community of citizens freely engaged in political, economic, and social forms of non-governmental and non-profit work.<sup>18</sup> Yet, even these kinds of bond are viewed with suspicion by some liberals. Members of racist associations can also be seen as a kind of civil society, they argue. The very fact of belonging to a community does not represent a virtue for many liberals; what counts is endorsement of liberal values in theory and practice. As Stephen Holmes forcefully argued: 'There would be no terrorism or nationalistic border wars without selfless devotion to social groupings... Those who have



homosexuals shot in the name of the Islamic revolution . . . cannot be accused of antisocial individualism or base self-interest.<sup>19</sup> Besides, granting some communities special favours is seen as wrong by liberals. Why should Christians be treated differently from atheists or Muslims? Why should persons of a certain race or ethnic background have privileges?

So far so good, but does our liberal vision sufficiently account for people's fears and passions, collective bonds and traditions, trust, love and bigotries? Real life is not just about commonly agreed procedures, rational institutions, and abstract fairness. People are born in families with certain views and connections, they grow up in certain places with history and culture, they work and socialize with people who are often emotional and biased. Liberals are suspicious of all these communal and often primordial links, which explains why they are often seen as detached from the 'real people'. Most persons have national pride, religious beliefs, and political prejudices. They feel 'at home' with like-minded and like-looking people, they trust those whom they know, they entertain peculiar habits, sentiments, and myths. Liberal calls to rely on evidence, reason, and experts fall on the deaf ears of people attached to places, communities, and particularistic (often old-fashioned or narrow-minded) ideas. Liberals may well know how to defend individuals from bad laws, religious orthodoxy, or ethnic hatred, but they have little to say on how to create harmony, solidarity, and communal spirit, which are needed for any serious collective endeavours. It is not even certain that a notion of a good society and justice can be spelled out and agreed upon without a reference to a certain group of people, living in a certain territory and sharing a certain historical, cultural, and moral perspective. It is hard to claim that these arguments merely represent populist demagoguery.

Nationalism is the number one enemy of liberals, not only because it has led to plentiful wars and pogroms.<sup>20</sup> Nationalism discriminates against ethnic minorities and migrants, which is illiberal. Nationalism is about myths rather than reason; it is about primordial rather than

civic bonds; it is about a forcible assimilation to a single group rather than about individual freedom. It is hard to disagree with such assertions. However, liberals cannot but admit that freedoms are chiefly guaranteed by states, or to be more precise, nation-states. Democracy, as you, Ralf, often reminded us, has also functioned well only in nation-states. And thus, getting rid of nations may well destroy the very fundamentals of democracy, the rule of law, and individual freedom. Most virtues of the liberal society have been possible thanks to nation-states, and not to any abstract political constructions.

For liberals it is particularly hard to cope with demands of national (and territorial) independence within multi-ethnic states. Liberals found ethnic wars in the former Soviet Union and the Balkans repulsive, and exotic. In the recent years, the cases of Scotland and Catalonia have also left liberals confused and divided. I am completing this letter at the time Europe's eyes are focused on the conflict over the Catalonian declaration of independence from Spain. The outcome of this conflict will have profound implications for the liberal project, but European liberals seem unable to go beyond vague calls for dialogue, democracy, and constitutional order.

Because the liberal conception of society is universal rather than linked to a certain place or nation it is only natural for liberals to embrace transnational politics and economics. Liberal ideals were behind the creation of the United Nations and the European Communities. Free trade, multilateralism, and cultural exchanges are among the prime means of advancing the liberal project. In short, liberals belong to the 'party of globalization' and not to the 'party of territoriality', to use Charles Maier's expression.<sup>21</sup> The question is: who will secure the liberal order in a world of fuzzy borders and cascading interdependence? The only transnational public authority of any meaning, the European Union, is now in the process of decomposition. International organizations such as the United Nations or the World Bank can hardly shield individuals from predatory economic and political behaviour. Does any genuine liberal still believe that the American empire is indeed an agent of freedom around the world?

Will a Russian or German 'empire' do any better in their respective European neighbourhoods?

In the Europe of the 1960s and 1970s much of the liberal discourse was about the welfare state and the idea that mutual responsibility, the recognition of interdependence, and a sense of community were the means to support individual development. This discourse has gradually evaporated since 1989. Neo-liberals (under the influence of Reaganomics) have introduced a false dichotomy between liberalism and communitarianism. The former was to be all about individuals: 'there is no such thing as society', famously declared Margaret Thatcher. As a result, the liberal project has left individuals lost in the maze of powerful transnational markets and deficient transnational institutions. Increasingly citizens find themselves isolated and deprived of public protection be it in the field of economics, law, or administration. We undermined national borders without creating effective transnational public authorities. The counter-revolutionaries are probably naive to think that a return to nation-states will solve any major problems, but I wonder whether liberal freedoms can still be protected in a Europe we liberals have created. I also wonder whether liberalism can effectively be defended without a collective will, solidarity, and hope bordering on myth. We failed to create a European civil society and a European public authority able to push forward the liberal project. No wonder more and more European citizens are abandoning us and are instead endorsing outdated but familiar policies of national glory, moral community, and walls separating one group from another.

### What Good am I?

Liberalism has been scorned and proclaimed dead a few times in history, most vividly in the nineteenth century and then in the inter-war period of the twentieth century. Yet, it always bounced back and may well do so again in the future. In fact, liberals are still holding on to power in several European states and we should not assume that the days of liberalism are numbered.

This does not mean that its current critics will soon disperse and liberalism will again be 'the only game in town' across Europe. I don't want to sound pessimistic, Ralf, but I fear that liberal ideals will be under assault for some time and will bounce back only after a long and probably traumatic period of history. Let's hope it will not be as bad as in the 1930s and 1940s, but we cannot be sure. To bounce back, liberals would need to rethink their vision of democracy, capitalism, and European integration. Preaching abstract liberal principles and bashing anti-liberal opponents will not do. To bounce back, liberals need also to change their leaders because those who compromised, or even betrayed, the liberal project cannot be entrusted with renewing it. Above all, liberals ought to admit their errors, not just to regain credibility among the voters, but also to understand where improvements ought to be made.

In 1989 Bob Dylan wrote a song that could become the liberal motto for the next few years:

What good am I if I know and don't do,  
 If I see and don't say, if I look right through you,  
 If I turn a deaf ear to the thunderin' sky,  
 What good am I?

...

What good am I if I say foolish things,  
 And I laugh in the face of what sorrow brings,  
 And I just turn my back while you silently die,  
 What good am I?<sup>22</sup>

I have tried to convey to you, Ralf, what liberals have ignored or done incorrectly. I have failed to do this as concisely and poetically as Bob Dylan, but three terms or, if you wish, values have come to the fore repeatedly: equality, community, and truth. They are now on the banners of counter-revolutionary politicians. Liberals should try to regain these terms for their own project.

There is no chance for equality to be taken seriously without abandoning neo-liberal economics. This is not just a question of economic theory; there are vested interests behind neo-liberal

economics, and genuine liberals need the courage to stand up against them. Yet, their struggle against neo-liberalism will not succeed as long as there is no plausible alternative vision of capitalism in sight. (I will write more about the neo-liberal notion of capitalism later in this letter.)

Liberals cannot just think and talk about individuals and their liberty. They should start seriously thinking and talking about communitarian bonds, social responsibility, and their potential for securing liberal freedoms. As Philip Selznick argued many years ago, 'The thin theory of community espoused by many liberals is not enough... we need a stronger idea of community, one that will justify the commitments and sacrifices we ask of ourselves, and of one another, in the name of a common good.'<sup>23</sup> I am not sure whether a kinder version of nationalism is a viable option, a 'liberal nationalism' as Stefan Auer put it.<sup>24</sup> Most probably a new, and somewhat utopian, vision of a communitarian republic ought to be envisaged with the help of digital means of public deliberation. Whatever the option taken, leaving communal issues to counter-revolutionary forces would marginalize liberals and expose Europe to all negative manifestations of communitarianism: national belligerency, ethnic hatred, and religious fundamentalism in particular.

Last, but not least, liberals ought to embrace truth. By this I do not only mean refraining from lying or confusing facts with interpretations and opinions. Nor do I want to advocate any ideological truths. As Michael Freeden explained, 'If liberals do subscribe to a notion of truth, that truth is experimental and subject to changing historical and spatial understandings.'<sup>25</sup> By embracing truth I mean genuine efforts to comprehend present-day Europe and the concerns of its citizens. Agonizing about the latest opinion polls, flashing comfortable statistics, and spinning political images go in the opposite direction.

By embracing truth, I also mean searching for novel liberal solutions to key challenges of the twenty-first century such as peace, sustainable development, climate change, migration, and equality. Before we rush to any action we need to understand the issue we are trying to address and our (in)capacity to improve things. This is not easy in the heat of the current political battle, but we need to find

a proper balance between denouncing and explaining. We cannot just engage in finger-pointing at our opponents who prevent us from setting things right; we also need to look in the mirror and comprehend our own failings. The explainers tend to justify wrongdoing: is not globalization responsible for populism? Yet, the denouncers do nothing to explain: look how destructive populists are!

One cannot understand the world without any normative compass, which obviously requires us to make certain judgements. Yet, judgements cannot be applied only to our opponents, but must also appertain to ourselves. We need repeatedly to ask: what good am I? Do I live up to my liberal standards? Only then will we be able to teach by example, which Hannah Arendt conceived as an ideal link between truth and politics. As she put it in her famous 1967 essay: 'teaching by example is, indeed, the only form of "persuasion" that philosophical truth is capable of without perversion or distortion.'<sup>26</sup>