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Our Wildly Different Diagnoses Of “Liberalism”

William Gillis

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Infamously anarchists, marxists and conservatives all use the word “liberal” as a slur — probably the most frequent one that rolls off our tongues — and yet we each mean wildly different things by it.

To an anarchist the foremost characteristic of liberalism is shortsightedness. Liberals embrace state power and other problematic means to achieve some ameliorations in the short term at the cost of future victories. The watchword of liberals might as well be “good enough” and their slogan John Maynard Keynes’ famous line “in the long run we’re all dead.” Liberals are uninterested in the fundamental dynamics or historic consequences, they’ll do what they need to do to get a few million more people shitty health insurance ASAP even if that means compromising in deeply dangerous ways. Most of our modern world is the consequence of such thinking.

Instead of wildcat and general strikes up and down the production chains, labor got into bed with the state, getting a few bureaucratic unions like the AFL-CIO established as a second

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wing of capital and conceding almost all means of substantive pressure.

Instead of doing the hard work of (re)building alternative community organizations or consumers cooperatives to negotiate and secure terms of health care and basic needs for all, liberals took the quick fix of getting employers or the state to secure these services, making people even more dependent upon and subservient to them.

Rather than building grassroots consumer reporting and mobilizing capacity to hold producers accountable liberals happily ceded this role to the state and centralized regulatory institutions like the American Medical Association which were promptly captured by the biggest powers in their respective industries and enacted prohibitive barriers to competition, securing an oligarchical system.

Liberals cut corners. They look for apparent quick fixes on a global scale and rarely consider the possibility of unintended consequences from such hamfisted solutionism. This inevitably leads them to prefer political or statist solutions over the harder path of decentralized and persistent activism from the bottom up. Liberals sell activists out — they appropriate and subsume active struggles into codified “compromises” with terrible terms that become deadweight burdened on future generations. Their hearts are sometimes arguably in the right place, but only in a cavalier and dismissive way that does immense damage.

Anarchists, in contrast, are far more pessimistic but also far more audacious. We know there aren’t easy simple solutions. We know that building a better world, a profoundly different world not overwhelmingly characterized by relations of domination and rulership but liberation and solidarity, will take time and continual effort on countless fronts. That our progress towards liberation will never be measured in terms of a simple variable like how many seats in a legislature our team has, but rather in billions of variables, billions of considera-

tions. Culture, narratives, technology, infrastructure, habits, all the way down to our interpersonal relations, our everyday lives. Anarchists embrace grappling with such complexities. We resist writing anything off, accept no limited horizon to our considerations or our desires.

Thus to anarchists “liberals” are the opposite of radicals because they don’t strike at the roots of power itself. In this sense we see both marxists and conservatives as just another flavor of liberalism.

Yet when a marxist uses the term “liberal” they often mean someone who is insufficiently extreme — perhaps burdened by conscience or hesitation at using any and all force against political enemies, someone who is idealistic rather than brutally “practical.” In this use “liberal” is *another* way of saying “coward”, someone who shies away from What Needs To Be Done, rather than someone who shies away from recognizing complexities and the need to delve further. Usually — it is assumed — this cowardice arises because of a class position that is invested in the appearance of care but not anything that might risk their own privilege. In this picture anyone who balks at the prospect of using mass murder, mass imprisonment or just the social democratic police state in some rube goldberg strategy to achieve a freer world is a “coward.” Similarly anyone concerned with the particular “hows” of economic coordination or how to assure their “transitory state” / “dictatorship of the proletariat” withers away is revealed as a liberal, a neb-bish egghead coward, corrupted by privilege or false class consciousness.

The conservative use of “liberal” follows the same brutish narrative of cowardice, except of course the teams are assigned a little differently. What Needs To Be Done to save everything good in the world is suppress The Gays or The Muslims, and “liberals” are thus fifth column betrayers with their weirdly abstract or ethical considerations. Of course the teams that conservatives identify with and against don’t align with the true

oppressors and underdogs in any sane analysis of institutional power differences, but there are clearly parallels with many marxists. Especially those marxists that agree with the fascistic premise that power relations are inescapable and freedom is an impossibility.

We all see “liberal” as denoting a certain cowardice, yet the cowardice that anarchists diagnose is at odds with that diagnosed by marxists and conservatives. Anarchists see liberals as intellectual and ethical cowards of halfassed analyses and strategies — cowards even of the heart, settling for the most tepid of desires and ideals. But marxists and conservatives tend to see liberals as cowards in the war against their own conscience, cowards in the traditional sense of someone without the stomach for warfare.

These are irreconcilable diagnoses.

To the marxist and conservative we anarchists are the very apex of liberalism — a focus on individuals, freedom, ethics, “abstract” underlying dynamics and a rejection of simplistic notions of social conflict. Whereas to the anarchist, marxism and conservatism are themselves extreme variants of liberalism. If the myopic technocracy of Vox is deeply characterized by a gravitation towards simplistic and immediate “solutions” that ultimately work against systemic change, then the simplistic narratives of war, shortsighted embrace of dictatorship, centralization and vertically structured apparatuses of control that both marxists and conservatives fall into are surely just the intensification of such liberalism.

While the internal differences to be found between marxists and conservatives are not trivial — we anarchists clearly critique “liberalism” from the opposite side of it. The failures of our world are not the result of an effete timidity when it comes to hurting other people or a nerdy inquiry into root dynamics and the externalities of approaches. We didn’t get global warming because too many people thought too far ahead about pos-

sible dangers. Centuries of colonialism and genocide are not the fault of anyone being too adverse to bloody team sports.

There is, of course, a place for fighting back, for action. And there are real enemies and threats to liberation. But strength to act is almost utterly irrelevant compared with the consideration needed to act well. The last thing we need is something as immediatist, as quintessentially *liberal*, as a warrior perspective. Humanity is in no short supply of brute guts and it never has been, it is in short supply of vision and audacity. It is in this respect that liberals are truly mewling cowards. And it is in this respect that marxists and conservatives, for all their bluster, are far less radical than even liberals.