



ECONOMIC FREEDOM

In America and around the world

PAGE 3



CLINT BOLICK

On liberty's neglected weapon

PAGE 9



HOLIDAY READING

For gifts and wish lists

PAGE 16

Cato Policy Report

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2016

VOL. XXXVIII NO. 6

A New, Old Challenge: Global Anti-Libertarianism

BY TOM G. PALMER

A spectre is haunting the world: the spectre of radical anti-libertarian movements, each grappling with the others like scorpions in a bottle and all competing to see which can dismantle the institutions of liberty the fastest. Some are ensconced in the universities and other elite centers, and some draw their strength from populist anger. The leftist and the rightist versions of the common anti-libertarian cause are, moreover, interconnected, with each fueling the other. All explicitly reject individual liberty, the rule of law, limited government, and freedom of exchange, and they promote instead radical, albeit aggressively opposed, forms of identity politics and authoritarianism. They are dangerous and should not be underestimated.

In various guises, such movements are challenging libertarian values and principles across the globe, especially in Europe, in America, and in parts of Asia, but their influence is felt everywhere. They share a radical rejection of the ideas of reason, liberty, and the rule of law that animated the American Founding and are, indeed, the foundations of modernity. Those who prefer constitutionalism to dic-

tatorship, free markets to cronyist or statist statism, free trade to autarchy, toleration to oppression, and social harmony to irreconcilable antagonism need to wake up, because our cause and the prosperity and peace it engenders are in grave danger.

THREE THREATS

At least three symbiotic threats to liberty can be seen on the horizon: a) identity politics and the zero-sum political economy of conflict

and aggression they engender; b) populism and the yearning for strongman rule that invariably accompanies it; and c) radical political Islamism. They share certain common intellectual fountainheads and form an interlocking network, energizing each other at the expense of the classical liberal consensus.

Although all those movements are shot through with fallacies, especially economic fallacies, they are not driven merely by lack

Continued on page 6



TOM G. PALMER is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the executive vice president for international programs at the Atlas Network. His books include *Realizing Freedom* and most recently *Self-Control or State Control?*

Cato's recently released 2016 edition of *Freedom in the 50 States* is the most up-to-date and comprehensive freedom index available for the United States, with detailed rankings evaluating both economic and personal freedoms. See page 14 for more.

Continued from page 1

of understanding of economic principles, as so many statist interventions are. While most support for the minimum wage, trade restrictions, or prohibition of narcotics rests on factual misapprehensions of their consequences, the intellectual leaders of these illiberal movements are generally not thoughtless people. They often understand libertarian ideas fairly well, and they reject them root and branch. They believe that the ideas of equality before the law, of rule-based legal and political systems, of toleration and freedom of thought and speech, of voluntary trade—especially among strangers—for mutual benefit, and of imprescriptible and equal individual rights are phony, self-interested camouflage for exploitation promoted by evil elites, and that those who uphold them are either evil themselves or hopelessly naïve.

It's time for advocates of liberty to realize that some people reject liberty for others (and even for themselves) not merely because they don't understand economics or because they will realize material benefits from undermining the rule of law, but because they oppose the principles and the practice of liberty. They don't seek equality before the law; they reject it and prefer politics based on unequal identities. They don't believe in your right to disagree with them and they certainly won't defend your right to do so. They consider trade a plot of some sort. And they prefer a politics of will to one of processes. They will attack anyone for offending their sacred identities. They do not want to "live and let live."

IDENTITY POLITICS

It took decades, but a robustly anti-libertarian and anti-toleration movement on the left side of the spectrum has effectively taken over a great deal of academia in much of Europe, North America, and other countries. Their goal is to use administrative punishment, intimidation, and disruption to suppress all views that they consider incompatible with their vision. This move-

“Political correctness on the left has called forth an equally anti-libertarian reaction on the right.”

ment is rooted in the writings of a German Marxist who studied under the Nazi theoretician Martin Heidegger. His name was Herbert Marcuse, and after he came to the United States he became very influential on the far left.

Marcuse's 1965 essay "Repressive Tolerance" argued that to achieve liberation, or at least his vision thereof, would require

the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements which promote aggressive policies, armament, chauvinism, discrimination on the grounds of race and religion, or which oppose the extension of public services, social security, medical care, etc. Moreover, the restoration of freedom of thought may necessitate new and rigid restrictions on teachings and practices in the educational institutions which, by their very methods and concepts, serve to enclose the mind within the established universe of discourse and behavior – thereby precluding a priori a rational evaluation of the alternatives.

For Marcuse, as for his contemporary followers (many of whom have never heard of him), "Liberating tolerance, then, would mean intolerance against movements from the Right and toleration of movements from the Left." Following that script, those who dissent from the new orthodoxy are shouted down, denied platforms, forced into sensitivity reeducation courses, forbidden from speaking, intimidated, mobbed, and even threatened with violence to get them

to shut up. Consider again University of Missouri professor Melissa Click's call to her backers—"Hey, who wants to help me get this reporter out of here? I need some muscle over here!" That was Marcuse's message in action.

Political correctness on the left has called forth an equally anti-libertarian reaction on the right. The far-right movements that are gaining ground in Europe and the "alt-right" fusion of populism and white nationalism in the United States have attracted followers who are convinced that their existence or way of life is threatened by capitalism, by free trade, and by ethnic pluralism, but they have been infuriated and stirred into action by the illiberal left-wing domination of speech and witch hunts against dissidents. In a sense they have become the mirror image of their persecutors. In European parties they have resurrected the poisonous political ideologies and language of the 1930s, and in the United States they have been energized by and attached themselves to the Trump movement, with its attacks on international trade, its denigration of Mexicans and Muslims, and its stirring up of resentment against elites.

The call for politically correct "safe spaces" reserved for minorities is mirrored by white nationalists who call for affirming "white identity" and a "white nation." The doyen of white nationalism, also known as "Identitarianism," in the United States, Jared Taylor, recently told National Public Radio that "the natural tendency of human nature is tribal. When black people or Asians or Hispanics express a desire to live with people like themselves, express a preference for their own culture, their own heritage, there's considered nothing wrong about that. It's only when whites say, well, yes, I prefer the culture of Europe and I prefer to be around white people—for some reason, and only for whites, this is considered the profoundest sort of immorality." One collectivism begets another.

Philosophy professor Slavoj Žižek is an influential voice on the far left, better known

“Populist and authoritarian parties have taken over in several states.”

in Europe than America, but with a growing following worldwide. Žižek insists that freedom in liberal societies is an illusion and embraces the common thread tying the illiberal left with the illiberal right. That thread runs through the work of the National Socialist law professor Carl Schmitt, a collaborator of Martin Heidegger who famously reduced “the specific political distinction . . . to that between friend and enemy.” Žižek affirms “the unconditional primacy of the inherent antagonism as constitutive of the political.” Social harmony and “live and let live” philosophies for such thinkers are just so much self-delusion; for them what is real is the struggle for dominance. Indeed, in a very deep sense, the flesh-and-blood individuated person does not even exist for such thinkers, for what truly exists are social forces or identities; indeed, the “individual” is nothing but the instantiation of forces or collective identities that are inherently antagonistic to each other.

POPULIST AUTHORITARIANISM

Populism often parallels the various forms of identity politics, but adds angry resentment of “elites,” crackpot political economy, and a yearning for a leader who can focus the authentic will of the people. Populist movements have erupted in numerous countries, from Poland and Spain to the Philippines and the United States. Michael Kazin in his book *The Populist Persuasion* offers a definition of populism: “a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter.” The normal tendency of such movements is to follow a charismatic leader who, in his or her own person, embodies the people and focuses the popular will.

A common theme among populists is to empower a leader who can cut through procedures, rules, checks and balances, and protected rights, privileges, and immunities and

“just get things done.” In *The Road to Serfdom* F. A. Hayek described that impatience with rules as the prelude to totalitarianism: “It is the general demand for quick and determined central government action that is the dominating element in the situation, dissatisfaction with the slow and cumbersome course of democratic processes which make action for action’s sake the goal. It is then the man or the party who seems strong and resolute enough to ‘get things done’ who exercises the greatest appeal.”

Populist and authoritarian parties have taken over and are cementing their power in several states. In Russia Vladimir Putin has created a new authoritarian government that dominates all other institutions in society and depends on his own personal decisions. Putin and his cronies systematically and completely took over the media and used it to generate a deep feeling of a nation under siege, whose uniquely great culture is constantly threatened by its neighbors, and which is defended only by the strong hand of the leader.

The government of Hungary, after securing a two-thirds parliamentary majority in 2010, began to institutionalize control of all organs of the state by ruling Fidesz party loyalists. It depicted its leader, Viktor Orbán, as a national savior and launched an increasingly anti-libertarian agenda of nationalization, cronyism, and restrictions on freedom of speech. Orbán declared that “[We are] breaking with the dogmas and ideologies that have been adopted by the West and keeping ourselves independent from them . . . to construct a new state built on illiberal and national foundations within the European Union.” (“Within the European Union”

translates into “subsidized by the taxpayers of other countries.”)

After Fidesz’s 2010 victory, the leader of the nationalist and anti-market Polish Law and Justice Party Jarosław Kaczyński declared Orbán’s nationalist, populist, and cronyist strategy “an example of how we can win.” Kaczyński managed to combine identity politics with populism to oust the center right government of a country with a growing economy and then began to institute the kinds of populist and protectionist measures that have proven themselves inimical to prosperity. The classical liberal Timbro Institute of Sweden’s 2016 *Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index* concluded that on both left and right, in contemporary Europe “populism is not a temporary challenge but a permanent threat.”

Putin, the pioneer in the trend toward authoritarianism, has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into promoting anti-libertarian populism across Europe and through a sophisticated global media empire, including RT and Sputnik News, as well as a network of internet troll factories and numerous made-to-order websites. Russian media pioneer Peter Pomerantsev in his remarkable book *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible* notes that “the Kremlin switches messages at will to its advantages. . . . European right-wing nationalists are seduced with an anti-EU message; the Far Left is co-opted with tales of fighting US hegemony; US religious conservatives are convinced by the Kremlin’s fight against homosexuality.” Clouds of lies, denunciations, denials, and more are issued to undermine the confidence of defenders of classical liberal institutions. It’s a well-financed post-modern assault on truth in the service of dictatorship.

WHAT TRIGGERS AUTHORITARIANISM?

Such movements are not solely the result of a lack of education. They are deeply ideological in character. They embrace collectivism and authoritarianism and reject individualism and constitutional rules. What has caused them to generate so much popular

“All those trends are mutually reinforcing: Each demonizes the other.”

support so rapidly?

Current research indicates that authoritarian responses are triggered by the perception of *threats to physical security, group identity, and social status*. When all three are present, conditions are ripe for an explosion of authoritarianism.

Radical Islamist violence, recycled through the 24/7 news cycle to seem even more widespread and common than it is, certainly presents an apparently alarming external threat. Group integrity and status are also at stake. Research by the political scientist Karen Stenner supports the idea that there is an authoritarian predisposition that is triggered by “normative threats,” that is perceptions that traditional views are endangered or no longer shared across a community. Such normative threats trigger a response among those predisposed to authoritarianism to become active “boundary-maintainers, norm-enforcers, and cheerleaders for authority.” Threats to social status further exacerbate such authoritarian responses. The core support for authoritarian populist movements in Europe, as well as the radical fringe of the Trump movement in America, has been less-educated white males, who have seen their relative social status decline as those of others (females and foreigners) have risen. In the United States, white males 30-49 with high school degrees or less have seen their labor force participation rates drop precipitously, to the point where more than one in five are not even seeking work but have left the labor force entirely. Without remunerative and fulfilling work they have experienced a substantial loss of social status. Absolute living standards can rise for all (and living standards and real wages have risen dramatically over the past decades), but relative status cannot rise for all. If some groups are rising, others must be falling. Those in the groups that have been falling and who are predisposed to authoritarianism will be strongly drawn to authoritarian figures who promise to make things right, or to restore lost greatness.

RADICAL ISLAMISM

Radical Islamism mirrors some of the themes of the other anti-libertarian movements, including identity politics (the belief that the community of believers is at war with all infidels), authoritarian populist fears of threats to group identity and social status, and enthusiasm for charismatic leaders who will “Make Islam Great Again.” Radical Islamism even shares with the far left and far right common intellectual roots in European fascist political ideology and collectivist ideas of “authenticity.” The Islamist movement in Iran that created the first “Islamic Republic” was deeply influenced by European Fascist thinkers, notably Martin Heidegger. Ahmad Fardid promoted Heidegger’s toxic ideas in Iran, and his follower Jalal Al-e Ahmad denounced alleged western threats to the authentic identity of Iran in his book *Westoxification*. As Heidegger pronounced after the victory of the Nazi Party, the age of liberalism was “the I-time. Now is the We-time.” Ecstatic collectivism promised to deliver the German people from their “inauthentically historical existence,” and lead them toward “authenticity,” the cause now embraced by social justice warriors, alt-right “identitarians,” and radical Islamists alike.

All those trends are mutually reinforcing: Each demonizes the other; and as one grows, so grows the existential threat against which the others struggle. The growth of radical Islam draws recruits to populist parties in Europe (and America), and the hostility toward Muslims and their alienation from their societies increases the ability of Islamic State and other groups to recruit. At the same time, politically correct social justice warriors cannot bring themselves to condemn radical Islamism—after all, isn’t it just a response to the colonial

oppression visited on non-Christians by the dominant Christian/white/European hegemony?—and often they find themselves not only unable to condemn Islamist crimes, but they even promote anti-Semitism. Indeed, hostility to Jews and to capitalism is a disturbingly common feature of all three movements.

THE NEED TO DEFEND LIBERTY

The various anti-libertarian movements grow at the expense, not of each other, but of the center, as it were, made up of tolerant producing and trading members of civil society who live, whether consciously or not, by the precepts of classical liberalism. We have seen that dynamic before, in the 1930s, when collectivist movements vied with each other to destroy freedom as fast as they could. The Fascists claimed that only they could defend against Bolshevism. The Bolsheviks mobilized to smash Fascism. They fought each other, but they had far more in common than either wished to admit.

Unfortunately, the best argument that the defenders of civil society typically offer in response to those challenges is that the complex of personal liberty, the rule of law, and free markets creates more prosperity and a more commodious life than the alternatives. That’s true, but it’s not enough to deflect the damaging blows of the illiberal triumvirate of identity politics, authoritarian populism, and radical Islamism. The moral goodness of liberty needs to be upheld, not only in head-to-head encounters with adversaries, but as a means of stiffening the resistance of classical liberals, lest they continue retreating. Freedom is not an illusion, but a great and noble goal. A life of freedom is better in every respect than a life of submission to others. Violence and antagonism are not the foundation of culture, but their negation.

Now is the time to defend the liberty that makes possible a global civilization that enables friendship, family, cooperation, trade, mutual benefit, science, wisdom—in a word, life—and to challenge the modern anti-libertarian triumvirate and reveal the emptiness at its heart. ■