ON THE THREAT TO
LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

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When we think of the crisis of liberal democracy, or the threat to liberal democracy, we think of its antithesis, authoritarianism, which has claimed the lives of tens of millions of people in recent history, either as Nazism or as Stalinism in communist regimes. Tyranny, totalitarianism, or authoritarianism, different terminologies have been used to emphasize different aspects of the same concentration of power and deprivation of individual freedom and basic rights. What is more, when considering what has caused people to turn to authoritarianism, we have often focused on the "pathologies" (Arendt)[1] of the distraught population: the "losers" of economic globalization who have lost not only jobs and incomes but also social status, and who fear losing their cultural traditions and way of life as a result of the inflow of immigrants. This narrative of cultural and economic grievances, like the narrative of "great replacement" that plagued pre-Nazi Germans, can easily be

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[1] Hannah Arendt (1951). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

seen as warning signs of authoritarianism, with citizens losing faith in the future and turning to "strong leaders" at the expense of liberal-democratic principles. Donald Trump's election, and his strong appeal to de-industrialized workers and those with cultural grievances as ethnic minorities and immigrants grew in cultural and political power, appears to have struck just that nerve, putting democratic defenders on high alert.

Since WWII, we have developed vigilance to the warning signs of authoritarianism, such as grievance, animosity of immigrants, distrust of the institution, and willingness to follow charismatic figures. However, it is worth noting that Hitler came close to winning a *democratic* election before ascending to absolute power. The pathologic conditions may bring people to a strong leader while undermining the structure of democracy, but it is unclear why such pathologies would inexorably lead to violence, racism, and anti-Semitism, wreaking unthinkable destruction and atrocities on humanity. Authoritarianism is far more insidious and destructive at its root than feelings of resentment and loss of confidence. The ultimate concern of

democratic defenders should not be the election of more conservative sectors of the population, but the emerging elements at the core of totalitarianism and tyranny.

In one of the most powerful post-World War II analyses of what lies at the heart of Nazism, German critical theorist Theodor Adorno points to identity thinking, in which we subsume ourselves and others, with all our otherness and unidentified sphere, to the identity categories of "us" and "them," rendering all identity categories homogeneous and "same."[2] Such identity thinking would treat people not as unique individuals, but as members of identity groups with varying characteristics and status, which Adorno claims is at the root of racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia. Nazism is essentially an ethno-nationalism, an identitarian movement carried to its logical conclusion in order to preserve the purity and superiority of the Aaryan race at the expense of all others. When group allegiance, membership, and identarian beliefs override individual conscience, the seeds of tyranny are sown.

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[2] Adorno, T.W. (1973). *Negative Dialectics.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Individuality vanishes in this conception, and the other's humanity and freedom are stripped away, sacrificed for the cultural or moral superiority of one's identity group.

If we follow this analysis, then, the similar approach and logic exist in the other types of authoritarianism, the Stalinism and communism, which regard individuals as oppressors and oppressed in terms of class, race, gender, and others. Much of the political movements on the left inherited Marx's critical framing of social structure as essentially hierarchical and founded on group identities, with problems and solutions inextricably linked to identity divisions. While right-leaning populists have historically stressed shared ancestry and descent, or shared culture and tradition, left-leaning populists have frequently defined people in terms of class and power, rejecting those with wealth and influence. What remains constant, though, is identity thinking, racism, and classism, albeit a different class or race is demonized. Such structural thinking can be helpful in recognizing shared experiences and addressing systemic challenges and obstacles, but when identity categories are essentialized and incorporated into the

building blocks of envisioned new social order, individuals outside oppressed groups may be denied equal participation, violating the democratic conception of inclusion. The door opens to forms of authoritarianism unrecognized by many. As the libertarian economist Friedrich Hayek has remarked, observers after observers of the socialist regimes have noted the unexpected consequences of totalitarianism, and the "extraordinary similarity in many respects of the conditions under 'communism' and 'fascism.'"[3]

Unfortunately, after WWII, while there was a widespread and heartfelt call to systematically analyze Nazism in order to prevent it from resurfacing, there has never been a systematic and unrestricted investigation and reflection on the crimes committed by communist authoritarianism, even though authoritarianism became increasingly apparent in communist regimes at the same time (and later). The surviving communist regimes are also welding their power to prevent such investigation. The lack of investigation and condemnation of this type of

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[3] F. A. Hayek (1944). *The Road to Serfdom*. New York: Routledge. 27.

authoritarianism has allowed its elements to continue influence the dominant culture of the world, especially Western democratic societies. The hallmarks of Nazism are easily identified, but we turn a blind eye to totalitarian elements on the left. Many scholars have only approached anti-democracy from the far right, oblivious of the danger brought by the far left.

What authoritarianism is really up against is not necessarily democracy, but liberal democracy. A basic democracy, with equal and inclusive citizenship and majority rule, can still make majoritarian decisions that consistently work to the detriment of particular individuals and groups or infringe on their rights and freedom, as amply demonstrated in world history. Liberal democracy, on the other hand, is the very antithesis of authoritarianism in that it is built upon individual liberty. The central idea of liberalism is to recognize and safeguard a space beyond the government's legitimate reach, where individuals can enjoy independence and personal discretion. Liberalism as expressed in Western liberal democracies privilege individual liberty, property rights, and market freedom.

With a long series of philosophical deliberation, now liberalism has embodied the Kantian idea of personal autonomy, public use of reason, Mill's idea of press freedom, and Habermas' idea of the public sphere as a key organizational principle of the liberal constitutional state. Hayek's idea of a free market of countless individual decisions rather than top-down decision-making as a safeguard against totalitarianism has also contributed to the development of liberal democracy along neoliberal lines in the United States and the United Kingdom. Fundamentally, liberal democracy is anti-tribal, anti-identity politics, and anti-racism. Even though it has failed to deliver on many promises, it provides the resources to reform itself.

In this sense, the U.S. Declaration of Independence may be seen as centrally concerned with such liberalist principles. If all human beings are endowed with "certain unalienable rights," the government can only permit systems of governance that protect these rights. The constitution and bills of rights are established to "protect these rights," not to restrict or limit them.

Of course, the concept of individual that is at the core of liberalism is not without its own problem and there has been ample critiques and analyses from philosophers of all persuasions and schools after the tragedies of the last century. " A new concept of human individuality that allows for true liberal democracy would have to depart from the concept of the modern subject, deadened on the inside by obsession with conceptual understanding that blocks access to our infinite depth and possibilities of our individuality, and deadly on the outside by its sense of all-encompassing mastery that blocks the recognition of relatedness. The new concept would have to recognize the uniqueness and relatedness of all individuals, the freedom at the depth of her subjectivity that cannot be reduced and captured in the same, in a category or a membership. Unity is established by our connectedness to others as well as our equal, unique, and irreducible humanity, which deserves dignity, respect, and liberty.

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Therefore, the erosion of liberal democracy can come from political movements of all directions that treat people as identity groups and endorse identity thinking over individual conscience. The desire to protect and uplift oppressed groups is commendable, but it must be done in such a way that all marginalized groups and the conditions for such marginalization eventually vanish, and unique individuals with equal rights and freedom emerge in their place, rather than exploiting group identity as vital elements of social structure. Imposing identity divisions on the reality of true diversity of individuals elevates some social groups over others. As Fukuyama's recent analysis highlights, identity politics may be behind the problems that liberal

democracies are currently facing.[4] When incommensurable demands and expectations of groups compete within states, when others are seen as adversaries rather than fellow citizens, liberal democracy cannot be sustained. From this perspective, no form of identity politics can serve as the basis for modern, liberal democracy. If left unchecked, identity politics pose the greatest threat to liberal democracy.

To defend liberal democracy, therefore, we must focus relentlessly on identifying and countering threats to liberal institutions from all political movements, left or right. Many illiberal tactics imposed on individuals in the name of justice and inclusion, for example, are far more benign-looking and effective in stifling free speech and free press and eliminating ideas, voices, and communities who are deemed unworthy. When individual liberty, equal protection under the law, and equal rights for civil associations are jeopardized for some "undeserving" segments of the population, we have authoritarianism on

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[4] Fukuayama, Francis (2018). *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

our hands. It may not be the authoritarianism we expected, but it is authoritarianism nevertheless, a true threat to liberal democracy.