

# Why Are So Many Western Intellectuals Abandoning Liberalism and What Can We Do About It?\*

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## Abstract

This article analyzes some of the reasons why so many Western intellectuals have seemed ready to abandon the principles of liberalism lately in search for alternative solutions. I begin by examining the fascination exercised by Viktor Orbán among conservatives in the US who emerged as staunch critics of liberalism. Next, I show that the doom industry has a long history and discuss the conceptual fluidity of liberalism and its implications for students of liberalism. I argue that by acknowledging the polysemantic nature of liberalism we can better answer its critics. I draw on the lessons of German Ordoliberals to show that liberalism contains surprising resources neglected by its critics. The article concludes with a call to moderate liberalism inspired by Karl Popper's defense of the open society.

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## 1. Budapest, the new Syracuse

In a speech given on July 26, 2014, at Băile Tușnad (Romania), the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán boldly called for “breaking with the dogmas and ideologies that have been adopted by the West.” Speaking in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008–09 and soon after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, he argued that “a democracy does not necessarily have to be liberal to be a properly functioning regime. Just because a state is not liberal, it can still be a democracy.”<sup>1</sup> Such words would have been inconceivable three decades and a half ago, when Orbán himself was courageously fighting for *liberal* democracy in communist Hungary. Once a model for the young generation opposing communism,

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<sup>1</sup> For the official version of the speech, see Orbán 2014. For a perspective on Orbán's political trajectory to date, see Foer 2019.

he benefitted from the generosity of George Soros' Open Society Foundation that had sent him to Oxford to study civil society and the rule of law in the late 1980s. Yet, as the popular saying goes, no good deed goes unpunished. Today, Soros has become Orbán's *bête noire*, and the concept of open society that his foundation has done so much to promote in the region is now attacked by those who prefer the illiberal democracy embraced by the current Hungarian Prime Minister.

Orbán has shied away from virtually nothing to strengthen his grip on power. He has changed the constitution, attacked the judiciary and the free media, chased the Central European University away from Budapest (it relocated to Vienna), and sponsored a large system of clientelism and patronage meant to maintain him and his party, Fidesz, in power for the foreseeable future. A law passed in 2021 banned the discussion of gender and sexual diversity in schools, the media, and advertising. The control of almost a dozen major public universities, along with their assets, was transferred to government-controlled foundations and boards. The most recent report of the Freedom House for Hungary described its regime as "partly free," a significant downgrade since 2010 when Fidesz began to fully control the political landscape in Hungary (see Freedom House 2023).

And yet, despite all that, the man who has embraced the concept of "illiberal democracy" and emerged as the most reliable friend of Vladimir Putin in the EU has become the star of many conservative intellectuals in the West. How can we explain this paradox? In *The Reckless Mind* (2001), Mark Lilla referred to "the lure of Syracuse" to describe the attraction exercised by tyrants over thinkers, beginning with Plato, who made not one, but three trips to Syracuse in search of an outlet for his political ideas. Today, Budapest has become the new Syracuse that has had its own political pilgrims. The list of those who have made the journey to Budapest is surprisingly long and includes prominent names such as Jordan Peterson, Patrick Deneen, Yoram Hazony, Christopher Caldwell, Rod Dreher (now a resident of Budapest), Christopher DeMuth, and Joshua Katz.<sup>2</sup> Orbán returned the favor by accepting the invitation to speak at Conservative Political Action Conference in Dallas in August 2022, where he was widely applauded for his anti-immigration and pro-family Christian message. Furthermore, Orbán's regime welcomed John Sullivan, an editor and senior fellow at the *National Review* Institute in Washington, who founded the Danube Institute in Budapest. Its mission is to promote conservatism in cultural, religious, and social life, by defending the nation-state against liberal cosmopolitanism. The Institute has turned a blind eye to the rampant corruption that sustains Orbán's government, and its constant attacks on the separation of powers and the independency of the media. In turn, the former Fox News journalist Tucker Carlson spent a week in Budapest in August 2021 and described Hungary as the conservatives' paradise for its strong pro-family and anti-immigration, anti-EU, and anti-LGBTQ policies.

It is important to pause for a moment and take stock of our present situation. Nobody who witnessed the historical events of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe could have predicted that we would so quickly reach a point when the concept of "illiberal democracy" might become a systemic challenger to open society. When the Berlin Wall came down in November 1989, we thought for a moment that we were about to celebrate the definitive triumph of liberal democracy in the entire world. Those of us with the conscience of the shipwreck,

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<sup>2</sup> On Orbán's long political career, also see Wallace-Wells 2021. He is currently the longest serving political leader in office in the European Union.

born the other side—the “wrong” side, as it were—of the Iron Curtain, believed that the principles of liberal democracy had won the battle with their rivals. We hoped that the rule of law, political pluralism, limited power, freedom of speech, freedom of movement, freedom of press and thought, and toleration of dissent would finally bring about the normalcy that decades of communism had made impossible (Craiuțu 2023).

That was more than thirty years ago. Alas, the mood is quite different today on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Rejecting liberalism is fashionable on all sides of the political spectrum from Žižek (2001) to Deneen (2018), and the confidence in liberal democracy is at an all-time low, as a recent report of the Freedom House (2019) shows.<sup>3</sup> There are many causes and agents of democratic decline, with different agendas and diverse priorities. They range from antiliberal populist movements of the extreme Right, which show little respect for core civil and political rights, to radical movements on the far Left, whose rejection of gradualism and endorsement of cancel culture erode the belief in the legitimacy of key liberal norms and values such as free speech and equality under the law. Not surprisingly, classical liberals have become the scapegoat of populist movements in both Europe and North America.

Even friends of liberal democracy recognize the seriousness of our present predicament and wonder what might be done to avert future crises and strengthen liberal regimes. As Martin Wolf has recently put it, “today liberal democracy and market capitalism are individually sick, and the balance between them has broken. . . . The fire is not next time; it is now” (2023, 7). Many individuals feel that their political preferences are ignored or distorted, while major decisions are taken by global actors miles away from them. What is under attack is not only political liberalism and the free market, but also everything else associated with them, from free trade and migration to cultural tolerance, religious neutrality, and multiculturalism. Are we witnessing then the “twilight of democracy” as Anne Applebaum (2020) feared? Is liberal democracy really “the light that failed” as Krastev and Holmes (2020) argued? Who could serenely ignore these warnings without a feeling of guilt?

To answer these (arguably unsettling) questions, it is important to reexamine why so many intellectuals on both sides of the political spectrum seem willing to abandon the principles and values of liberal democracy. They believe that the liberal project is ultimately self-contradictory and self-defeating, culminating in “the liberated individual and the controlling state” (Deneen 2018, 38). According to this view, the twin outcomes of this development are “the depletion of moral self-command and the depletion of material resources” that cannot be easily replenished in the short term (*ibid.*, 41). The political philosophy that was launched to foster greater equity, defend different cultures and beliefs, and protect human dignity has generated in practice “titanic inequality,” enforced “uniformity and homogeneity,” fostered “material and spiritual degradation,” and undermined freedom (*ibid.*, 3). “The current political reality of disintegrating national states, ruined families, and eviscerated religious traditions,” another conservative critic writes, “is the direct consequence of the embrace of liberal dogma as a kind of universal salvation creed throughout much of the West” (Hazony 2019). On this view, liberal democracy is slowly but certainly disintegrating into something that resembles a mixture of anarchy and totalitarianism.

The conclusion reached by these critics of liberalism seems obvious. Since the underpinnings of our inherited civilized order have been eroded and damaged by liberal principles, a

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<sup>3</sup> On the current discontents, see Luce 2018, 17–72.

radical change of course is needed. We are told that we are on a “Flight 93” dangerous path that must be reversed as soon as possible if we are to avoid shipwreck.<sup>4</sup> “Liberalism’s end-game is unsustainable in every respect,” Deneen argued (2018., 41) and we must abandon the belief that our social and political ailments can be fixed with more liberal therapies. The real and serious problems of Western countries exist *not* despite liberalism, but *because* of its principles. In other words, they exist not because liberalism has failed, but because it has *triumphed*. We are witnessing “an increasingly systemic failure,” due to the bankruptcy of liberalism’s underlying political philosophy and of the political system it has created (*ibid.*, 4).

It would be an error to believe that this dark view can be found only on the Right. On the radical Left, liberalism is denounced as an ideology of propertied white men that has set in place unfair and illegitimate hierarchies of race, ethnic groups, and class. The liberal focus on the rule of law and individual rights has been denounced as being a mere mask hiding deep-seated inequalities and pernicious power structures. As the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm argued a few decades ago, none of the major problems facing humanity in the twenty-first century can be solved by liberal principles such as unlimited economic growth and technical progress, individual autonomy and choice, electoral democracy, and the rule of law (Hobsbawm as cited in Fawcett 2014b). His conclusion is similar to the one advanced by the conservative critics of liberalism: there can be neither a return to the old status quo nor a restoration of the liberal dogmas. We are approaching the end of a natural cycle of decline and must relinquish the liberal bromides that have caused our present troubles. We should search for a new horizon *beyond* liberalism.

## 2. The Long History of the Doom Industry

It is not easy to know what to make of all these pronouncements, some more rhetorical and theatrical than others. To begin with, they remind us of the “jeopardy thesis” coined by Albert Hirschman in *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (1991): the claim that many government-enacted reforms tend to jeopardize liberal institutions and individual liberty. One of his historical examples was the once popular assertion (within conservative circles) that the Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867 in England extending suffrage to many working-class males were going to cause the “death of liberty” across the Channel. That did not happen, of course, but it did not stop its critics from continuing with their jeremiads. Hirschman (1991, 122) noted that there seems to be some inherent intellectual attraction and benefit in advancing various version of the jeopardy thesis for different political agendas. This is even more true today than three decades ago. The whole liberalism bashing industry has turned into a jeopardy thesis affair on steroids.

Nonetheless, dismissing the anti-liberal rhetoric as entirely reactionary would be unwise and incorrect. We must be honest and admit that there are plenty of reasons for concern today. Consider, for example, the injury to liberal values done from *within* liberal regimes by the rise of inequality, universal surveillance, reckless war-making, and torture. Liberal reforms are often too slow and inconclusive in the short-term. In turn, liberals sometimes tend

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<sup>4</sup> For the metaphor of Flight 93 election, see Anton 2016. A radical regime change is outlined in Deneen 2023.

to behave illiberally, as for example when they deem some populations as unfit for self-governances, or when they go too far in the name of promoting social justice and identity politics. Add to this a global banking collapse, the pandemic, and the lockdowns, plus the costly rescue packages and the prolonged economic uncertainty that followed, and we should not be surprised that those affected by all these changes would start questioning the virtues of liberal democracy.

This issue must be taken seriously. For one thing, we may try to remind liberalism's critics some *real* facts. Appearances notwithstanding, liberalism has worked well after all, when compared with its rivals, left and right. For example, in the past two centuries, the global life expectancy has risen from thirty years in 1800 to seventy-one in 2015, due to great successes in fighting child mortality and improving health care and education. The share of people living below the threshold of extreme poverty has fallen from 80% to 8%, while the human population increased sixfold. The literacy rates are up more than fivefold to over 80%. Civil rights and the rule of law are more robust than they were only a decade ago.<sup>5</sup> The stunning "Great Enrichment" (McCloskey 2019a, 30–1) that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made goods and services that were previously reserved only for a small elite available to a large segment of the population, resulting in an approximately 3,000 percent increase in such services and goods.

Yet, it would be an error to believe that these numbers alone will be enough to convince the skeptics and enemies of liberalism to change their minds. Liberal triumphalism has little persuasive power today and it is not immune to hubris. Even champions of liberalism like Deirdre McCloskey or Francis Fukuyama acknowledge that after 1848, liberalism was weakened as the classical liberal vision of a society of free people entering into mutual agreements was gradually replaced by a collectivist conception of a society marked by constant class conflict (McCloskey 2019a, 35). The economic crises of the last few decades impose upon us the duty to offer a clear-eyed and accurate diagnosis of what has gone wrong without any self-congratulatory tones. It is time to recognize that "the appeal of liberal democracy is not a given" (Luce 2018, 215). The fact that many contemporary critics of liberalism now live in the most prosperous nations of the world that guarantee their freedom of thought and movement will hardly make them reconsider or tone down their hostility to liberal principles.

Those who still believe in liberal values are therefore faced with a daunting task. The temptation to succumb to pessimism is always present. Yet, it is important to take a larger view of the situation and remember that the death of liberalism is *not* a new topic, although the intensity with which it is affirmed today is both surprising and concerning. In fact, scholars and pundits have been declaring liberalism dead or in deep crisis for at least a century and a half (Cole and Craiutu 2018). An article in the February 1900 issue of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* declared that "Liberalism is dead," referring not just to the UK's Liberal Party, but to liberalism as a political theory in general. The anonymous author labeled liberalism "a bastard philosophy" and deemed it to be altogether superfluous, before concluding that "upon the whole, it is good to know that Liberalism is dead" (cited in Cole and Craiutu 2018). That same year, across the Atlantic this time, Edwin L. Godkin, the founder and editor of *The Nation*, wrote about "the eclipse of liberalism" by a new nationalism of greed that was making strides in the US. "The Declaration of Independence no longer arouse-

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<sup>5</sup> See *The Economist* 2018b, 13; McCloskey 2019a, 29–34; Wolf 2023, 223–4.

es enthusiasm,” he opined, “it is an embarrassing instrument which requires to be explained away” (Godkin 1990). Godkin thought the U.S. Constitution was out of step with the new progressive zeitgeist. Today, the promoters and defenders of the controversial *1619 Project* are making, *mutatis mutandis*, much the same points while pursuing a different agenda.

Although the defeat of Nazism in World War II was a victory for liberalism in the West, obituaries for liberalism continued to be written with surprising regularity and in different guises. As the old world began digging itself from under the rubble of the war, two German thinkers published a widely acclaimed book, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in 1947. In its pages, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno claimed that for all the enlightened ideals of the Enlightenment, its instrumental rationality had produced mostly negative consequences, among them a repressive form of toleration, an impoverished view of human life, and a pernicious culture industry as an instrument of mass deception and cheap entertainment (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 1972; Craiutu 2023, 16). In *Nixon Agonistes*, the liberal historian Gary Wills (1971) declared liberalism dead, despite noting that its “*historical achievement ... is a great one*” (Wills [1969] 2002, 598). On Wills’ account, it was Nixon that killed it for good. When in 2011, R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr., the founding editor of *The American Spectator*, proclaimed “The Death of Liberalism,” he was not foretelling the rise of Trumpism as a reaction of those left behind, but condemning the liberal administration of Barack Obama for its allegedly neo-liberal sins. Modern liberalism, he argued, is a flawed movement that has no real answers to current political issues. This has been the message of prominent intellectuals on both sides of the aisle, from Pankaj Mishra, Ibram X. Kendi, and Slavoj Žižek to Ryszard Legutko, Patrick Deneen, and the members of the Claremont Institute.

## 2.1 The Many Meanings of Liberalism

It is indeed surprising that a simple word like liberalism has received so many death sentences and certificates over time with such regularity. But this detail ceases to surprise us once we begin considering the meanings of liberalism, that has always been an ambiguous, controversial, and contested concept. In fact, few words have received more meanings than liberalism, which still has different connotations in the US, UK, and continental Europe or Asia. It does not so much describe a unified, coherent political theory as it serves as a large umbrella for a family of theories created over the course of several centuries. The very term *liberal* came to be used self-consciously as a political label only since the early nineteenth century. As Michael Freeden once argued, “one can never understand liberalism if one assumes that it is a monolith in its postulates, assumptions and values” (2005, 15). The seminal fact that liberalism is “not just a philosophy but a sophisticated cultural compound” (*ibid.*, 8) is not usually captured adequately by standard histories of political thought. Liberalism presupposes a series of moral sentiments and a distinctive political temperament that have implications for political practice. So, until we see better what the different versions of liberalism really are and stand for, it is hard to know what we should be worrying about when others announce the death of liberalism.

The diversity of liberal languages has been the subject of several recent histories of liberalism written by Edmund Fawcett (2014a), Helena Rosenblatt (2020), and Alan S. Kahan (2023). A cursory historical survey shows that the word *liberalism* has been used to describe diverse systems of governance from *laissez-faire* and the night watchman state to Franklin

Roosevelt's New Deal, the law-ordered state of German Ordoliberals, and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Liberalism can be described simultaneously as a narrative (focused on the liberalism of individuals from oppression and discrimination), as an ideology (centered around the notions of liberty and individuality), and a philosophy (laying out rules and norms for imagining a just and fair society).<sup>6</sup> Today, liberalism is decried by the hard Right and extreme Left as a doctrine embraced by amoral and callous elites, offering a blind apology of market greed and low taxes, as well as a shallow way of life, mired in materialism, individualism, and consumerism. On the Left, many criticize neoliberalism (often a catchy and imprecise word) as a cause of increasing inequality and declining social mobility. At the same time, classical liberals denounce the excesses of the social welfare state for its encroachments on individual liberty and the state-dependency it creates.

Acknowledging the diverse dimensions and dialects of liberalism is likely to pose the following challenge. There are many ways in which liberal values and principles can be affirmed and defended, which is another way of saying that there are many forms of liberalism out there. Just how many, one might ask, and how are we to distinguish between allegedly "good" and "bad" forms of liberalism? To properly answer this question, we need to look again at liberalism's history (Cole and Craiutu 2018). In a short and learned book published three decades ago, *Liberalism: Old and New* (1991), the Brazilian diplomat and political philosopher José G. Merquior identified nearly thirty varieties of liberalism—no doubt with substantial overlap between them—in fewer than 140 pages. The list of Merquior's sub-species of liberalism is long and includes concepts as diverse as old liberalism, classical liberalism, proto liberalism, left liberalism, radical liberalism, French liberalism, neoliberalism, sociological liberalism, utilitarian liberalism, Whig liberalism, and Ordoliberalism, to name only a few.<sup>7</sup> As Guido De Ruggiero pointed out in his classic book *The History of European Liberalism* ([1927] 1959), there are also national variants of liberalism—English, French, Italian, German, Spanish etc.—whose historical trajectories are as different as their priorities. English liberals seek to limit state power above all, while their French colleagues prefer a liberalism *through* the state rather than *against* the state. What, then, are we to do with so many flavors of liberalism?

Given this internal diversity, it is to be expected that liberals would disagree with each other on many issues, and that is, indeed, the case. The history of liberalism properly understood is, in fact, a series of principled and civil disagreements among liberals on what it takes to build a free society. We can find three essential justifications for liberalism: as a pragmatic means for regulating violence, protecting individual dignity and rights, and promoting economic growth and prosperity (Fukuyama 2022, 5). These goals can rarely be achieved at the same time with the same degree of success. If neoliberals (including followers of Hayek and von Mises) endorse a substantial reduction in the size of the welfare-state, other progressive liberals, drawing, for example, upon the ideas of Leonard T. Hobhouse, John Dewey, John Rawls, or Amartya Sen, might well consider such a move to be a serious setback for modern liberalism committed to justice. Liberals also disagree with one another over just how free markets and trade should be. It would be hard to find anyone who thinks they should not be regulated at all, or that they should be entirely centrally planned by experts. Liberals also differ over how strongly to protect property rights versus competing interests and, more gen-

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<sup>6</sup> On the diversity of liberal languages, see Freedman 2005, 5 ff.

<sup>7</sup> For more details, see Merquior 1991.

erally, they have different views on the size, scope, and intrusiveness of that state intervention. Some of them like the Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom even argued that it makes little or no sense at all to talk about “*the government*,” preferring instead to work with the concept of polycentricity. Other disagreements among liberals arise over taxation, immigration, and education, which is another way of saying that disagreement is built into the fabric of liberalism.

## 2.2 What Should Be Done?

What are we to do then with this conceptual fluidity and complexity? In my view, these differences and disagreements are themselves emblematic of the internal diversity and complexity of liberalism as well as of its richness, pragmatism, and adaptability. All that, I believe, is a good thing that needs to be examined and properly understood. Why do I say that?

First, what distinguishes liberalism from other doctrines is that no one version of the liberal outlook has ever become canonical or is likely to become dominant soon. Liberalism, unlike socialism or communism, has no accredited Church, no Communist Manifesto, no Marx and Engels, no standard Bible, and no *Mein Kampf*. Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), and Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) are no more to be considered canonical liberal texts than Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835–1840) and Mill’s *On Liberty* (1859). Any reader of these seminal texts knows well that there are major differences between them.

Second, although liberalism is a fluid and capacious term, a big tent with enough room for diverse individuals, it has always displayed a “a recognizable degree of unity and continuity” (Fawcett 2014a, 10), from where it has derived its vitality and strength. At the heart of liberalism, one finds several broad clusters of ideas—Edmund Fawcett identified four such clusters, although the number is open for discussion—that distinguish liberals from conservatives and socialists. Liberals affirm the need to accept and regulate the ethical and material conflict within society. They believe that power must be distrusted and resisted. Liberal principles express the faith in human progress and reason and promote respect for free thought and individual dignity. Finally liberal institutions help fight against exclusion and intolerance and seek to protect minorities of all kinds (*ibid.*).

That is why to understand the essence of liberalism we need a multidisciplinary genealogy allowing us to explore its many sources, values, and principles. The list of liberal principles and values is long and includes tolerance, freedom of thought, freedom of opinion and press, fair play, discussion and debate (in lieu of violence), trial by jury, publicity of proceedings, and opposition to any form of cruelty and arbitrary power. Liberalism is based on the recognition of the infinite value of individual dignity and freedom. Liberal institutions protect against abuses of power, oppose political and religious fanaticism, and promote the rule of law; they advance economic liberty and defend private property. Intimately connected with all that is the idea of liberal reason predicated upon the pursuit of truth and the rejection of obscurantism and bias of every kind. The liberal temperament implies discipline of thought and inquiry, clarity, logic, and reliance on real facts rather than alternative ones.<sup>8</sup> Fawcett pointed out that liberals insist on pursuing all four ideas at the same time, but liberalism’s critics often see this as a form of incoherence. They assume that it is possible to

<sup>8</sup> On the agenda of liberalism, also see Gopnik 2019, 80–2.



pursue all these principles simultaneously and effectively but that is a form of wishful thinking on their part most of the time. One of the things they overlook is that liberalism's attempt to pursue all four ideas can and should be seen as a form of courage and strength, endurance, and vigor rather than weakness or incoherence.

Third, it is important to highlight what distinguishes liberals as moderates from anti-liberals and illiberals. Because they embrace pluralism and fallibilism, moderate liberals always fight against the fanaticism of single causes embraced by their enemies. They refuse to essentialize one single principle or value, recognizing instead that life can be contemplated and understood through many windows and perspectives.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, true liberals know how to appreciate the abilities of ordinary people without exaggerating or dismissing them. These abilities, notes Deirdre McCloskey, "are routinely undervalued by conservatives and progressives. Our friends on both the right and on the left wish to use state power to judge people or to nudge them" (McCloskey 2019b, 297). Only liberalism does otherwise; it alone gives people a space to grow up, unlike the rule of experts and aristocrats. As Peter Boettke and Rosolino Candela explained, "The goal of progressives and collectivists, then as now, is to govern *over* people, while the goal of the true radical liberal is to govern *with* people in a self-governing democratic society. The idea is to empower individuals to live as free and responsible human beings in a manner that gives meaning to their existences as understood by them" (2019, 209).

This is an important strength of liberalism to which I'd like to add another one. Unlike its rivals, liberalism openly acknowledges that it does not have all the answers to pressing social, political and economic dilemmas. Liberalism is another form of fallibilism and has a built-in mechanism for self-correction made possible by freedom of thought, open criticism, and opposition. As Adam Gopnik reminds us, "one need only compare this process with that of all authoritarian states . . . to see why the liberal state can confront and, sometimes, correct its own injustices more rapidly than any other society on the fully historical record" (2019, 195).

It is no accident that liberalism has always been loose-fitting, open to interpretation and argument, and susceptible of being partially reconstructed or reimagined, and it is likely to remain so in the future. According to Michael Freeden, this partial reconstruction of liberal languages and themes has often run "counter to many—though far from all—of the assumptions, beliefs, and prescriptions that have typified Western liberalism" (2005, 6). Failure to recognize this essential aspect of liberal principles and institutions has led critics from Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche back in the day to Hazony, Deneen, and Legutko today to narrowly essentialize and misinterpret the meaning of liberalism. In many cases, its opponents have deliberately concealed or underestimated its achievements while exaggerating its failures.

Now, the problem for anyone confidently declaring the death of liberalism is that the latter, as we have seen, has not one but several pillars and dimensions: legal, political, economic, cultural, moral, and religious. The weakening, alteration, or disappearance of one or two pillars or facets would *not* be enough to declare liberalism as a whole dead for good. One form of liberalism might one day disappear or change without implicating the entire body of liberal theories (Cole and Craiutu 2018). For example, the welfare state may be

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<sup>9</sup> For a similar view, see Berlin 1998; Gopnik 2019, 178–9; Craiutu 2023, 127–34.

strengthened or weakened while leaving standing the rule of law, free trade, and individual freedom of choice, association, and speech. Some liberals may express skepticism toward key liberal principles such as individual agency and individual choice, while maintaining a strong commitment to freedom of expression and thought. In the same vein, one might be skeptical toward unregulated markets or trade, but embrace other essential features of liberalism such as nondiscrimination under law, private property rights, and freedom of contract. Neither does liberalism require open borders all the time, as its critics imply; it only opposes limits on immigration based solely on certain characteristics of immigrants (where they come from, what language they speak, their religious preferences, etc.).

The conclusion that I would like to propose is that rather than bemoaning liberalism's polysemantic nature and declaring it incoherent or flawed, we should take its internal diversity seriously and learn how to make best use of it. Acknowledging the variety of liberal languages can help us better answer the legitimate objections raised by its critics. We should remind them that there are *many* liberal languages that emphasize different things: human capacity, privacy, individual responsibility, toleration, cultivation of individuality and human flourishing, limited power, pursuit of greatness and excellence, equality, equal respect and dignity, social justice, etc. It is unwise to ignore the existence and diversity of these liberal dialects and assume that liberalism can be reduced to just one single language that suits one's ideological agenda. To give only one example, the key issue is often not so much the size or scope of government as the quality of government (Fukuyama 2022, 147). Many liberals understand this, while a few others remain skeptical toward government in general. That is one of the reasons why we should challenge the caricature of nineteenth-century liberalism as a single-minded campaign for unlimited economic liberty and small government (*laissez-faire* capitalism), a caricature often used by contemporary critics of neo-liberalism to advance their own ideological agendas.

The key point that needs to be repeated time and again is that under liberalism's big tent one finds many different conceptions of the good life, some of which may be in tension with each other. It may be possible to see this feature as a weakness of liberalism and denounce the latter as an incoherent doctrine, but it is also possible to regard its eclecticism as a strength. This was the view of the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) in *The Revolt of the Masses*. Writing in the late 1920s, at a moment when liberalism's death was widely proclaimed in the Western world, he argued that liberalism should be defined as “the supreme form of generosity” (Ortega y Gasset [1930] 1957, 76). In liberal regimes, the majority which has power on its side concedes to weaker minorities the right to live on their own terms, thus announcing the determination to share existence with—and respect those—who have a different view of the good society.<sup>10</sup> Ortega rejected Carl Schmitt's view that “the development of modern mass democracy has made argumentative public discussion an empty formality” (Schmitt [1923] 1988, 6). On the contrary, he argued that far from being obsolete, liberalism, as a regime of publicity and discussion, was the only sensible solution for overcoming the crisis of democracy afflicting Europe at that time. In Ortega's view, the real danger came from “a renunciation of the common life based on culture...and a return to the common life of barbarism” ([1930] 1957, 74), that is, the disintegration of peoples into groups incapable of living with one another. Only liberal principles,

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<sup>10</sup> On liberalism as a form of generosity, also see Gopnik 2019, 195. On liberalism as an extended form of liberality, see Rosenblatt 2020, 8–40.

he believed, could bring people together and offer such a common life that would prevent the descent of the civilized world into chaos and anarchy.

We should also remind the opponents of liberalism that anti-liberalism has had a terrible historical record, something they tend to minimize or even gloss over in their diatribes against liberalism. Rousseau's ideas were misinterpreted and begot Robespierre and Saint Just; Marx's doctrine opened the door to Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, and Nietzsche's nihilism inspired a criminal like Hitler who set the world on fire (see *The Economist* 2018a, 57–8). Moreover, contemporary critics of liberalism in the West forget to furnish any proof that we shall do better with their proposed brand of economy or social arrangements, assuming they have one. We are entitled to ask for a viable counterproposal and program of action, but most critics tend to leave us in the dark regarding their positive program.<sup>11</sup> Instead, we are told that we are facing a crisis not merely of the economy but of the whole system that cannot—and does not deserve to—be saved. Yet, the economic system that is to replace the present one exists only in the imagination of liberalism's critics. If liberalism has failed to deliver, it is quite difficult, if not virtually impossible, to imagine the world without it, one way or another. Let's not forget that we tried other options in the past, more than once, and the results were negative. Despair itself often generates forces of destruction rather than reconstruction.

### 3. The Lessons of Ordo-Liberalism

Today, much like in 1938 when liberals gathered in Paris to attend the Walter Lippmann Colloquium, it is the duty of any serious critic of liberalism (or capitalism) to carefully examine what defects and imperfections are to be imputed to the core of the liberal economic system rather than to historically accidental circumstances.<sup>12</sup> Any observer of the twentieth century knows that the liberal capitalist economic system had been saddled with burdens such as no other economic system has likely ever borne. Liberal policies did not always work well. But capitalism and liberalism alone cannot be blamed for the unparalleled population increase, the armaments race, the world war, the peace treaties, inflation, revolution, and mass epidemics of all kinds. When judging liberalism, it is vital to distinguish between its essence broadly defined and those elements that disfigure it, mostly distortions of the complex economic structure caused by tariffs, regulations, cartels, and monopolies. We should not allow liberalism's critics to attack what is the imperishable—that is, the core of liberalism as described above—by ignoring what has worked well and focusing only on the excesses or deformations of liberal values and principles.<sup>13</sup>

It was Wilhelm Röpke who convincingly made this point in *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart* (*The Social Crisis of Our Time*, 1942), a courageous book as important and original as Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) and Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945). It is important to remind present critics of liberalism that older liberals did not shy

<sup>11</sup> For an exception, see Deneen 2023.

<sup>12</sup> See Reinhoudt and Audier 2018 and the Special Issue of the *Journal of Contextual Economics* dedicated to the Lippmann colloquium (Horn *et al.* 2019).

<sup>13</sup> For an example of such a critique from the Right, see Legutko 2016 and 2020. Working with a caricature of liberalism, he argued that modern liberal-democratic societies do not deviate in key aspects from the communist ones and share the same utopian ethos, illusions, and eschatology.

away from denouncing “liberal immanentism,” that is, the belief that the free market and competition can generate their own moral prerequisites autonomously.<sup>14</sup> In reality, as Röpke and others insisted, these conditions come from *beyond* the market, and the ultimate moral support of market economy always lies outside the market. To function properly, the latter requires a moral, cultural, and religious framework grounded in “bourgeois virtues:” prudence, saving, tradition, courage, a sense of duty, civic-mindedness, and honesty (see McCloskey 2006). Market economies also rely on a complex set of legal rules and overlapping orders that require expert design and careful nurturing.

These were key themes in the writings of German Ordoliberals—among them, Walter Eucken, Wilhelm Röpke, Alexander Rüstow, and Alfred Müller-Armack—which remain surprisingly relevant today when liberalism is again declared obsolete. The significance and importance of Ordoliberals’ writings can hardly be exaggerated. Their liberalism was both original and effective in practice, offering the underpinnings of the German Social Market Economy responsible for the post-1948 German economic miracle. By itself, Eucken wrote, “an economic order cannot make people moral, that must happen through other forces” (cited in Dyson 2021, 210). Morality, culture, and religion are fundamental to the economic order because they help individuals transcend their natural selfishness, allowing them to work with others to achieve common goals. It is not an accident that for Müller-Armack, economic policies must embody certain ethical values beyond freedom. Ordoliberals, he pointed out, could not afford to be pure technocrats concerned only with economic issues. It is not acceptable to view individuals solely as consumers and producers, mere atoms unconnected to each other and preoccupied only with maximizing their short-term profits.<sup>15</sup>

Röpke and Rüstow denounced moral relativism, the target of today’s conservative critics of liberalism. While defending liberal principles and institutions, Ordoliberals emphasized the role of religion and Christian ethics in maintaining liberal civilization and promoting effective social and economic policies. They drew, among others, on Schiller’s and Goethe’s writings on education to remind their contemporaries about the importance of the aesthetic education of mankind. Ordoliberals insisted that the liberal economic order is not only a mechanism ruled by the invisible hand of the market, but also a cultural construct and implies the formation of character (see Röpke 1947; Rüstow 1949; Dyson 2021, 7). To work well, the institutions and rules of the free market must create the conditions necessary for people’s personal development and the exercise of personal responsibility.

In *Jenseits von Angebot und Nachfrage* translated into English as *A Humane Economy*, Röpke acknowledged that “man simply does not live by radio, automobiles, and refrigerators alone, but by the whole unpurchasable world beyond the market and turnover figures, the world of dignity, beauty, poetry, grace, chivalry, love, and friendship. The world of community, variety of life, freedom, and fullness of personality” (Röpke [1958] 1998, 89). There are certain things that are—and will always remain—beyond supply and demand. “The highest interests of the community and the indispensable things of life,” Röpke wrote, “have no exchange value and are neglected if supply and demand are allowed to dominate the field” (Röpke [1958] 1998, 137). People look for the meaning of life in their communities and the friendships they develop within them, in works of art and literature, in music, sculpture, and painting. It is worth noting that while rejecting “a morally callous econo-

<sup>14</sup> On this issue, see Röpke 1947, 11–27.

<sup>15</sup> On Müller-Armack’s economic philosophy, see Dyson 2021, 189–93.

mism,” Röpke was also careful to distance himself from an “economically ignorant moralism” (cited in Dyson 2021, 229) and a romanticized conception of economic life that ignores its laws and constraints.

Conservative critics of liberalism today would be well advised to pay attention to what the Ordoliberals could teach them before claiming that no renewal of liberal principles is possible. Röpke and his colleagues preferred a society in which the center of decision and the locus of responsibility lie midway between the two extremes of the unencumbered individual and the centralized state. The Ordoliberals’ *civitas humana* is one that has room for genuine and small communities, including families; it opens up space for voluntary action and makes possible close human contact. This type of society is “natural, organic, time-tested, spontaneous, and self-regulating” (Röpke [1958] 1998, 227). It avoids the cold impersonality and centralized nature of mass social services and serves as a safeguard against political arbitrariness. Its underlying premise is that society and economy cannot be reconstructed solely from above without considering “the fine web of the past” (*ibid.*, 227) and the host of intermediary bodies in society.

Finally, contemporary critics of liberalism would be surprised to discover that Ordoliberals made another point that resonates with their objections to liberalism: namely, the claim that the free market should not be allowed to turn the entire society into a ruthless rat race. “Nothing could be more unwise or dangerous,” Röpke wrote, “than to turn society into a continual race. Even if the production of goods could be so maximized, it would not be worth the price. Men would be incessantly on the move; culture, happiness, and nerves would be destroyed by an unending to and fro and up and down from place to place, from profession to profession, from one social class to another” (*ibid.*, 232). Hence, one does not have to be a radical critic of neoliberalism to acknowledge that liberalism properly understood can still work and has redeeming features today.

#### 4. The Hour of Decision

In 1947, Röpke claimed that our modern world had turned into a “*Maskenfest der Ideologien*” (Röpke 1947, 5) in which no one knew any longer what lay behind the words used to describe these doctrines. The situation has not changed much since, but there is one major novelty that must be pointed out. Contemporary challengers of liberalism no longer come from outside of the liberal world, as was the case when Röpke wrote in defense of liberalism. They now come from *within* western democracies and from both sides of the political spectrum. Marxists, anarchists, populists, and traditionalists, they all tell us that liberalism is dead, and we need regime change.

The hour of decision is again upon us. We have reached a point when the rejection of liberalism is not a mere rebellion against perishable ideas and past modes of thought, but a rejection of the ultimate foundations of what is called the Western civilization. The stakes could not be higher. Before we act, we must remember that, for all its limitations, the Western civilization and its sophisticated intellectual and institutional heritage enable us to live prosperously in complex communities with liberty and dignity, without fearing for our lives. All this was made possible by Renaissance humanism, individualism, rationalism, Enlight-

ement, science, economic liberalism, and the free market seen by its critics as the main culprit for all our present evils.

Late in his life, the self-described liberal “optimist” Karl Popper pointed out several achievements that contemporary critics of liberalism should take into account before passing judgment on its shortcomings. Popper was a lucid scientist who did not believe that we live in the best of all possible worlds. Even in liberal societies, he observed, power corrupts, civil servants often behave like “uncivil masters,” and “pocket dictators” persist. Corruption can never be fully eradicated from human nature either. Nevertheless, throughout the liberal and free world, Popper wrote, many of life’s greatest evils, including slavery, poverty, unemployment, race- and class-based legal differences, and religious discrimination have been greatly ameliorated, if not eliminated altogether. At no other time, and nowhere else have human beings been more valued, as individuals, than in liberal (Western) societies. Never before in history have their human rights and dignity been respected and acknowledged more than today, never before have so much been done to alleviate the plight of the less fortunate ones (Popper 1986–87, 115). Of course, much more remains to be done in this regard, but we need an accurate balance sheet to figure out where we should be heading to from here.

That is why, Popper believed, we have the duty to remain optimists and give the younger generations reasons for hope. Speaking in Munich on June 9, 1988, he concluded his long lecture about the state of democracy with these forceful words addressed to the critics of liberalism:

So ist die Welt. Sie stellt uns Aufgaben. Wir können zufrieden in ihr sein und glücklich. Aber das muss man auch aussprechen! Ich höre es fast nie. Statt dessen hört man täglich Gejammer und Ge-  
raunze über die so angebliche so schlechte Welt, in der wir zu leben verdammt sind. Ich halte die  
Verbreitung dieser Lügen für das grösste Verbrechen unserer Zeit, denn es bedroht die Jugend  
und versucht, sie ihres Rechtes auf Hoffnung und Optimismus zu berauben” (Popper 1994, 238).

“I consider the dissemination of these lies as the greatest crime of our times”—Popper did not mince his words when condemning those who issued death certificates for liberalism; we should emulate his example today, as long as we still believe in the virtues of liberalism. To those who think of liberalism as extinct and incapable of renewal, those who imagine a new political horizon beyond liberal democracy and no longer see any merits to liberalism, we should remind them that liberal policies and institutions saved the planet from the tragedies of Nazism and communism, not the other way around. We should make sure that before they try to relinquish the cargo they despise, they should be clear in their minds as to what constitutes the precious consignment itself of which they are about to rid themselves.

Maintaining our civilization is an arduous task that requires patience, expertise, and fine tuning. Liberalism made a big and bold bid: that one can simultaneously live according to the principles of liberty and equality, reason and rational debate, so that we can limit power, avoid cruelty and anarchy, and solve our differences without violence. Such a bold wager is likely to inspire and disappoint in turn, because it raises the bar quite high and demands a lot from us (Cole and Craiutu 2018). When liberals met to form the Mont Pèlerin Society in April 1947, Hayek feared there may have been too many economists in the room.<sup>16</sup> Fortu-

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<sup>16</sup> For an excellent edition that contains transcripts of the founding meeting of the Mont Pèlerin Society, see Caldwell 2022.

nately, those who attended the original meeting were much more than mere economists preoccupied with economic freedom. They were real humanists who understood that “market economy, price mechanism and competition are fine but they are not enough” (Röpke [1958] 1998, 35) to create and maintain a good and decent society. It makes a big difference whether these elements are associated with a sound or unsound structure of society. And it is important to acknowledge that individual autonomy and choice, two fundamental liberal values, do not exhaust the liberal vision of the good life.<sup>17</sup>

That is why to save and reaffirm liberalism as a force of enlightenment and progress at the beginning of the twenty-first century we should simultaneously be philosophers, economists, historians, sociologists, political scientists, and lawyers. We should make sure that we do not limit ourselves to promoting just a set of economic policies but pursue a more comprehensive agenda (social, political, cultural, and educational). Never losing sight of the fragility of liberal civilization, we ought to insist that liberalism has to be saved not only from its enemies and harshest critics but also from itself and its own errors and hubris. We must firmly denounce not only the pathological forms of liberalism like monopolies and cartel power but also all attempts to dismiss liberal values and principles as expressions of capitalist greed or oppression. At the same time, we should fight against any caricature of liberal principles that distorts their nature, ignores the internal diversity of liberalism, and minimizes its seminal contribution to the maintenance of a free and open society.

We must insist again, as Ordoliberals did more than half a century ago, that liberal principles form a distinctive way of thinking not only about the economy, but also about the state, the law, culture, religion, and society at large. For liberals like Locke, Montesquieu, Necker, and Constant, to name only a few, there was no incompatibility between religion, morality, and liberty (Kahan 2023). If one wants to be free, one must believe, Tocqueville argued. These thinkers also understood that the liberal order depends on and requires the cultivation of a certain set of virtues and character without which institutions cannot work well. Their lessons remain relevant for us today. While we must be concerned about the material welfare of our societies, we must not be the mere creature of our age and should strive higher. The guiding principle of all liberals ought to be, in Schiller’s words: “Render to your contemporaries what they need, not what they praise” (1965, 54). That includes not only what the free market and liberal institutions make available, but also what lies “*jenseits von Angebot und Nachfrage*”—beyond supply and demand—to use Röpke’s phrase once more.

Friends of liberalism should also emphasize the seminal role played by rules and rule-based orders and the process of designing them. In this regard, it would also be useful to return to Walter Eucken’s seminal distinction between constitutive principles of the economic order, regulative principles, and principles of state action, and insist that there can be no free and open society without the first ones, that is, constitutive principles. They include competitive prices and free competition, open markets, primacy of property rights, freedom of contract, unrestricted liability, and predictability, to name a few (see Dyson 2021, 108–9).<sup>18</sup> All these principles are meant to serve the common good and seek to secure precious goods such as freedom, individual dignity, solidarity, and cooperation.

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<sup>17</sup> For a similar point, see Fukuyama 2022, 151–2.

<sup>18</sup> These principles were outlined in Eucken 1952.

## 5. It Would Be a Great Idea...

I began by reminding you of the great transformation that occurred in that *annus mirabilis* 1989 when the wall came down and a new world of possibilities opened up. At first sight, it appeared to be a definitive victory for liberalism. In reality, the fall of communism was a double-edged sword because it left liberalism without a global rival against which it could compete and define itself conceptually. That is why—its rivals having been defeated—it is difficult to evaluate liberalism properly. Yet many things do not seem to be going in the right direction in the liberal universe.

As dark as our situation is today, it has not (or at least, not yet) sunk to the depth of the European crisis of the 1930s. Nonetheless, it is difficult not to feel a sense of solidarity with the lone liberals who attended the Walter Lippmann Colloquium in Paris in 1938 searching to avert the impending catastrophe. Similarly, it is easy to empathize with Röpke's remark about the irresponsible attitude of many intellectuals in pre-war Germany. "Rarely in history," he said, "has a group of people been so busy helping to saw off the branch on which they sit" (Röpke 1969, 89). He was referring to those intellectuals who were keen to denounce the limitations of the Weimar Republic while turning a blind eye to the alternatives. Röpke's statement was made on February 8, 1933, a few days after Hitler had been appointed Chancellor of Germany, and shortly before Röpke went into exile. The rest is history. Do we want to repeat it?

The question may be rhetorical for most of us, but not all. Some have made pilgrimages to their new Syracuse (Budapest, Mar-a-Lago, etc.) and seem ready to abandon liberalism in search of a new regime. They are entitled to do so since we live in a free society. But it is our task to remind them that it is liberal democracy that allows them to write their works, meet and travel freely to disseminate their ideas, and defend them in the court of public opinion against their critics. They should also remember that no one living in totalitarian societies had the luxury of declaring totalitarianism dead. When people have tried to do that, they have been promptly arrested and have disappeared instead of publishing books and being invited and paid to speak at various conferences in posh locations.

Historical evidence tells us that, for all its shortcomings, liberalism has brought about a level of freedom and prosperity unparalleled in human history. To reject liberal democracy, especially in this hour of crisis, as an alarming number of intellectuals today want us to do, would be to saw off the branch upon which we are all (more or less comfortably) sitting. In the end, it is important to remember that liberalism neither promises nor delivers ready-made panacea solutions to our many social and political problems. It is neither a shorthand for universal bliss nor a synonym for utopia. Liberalism is aspirational and experimental and remains open to self-correction and incremental improvement. It offers pragmatic ways of dealing with complexity and uncertainty.<sup>19</sup>

More modestly, liberal norms and institutions seek to limit political power and enable individuals, alone or in voluntary associations, to experiment freely in various spheres of life. Liberal institutions allow the government to be deposed without bloodshed and provide a safety valve that makes revolutions and civil unrest redundant. They offer an opportunity

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<sup>19</sup> This perspective reflects the core message of an in-progress book manuscript I am currently co-writing with Daniel Cole and Michael McGinnis. Also see the arguments in Craiutu 2023, 11–25.



to solve our disagreements in a civil manner and in a structured framework provided by Parliaments, courts, newspapers, etc. That is why liberals emphasize *how* power ought to be used—the key theme of Locke, Montesquieu, and the *Federalist Papers*—rather than *who* should have power, the obsession of Marxists and communists. Liberalism subjects all claims made in the name of the good society to scrutiny and rational debate and leaves open the possibility that there are no ultimate truths and criteria to settle our disagreements. Liberal institutions allow us to learn from policy failures and make incremental headway. Liberals believe that our societies can make incremental progress only through a process of constant experimentation in which individuals criticize ideas and arguments based on evidence rather than faith (Cole and Craiutu 2018).

Liberal principles also provide us the opportunity to listen to our critics and learn from their ideas, no matter how different they might be from ours. In other words, by providing an arena for rational and civil debates, liberal institutions teach us how “to ride the tiger,” to employ the title of a provocative book by Julius Evola ([1961] 2003), one of liberalism’s fiercest critics from the hard Right. The ability to learn from others’ successes, mistakes, and illusions and compare our achievements with theirs is simultaneously a guarantee of progress and a source of permanent dissatisfaction. This discontent reflects liberalism’s inherent fragility which is real and cannot be ignored. But we should neither exaggerate it nor underestimate liberalism’s adaptive resilience proven by history itself. This surprising resilience owes a lot to liberals’ principled concern with maintaining a healthy balance between extremes, a middle ground that opposes fanaticism, sectarianism, Manichaeism, and dogmatism (Röpke 1947; Cherniss 2021; Craiutu 2023). To revolutionary transformations and visionary ideas of a perfect, conflict-free society, liberals prefer imperfection, prudent reforms, negotiations, and discussions. Instead of violence, they insist on civil standards of behavior, courtesy, moderation, and compromise. All that is the essence of the liberal civilization that contemporary critics denounce today as a total failure.

The doubts we feel about liberalism are an integral part of the doctrine itself. It is not a universal panacea and will always remain an open experiment, a work in progress. For all its alleged shortcomings, that is a good thing. The doubts we may entertain about liberalism should not cause us to fall into despair or become passive. Instead, they ought to encourage us to draw on liberalism’s diverse resources and dialects, to be passionate in defending our free way of life and the values and norms that make it possible. In so doing, we must not dismiss liberalism’s critics who can point out real flaws and thus help us find the best means of maintaining and improving the institutions of our open societies. That is why liberalism today should not be about splitting differences and searching for mushy compromises and halfway solutions. It should be about boldly staking out its ground and affirming its beliefs with vigor, conviction, and pathos while also maintaining a good dose of skepticism, fallibilism, and self-doubt. The proper answer to liberalism’s critics is not to abandon liberalism but try to moderate it through “the intercession of a thousand small sanities” which are always better and more effective than big sweeping ideas and utopian revolutionary agendas (see Gopnik 2019, 227).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For similar views on defending a moderate form of liberalism, see Smith 2022 and Fukuyama 2022. A liberal agenda for reforming the relationship between democratic politics and the market economy can be found in Wolf 2023.

All this is an endless task. Invoking Gandhi's apocryphal response to the question of what he thought about Western civilization is à propos here. After reflecting for a moment, Gandhi is reputed to have said: "It would be a good idea." This time, let's apply the same words, slightly amended, to liberalism itself. It would be a truly *great* idea (Craiutu 2023, 25).

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