

## Trump, 1 year later: Three myths of liberalism exposed

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In writing my commentary for *Political Geography* earlier this year (Koch, 2017), I sought to critique the script about "authoritarianism coming to America," which proliferated during Donald Trump's candidacy and his subsequent election. I argued that by treating authoritarianism as foreign to American political practice – and soil – this script is best understood as a geopolitical identity narrative reinforcing the myth of American exceptionalism. The notion that the United States possesses exemplary liberal credentials is a nationalist vision, less fact than aspirational fiction about who "we" are and what "we" should value as US citizens. The othering of authoritarian practice is fundamental to this nationalist vision, premised on the ideals of liberalism. These ideals have been challenged in new and striking ways since Trump has haphazardly tried to assume the presidential helm. Indeed, these challenges have left many of America's devout liberals thoroughly bewildered. In this short contribution, I want to suggest that this bewilderment is the result of a systematic failure of America's left to understand liberal ideology as ideology. To illustrate, I will consider three fundamental myths of liberalism, which many in the US have (mis)taken for basic truths. The myths themselves are not new, but central to liberal ideology. What *is* new is the scope, intensity, and public nature with which they have been exposed on the national stage.

The first myth of liberalism recently laid bare in US public discourse is that *liberal subjects are rational subjects*. With early roots in a form of *laissez-faire* economic logic applied to political systems, liberalism has always been tied to the idealized notion of a rational subject acting in his or her "interest." Michel Foucault (2008) traces the rise and spread of this governmental logic in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, arguing that what characterizes liberal rationality is how to model government "on the rational behavior of those who are governed" (p. 312). Instead of seeking governmental legitimacy in a truth-claim, such as divine right, liberal ideology takes a different tack: "That is to say, one no longer tries to peg government to the truth; one tries to peg government to rationality" (Foucault, 2008, p. 311). This history is significant because the idea of a rational actor is so thoroughly taken for granted by liberals today that it is hard for most to conceive of it as a social construction, let alone a tool of government.

The liberal romance for rational subjects has been profoundly shaken by the apparent crisis of liberalism unfolding in the United States (among other avowedly liberal countries of the world). Rationality itself has been publicly called into question as Trump and his supporters (as well as a slew of other groups pre-dating his rise) have so openly and brazenly assaulted the tenets of science-based reasoning. Exemplified in rhetorical claims to "alternative facts," the xenophobic fantasies conjured by white supremacists at the Charlottesville protests, and the non-stop vitriol espoused by right-wing opinionators and their social media devotees and bots alike, US liberals have been stunned by the fact that their compatriots so obviously lack a commitment to truth, reason, or utilitarian ideals – a commitment many naively thought was shared by all American citizens. Yet as I have long noticed in watching the right-wing media permeate the televisions and radios of members of my own family, beginning with the rise of Fox News in the late 1990s, these outlets have always appealed to emotion, rather than reason. Diverse as these groups may be, they share no romance for rational subjects.

Cultivating anti-rationalist subjects is much older than Fox News and its social media-based progeny; it is a staple of illiberal government. Similarly, nationalisms and many other political identity narratives have a long history of appealing to emotion rather than reason. In his effort to define some of the main elements of a generalized "ur-fascism," Umberto Eco (1995) explains that such cases of irrationalism depend on "the cult of action for action's sake. Action being beautiful in itself, it must be taken before, or without, any previous reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation." For American liberals who truly value reason – and thinking! – what they are now experiencing is not an objective political crisis as such, but an ideological crisis whereby the foundational tenet of all citizens being rational actors has been challenged. Yet many critics on the left seem to be woefully unaware of the extent of the problem, of the fundamentally mythical nature of people being *a priori* rational subjects.

This is especially apparent in the fact that liberal responses to the hate provoked by espoused by Trump and his followers nonetheless consistently appeal to truth, reason, and utilitarianism. The result is that liberals have found their responses to the president's lies and spiteful politics to fall on deaf ears. Meanwhile, they look on in utter disbelief. Again based on my own experiences of dealing with individuals afflicted by this rhetoric, one cannot argue with emotion – let alone when a common commitment to reason-based argumentation is absent. Yet since Trump's inauguration, this challenge has become more apparent to liberal critics, who are starting to recognize the liberal myth of rational subjects for what it is.

I suspect that this shift is only partly precipitated by current political affairs in the wake of Trump's election, but also reflects a generational shift. Contemporary liberal ideology in the US is largely tied to post-World War II identity narratives of American exceptionalism. Political commentators and ordinary citizens alike have mistaken the hegemony of liberal ideology since that time for the actual reach of citizens' commitment to its tenets and values. Yet the apparent hegemony of reason-based and utilitarian civic norms in the world's "liberal democracies" are exactly that: apparent. As I suggested in my previous commentary, "we" have never been so liberal. The exposure of the liberalism's myth of rationality has unsettled many people in the United States – and rightly so. But where does this leave us? Is the liberal fantasy of the rational actor bound to be illusory? I would suggest that the issue is more a problem of being able to recognize political ideology for what it is: governing through reason is an aspirational discourse that is the engine of liberalism's telos. This means that if liberals want their political project to succeed, they must work to *craft* rational subjects, rather than assuming them to be the natural product of America's (fictively "exceptional") social and political milieu.

This leads me to the second myth of liberalism that has been publicly exposed since Trump's rise: *that limits on freedom are attacks on liberalism*. In theorizing liberalism, Foucault (2008) defines it as a governmental that logic works *through* freedom. Like its quintessential rational subjects, liberalism must also manufacture these freedoms. They do not exist in some natural state to be harnessed by governments. This means that liberal ideology is not the acceptance of freedom, but rather a *producer* of freedoms (Foucault, 2008, p. 65). Once conjured, these freedoms become liberalism's *raison d'être*, as they need to be managed and organized – as do "the conditions in which one can be free" (Foucault, 2008, p. 64). The paradoxical result is that "at the heart of this liberal practice is an always different and mobile problematic relationship between the production of freedom and that which in the production of freedom risks limiting and destroying it" (Foucault, 2008, p. 64). In brief, the act of (de)limiting certain freedoms are not attacks on liberalism, but are foundational to the very nature of liberal ideology. This is important because many people imagine liberalism to exist in some abstract "marketplace of ideas," in competition with other ideologies like communism or fascism, which are butting up against and threatening its freedoms. Rather, the vision of freedom under siege is *internal* to liberalism: it is its motivating drama.

This theoretical starting point helps to explain why so many on America's left are finding now themselves in the uncomfortable position of advocating restrictions on certain freedoms. In response to the onslaught of hate speech launched to a new level by Trump's demagoguery, combined with actual and latent violence (both resulting from and preceding his presidency), many Americans are increasingly prepared to impose restrictions on various forms of free speech. As Timur Kuran (1995) shows in his foundational book on preference falsification, to allow complete freedom of expression would require "exemplary tolerance," which is when:

no one would ever seek punitive actions against others for their political views. By this account, to show tolerance is to object to an idea about objecting to its expression. [...] Perfectly tolerant individuals would not even frown at a speaker promoting the most repulsive ideas. They might, of course, express reservations and offer alternatives. Tolerance is not apathy, indifference, or diffidence. What it requires is acceptance of the principle that no political end, however noble, justifies the suppression of an idea. (Kuran 1995, 97)

Although many Americans like to believe the nationalist script about the country's exceptional track-record for promoting free speech, it does not imply that citizens are actually committed to any form of "exemplary tolerance." As Kuran argues, and which many other social scientists confirm, even in liberal democratic states, few people "are perfectly tolerant. Most people exhibit a readiness to censor views that are unexceptional even within their own communities" (Kuran, 1995, p. 97). While I like to think of myself as an advocate of tolerance, I am acutely aware of the social and political risks of allowing forms of hate speech, fear-mongering, and barefaced lies to go unchecked. So, again, where does this leave us?

If we take seriously Foucault's argument about the liberal art of government as manufacturing, managing, and organizing freedom, the myth that limits on freedom are attacks on liberalism becomes easier to expose. Limiting free speech, for example in the form of removing racist-inspired statuary or refusing to permit a white-supremacist rally, is not anti-liberal. Debating how, when, where, and for whom certain freedoms can be enjoyed, as I have already noted, is the very *raison d'être* of liberalism. Furthermore, as Kuran argues, because of the diffuse forces of social stigma, there is nothing essential to liberal democracy that prevents individuals from being penalized for advocating certain ideas. What sets liberal regimes apart from illiberal regimes is instead that the former simply tend to restrict "the menu of possible penalties" (Kuran, 1995, p. 85). Whereas nondemocratic regimes usually have recourse to physical, economic, and social penalties, liberal regimes "worthy of the name" tend to restrict the scope of such sanctions for those expressing radical ideas (Kuran, 1995, p. 85). However configured in practice, this is to suggest that there is an important difference between a government that *limits* forms of public expression and one that *punishes* it.

Finally, the third myth of liberalism that has been shaken to its core since the beginning of the Trump administration is that *being politically engaged is not only the duty of liberal subjects, but the apex of their self-fulfillment*. Arguably more so than the right, the left in America has a long-running romance with political engagement that constantly affirms this ideal. I have often found this perplexing because the left tends to be far more attuned to the challenges of those deprived of financial and social resources. And as many on the left are well aware – and perhaps more so today than in the recent past – doing activist work demands substantial time and financial resources that puts it out of reach for many. Being politically engaged and informed is also emotionally taxing. Many in the US who consider themselves to be good liberal subjects may have been loosely aware of this before the Trump presidency, but have since been hit with the full force of emotional exhaustion in simply trying to keep up with the day's news and each new crisis.

This calculated chaos may be one of the Trump administration's few strategic "successes" thus far – not only has it kept the left in a constant state of apoplexy (to the delight of that amorphous creature, the Trump Base), but it has riddled them with tremendous guilt. This guilt is a liberal guilt. It is rooted in liberalism's idealization of the informed and engaged citizen who should derive fulfillment, if not pleasure, from assuming this subject position. Lacking the time and emotional resources to keep up with every new political onslaught, many critically-minded Americans feel demoralized and personally ashamed for not being able to do more, for not being "sufficiently" politically engaged. The problem is an old one, of course (as most are). In any political system, liberal or otherwise, public discourse is always limited: "An infinite number of human concerns are candidates for becoming political issues. A small minority actually do. Political discourse focuses on a few concerns at a time, treating the rest as nonissues" (Kuran, 1995, p. 46; see also Schattschneider, 1960).

Political theorists have long stressed the importance of setting the political playing field – what does or does not become a political issue – but the challenge today is that as people become more globally networked, "this rise in social interdependence has not been matched by a commensurate improvement in our cognitive faculties" (Kuran, 1995, p. 98). Many Americans today may have broader awareness of various political issues thanks to internet resources and social media platforms, but this does not mean that people are better equipped to process everything that is theoretically only one click away – let alone act on it. In the mainstream public discourse, US liberals have thus tended to focus on a select set of issues. But since Trump has come to office, they have found that their capacity to engage on all their important causes has been completely obliterated. Of course, many people are still energized to fight

back, but others are increasingly finding themselves in the same situation as many citizens in authoritarian regimes – where political withdrawal becomes a coping strategy. This too brings along another layer of liberal guilt, insofar as people feel that they are shirking their civic duty, even if it is a very immediate (and, dare I say, rational) response to prioritizing one’s mental health, wellbeing, and personal commitments.

I have observed this logic of self-preservation in diverse authoritarian states, which I have studied over the years. The people I have encountered in places like Kazakhstan, the UAE, or Russia are well aware that *selective* political engagement is just as powerful as (if not more powerful than) trying to turn oneself into the archetype of the hyper-engaged, thoroughly-informed liberal subject. For them, this can often be quite dangerous, but ultimately, I believe it is more an issue of practicality: everyone has limited resources to engage and they must carefully consider the trade-offs to be made. This realization is starting to come to America. As those on the left have personally encountered the challenges of their romance for political engagement, there is an increasing space for individuals to accept that being a “good citizen” requires critically assessing where one’s actions can actually be impactful. Centrally, this is not just a question of the topical scope of one’s activism, but one with a different temporal horizon for differently-positioned individuals. Although every new headline appears to be a crisis, the narrative of urgency brings us perilously close to the fascist “the cult of action for action’s sake” (Eco, 1995). If liberal ideology is to prevail in the United States, resisting this liberal guilt and thinking strategically may well be one of the most important tasks ahead.

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