Three Paths of Liberal Democracy: Rorty, Toffler, Darby

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At the Forum 2000 conference, hosted by Václav Havel at Prague Castle in October 1998, the topic of discussion was "Globalisation". As befits such an all-encompassing term, globalisation was considered in its various economic, technological, political, cultural, and even moral aspects. With each presentation, however, the concept itself became less and less clear, as did the dimensions of the real-world phenomena it purported to define. Perhaps, in this way, globalisation is much like jazz: if we try to explain it, it means we don't understand it...

The Indian political scientist, Ashis Nandy, captured the essence of the matter with the following anecdote. As he tells it, towards the end of the 19th century, the Royal English Academy convened the best minds of Europe and North America to consider and discuss the trends and challenges likely to unfold in the upcoming 20th century. The common denominator of all their various hopes, warnings, and predictions was that they were proved wrong on virtually every count.

Modern society was simply too complex and too dynamic to permit accurate predictions of the revolutionary scientific and social advances that would bring the Western world a level of material progress and prosperity that was still undreamed of – even by these "wise men." Yet, the events of this century likewise overwhelmed the dark forebodings of even the most dire sceptics and pessimists among them. To be sure, hatred and fanaticism, human suffering, and mass killing are not exclusive to this century. However, and thanks to the same science and technology that has helped increase the standard of living of so many and that makes us proud of human achievement, modern tyrants have been able to fulfil their mad and destructive projects to an unprecedented, indeed unfathomable, degree. What is more, they invariably have done so in the name of one or another seemingly humane ideal – reason, freedom, equality, progress – by which "mankind," or "the nation" or "the working class" will achieve perpetual peace and freedom, provided that people must bear the requisite sacrifices.

All of these 20th century social experiments – Nazism, communism, militant nationalism, religious fundamentalism - have failed to achieve their ultimate conquest, and fortunately so. Yet, in some form and to a significant degree, the forces that led to the emergence of these illiberal movements still exist and may yet lead to new and even more devastating manifestations. To prevent such a turn of events, therefore, it is imperative that we remain vigilant in identifying and exposing illiberal tendencies, whenever and wherever they appear.

As this century comes to an end, liberal democracy has outlived most of its rivals. That it should have done so was not foreordained. For while liberal-democracy is the least utopian of this century's political systems, in some respects it is also the most fragile and unstable. Its fragility is due in large part to the inherent tension between civil and political equality on the one hand, and economic inequality on the other. Liberal-democratic governments of the left and of the right have sought out different strategies to address this tension, with only temporary success. While a better balance of these competing values is both necessary and possible, the tension itself cannot be entirely eliminated. As this century has demonstrated all too well, grand schemes to put an end to economic inequality have usually demanded a high price in political liberty and transformed high-minded ideals into their totalitarian antithesis.

The instability of liberal-democracy derives from the fact that it cannot offer its supporters an enduring substantive vision, something permanent and inevitable, something that has the assurance of "Absolute Truth" - as has been offered by its rival ideologies. Unlike these others, liberal-democracy requires that we accept a large measure of uncertainty – in respect to both the philosophical question of the nature of the "good life" and the practical outcomes of social and political struggle. Liberal-democracy offers procedures and principles. It does not offer panaceas. Still, it remains the most tolerant and agreeable form of government, in large part because political equality, civic freedom, and human rights are not just high-sounding ideals but the very preconditions of its existence.

Given that toleration of diverse opinions is one of the central pillars of liberal-democracy, it is ironic that today the greatest challenges to liberalism have been posed by those who owe their very existence to the system they so ardently criticise. Among

ENGLISH

these challengers are some Western intellectuals who - dissatisfied that liberal-democracy has not realised absolute justice and prosperity for all, "but only" imperfect justice and limited distributional equity - would throw out the baby with the bathwater. Perhaps more dangerous, however, are the intellectual and political relativists of the postmodern variety who treat liberal democracy qua political ideology, that is, much the same as any other political ideology – be it fascism or communism. While the nihilism of this position is particularly extreme, relativism itself is nothing new. Like civil rights, the autonomy of the individual, or the inviolability of private property, this relativism is part and parcel of the classical liberal tradition and its guiding principle of tolerance. That relativism should have become a weapon against the remaining values of liberalism in the West's "culture wars" of the last decade may be the unavoidable if ironic price of toleration in an open society.

In October 1998, Slovakia narrowly escaped the temptations of one of the 20th century's twisted social visions, opting instead to develop civil society under the banner of liberal- democracy. Given both our recent past and the challenges before us, this will no doubt be a difficult path. Thus, it is all the more important for us to think through and to discuss openly both the known and the unknown sirens that remain to tempt us away from that path. Doubtless too, we will have to learn how to grapple with the dilemmas that are posed when the enemies of an open society seek to use the means and opportunities provided by liberal-democracy to undermine it.

In this issue, we present three authors whose thinking illuminates the state of liberal-democracy today. Although all three are supporters of liberal-democracy, each focuses on different aspects and foresees different possibilities for its development in the next millennium.

The American philosopher Richard Rorty comes from an intellectual tradition that is quite alien to most central Europeans. As he describes in his autobiographical article, *Trotsky and the Wild Orchids*, the idol of his youth was the founder of the Red Army, Lev Trotsky, a figure who enjoyed considerable popularity among a significant number of leftist American intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s. Their flirtation with Marxism was not an effort to bring about Bolshevik revolution in America, but rather an attempt to alleviate the manifest tension between political and economic equality. The revelations after Stalin's death and especially the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia had a radical sobering effect, forcing many leftist intellectuals to radically re-appraise Marxism or to abandon it altogether. Many found a new intellectual home in other radical currents such as radical feminism, environmentalism, and postmodernism. Still others, like Toffler, placed their faith in technological achievement as the solution to those problems that communism had failed to resolve. Finally, a considerable number fell into resignation and pessimism, abandoning all hope for genuine human progress.

While rejecting Marxism, Rorty did not replace it with another radical ideological framework. For this reason, his views have provoked not only conservatives and right-wing liberals but also many of those "betrayed idealists" who still sought radical solutions. Rorty ceased to be an idealist, yet he refused to feel "betrayed". Instead, he reached for an intellectual tradition more conventional and restrained and one that is uniquely American: pragmatism. From this perspective, the fact that Marxist ideology could not solve liberal democracy's problem of economic inequality does not mean we should not keep searching for incremental ways to alleviate its impact.

More dramatically, Rorty claims that philosophy is not in a position to solve the problems of humanity. He is singularly disenchanted with those who would yet hope to find some metaphysical principle that can offer the key to human happiness. Rorty does not dismiss philosophy as such. In his view, metaphysics is a superb creation of the human mind. What he steadfastly rejects, however, is the attempt to use philosophy as a framework for addressing the ills of our age. In a similar way, he refuses to regard liberal-democracy as something sacred and irrefutable. It is, he asserts, an idea, a creation of human reason which strives to develop a political system that can guarantee tolerance and human freedom. The fact that a free-spirited individual aspires to live in and defend this kind of political system is, says Rorty, simply a natural and pragmatic urge.

Rorty gave a memorable lecture in Bratislava in 1996 at a conference on the social role of the

intellectual. Instead of offering another variation on the theme of "revering or rebuffing intellectuals", however, Rorty launched into a discussion of the insoluble problem of poverty and criminality among African-Americans in the ghettos of American inner-cities. Admittedly, many of us in the audience were somewhat startled by his choice of topic. Gradually, however, he made his meaning clear. Any debate about the role of intellectuals, he explained sincerely and with apologies to his hosts, was irrelevant as long as intellectuals remain unable and unwilling to solve the tragic state of affairs that leaves the inner-city ghettos to languish in poverty and despair.

The second author, Alvin Toffler, is in many ways typical of that distinctively American brand of optimism which invests technology with the progressive power to overcome all manner of social ills, including human bigotry and animosity. I admit, Toffler is not one of my favourite thinkers. But given his wide audience and his evident popularity in our own region, I believe it is important to present the context of his thinking and how he has been received by his readers in the USA. As with Samuel Huntington, whom we featured in an earlier issue, Toffler seems confident in his ability to predict the future. In contrast, I believe that, as opposed to astrologers or visionaries, social scientists must be extremely cautious when it comes to predicting the future. Indeed, even at its most methodologically rigorous, the most that social science can offer is a conditional and probabilistic assessment of future trends for a specified problem, based on a careful, comparative analysis of past trends and present conditions. And as the revolutions of 1989 have proven yet again, the predictions of social scientists can be woefully far from the mark.

However much we might dispute Toffler's originality, his description of advances in technology and how technology influences the way we think and act remains highly relevant. The rapid advances in computer technology, for example, have opened possibilities for humankind that we are not yet able to fathom fully. We could plunge ourselves into pure speculation, as did Jules Verne admirers a century ago, but would still not be able to say with any certainty whether computers will be more help or hindrance to the creation of a more just and decent world.

In his second of three essays (see K&K, 2/98), Tom Darby examines three thinkers who have occupied themselves with the meaning and limits of liberalism: Leo Strauss, Alexandre Kojève and Carl Schmitt. Each of them comes at liberalism from markedly different angles: Schmitt was a Nazi supporter, Strauss a Jew who escaped Hitler's Germany for the USA, and Kojève a man who gave up philosophy to help build the foundation of today's European Union. All of them share a vision of a future fraught with danger and all believe that liberal-democracy is insufficient for solving the problems that the world is heading towards. In Darby's assessment, these three, together with Heidegger, are the principal thinkers of the 20th century - the intellectual successors of Hegel and Nietzsche who, he believes, most accurately defined the 19th century. It is, of course, too soon to tell whether and to what extent the pessimism of Darby's protagonists is an accurate foretelling of our own future. Be that as it may, their respective critiques of liberal-democracy permit us to better comprehend our current condition as well as to contemplate one possibility of what may be expected in the coming century.

Rorty, Toffler and Darby offer three possible scenarios of the future of liberal-democracy in an era of globalisation. Whether the appropriate stance is one of the skepticism of Rorty, the optimism of Toffler or pessimism, as adopted by Darby, only time will tell. For now, it remains a question for each reader to deliberate for him or herself - keeping in mind, perhaps, that our powers of prediction are likely little better than they were a century ago. •

FERO GULDAN, ANDAU (ÖSTERREICH) 1994

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