Three Liberalisms

Michael A. McCarthy

Sidecar, 13 November 2024Ideas

Trump's crushing victory over Harris casts serious doubt on one of the darling concepts of American political science: 'polarization'. As of the latest count, Trump won the popular vote by over 3.5 million, capturing most swing states and flipping those that went for Biden in 2020: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin. Voters thought to be entrenched in separate camps defied psephologists' predictions by crossing from one to the other. Dominated by the Democrats for two election cycles, urban counties swung to Trump by 5.8 points, while suburban counties that went blue for Biden shifted red by 4.4 points. Both less-educated and more-educated counties also trended towards Trump (by 5.2 and 4.6 points respectively), as did most non-white groups: Hispanic-majority counties (13.3 points), indigenous counties (10 points) and black-majority counties (2.7 points). Trump even did better among women, who shifted 5 points to the right relative to 2020.

The president-elect now enters the White House enraged by his court battles and emboldened by a significant mandate. His party, having purged most of the Never Trumpers and replaced them with loyalists, is on the verge of controlling all the branches of government: a supermajority on the Supreme Court, a 3-seat majority in the Senate and likely a slim one in the House. The Democrats may still storm back in a few years' time, as they have done after previous routs. But their fortunes will depend on how they adapt politically. What is the outlook for their particular brand of liberalism in the wake of this defeat?

An unlikely theoretical resource for understanding the American political scene can be found in Tosaka Jun's *The Japanese Ideology: A Marxist Critique of Liberalism and Fascism*, first published in 1935 and now available in English thanks to Robert Stolz's recent translation. Tosaka was a prominent critic of the Kyoto School of Philosophy, which emerged in the 1930s as an intellectual prop for Japanese imperialism and militarism. In 1931 he co-founded the Institute for Materialism Studies to bring Marxism to bear on Japanese history. Forced out of the academy just three years later, he eventually suffered a fate similar to that of Antonio Gramsci – dying in a fascist prison in 1945 from sickness and maltreatment.

Fascism in Japan did not break with the legal order; instead it took a 'constitutional' form in which restored feudal institutions were legitimated through bourgeois democracy. Tosaka's key insight was that liberalism and fascism were both rooted in idealist philosophies, and therefore shared such intimate affinities that a switch from the 'common sense' of one to the ideology of the other could be easily effected under certain historical conditions. Liberalism, as an empty and contentless cultural worldview, can undergo what Stolz calls a 'dialectical inversion', where the positive content that comes to fill it is nativism, ultranationalism and archaic notions of 'the people'.

In developing this theory, Tosaka divided liberalism into three distinct forms: political, economic and cultural. Each is built on a negative conception of freedom: *freedom from*. Political liberalism, obeying what it sees as pre-political laws of nature, entails freedom from governmental tyranny for the rights-bearing individual. As Locke wrote in his *Second Treatise on Government*, 'The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it. Reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind who will but consult it, that being all equal and interdependent, no one ought to harm another in life, health, liberty, or possessions.' In this conception, whose institutional expression is bourgeois representative democracy, the social contract establishes a limited government that is supposed to afford civil society maximal autonomy.

Economic liberalism entails respect for property rights and insists that markets function best without government interference. It too relies on a view of the political as an ontologically distinct and disconnected sphere of social life. Adam Smith took this separation a step further than Locke to argue that in the realm of civil society, self-interest leads to greater cooperation, freedom and efficiency – not merely mutual recognition and a social contract. Free from political intervention, markets spontaneously produce a healthy social order.

What of cultural liberalism? Tosaka was careful to distinguish its content from its form. At the level of content, there are many recognizable liberal sentiments today – respect for the law, expertise, rules of civility – but these do not coalesce into a coherent political worldview. They are confined to the aesthetic realm of tastes, dispositions and affinities, which are changeable and often contradictory. The form of cultural liberalism, however, is more fixed. It entails the freedom of individuals to develop their own thoughts and sense of self: the various ways in which their personality might be perfected or their identity worked out. Taken on its own terms, Tosaka wrote, cultural liberalism has 'no relationship to any political goals at all'. It is a purely negative space. Yet it constantly demands that positive content be smuggled back in, so that subjects can make sense of real-world problems and give meaning to their lives.

Assessing the rise of Japanism – the variant of fascism that gripped Japan in the 1930s – Tosaka argued that the developmental dynamics of monopoly capitalism had undermined the economic and political pillars of liberalism, leaving only its cultural form. Japanese liberalism thus became little more than a sentimental and incoherent conception of the free self, abstracted from material relations of exploitation and domination. This allowed fascism to incubate in liberal society, eventually emerging in a constitutional mould that saw elements of feudalism – the emperor, Shinto as the state religion – renewed. In this way, Japanism reinvented an authoritarian past to constitute a political subject fit for the present: one that would carry forward the project of imperial expansion. *Freedom from* morphed into *freedom to*. Liberalism was redefined as living in accordance with the culture, customs and traditions embodied by the restored feudal forms of the bourgeois state.

Has a similar process taken place, albeit in very different circumstances, in the contemporary United States? In the final quarter of the twentieth century, the Democratic Party's neoliberal turn led to the gradual delegitimization of political and economic liberalism: representative structures such as parties and trade unions were hollowed out, and capitalism evolved into a highly unstable financialized system that finally faltered in 2008. Since then, the Democrats appear to have moved away from such liberal mythologies, replacing them with an ethos of top-down control and management. Not only have they tried to outdo the Republicans on 'border security', with Biden's deportation numbers nearly matching Trump's; they have also pursued a set of aggressive carceral policies, politicized the courts and designed increasingly invasive systems of surveillance – not to mention mobilizing the vast resources of the American war machine to slaughter civilians in Gaza. If political liberalism could never fulfil its promise of a society free from state coercion, it now appears to have abandoned this pretence entirely. Meanwhile, economic liberalism looks equally discredited. Most of the Republicans' protectionist policies have been preserved, and some of them accelerated, under Biden. The outgoing administration has proposed new forms of state-led development, with the IRA and the CHIPS Act putting industrial planning and strategy at the heart of its programme. In the drive for militarized competition with China, free markets are out of fashion.

Yet Tosaka showed that even when liberalism's political and economic forms collapse, its cultural register can persist. The Democrats under Biden and Harris tried to base their electoral appeal on the sandbanks of cultural sentiment: on abstract notions of respectability, poise and personality. Harris spoke of a politics of 'joy'. *The Economist* noted that she was 'running on vibes'. Yet if this kind of liberalism is ultimately no more than the negative freedom of individuals to define themselves, this allows the far right to co-opt it by deploying its own 'positive' mythologies: from national palingenesis to xenophobia to misogyny. This is precisely what the Trump campaign did, juxtaposing Harris's false 'joy' to the baser emotions of anger, fear and resentment, all of which are perfectly legitimate for a working class that has long been ignored by Washington elites. With Trump's vengeful nostalgia tapping into real popular antipathy, large numbers of former blue voters decided to support him. 'Polarization' went up in smoke.

Trump was also helped by the Democrats' attempts to associate their brand of cultural liberalism with a particular notion of 'Americanness'. Hillary Clinton remarked in 2016 that 'Defending American exceptionalism should be above politics'. Biden frequently described MAGA Republicans as 'un-American'. Here, liberals have tried to give substance to their empty worldview by invoking the theme of the 'chosen nation', locked in a Messianic war against its civilizational rivals (from Islamism to Putinism). In the process, they have normalized Trump's narrative of a glorious country besieged by alien outsiders – placing it firmly within the political mainstream. Trumpism, notwithstanding the hyperbole of its opponents, is not a subversion of the constitutional order. Like Japanism, it is a continuation of liberalism that uses forms of restorationism to redefine the country's mission, promising to rebuild collective bonds by reinstating traditional social hierarchies. Unlike Japanism, though, it will struggle to reshape the state in its image or create anything resembling a new national order. Its ideological appeal does not necessarily translate into institutional power. If the left is to present an alternative to such dark passions, it must start by recognizing their repressed origins in the liberal consensus.

Read on: Murray Sayle, 'Refabricating Japan', NLR 10.