Postmodern Liberalism as a New Humanism

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The belief in Reason has had a great career in Europe. The most important factor was at the beginning, in the great Greek philosophers' abhorrence of everything that was not controllable and that threatened a descent into inner and outer chaos. It could be bodily passions or subjection to the irrational will of the crowd. The instability and fragility of the world had to be cured by something that could resist the logic of permanent change because it always remained the same. This attitude, typical of ancient philosophy, resulted in love of Reason and Truth, in hope for absolute certainty and in belief in the possibility of uncovering the principle behind all things. To be sure, Greek dialectics was an art of finding truth in the process of debating, but nevertheless the main hero of European narrative became the lonely philosopher capable of seeing all things as they were in themselves, fundamentals, principles and ideas. Truth was not a thing of this world, that was the axiom of almost all Greek philosophy, and without it the good life and the good political community (*polis*) were not possible. Plato – the founding father of this way of thinking – became 'the arbiter of elegance' for the whole of European culture (the sophists – the only philosophers who saw things differently – were defeated by him all too easily). Ever since Plato's time we have thought like Plato and his later European heirs such as Descartes, Kant or Husserl.

The shadow of Plato was visible in thinking about politics too. Here also ultimate reasons, harmony of interests and absolute, timeless solutions were sought. Real political life should be elevated and shaped to the level of the philosophical project of the ideal political pattern, it was said. And even those who were able to perceive this doctrinal shortcoming of European reflection on politics were unable to break out of its circle. One good example was conservative thinkers who soon noticed the rationalist bias of European reflections on politics and so decided to resort to notions of life, practices, custom and tradition. But even they were constructing their own Project of the good life and the good society covertly and silently. It was a Project that longed for the same ideal of clarity, ultimate foundations and absolute solutions

that all other political projects had longed for before. Thus conservatives also tried to beat Project by Project, Certainty by Certainty, Truth by Truth, the doctrinal purity of rationalist visions by setting against it a naïve belief in the mythical wisdom of tradition and the immutability of human nature.

Of course liberalism was an heir to the whole rationalist tradition in politics that shaped the European tradition. Closely connected with an Enlightenment project of human emancipation, it reproduced in itself an unshaken belief in Reason dictating Right Solutions for each political problem. If we recognize Enlightenment thought as the essence of modernity, we will have to perceive the liberal Project as an ultra-modern one. According to it Reason, Truth and Progress were supposed to show the paths of political thinking in Europe. Liberalism, being itself a result of a particular historical and political situation (or development?), wanted to go beyond that historical and local context. It preferred to be treated as a bunch of ideas having universal meaning. The Light of Liberal Reason was supposed to illuminate all humanity.

If we agree with John Gray that the modern conception of man is common to all variants of the liberal tradition,[1] then we have no solution but to say that the version of liberalism defended in this paper cannot be called 'classical'. Perhaps the best label to give it is 'postmodern' or 'communitarian' liberalism.

As is widely known, John Gray identifies four features of the classical version of liberalism. According to him liberalism is: (1) individualistic, because it accepts the moral priority of the individual over any claims of society; (2) egalitarian, because it admits the equality of all people and refuses any legal or political regulations which assume that people have a different value; (3) universalist, since it declares the stability of human nature and treats historical and cultural contexts as secondary; (4) melioristic, because it assumes that all social and political institutions are capable of self-regulation and self-correction. From the point of view recommended in this paper it can be said that (postmodern) liberalism is still individualistic in its character, but this does not mean that it accepts the moral priority of an individual over *any* claims of society. It can merely be said that the proper starting-point for the constitution of any community should be the free choice of individuals. Moreover, the moral claims of any community are justified only if individuals are allowed to shape its ethical and political character.

Postmodern liberalism does not express any reluctance toward community as such. It only requires a community which respects the rights of individuals to autonomous, moral and comprehensive choices. In this sense one can say that post-modern liberalism renounces antisocial biases while remaining faithful to individualism, which – starting with the social and the common – reaches the truly individual. The idea of the person associated with this kind of liberalism does not allow for the existence of the whole unencumbered self, to use Michael Sandel's words, but it in fact anticipates the possibility of changing one's relations to a community and oneself, which entails the possibility of changing self-identity as such. The identity in question is perceived as a *dynamic process* rather than just a result of communal pressure.

The version of liberalism I am attempting to defend in this paper is nonetheless egalitarian, insofar as it accepts the equality of people and treats procedural justice

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as a main tool for its implementation. However, it is not opposed to the evaluation of people in accordance with their personal character and talents. The only reservation is that this evaluation should not be translated into legal regulations that suspend or violate the principle of equality. Thus a postmodern liberal is not condemned to refraining from all evaluations or forced to accept general moral subjectivism. One can be a 'strong evaluator' (as Charles Taylor puts it), because when assessing social and political reality one must take into account the interpretative community to which one belongs and without which one could no longer be oneself (S. Fish). So one's choices and evaluations are not arbitrary or groundless. One should merely realize that those choices and evaluations are not free from the influence of historical and cultural contexts. By the way, cultural or social relativity is something entirely different from simple arbitrariness, unless we treat everything that does not claim absolute universality as wholly arbitrary. Thanks to the above-mentioned wisdom, liberals are able to resign from attempts to implement political rules that would be reflections of their hierarchy of values. In this way they are free from the temptation of political fundamentalism.

Postmodern liberalism has no universalist or rationalist pretensions. It regards the Enlightenment merely as an era in which a number of very valuable institutional devices were introduced and not as the age which gave us firm – because universal – and rational grounds for our liberal faith.[2]

According to Michael Kelly, we can identify three chief models of thinking about the status of moral principles:

> (1) there are universal moral principles which are applicable to all societies under the guidance of a universal practical rationality; (2) there are tradition-dependent moral principles which are nonetheless justified by discourse ethics so that they are able to transcend their tradition; and (3) there are tradition-dependent moral principles which are defended only by tradition-bound, practical rationality.'[3]

It seems that postmodern liberalism is at one with the third option.

It may accept the conviction that the source of our ideas about good is almost always communal. Two different issues are involved here: the cultural or communal genesis of our beliefs, and their particular content. Of course, in order to be able to function in a given society, individuals must join a particular interpretative community so as to give meaning to their life and obtain support for their actions (a social sanction). But at the same time this does not mean that they cannot change their communal affiliations. For example, they, together with others, can try to create a new kind of community, or take the position of an outsider, or – last but not least – move among different interpretative communities. It seems that the famous debate between liberals and communitarians does not concern the social and cultural character of personal views but the range of freedom left to an individual, as well as our evaluation of it. This does not at all mean that only a person who is autonomous or wants to be autonomous can be a citizen of the liberal world.

To be sure, we can agree with Richard Rorty that an ironist is a very good candidate for such a position, but this does not mean that one must be a Rortian ironist or a Kohlberg–Habermas post-conventionalist in order to be a member of a liberal

society. It is sufficient for postmodern liberalism that people do not treat their views and beliefs in a fundamentalist way, which means that they refrain from making them universally valid by using means which are not accepted by all. Thus it is not so much a question of the separation of the private from the public (a typical and still valid slogan of liberal thought), but rather of the necessity of treating the public sphere in a way that does not imply the use of force or coercion but only democratic procedures for building a common political will. Yet this does not mean that such weakened conditions of participation in a political community will turn out for many people to be hard to accept. They will treat these conditions as a concession in favour of a political order which they do not accept. In this situation there is no better solution than to call on certain historical narratives which present the virtues and merits of the liberal tradition in order to show that the implementation of their fundamentalist desires can lead to a social catastrophe, which in the end will turn against them as well. Of course, such a narrative need not prevail in a given society. Fundamentalists can win the battle for the future. But it will be a disaster for everyone; in a word, if fundamentalism wins, we will *all* be defeated.

Postmodern liberalism, unlike classical liberalism, does not support any thesis concerning human nature, because it does not even try to solve the problems connected with this notion. But it has a certain inclination to treat all of its definitions as a product of a definite historical and cultural context. More generally, it emphasizes the significance of historical moments and cultural forms as background elements in any political reflection. That is why it is aware of its own special character. Its claims have an openly ethnocentric character, which implies that postmodern liberalism is devoid of any claims to possess the ultimate Truth. I believe some thinkers are wrong when they insist that we need a political philosophy which does not take human beings as best judges of their interests and preferences, but instead tries to explain the needs and desires they themselves cannot comprehend. It is an illusion for any branch of philosophy, not only political philosophy, to think it is in a position to find a point of view that is anchored nowhere. Any philosophy is deeply rooted in its own time and culture. In other words, each philosophy is simply an expression of some human preferences. Philosophers are just an element in the picture they are trying to understand. They have no privileged access to something that would justify the attitude articulated by partisans of objectivity and neutrality. This attitude seems to be quite dangerous, for it assumes that political philosophy, which claims that it at last truly knows what the above-mentioned interests and preferences are, is able to free people from the burden of responsibility for their choices and at the same time abolish politics understood in terms of the Aristotelian category *phronesis*. The assumption that people can surrender the function of being the best arbiters of their affairs to someone else (Philosopher-King?) can result in paternalism. Therefore, it would be better if thinkers left to ordinary people the role of being arbiters of their interests and desires, trying only to exert an influence on their choices through education, a free press and the establishment of *civil society*.

Postmodern liberalism is aware of the fact that it is the only possible way of arranging the social and political order and that its claims cannot be justified in any ultimate way. It tries to uncover its own axiological and theoretical assumptions. But this does not mean that one can ascribe to it skepticism as to the possibility of

solving conflicts that stem from different cultural conceptions of life. Charles Larmore is correct when he writes that:

> . . . acknowledging reasonable disagreement about the good life need not be the same as skepticism. We may still believe that we have sound reasons for certain views about what makes life worth living. So we may be entitled to claim that people who reject them are in error. The point is that, all the same, we would be foolish not to expect our views to meet with some disagreement in a calm and careful discussion.[4]

My skepticism is connected with the possibility of justifying the objective validity of any philosophical or political doctrine. But this skepticism does not entail the need to agree that the values and patterns of life in a certain culture should not be violated outside the borders of this culture. It only implies consciousness of the fact that the values and patterns in question cannot be theoretically justified outside this culture. This, in turn, can change the method of propagating the superiority of the above-mentioned values and patterns. Because of this perspective it is no longer possible to treat Others as people who do not fulfill some claims of Reason.[5] One can only try to convince them that one's way of life, especially in political matters, is better than theirs. Unfortunately history has been dominated by another manner of implementing the universalist claims of cultures: coercion. We cannot idealistically assume that the mode of action in question is something that has disappeared from the political scene. What is more, it should still be used in certain very limited cases, especially in situations when what are called Human Rights are being violated. But this does not mean that there are some culture-independent tools capable of justifying them in an ultimate way. Someone may think that this equates liberal-democratic culture with all other cultures and deprives its partisans of any motivation to defend it, whereas the use of power against people who violate Human Rights becomes completely arbitrary. But if we reject the thesis that the acceptance of the view that everything is as good as everything else must necessarily imply philosophical skepticism, we will be able to refute this allegation. The fact that justifications are always ours and that their sequence never ends with something that is absolutely primary, which cannot be an element of another interpretation and justification, does not mean that we cannot give any justifications at all or that they have no power. Only if one thinks in accordance with the principle 'everything or nothing' is one prone to disqualify any justification that is culture- and context-dependent.

The liberalism defended in this paper resorts to various justificatory narratives. Among the most important is the one that recalls a historical context of its birth, by which I mean conclusions drawn from the religious wars in Europe. Another underlines the fact that liberalism is deeply rooted in the values of a certain community. In this sense, one can say that it is communitarian liberalism, which is aware that without a communal background, without a certain political culture, its existence would not be possible. Postmodern liberalism admits that it is faithful to a particular (or definite?) idea of good and does not want to pretend it is neutral with regard to all other ideas of good. It is also communitarian, for it does not make an absolute value of individuality and it appreciates the value of communal bonds and altruistic attitudes. One of its main features is its support for human solidarity and sense of

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responsibility for the fate of others. Thus it is not a liberalism that glorifies egoism and selfishness, but a liberalism that is sensitive to human pain and suffering. It tries to supplement the logic of the free market with extensive welfare programmes. It wants to bring into being rules of justice, understood in Rawlsian terms, both within the borders of a given country and within the international community of countries and states. So this means that it will accept inequalities only if through them the situation of the most disadvantaged (individuals, social classes or even whole countries) can be improved. Postmodern liberalism does not accept unreservedly the logic of globalization. It opts for establishing international organizations, even international government, in order to bring international capital and markets under control. Thus this is a liberalism which seeks an ally in social democracy rather than in libertarianism, in the political left rather than the right, in the supporters of social reforms and new political solutions to the problems of democracy and justice, rather than the conservative or ultraliberal guardians (or defenders?) of the status quo.[6] Postmodern liberalism is opposed to economic bias and the 'tyranny of money' (Michael Walzer), to social injustice and cruelty. It treats all citizens as free and equal. According to William Galston, it understands society as a system of voluntary cooperation in which each person has the right to equal shares in its fruits, but is at the same time obliged to support its institutions, which embody the shared conception of fair rules.[7] Postmodern liberalism wants to implement these rules within the context of international cooperation.

Postmodern liberalism is opposed to technocracy and the rule of bureaucracy. It wants to renew a sense of citizenship and work toward the full realization of democratic principles. It opts for an alliance of all powers within civil society with a view to replacing cultural patterns typical of mass culture, especially consumerism, with values that transcend the sphere of consumption. Guided by the rule of continuous self-correction, it does not treat its forms as ultimate and perfect, but as open to modification. As I mentioned earlier, it is especially interested in eliminating all the elements of injustice, domination and coercion still present in today's societies and today's world. In dealing with these phenomena, it permits state interventions that help make society better. However, it also guards against statism, seeking the prospect of a better life in the development of civil society and participatory democracy rather than in the power of state. In this context, it appreciates the rule of subsidiarity.

And so it is not true that the ethos of liberalism is poor in content, devoid of rational grounds and motivationally weak,[8] or that the ethos of liberalism amounts to the absence of any ethos.[9] The truth is that liberalism needs concern, which sometimes must result in open and sharp critique of its practices.

The opposition between the individual and the community, so frequently highlighted by communitarians and liberals, seems unjustified. What we really need is a new vision of the community and a new vision of individuality, of an individualism that has its roots in the community, a community constructed through the activity and imagination of individuals; in a word, we need a new look at old problems, their reinterpretation and recontextualization. Perhaps we even need a new utopia as a useful clue to social and political practice. I hope that postmodern liberalism can create such a utopia, avoiding the temptations of both the radical, revolutionary

approaches of a communist-type strategy and also the selfish or unjust approaches of an ultraliberal 'Chicago boys'-type strategy. In this way it may revitalize the sense and meaning of humanism, understood as the idea of life of human beings who can create their own lives independently and freely in a political and social milieu that promotes justice and solidarity. It is not a metaphysical humanism but a political one, because it does not try to answer the question 'what is a human being' as such, but only what kind of political life is worthy of acceptance by people. As a new humanism it abandons the heritage of the classical Enlightenment-type humanism because it refrains from projecting any pattern of being human at the level of outlook or sense of life. It makes possible a concern with a good life for all those for whom ideals of political freedom and strong citizenship are important, without taking up a position on issues that should be left to the private sphere of life.

Postmodern liberalism, like classical liberalism, accepts the pluralism of different ways of life. However, unlimited toleration for all individual plans and life goals is by no means characteristic of this kind of liberalism. It supports instead the rule of law, and almost every democratic country is marked by a certain moral vision, to which one may remain faithful while at the same time obeying the law. The word 'liberal' also recalls the fact that cultural and social pluralism can flourish only on condition that, in a given society, there should exist certain common norms and principles adumbrating a definite moral as well as political consensus, which permits variations without threatening the continuance of the liberal democratic social order. Liberals are not compelled to tolerate all those behaviours that do *not* violate principles of law. They can work for the public condemnation of many such behaviours, both by acting together with others within the framework of civil society in special interest groups seeking influence through the media, and in extreme cases by seeking to change the law. And this path remains open to everybody. Liberals, especially postmodern liberals, are distinguished from non-liberals, however, in that they acknowledge the relative moral value of even those plans and life goals that are alien to them, as long as they do not violate principles of law. Therefore their relationship to others is characterized by goodwill and recognition of their individual worth, rather than by mistrust and readiness to condemn them as soon as a pretext should present itself. That is another aspect of the humanism of postmodern liberalism. As John Rawls correctly argues, people are worthy of respect, even if we cannot share their comprehensive views, as long as they accept ideas of freedom and equality as members of a political community that lets each and every person live in peace.

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Notes

An earlier version of this text was published in J. Miklaszewska (ed.) *Democracy in Central Europe 1989–1999* (Krakow 2000).

1. Gray (1986).
2. Rorty (1997).
3. Kelly (1991).
4. Larmore (1990).
5. Rorty (1997: 125).
6. On the subject of the difference between liberalism and conservatism, and the sensitivity of the first to change, see Dworkin (1978).
7. Galston (1989: 711).
8. Kowalczyk (1995: 178).
9. Beiner (1992: 22).

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