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Editors' Forum / Hot Spots

Losing Our Manners: The Current Crisis and Possible Durability of Liberal Discourse

FROM THE SERIES: Crisis of Liberalism

Photo by [Alfredo Gauro Ambrosi](#).

By [David A. Westbrook](#)

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Liberalism was first Europe's, and then much of the world's answer to the problem of conflict rooted in human difference—an effort to build politics on the agreements of formally equal and autonomous parties. Here I focus on the European Union and the United States, liberalism's homeland and what I know best. Different stories might be told about other places.

In Western philosophy, liberalism has long been in crisis, incapable of addressing fundamental questions about the human condition. Philosophical objections, however, have not kept liberalism from becoming the language of international law or the modern republic, central to the emancipation of slaves, women's suffrage, anticolonialism (albeit long challenged by Marxism), international institutions, and even the ongoing sexual revolution, wherein gender is a choice. By 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell, Francis Fukuyama could channel Hegel in declaring the end of history. Events would not cease erupting, of course, but a certain idea of history—as a proving ground for ideas about the best form of collective human life—was over. Liberalism had won and there was no longer any other publicly acceptable way to think about politics.

Fukuyama notwithstanding, history may still be understood in other ways. Islam certainly provides an alternative, one brilliantly laid out for a tired West by Michel Houellebecq's (2015) *Submission*. From within the Western tradition, I have argued (Westbrook 2004) that postwar responses to World War II (the Bretton Woods institutions, the World Trade Organization and its predecessors, and European integration) erected a supranational political economy that was essentially illiberal. The emphasis was not on autonomy but on economic and, ultimately, cultural interdependency. We might note that the denial of this interdependency has made Brexit deeply offensive to jilted Europeans. The politics of globalization is based on economics; it is the gut or gonads and not the cerebellum, the logic of inequality and not Alexander Hamilton's collective "reflection and choice" among equals. Liberalism nevertheless survives as the house ideology, a *lingua franca* or perhaps even a form of manners. It is the way civilized strangers address one another, the form of self-presentation that marks the better sort of people.

A forme de politesse is just that, a form, incompletely representational. It need not be candid or

honest; that is what “mannered” means. After all, Victorian Englishmen understood lust and blood lust; they simply seldom talked about it and wrote about it not at all. In order to function, however, a form relies upon tacit understandings. Users must know what is implied but left unspoken. The crisis of liberalism today is that we are losing our manners: the tacit understandings that made liberalism comprehensible and, indeed, indispensable are ever more narrowly shared. Those who have truly lost their manners are viewed with horror (Donald Trump, for example), thus contributing to the sense of crisis among the aforementioned better sort.

So what were these tacit understandings that long made liberalism work as a *lingua franca*, and that now seem to be weakening? Let me mention three.

Cultural Homogeneity/Consensus

From an American perspective, the consistency of vision within European nations is astonishing. One can speak about French versus German understandings of *economics*. There is no European equivalent of Los Angeles, and the city that comes closest, London, will soon no longer be in Europe. It is easy to speak of tolerance when your neighbors share your mores, but less so if they do not. Thus, massive immigration has challenged the smug liberality of many Europeans.

U.S. liberalism long depended on the male WASP consensus. But this consensus, and indeed the meaning of *male*, can no longer be assumed. In fact, in the United States today very little can be assumed about how to act. For example, universities are so-called safe spaces where talk is constrained but where carrying firearms is often encouraged, lest we have an *active shooter*—nothing in this picture appears liberal.

Past and Present

The United States was founded as a city on a hill, an example to the world. It was to be an experiment in self-governance, through which the nation would not only move away from (European) aristocracy and despotism but would continually improve. The best was always yet

to come and, as such, American identity rests on an evolutionary claim on history itself.

Although the U.S. economy has finally resumed growth, for decades the middle class has struggled. Much poverty remains and inequality increases. For the first time, many Americans are doubtful about the nation's future. Going into the presidential election of 2016, the idea that the nation is democratically governed is belied not only by the Republican circus but also by the Democratic nomination process, which seemed to have been decided years ago. There is a real possibility that the idea of the United States as experiment, built not on common patrimony but on a promise of a future that different peoples could share, is fading from the scene.

Europe, too, was founded on an imagination of the past (*never again!*) and of the future: integrated, democratic, and bourgeois. Just how this Europe was to be achieved was always somewhat unclear, but it was a work in progress perpetuated for over a generation by the desire to do something profoundly different. Yet as a founding statement *never again* is a negative proposition that offers little direction regarding what specifically should be done. *Never again* began to lose traction as the war generation passed away and the European project became increasingly legitimated by promises of bourgeois pleasures derived from material growth. This was foolish: yesterday's growth is today's status quo. Never in history has growth been evenly distributed across time and a continental space; as such, predicating a polity on sustained widespread growth was doomed to fail. (Nor are Europeans, with their thin solidarity, inclined to make large-scale transfers of wealth indefinitely.) When material progress failed, as it has for many, European governance itself was called into question and stronger sources of political identity—populism—have come to the fore. Evidently, the *demos* is not necessarily European.

Celebrity and Bureaucracy

Large polities rely on celebrity and bureaucracy to span the vast distances among people. Celebrity gives people who have little in common something to discuss. Bureaucracy gives governments purchase over vast spaces and vague issues. Neither celebrity nor bureaucracy, however, is particularly liberal. There is something base about caring why Brangelina are separating. And achieving the European Constitution, which was democratically defeated, through the elitist mechanism of the Lisbon Treaty hardly sounds like self-governance.

While they may be vital for social cohesion, gaudy celebrity and labyrinthine bureaucracy make it ever harder to sustain the pose that society is liberal, founded on the reflection and choice of a sober, independent citizenry. Unsurprisingly, many people are now openly illiberal and disrespectful of liberal virtues.

In the United States, liberal politics tends to be undermined by the circus of politics; can we really be talking about menstruation? Meanwhile, in Europe, the democratic subject is more likely to be undercut by the sense that some expert, somewhere (presumably Brussels) has made some rule with the very intention that it will never be understood. Perhaps the form of executive politics, presidential versus parliamentary, has much to do with the vulnerability of American liberalism to celebrity, and European liberalism's capitulation to bureaucratic elitism.

* * *

Republican democracy, and even equality, is not all there is. Venice produced great things. Drive a fast car along the Colorado as it winds through the high desert, for example, and ask yourself if you really care about liberalism. Just suppose we acknowledge that the particular self-respect of the republican citizen is no longer available to us. The crisis of liberalism long anticipated by philosophy would be over. While intellectually tempting, we who must live with globalization would be left with the question of manners—in some sense, the question for which liberalism was invented: how do we speak to strangers?

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