



## A Classical Liberal Revival

**Abstract** The last chapter summarizes my conclusions by asking for a revival of liberalism itself. While populism for several reasons may be self-defeating in the longer run, the costs may be exceedingly high. Classical liberalism is a much richer tradition than the strawman of neoliberalism that many left-wing populists and social scientists have constructed. It is not only able to offer prosperity and security, but also a sense of belonging and community that is superior to what the right-wing populists and nationalists are asking for. It is a tradition that needs to be developed and revitalized.

**Keywords** Liberal revival · The spirit of classical liberalism · Policy development · Policy entrepreneurs · Polycentric effort

The ideas and institutions of classical liberalism created the modern world. The liberty, prosperity, and human flourishing that the world has experienced during the last 200 years would not have happened without institutions that secure individual liberty, equal rights, the market economy, free trade, freedom of association, the rule of law, pluralism, constitutional democracy, and limited government. The liberal economy and society have created wealth, welfare, voluntary cooperation, social cohesion, and

emancipation for humans worldwide on a scale unprecedented in human history.

Today these achievements are threatened by a worldwide populist wave that undermines liberty, free markets, and an open society. While there are other kinds of authoritarian regimes, populism is a threat that has emerged within democracies. What has happened is that liberal institutions fundamental to both markets and democracies, as well as civil society – the rule of law, independent courts, and different civic and political liberties—have been weakened or started to crumble. The number of liberal democracies has been falling for the last two decades and a large majority of the world's population today lives in different sorts of autocracies.

The success of populism can largely be explained by the divisive activist ideas they base their policies on, ideas originating in the works of Rousseau, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Schmitt, later developed within post-modernism and critical theory.

The populists use a distinct rhetorical style or discursive frame to deliberately create the polarization of society into an 'us versus them' antagonism, using emotional arguments and framing to create anger and moral outrage towards opponents and their supporters. Often a real or imagined economic or social crisis of some kind, increasing uncertainty, is used to trigger such tribal sentiments. The use of unserious and ill-founded policy solutions to complex social and economic problems is most often also part of populist strategies. When in power, the autocratic institutional orientation of populism is manifested in the gradual decline of the democratic, open society, rather than open coups, a process of creeping autocratization. There are both left—and right-wing versions of these populist strategies that share the same structure.

Populism from left to right is a kind of collectivistic identity politics. It appeals to the 'people' by offering a sense of belonging, to the nation, class, history, social status, religion, or some other trait, and by offering a worthy purpose and meaning, namely, to defend the people against enemies and threatening others, both constructed by the populist themselves.

This kind of politics is the opposite of classical liberalism. It is contrary to freedom, to liberal institutions, to the liberal society with markets and civil society, to pluralism, and to the liberal spirit that cherishes optimism and human flourishing. Therefore, liberals need to fight back. The world will not change for the better unless liberals do. Liberals must develop

and revitalize their own ideas, beliefs, and values to battle populism, just as in previous times in history.

Writing in 2023, the autocratic threats from Putin's Russia and Xi Jinping's China may have triggered an increased awareness among democracies of the West about the necessity to defend their liberal institutions and societies. But even though external threats (ironically similar to the populist logic of 'us-versus-them') may help to mobilize support, such threats cannot do the job itself and are surely insufficient in the longer run.

It may also be argued, as in Weyland (2022), that populism is somehow self-defeating, as some of the more recent elections in countries like the US and Brazil may indicate. He argues that the personalistic, plebiscitary leaders of populist movements tend to make mistakes and misdeeds that undermine the support of both the masses and important special interests and other established political actors, which make checks and balances and external constraints set in. While this may well be true in some cases, in other cases—countries like Venezuela and Hungary come to mind—the process of creeping autocratization may have gone too far to be reversed easily. Also, other populists, perhaps with an opposite ideological orientation, as frequently has been the case in Latin America, may gain power instead.

There is, however, another, perhaps more fundamental reason populism may be self-defeating. Recall the analysis in Chapter 5 where it was argued that small-scale communities like those of families, friends, and clubs were prerequisites for the emergence and sustenance of social norms and that such norms could be upheld also in larger groups or collectives if they were internalized. But when the underlying communities disappeared, the social norms in the collectives would eventually disappear as well. And so will the collective sense of belonging that the populists offer. The same may also be true of the personal virtues that are learned by practicing them, in markets and civil society, and by reflecting on these practices, throughout life—they may also be undermined. A society without either social norms or personal virtues is not likely to be attractive to anyone.

Instead of passively awaiting the collapse, a better and more long-term solution to the populist threats to liberty, free markets, and the open society involves a revitalization of liberalism itself. Classical liberalism is a much richer tradition than the strawman of neoliberalism that many left-wing populists and social scientists have constructed. It is not only

able to offer prosperity and security, but also a sense of belonging and community that is superior to what the right-wing populists and nationalists are asking for. It is a tradition that can and need to be developed and revived.

Such a revival is only partly a question of better policy responses to changes in economic and social conditions affecting voters. Or a better defense of the liberal institutions and policies that actually are welfare enhancing. Modern liberals have largely neglected that humans have a quest for meaning, community, belonging, identity, and a purpose in life, that we are meaning-searching, meaning-creating animals. Hence, it is also necessary to revitalize the soul or the spirit of classical liberalism. In addition, liberals need to invest more resources in policy entrepreneurs and political leaders that have the skills and ambitions to articulate and promote liberal policies in the political process.

In the previous chapter about classical liberal statecraft several strategies for how to fight back against populism have been suggested. These include the exposure of the populist strategies to make the public and voters aware of the deliberate manipulation that lies behind the strategies used by populists and the negative consequences that follow for society at large, and in the end for the supporters of the populists themselves. Liberals also need to be better at defending and developing liberal institutions and policies. When economic and social conditions change, many institutions and policies need to change as well. In general, liberals must be better at defending and explaining why a strong, limited, and decent state is preferable to its alternatives, and how the liberal institutions it upholds produce spontaneous orders in markets and civil society. But there are also specific policies that need to be advanced, such as the promotion of social mobility, the implementation of high-quality basic education for all, the strengthening of integration, and the restoration of public discourse.

But rational argumentation and policy improvement will not be enough. Liberals also need to appeal to emotions and character by advancing a liberal politics of identity, a politics that shows that a liberal society can offer meaning, community, belonging, identity, and emancipation. It is an embedded liberal politics that emphasizes self-development and human flourishing. More and better narratives of why and how liberalism and liberal institutions contribute to a good society need to be created to achieve this, narratives that combine ethos, pathos, and logos.

Lastly, I have suggested that liberals should develop liberal statecraft by conquering the idea arena, promoting liberal policy entrepreneurs, and investing in power resources that can change institutions and policies. This is a polycentric effort where many different actors and policy entrepreneurs need to be involved. The promotion of the liberal spirit is central to liberal statecraft.

The defense of liberty, free markets, and an open society is a long-term project that requires many different skills and virtues. It is difficult, but no doubt possible, and with great potential to all. The cost may be exceedingly high if we do not try.

## REFERENCE

Weyland, K. (2022). How populism dies: Political weaknesses of personalistic plebiscitarian leadership. *Political Science Quarterly*, 137(1), 9–42.

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