DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 16.11.2021 | Michael Bröning

The lure of progressive authoritarianism

Authoritarian tendencies also exist on the left. Progressives urgently need to rediscover the virtue of liberty



Michael Bröning (2021), Vom Ende der Freiheit: Wie ein

gesellschaftliches Ideal aufs Spiel gesetzt wird, Dietz-Verlag

The public debate on the threat to democracy typically focuses on the dangers from the right. At a time when an ousted US president refuses to acknowledge his defeat, this seems only too justified. But in their activist enthusiasm, progressive circles tend to overlook the inconvenient truth that alarming authoritarian tendencies have also taken hold on their side of the political spectrum. A few weeks ago, *The Economist* dedicated its cover to the 'threat from the illiberal left'. So far, however, the progressive response has largely consisted of eye-rolling indignation as opposed to reflected self-criticism.

This is unfortunate given that democratic ideals of liberty and freedom lie at the centre of a perfect storm with classical opponents of liberalism and a new generation of adversaries establishing unconventional new coalitions.

The unique restrictions of fundamental freedoms in the wake of the pandemic, for example, have only rarely been called into question by progressives. In most Western democracies reflexes have replaced reflection as the fight against the pandemic has essentially followed China's authoritarian example. To the extent that Covid-19 measures were rejected by the extreme right, the progressive camp has resorted to discrediting even the slightest criticism as political recklessness.

By and large progressive voices – caught up in the 'war against the virus' – did not seem particularly bothered by historically unprecedented curfews, quarantine regimes, border closures, and the elimination of privacy. Instead of calling for a measured response, progressives decided to stifle dissent under the guise of 'follow the science', frequently replacing discourse with paternalistic grandstanding and groupthink.

The principle of 'better safe than sorry' is an unsuitable guideline for defending the values of liberal democracy.

The objective, of course, was to shield the politics of the pandemic against criticism. But recruiting science for the ever-escalating culture wars of the West did not result in the rationalisation of politics but rather in the politicisation and moralisation of science. Technocracy – with its supposed rational self-evidence – does not lead to a sacrosanct realm of quiet truth but to a democratic fall from grace and a public revolt against the ostensible absence of alternatives.

Better safe than sorry?

At present, it does not seem that the political left will be a leading voice in the growing chorus against sweeping, often arbitrary, and blindly indiscriminate measures of 'keeping us all safe in these unprecedented times'. Isn't it ironic that social circles who until recently viewed the presentation of passports at international borders as an anachronistic imposition now enthusiastically welcome vaccination cards for daily errands?

This, however, is anything but a minor nuisance. After all, instances of state overreach tend to evolve into an insipid permanence. To this day, millions of international travellers scan their footwear on account of one madman who attempted to bring down a plane in 2001. And the exceptional police prerogatives introduced in the wake of 9/11 just celebrated their 20 years anniversary.

Despite this precedent, progressives do not seem overly concerned with defending personal autonomy against the stifling mix of virtue-signalling safety theatrics, rigid health bureaucracies, and Big Covid-Business. The principle of 'better safe than sorry', however, is an unsuitable guideline for defending the values of liberal democracy. An abundance of caution is in effect also an absence of liberty.

The woke left

To make matters worse, the current 'great awokening' of parts of the activist left has accelerated the shift away from freedom. Woke progressives are increasingly embracing essentialist group identities. Ambiguous notions of 'racial equity' threaten to replace equality of opportunity with an anti-liberal equality of outcome. In this process, justice for individuals is routinely being replaced with justice for groups.

Leaving behind universalist ideals, however, undermines the principles of democratic equality, regardless of whether this assault is orchestrated by the right or the left. While the dangers of far-right ideologies of exclusion are – with good reason – widely discussed, the increasing anti-universalist tribalism in parts of the left is frequently glossed over as irrelevant or a right-wing illusion.

Considering liberty a finite commodity linked with the emission of CO2 has its own intricate

The German political scientist Jan-Werner Müller is a case in point. 'What is the matter with a liberalism that bashes a supposedly radical left minority in times when authoritarians in China, India and Brazil are

expanding their power?', Müller asks in a recent essay. Certainly, drawing attention to authoritarian regimes is justified. But an equally pertinent question also deserves to be asked: What is the matter with a liberalism that fails to respond to legitimate criticism with self-reflection but rather with incensed finger-pointing? Have the proponents of woke not recently coined the term 'whataboutism' to describe the practice of avoiding uncomfortable discussions by changing the topic?

Even with regards to freedom of expression, parts of the left are giving up on previously held principles. Surveys in numerous Western countries demonstrate that large parts of the public now shy away from openly articulating political opinions. In the United States, a recent survey by the libertarian Cato Institute reveals that 'given the prevailing political climate,' 62 per cent of Americans refrain from expressing their views. In Germany in 2021, just 45 per cent of citizens responded that they feel like they can speak their mind freely.

But this trend does not affect the right and left in equal measure. In Germany, by far the least amount of pressure to adapt is perceived by supporters of the Greens. And in the US, the Cato-survey shows that only the 'very liberal' group is confident to express their opinion openly at any time. The progressive camp may still believe in the ideal of liberty, but it is evidently not particularly successful in effectively communicating this professed tolerance to the opposing political spectrum. 'All great political action begins by saying what is', declared Ferdinand Lassalle in 1862. Parts of the left would be well-advised to revive this insight.

Reclaiming liberty

A similar process of shying away from liberty is notable in the climate crisis. Certainly, swift political action to protect the climate is necessary. There is no freedom on a planet on fire. But here too, important parts of the progressive camp have come to consider liberty a liability rather than a strength. There is widespread suspicion in activist circles that democratic processes will not be capable of dealing with the magnitude of the task at hand. This may or may not be true. But uncritically embracing states of emergencies – as now declared by thousands of cities around the globe – circumventing parliamentary work via the judicial process, and calling for massive restrictions on civil liberties is almost certain to produce negative outcomes in the long run.

In a time when liberty is threatened by enemies and appropriated by false friends, progressives must not to silently abandon this ideal but reclaim, redefine, and rediscover it.

Considering liberty a finite commodity linked with the emission of CO2 has its own intricate pitfalls. What is supposedly required is an act of wilful self-disempowerment in which a virtuous superego delegates individual responsibility to the community. This attempt to relieve the individual from accountability through the enforced regulation of climate-neutral behaviour on the state-level is reminiscent of what Theodor Adorno calls the 'authoritarian character'. As such, it is the exact opposite of self-empowerment and individual responsibility long celebrated by the left. The idea that liberty is now primarily a function of what must *not* be done, echoes Orwellian euphemisms in which 2 and 2 equals 5 and war is just another word for peace.

In matters related to Covid-19, identity politics, and the climate crisis, important parts of the left are turning their backs on long celebrated ideals of liberty and freedom. And conspicuously, liberty seems to be losing its appeal precisely to the extent that progressive forces are gaining social and cultural hegemony.

In her essay *The Freedom to Be Free*, Hannah Arendt expresses hope that 'freedom in a political sense will not vanish again for God knows how many centuries'. Arendt's passionate call for freedom resonates through the ages. In a time when liberty is threatened by enemies and appropriated by false friends, progressives must not to silently abandon this ideal but reclaim, redefine, and rediscover it.

The text is a slightly edited excerpt from the recently published book: 'Vom Ende der Freiheit. Wie ein gesellschaftliches Ideal aufs Spiel gesetzt wird'.



Michael Bröning
New York CIty

Michael Bröning heads the office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in New York.