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The Alterliberalism Trilogy

Three books:

1. ***The Political Aesthetics of ISIS and Italian Futurism***
2. ***The New Aesthetics of Deculturation: Fundamentalism, Neo-liberalism and Kitsch***
3. ***Micro and Macro Philosophy***

Daniel Nicholson writes that “while no one doubts that the twentieth century will be remembered as ‘The Century of the Gene’, more and more biologists and philosophers have been calling for ‘A New Biology for a New Century’ that will reinstate the organism back to the center stage of biological theory.” We are living in the century of the organic, and this trilogy, together with my book Organic Cinema (Berghahn 2017), establishes this view in philosophy.

Introduction: Deculturation and the two Liberalisms

The trilogy attempts to approach in a philosophical fashion a complex “crisis of liberalism.” Capitalism focuses on economically exploitable and technical knowledge. The result is a state of “deculturation” most manifest in the contradictory form of liberalism often referred to as “neoliberalism.” However, neoliberalism is not the only culprit. A paradoxical interlinking of conservative neoliberalism and leftist liberalism has contributed to the separation of culture from domains like education. In postindustrial environments cultural landmarks are dwindling. In neoliberalism, individuals must function inside a market. Neoliberalism embraces the world in terms of efficiency whereas progressive liberalism embraces individuals as abstractions via ethical imperatives of tolerance, the law, and political correctness. Both liberalisms produce a limited and naïve vision of a *homo aequalis*, who is a hard-working consumer respecting the law and the market.

Instead of abandoning liberalism altogether (as extremists often suggest), I try to design a better, self-critical form of liberalism. Both neoliberalism and progressive liberalism are caricatures of what “liberal” was once supposed to be. Liberalism has degenerated into a fundamentalist, decultured philosophy of quantification. I suggest continuing a value- and idea-oriented tradition of liberalism along the lines of a neohumanist agenda of *Bildung*, of historicism, and of historical criticism. In this liberalism, culture is perceived as the real essence of humans, society, and their achievements. Culture contains emotions, choices, values, desires, perceptions, attitudes,

interests, expectations, and sensibilities. Culture is the only reality of human life, and this reality is getting lost in the neoliberal world.

1. *The Political Aesthetics of ISIS and Italian Futurism (Lexington 2018)*

The Futurist movement peaked in 1913 because the epoch of liberalism (in Italy often referred to as “Giolittismo”) had come to an end. During the liberal era of Giolitti, political culture was believed to be stable, scientific, and based on logic. Fascists and futurists no longer took this logic for granted. Futurism and fascism did not accept this patriarchic “reasonableness” and found liberalism hypocritical.

A hundred years later, in June 2014, ISIS proclaims its Caliphate in the Middle East. One of the reasons why ISIS could be so successful was that liberal powers had shown signs of weakness and instability. Western culture, which was believed to be stable, scientific, and based on logic, turned out to be weak. Futurism, ISIS, but also the most recent populist political movements consolidating themselves in Western countries, express a *Zeitgeist* announcing the end of a certain liberal culture.

The crisis of liberalism manifests itself most clearly in Cyberpunk. Cyberpunk symbolizes the exhaustion of the industrial economy and the exhaustion of the avant-garde. This crisis is more radical than the crisis experienced by liberalism in the 1900s and to which Futurism and fascism reacted. Cyberpunk developed in the form of a nihilist culture in a postindustrial world. Cyberpunk represents a decadent form of liberalism. The crisis that both ISIS and Futurism try to overcome is the crisis of “liberal modernity.”

2. *The New Aesthetics of Deculturation: Fundamentalism, Neo-liberalism and Kitsch (Bloomsbury 2018)*

This book examines both neoliberalism’s and progressive liberalism’s preferences of kitsch, relativism, and an obscure concept of freedom. Political correctness becomes symptomatic for the confused state of the battlefield of liberalism. Aesthetically, a “new bad taste democracy” sporting an “anything goes ethos” and the “affectation of indifference” (Holliday and Potts) has become the trademark of liberalism.

The “really existing liberalism,” as Jean-Claude Michéa has called it, is very different from what the inventors of neoliberalism intended. Christopher Lasch holds that liberalism “has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of all against all [and] the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self.” Still Winston Churchill and Ronald Reagan understood liberalism as a majoritarian democracy guaranteeing free speech, free association, and free media. Today liberalism stands for the weakening of traditions, the overproduction of legislation, the cult of mediocrity, and the idea that minority rights should penetrate every aspect of life.

How could liberalism end up there? Originally, “to be liberal” denotes an idea of modern freedom. Liberal positions build upon Enlightenment values and put forward the right to difference, freedom of religion and speech, democracy, international cooperation, and societal permissiveness. The mechanical and rigid use of liberal convictions in terms of ideologies,

assumptions about the universality of values, standardizations, and the requirement of transparency of even the most insignificant opinions has led liberalism astray.

In a chapter on Jakob Burckhardt, Julius Evola, and Friedrich Meinecke, I show the historical dimensions of the crisis of liberalism. Those thinkers were dissatisfied with a certain form of liberalism. Burckhardt and Meinecke criticize the Prussian degenerated form of liberalism, which concentrates on the functionally-reasonable and imposed itself upon German culture. The irrational counter-reaction of the Nazis to superficial, rational-liberal culture is not desirable.

Liberal tolerance became dogmatic as liberalism required its own conformity standards. What is needed is a better, self-critical image of liberalism that avoids circular reasoning and narcissistic self-confirmation. Contemporary liberalism has become kitsch as it is only about tolerance and helping the weak. It is mined by relativism, institutionalized skepticism, and axiological neutrality. It is philosophically bankrupt, only backed up by the firm belief in the economy and in growth. Current liberalism believes that the denial of all cultural and social obligations except that of tolerance signifies the supreme achievement of Enlightenment values.

It is possible to design a positive form of liberalism containing a reasonable dose of tolerance without emptying itself into relativism. A liberalism not based on a concept of excellence issuing abstract beliefs resembling absolute truths of economic fundamentalists but a liberalism defining freedom in a philosophically sound and sophisticated fashion. An enlightened liberalism that has kept its cultural roots. A liberalism making the best of the postmodern condition by defending an undogmatic mindset, free of compulsion, and open to self-criticism.

3. *Micro and Macro Philosophy (forthcoming)*

Philosophy needs to be redefined at the age of neoliberalism and globalization. The deculturation of philosophy evolves in parallel with the deculturation of religion in fundamentalism. How much cultural influence is allowed in philosophy in a globalized world where even religion and education manage to define themselves as more and more deterritorialized social activities, independent from local cultural constraints? The relationship between philosophy and culture or, more generally, between thinking and culture, should be seen through a micro/macro pattern.

Anti-globalization movements attempt to deconstruct universalisms by fighting for political decentralization and against economic liberalization. Disillusioned by the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s, modernists of the second phase (postmodernists) deconstructed values because they saw them as paternalistic and imperialistic. All this is merely “micro.” How can the macro be defined in a non-totalitarian fashion?

In liberal, democratic thought (as analyzed Paolo Virno), the idea of “the many” or of “multitude” provokes uneasiness. Liberal thought is impregnated by the idea of centralized states and a modern concept of sovereignty and thus tends towards the macro. The replacement of macro-micro with “public-private” (or the “collective-individual” in more leftist branches of liberal democracies) *seems* to retrieve an organic dimension of society. In reality, it privatizes the micro and excludes it from the “public” macro sphere. The micro is seen as archaic and needs to be silenced.

Most philosophy is either universalist (macro) or particularist (micro). Micro philosophies flourished after World War II on the European continent. Propelled by a general criticism of

scientism, universalism, and eurocentrism, the largest part of postwar poststructuralist or postcolonial philosophy underwent a shift away from universal and “totalitarian” structures and pleaded for micro approaches. Postwar philosophy decided to deconstruct wholes in the name of the liberation of the individual. The most extreme manifestation is Foucault’s uncritical embrace of the non-West.

The result is a philosophically unsatisfying relativism backed up by value-neutral methods such as evaluations and statistics. By celebrating cultural diversity and by challenging the cultural hegemony of traditional Western “majority” groups, those movements reiterate the pattern of ethnophilosophy. Beyond creating a certain awareness, this neo-ethnicism mainly deconstructs but never attempts to find a micro-macro alternative.

References:

Daniel Nicholson. 2014. “The Return of the Organism as a Fundamental Explanatory Concept” in *Biology Philosophy Compass* 9/5, 347–359.

Paulo Virno. 2004. *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. New York: Semiotext(e)