

We Need to Talk about Liberty – Reflections on the 2020 US Election

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Like many around the world, and some 70+ million Americans, Wednesday 4th November started for me filled with despair and foreboding. I had been sceptical of the predicted ‘Blue Wave’ supposedly about to sweep the US, but was nonetheless relatively confident that the raw, lived experience of four years of deepening polarization, poisoning of the social fabric, avowed disrespect for legal and constitutional norms and tens of thousands of preventable Covid deaths would be all the evidence the American voter needed to opt enthusiastically – desperately! – for the end of the Trump era. Surely the clear majority of Americans could see that another four years of this would not Make America Great Again, but secure its dreadful, violent collapse; a catastrophe for those very voters, for the US as a totemic historical experiment and, indeed, for the world. Yet the results being broadcast the morning after Election night were not just disappointing, less than hoped for, but both bewildering and terrifying.

As the day – and days – progressed, however, this anguish turned into something else: the persistent questioning of ‘how was this possible?’ This is not the same question that followed the 2016 election (or Brexit in the UK), of how the supposed ‘outlier’ event has come to pass. As such, it is not a question about ‘what did I/they/we miss in presuming otherwise?’ and, specifically, ‘*who* was neglected in the construction of that falsified and complacent common-sense expectation?’ No, this time the question is much more insistent and profound, because it raises issues of gaps in understanding that are not merely empirical – factors and/or voters we didn’t take into account in composing our falsely reassuring expectations – but conceptual, challenging whole worldviews regarding how the world works and what really matters, to others as much as to oneself.

In other words, ‘how was this possible?’ has increasingly become a genuine question, demanding some serious rethinking, not just an idle lament. And it has become even *more* insistent as the details of the election have become clearer – not *less* so as it turns out ‘our guy’ won in the end. Three facts in particular should cause every thinking person serious pause for reflection, and especially those, myself included, most appalled by and implacably opposed to Trump, and hence relieved at his defenestration. First up is the sheer closeness of the election, which is no artifice of the esoteric mechanisms of the electoral college system, but there in the actual votes, with wafer thin margins in multiple ‘swing states’ and slam-dunks hardly to be seen across the whole country. Zooming into intra-state, county data simply reinforces this picture, if predictably showing blue clusters in bigger cities surrounded by rural red. However much you zoom in, though, the story is much the same – this election was close; and mind-bogglingly so considering the evidence before the American public of what a destructive force Trump is and how uniquely unfit he is to hold high office of state.

Secondly, the turnout, and both in total and – crucially – for Trump himself. This was the highest electoral turnout for a century, showing a country electrified by politics such that millions who don’t usually vote – perhaps have never voted before, and not just due to age – decided they had to do so. On its own, given the disastrous prospect of a second Trump presidency, this may be easily – but wrongly – explained in terms of Americans expressing their determination to oust him. Yet, the record turnout was not just to boot him out of office, but also to ensure he stayed resolutely in place! As such, while Biden recorded the greatest number of votes ever, the historical second place – and not far behind – is Trump 2020. Again, then, any selective reading of the former fact alone, absent the latter, as grounds for

triumphalism of the ‘we won’ or ‘the big bad wolf is dead’ kind is simply deluded. Trump may have lost this election, but Trumpism is not just alive and kicking, but stronger than ever, in terms of popular support.

Finally, the demographics of this surge in voting. While exit polls are to be taken with caution and further details will need confirmation, it seems that there is only one demographic that swung to Biden from 2016 to 2020, namely white males. Perhaps this reflects this particular demographic’s shame at association with Trump in an age of identity politics, and the resulting unique determination to distance themselves from him. Yet, more strikingly still, apparently all other demographics swung significantly *to* Trump, not even maintaining their status quo. Again, this surely demands a deep breath and some significant reflection. How is it *possible* that *even more* Blacks, Latinos, women, gays and lesbians voted for Trump this time – having witnessed everything he has *actually* done and said as President, and all the social turbulence regarding social justice issues through which the country has gone in his time in office – than did back in 2016? Indeed, in some cases, such as Black voters, they apparently *doubled* their support for him. Whatever else is to be taken from this, given that it is swing not blocks (‘flow’ not ‘state’) that makes the *difference*, it is thus surely arguable that it was white males, against all odds, than won it for Biden (i.e. against Trump and compared to Clinton 2016) – and especially so, given the numbers of other demographics who swung the *other way*.

How was this possible? The question persists, and, I want to argue here, holds significant lessons for the future of a more constructive and equitable politics. For, in brief, the answer to this question lies in ongoing neglect in serious public discussion of what is actually the key political issue of the day... thereby allowing it to be claimed in the US, by default, by Trumpism. This neglected issue is liberty.

Let’s start by taking a step back to survey where we are, so that we can see how this is the case. In other words, to understand this perplexing election result, we must first put down the compulsive fascination of US party politics in all its current heat and polarization, and turn to a broader purview of the political landscape in 2020. This can be characterised as a moment of epochal disruption in which the world – and all the societies therein – is confronted with a whole set of massive, unprecedented and complex system challenges, the acme of which is surely the future of the planet, regarding climate change, biodiversity and numerous other ‘planetary boundaries’. These challenges are both existentially threatening in ways that understandably are incubating a zeitgeist of profound ontological anxiety, but also precisely so threatening because they appear largely to exceed the current capacities of government to tackle them effectively. Hence the pervading mood of fear is accompanied by one of disorientation, the two then feeding each other. While for millions of Americans such issues may rank quite low down indeed in their self-conscious concerns, the broader context of complex system challenges – including also inequality, the transformation of social life by digital technologies and many others – is inescapable. It is self-evident that this broader mood has been rich ground for Trump, enabling the otherwise unthinkable realization of his political ambition.

Beset by so many new and uncontrollable challenges, there is small wonder that there has been a resurgence in interest, both from ‘critical’ academic research and street-level activism, in questions of justice. This includes works expanding and updating understanding of the actual mechanisms of distribution of social goods and bads in this ‘new world’, highlighting empirical issues of injustice that are largely unknown or not discussed yet increasingly significant in shaping life chances; and works opening up the very concept of in/justice itself, not least regarding issues of recognition and restoration. The surge of such work is not only

understandable but often necessary, laudable and insightful. And it is quite obviously incubating and inspiring singularly dynamic social movements, largely on the (green) left, of many who are rightly appalled by – and determined to do something about – yawning inequality, ongoing ecological destruction and compounding interaction between these issues, e.g. in terms of ‘just transition’. Indeed, I would position my own work squarely in this project.

Yet while justice obviously matters – and in the key sense that it really does matter to (lay, or ‘real’) people, not just to activist and/or academic theorists and their ideas or ideologies – there is another collective issue, or social virtue, that is arguably valued even more keenly or fundamentally by people, and as both the necessary means or condition for the ‘good life’ and as an end-in-itself, namely liberty. Yet today ‘liberty’ is not only rather neglected by strident advocates of a new justice, but even often actively repudiated; and nowhere more obviously than in the contemporary US. The reason for this allergic aversion to liberty is obvious. For the term has occupied a central position in the political project that many of those concerned about justice see it as their primary goal to dismantle, not least because this ‘*neoliberal*’ project of ‘liberty’ can credibly be blamed in large part for the massive acceleration of both ecological destruction and socioeconomic inequality that characterize precisely the new injustices. Indeed, as I have argued at length elsewhere, the global (and US-centric) project of neoliberalism underpins the whole gamut of overflowing complex system problems that now threaten to overwhelm us, in its Promethean celebration of untrammelled entrepreneurial innovation and exploitation of risk. At the centre of this manifestly dysfunctional yet still supremely powerful political project, however, is the celebration of the freedom of the individual, as both consumer and entrepreneur, as manifest in the freedom of the market.

The upshot, thus, is an extraordinary situation in which in contemporary US politics in particular there is an all-out war between ‘justice’ and ‘liberty’. Given that to most people, and to most theories of the good society, both matter, it is already clear that this is a dysfunctional state of affairs. Indeed, it is increasingly so, as the polarization and opposition of these two terms is to set up a political ‘game’ in which only those committed to one but *against* the other, and so almost by definition at the extremes of political opinion, will thrive. As they flourish, though, this also thereby poisons popular understanding of both terms amongst the majority who would like to value (and enjoy!) both, thereby generating further disorientation and division, as all-but-random and minor initial conditions and personal preferences then get amplified into full scale rejection of the ‘other side’ and the other term. The conclusion of this dynamic is predictably catastrophic, for no society can thrive when it must choose between justice-but-emphatically-not-liberty and liberty-but-in-rejection-of-justice. A rapprochement between ‘freedom’ and ‘justice’ is thus manifestly and urgently needed in the US (and West more broadly) today – and I would suggest that the missing piece here, and necessary starting point, is not theories of justice, but concepts of liberty.

Yet what has liberty to offer to contemporary theories of justice? On my understanding, everything. For this situation is not just peculiar but also notably anomalous. History, and indeed the present, is peppered – saturated – with undeniably ‘progressive’ movements that have been motivated first and foremost by the desire for freedom: from bondage, from ‘foreign’ and/or imperial power, from exploitation, from drudgery, from terror and tyranny. Though I offer here no empirical measurement as backing, a broad overview of history, and modern history in particular, would suggest that it is ‘freedom’, not ‘justice’, that has been the rallying cry for most of the great movements of human civilizational advancement. Indeed, even for those who have been clearly and loudly concerned with justice, e.g. within established nation states, most if not all of these movements too have featured a strong element and motivating

drive regarding liberty, e.g. the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa, the civil rights movement in the US, female suffrage, Hong Kong's democracy movement today and even various movements of environmental action. Equally, the opposite also holds, most obviously in the uniquely murderous and spirit-crushing regimes of mid-C20th communism, all of whom saw themselves as uniquely righteous regimes of justice and emancipation, while explicitly disdainful of individual liberty. In short, a demonstrable, even primary, concern with liberty – and hence, inevitably, to some large if immanent extent, the flourishing of the free person or individual – is arguably the litmus test, a necessary if not sufficient condition, for any movement regarding its likely tendential positive or negative influence in the world.

It follows that movements can be concerned progressively for liberty without much avowed concern for justice, but can only really be applauded in their primary concern for justice to the extent that they are also explicitly concerned about liberty. This is because a movement for liberty (of some description) will, if successful, create a new constituency of free persons and/or a new level of freedom that they enjoy. Presuming only that a new 'freedom' of one group at the *expense* of the freedom of another does not qualify as 'freedom' at all and so can be held to account on this basis – as parsimonious a qualification as can be imagined, compatible with even the thinnest, negative definitions of liberty – there is no way that such an outcome can be worse than the status quo ante, whether for those thus personally freed or for society (or even civilization) as a whole. Yet this is not the case for 'justice', which is not only much more dependent on the particular conception of the term that is mobilizing any group rallying to its cause, but also is readily conceivable – as a matter of the 'scales' or balance – as coming, almost inevitably at the *cost* of some for the benefit of others.

As such, while liberty can hardly run amuck insofar as it is restrained by this most slight of conditions, justice demands considerable work and argument to ensure it does not veer into its near enemy of vengeance; and potentially without limit where victimhood and/or grievance has become deeply internalized. Indeed, such conditions on justice are those of process, demanding accountable and open reasoned argument and the secured rights of individual persons to explore and think them through so as to reach conclusions that then meet their uncoerced assent; i.e. precisely *all* issues of liberty. It follows, therefore, that the foundational ingredient of a free, *and* just, society is a free people and that liberty is the primary political – or rather, constitutional – virtue. As such, when, as at present, there appears an implacable opposition in our concepts of liberty and justice, *both* need some profound rethinking, and with the work on liberty being the priority while rethinking of justice is secondary and asymmetrically dependent on the former. Today, however, we see the exact opposite situation: frantic inspiration in the exploration of justice, but complete disregard for liberty. The result is the abandoning of liberty, allowing it to become the property and 'turf' of even the most extreme and illiberal groups on the far right.

Yet reclaiming liberty is not just needed as some exercise in reintroducing 'balance' in mainstream political argument and the public sphere by taking seriously again as an issue that really matters. It is not just a matter of reviving lost interest in settled conceptions of liberty. Rather, the urgency and necessity of a concerted and explicit reengagement with liberty is precisely because what liberty is, what it means, how it works and what is of value about it has been radically shaken by the emergence of this new world of complex system problems. In other words, liberty is the key political issue of the moment *not* because it is the clear and shining value to which good, right-thinking people everywhere should rally, but precisely because it is both of supreme, trans-historical concern to human flourishing *and yet* today so

profoundly in question, so unclear and confused, and so desperately in need of renewal and reinvigorated defence.

Our present confusion regarding liberty, and the associated crisis of our polities, is thus not a matter of the strength of illiberal extremes of political opinion and ideologies, but the weakness and instability of settled understandings of ‘liberty’ confronted by a world for which they were not developed. In short, just as complex systems present genuinely novel and problematic challenges that demand rethinking what we thought we knew about how the world and society and history and people all work, so too for our existing, and largely unchallenged, conceptions of liberty. In particular, the dominant understanding of liberty today – and especially in a late-neoliberal US – as the unconstrained right of the sovereign individual pretty much to do as s/he wishes, and in particular in terms of insatiable materialist consumption and unaccountable socio-technical experimentation, is manifestly incompatible with the world and its current problems on even the most anaemic of critical analyses of the latter. Yet it is also clear that there is simply no hope of any progressive movement beyond this moment of global system crisis without an almighty exertion of human freedom, in terms of unprecedentedly rapid collective experimentation, learning and political participation. In other words, freedom is not just a problem and regrettable complication for our current complex systems challenges but itself a fundamental presupposition of any ‘successful’ transformation of human society that meets these challenges. There is no ‘just transition’ without *new liberties*, not just reinvigorated concern for novel injustices.

Yet how exactly this is to work is undeniably a thorny and contestable arena of issues that can only be worked through in practice, not theorized in advance and in abstract. Reviving liberty, and thence justice, will thus demand the ongoing effort of a generation, a political process that takes the issue of liberty as an explicit but key question, thereby refounding the constitutions of free societies that have come to learn (and are still learning, optimally and on an ongoing basis) how to flourish amidst global complex systems. And it will take that long because the issues are that complex.

Perhaps nothing has illustrated this better to date than the headline story of 2020 – the Covid-19 pandemic. Unquestionably itself a problem of the government of complex systems¹ and, as such, humanity’s first real ‘dress rehearsal’ for the wave of turbulence and disruption still coming our way over the rest of this century, not least from global climate change, Covid has confronted the world most starkly as a problem of liberty, its form and its role in government. Here, for instance, we are confronted by issues of seeming paradox, acute tension and simple unprecedented choice.

Regarding paradox, for instance, we see that the willingness, or unwillingness, of a democratic society to concede (albeit temporarily) some level of oversight and control of one’s movement to (trustworthy) state authorities is strongly correlated with the extent to which one’s freedom of movement is in fact preserved and expeditiously returned to normal (as in Taiwan) or not (as in the UK or US) respectively. In terms of acute tension, meanwhile, we see that simply entrusting it to the state to decide what is allowed in terms of ‘essential’ mobility effectively rules out not just tourism but also leisure travel (and associated activities), whether for socializing, recreation, (high) culture or worship. In other words, while the state may in some

¹ See Tyfield, D. (forthcoming, Jan 2021) *Speculation, Complexity and Reimagining Liber(ali)ty*, in Special Issue *Global Discourse*, ‘Staying with Speculation: Natures, Futures, Politics’, Eds L. Moffat, M. Lujan Escalante, C. Mortimer: <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff/tyfield/Postsecular Liberalism interview-coda.pdf>

respects be the precondition of one's freedom (of movement), it also remains the case that much that is of greatest value to the (free) individual is likely to be deemed 'inessential', frivolous and dispensable from the perspective of the state. The right – or freedom – to move *for no reason whatever*, at least sometimes, thus emerges, paradoxically, as a key element of a good society, and not just for a hyper-mobile elite; everyone would be rightly concerned about this liberty.

Finally, regarding unprecedented decisions we must confront the whole issue of how, in the new information ecosystem of personalized and immediate digital social media, to conduct free and open discussion, even amidst a public health emergency, about the costs and benefits of certain responses to such exceptional challenges. When does advocacy and argument for or against a particular course of action veer from inclusive, informed debate into disinformation and/or spreading of panic or irresponsible complacency; and when is containment of such discussion preservation of the liberty from social chaos or authoritarian censorship that infringes freedom of speech, and even self-defeatingly obstructs necessary societal learning?

This is evidently not the place to answer or address any of these concerns. The point rather is that these are *genuine problems* to which society does not yet have credible answers: problems of our currently inadequate definition of liberty in particular, and problems that society will increasingly face as future decades of profound but inescapable societal and environmental disruption crash across our bows. The woefully incompetent response to the pandemic of many countries, including those supposedly bastions of liberal democracy, is evidence not just of self-serving malice and venal incompetence (though it is, of course, unquestionably this too). Indeed, perhaps it is not even *primarily* illustrations of these failings. Rather these vices have been allowed to characterize the governmental response, especially in the US and UK, because there has been no meaningful discussion at all about the real political issue the pandemic has foregrounded, namely liberty.²

Note too that this is the case even as 'liberty' has emerged as battle cry for anti-lockdown protest and political commentary. For the loudest and largest section of this opinion is simply unreflexive – and often *illiberal* – rallying to precisely the inadequate conceptions of liberty that are the root of the current problem(s). While certainly reminding us of its supreme importance, the dog's dinner of Covid response in the 'West' shows us that we need to stop and *rethink* our understanding of liberty, not just mobilize to its cause, as if we already understood what it is.

Indeed, if anything demonstrates the foundational disruption to our politics and the key role of our currently unsettled conceptions of liberty, it is surely the surprising political coalitions and unfamiliar bedfellows that have emerged through the pandemic, and on both sides of lockdown debate. Those most vocal in its support include both a left concerned for public health and for those most exposed or vulnerable to the disease – and, of course, largely in favour of big state intervention – but also a right that is fearful of 'foreign' disease, anti-immigration and prone to securitize such emergencies. Conversely, vocal opponents of lockdown obviously include armed far right groups and baying Trumpist mobs, but also modestly 'small c' conservatives and capital-L Liberals genuinely concerned about new and overreaching state powers, and even left-wing egalitarians concerned about how lockdown harms the (global) poor hardest.

² As an aside, the same could be said of the broader crisis in liberal democracy, which is at root a crisis in liberty and its role in the constitution of national polities, not some haemorrhaging in support for liberal democratic vs. authoritarian government; a Cassandra misreading that merely reflects, and serves to strengthen, the distorted boogiemans of a rising China.

These are not new coalitions that will last. But they do signal that questions of – and specific understandings of – liberty are live and as genuinely confused as is our understanding of these complex system problems. Moreover, they will likely continue to shake up established political spectra in ways that diametrically oppose the polarization of opinion driven by the headline, social media dynamic of the ‘justice’ vs. ‘liberty’ confrontation. In this regard, therefore, we again see how rethinking liberty has promise of being *productively* destabilizing while focusing on justice alone simply tends to entrench division and enmity, hence feeding self-defeating dynamics overall.

As I write this, it appears that a vaccine has been created for Covid, so perhaps this specific issue will go away in 2021, as quickly as it arose. But the questions and shortcomings in our politics and systems of government illuminated by the pandemic will not disappear so quickly, and, rather, can be expected to be tested and exposed unrelentingly over the next few decades. Consider climate change. Even supposedly ‘easy’ issues of moral choice regarding the changes to our ways of life seemingly required of any meaningful response to this planetary emergency are actually not so lightly dismissed – and especially as issues of serious political change, not just moralistic grandstanding. It is easy to argue that there is simply no place for aviation in the urgently needed low-carbon world, perhaps even for ‘essential business’ and trade, but certainly not for relatively cheap, long-distance tourism. But whether this argument is actually convincing to many, let alone most, is quite another matter – with the presumed understandings of the liberty and associated ‘good life’ they would thereby be sacrificing obviously the major objection. Likewise, what of the global South economies that would be decimated by a permanent collapse in such tourism?

But such issues are but low-hanging fruit compared to the excruciating and intricate questions that climate change is going to throw up for our societies. In short, where climate change is (correctly!) understood as a matter of planetary emergency, where does liberty fit in this picture? Nor is this simply a rhetorical question, supposedly gesticulating at the terrifying conclusion: ‘nowhere!’ To the contrary, things are not even that ‘easy’, if dystopian, for it is actually the case – as alluded above – that the unprecedented rapid transformation of our societies that is needed actually *presupposes* multiple forms and exertions of individual liberty, if only to avoid an economic collapse and ensuing chaos that would itself consign any prospect of expedited climate action to the dustbin; e.g. in terms of new innovations, and both their invention and adoption, new forms of energised, bottom-up participatory governance and evolution of human desires, in actual individuals across the world, to a focus on post-materialist sources of pleasure. Last, but by no means least, there is simply no prospect of anything resembling accelerated and just transition without a huge wave of bottom-up and dispersed *learning*, and this itself cannot be forced (though certainly supported and enabled) but is premised upon individual liberty. The urgency for serious public and political discussion about liberty, thus, could hardly be greater.

To sum up, then, we have established two key points. First, that liberty really matters to the constitution of a free polity and that people somehow instinctively know how important it is, so that it really matters to them personally too. As such, they can also be expected to be energised to vote for liberty if they feel it is in question or jeopardy. And secondly, that the new world of complex system problems and the challenges of governing them well has exposed our current understanding of liberty as profoundly problematic, hence calling for an urgent but medium-term political project of reclaiming and updating that understanding, and with it the foundation of a thriving democratic society.

But let us return to the present – and our question regarding the US election: how was this possible? The premise of this question remains intact: that one of the candidates – indeed, the incumbent – is singularly and, after 4 years, evidently unfit to be President; that he is a uniquely polarizing and divisive figure whose effect has been shown to be disastrous for the US polity; and that four more years of him at the helm risks being a catastrophic blow to the nation, and the world. It is also the case, therefore, that Trump’s presence in the 2020 election was the central and ‘efficient’ cause of the outcome, which must feature in explanation of the result. Yet the outcome apparently defies all explanation from this set up alone. Set in the context of the above argument regarding the societal crisis of our understanding of the constitutional foundation stone of a democratic polity – and *especially* the US, ‘sweet land of liberty’ –, however, everything fits seamlessly into place. Let us take our three facts in turn.

First, the record turnout for the whole election. Trump is clearly a key factor in this outcome, having electrified Americans’ political consciousness, as would be expected given the current chaos and street violence evident for all to see. Yet since this record turnout was not *just* to vote Trump out, there has to be more going on. To see what this is, we need to turn to our second fact, namely that there was a record surge in voters both against *and for* Trump, *and* that this latter included an incredible swing *towards* Trump from almost every demographic, with a notable exception of white men; hence amongst every demographic that Trump has insulted, harmed and shown to be prejudiced against in the last 4 years. How can *so many* Americans have chosen this man, and especially so many *more* of those who are supposedly his primary victims? How can so many Americans have voted for their own continuing collective misery, if not individual ‘exploitation’? Certainly, our starting point, setting this up as a genuine question, has to be that this many Americans cannot have voted as they did out of malice or greed or stupidity or white supremacy – though, no doubt, this covers many of his supporters. So let us simply dispose of this shamefully patronising analysis.

It is at this point that the background outlined above comes into play. For Trump has shown himself to be the vile and narcissistic bigot he is in this broader context of both (1) urgent complex system problems – and new, associated questions of justice and even human survival, surely a primary aspect of ‘justice’ – and (2) epochal instability in our concept of liberty, the cornerstone of our societies, which has thereby resensitized the polity to its importance. First, regarding point (1), it is thus perfectly understandable that his dismissal of just such existential issues, and indeed deliberate incitement of diametrically oppositional stances, has elicited a powerful backlash. And this obviously includes those justifiably terrified about how bad things could get – not least as Trump himself continues to poison the public sphere and disparage and dismantle the structures of state – and the opportunities being missed for urgent action in response, which can only incubate further fear and public angst as the unaddressed problems grow. With Trump as unshiftable pole, though, this response has come to be dominated, in vehemence and bandwidth if not popular support, by the opposite extreme on the Left, of those explicitly adopting the banner of justice-against-liberty.

Secondly, though, regarding point (2), in the context of a heightened popular sensitivity to the importance of liberty, however tacit or subliminal, this movement on the extreme cultural/identitarian Left is likely to alienate and mobilize *against* its cry just as many, if not many more, as it excites and inspires. Moreover, with both an emergent polar opposite to Trump seemingly dominating the conversation and party on the Left *and* the unsettled but still-inadequate-incumbent understanding of ‘liberty’, the categorically and demonstrably illiberal

Trump is thereby crowned – against all odds – as the standard bearer for ‘liberty’; of course, in the form of liberty-*against*-justice.

Together then, the rise of Trump *and the militant Woke reaction* (i.e. militant in the sense of being even ‘open-minded’ to the need for ‘violent struggle’, if not actively inciting and participating in it) have fed each other and have *together* electrified that great majority of Americans – and of all ethnicities, sexualities, genders, classes etc... – out of their sofas and into the (proverbial) polling booth, hence the record turnout *per se*. Moreover, so threatening and repugnant is the latter, as justice-*against*-liberty, to this great middle of opinion and so polarizing is it regarding the options presented in this election, that many have voted – against all reasonable understanding – by siding *against* ‘Justice’(-not-liberty) and *with* its nemesis, which thereby *becomes* ‘Liberty’(-not-justice). Indeed, they have voted enthusiastically and in record numbers, not opted out in despairing resignation at the terrible choices on offer. In the greatest of all ironies, therefore, the most radical of revolutionaries have actually elevated Trump into the unlikeliest of heroes of liberty, something he could never have achieved on his own. In short, for a great number of Americans, *so important* is liberty that when it was understood to be in jeopardy many gladly held their noses and voted for the unelectable constitutional wrecking-ball rather than risk what was interpreted as a different, but even worse, fundamental assault on their country; and even as this latter movement has itself been turbocharged by Trump over the last four years, as his bastard offspring, and would most likely be again over another four, in a rather sick form of symbiosis.

And this was even true of groups who according to all normal expectation, let alone the voguish logic of identity politics, should be particularly offended and appalled by a Trump presidency. Yet from the perspective of this analysis, why should we expect otherwise, given any reasonable account of these groups as just as concerned with liberty, just as hostile to justice-without-liberty and, indeed, just as American as the proverbial white male that is his core constituency? Here, in other words, we have not just an election dominated by two extreme and unpalatable options, but also one in which the particular dangers of one side – and *to liberty in particular* – have been widely interpreted as so great that they trump all other considerations (no pun intended). Moreover, understood in these terms it is surely hard, even as an implacable opponent of Trump, not to extend to these record-breaking number of Trump voters a single cheer, standing as many have, understandably and not entirely discredibly, and in record numbers with what is indeed the cornerstone (however disfigured) of the US constitutional order against a version of ‘justice’ that has clear totalitarian tendencies.

It follows that if anything tipped the balance just enough in Biden’s favour it was possibly Covid, but most likely Biden himself: his studied and explicitly centre-ground and nation-unifying message, and the credibility of this pitch given his longstanding career in the public eye at the highest levels, well-documented and reliable character and reputation for precisely such a brand of politics, all of which diluted the kryptonite-like repulsion³ of others in his party to these crucial voters. Our final fact thus also becomes intelligible, namely the simply outrageous closeness of the contest. For as a Manichean contest between Liberty-not-justice and Justice-not-liberty one would precisely predict an all-but 50/50 split – a coin toss –, probably leaning (and especially in America) towards the *former*, but tilted back the other way by Biden and the personal contrast of his character with Trump’s.

³ I thank my friend Henry Brace for this analogy.

What, then, is there to learn from this election, this extraordinary periodic exercise in learning about the public's political will? By now the message should be loud and clear: so compelling and crucial is liberty, even in the bastardized, mutilated form of liberty-not-justice, and *especially* set against the even more dystopic justice-not-liberty, that almost 50% of Americans chose to vote for the worst President imaginable, and a mortal threat to political order in their country. The implications are clear, and both immediate and political, *and* more profound and societal.

Regarding the former, it is clear that Biden must stick unrelentingly to his programme of reunification and 'one nation' leadership, and deny all calls for high-level office for those from the justice-not-liberty extreme. It must be added here that what *counts* as this extreme is indeed an issue of genuine debate. For instance, an American Green New Deal of some description would seem to be eminently sensible, not the crazed dream of self-declared communists – at least in certain forms, though with the devil obviously in the detail. But certainly Biden should understand he owes absolutely nothing to that constituency; indeed, far from 'winning it for him', as they now seem to be claiming, they very nearly *cost* him the election. For they may well have energized support on his side (though even this is debatable, as it was likely opposition to Trump, not support for Biden, that did this, as equivocal and begrudging statements from this group during the campaign confirmed), but they also energized votes *against* – and seemingly a great deal more effectively. Moreover, this sidelining should now become progressively easier as the great driver of the whole process of polarization and division, i.e. Trump, is at least deprived of executive powers, thereby also calming the febrile atmosphere that offered perfect conditions for the rise of his polar opposite. The poisoned thorn has been drawn, and perhaps now some healing can begin.

Regarding the latter, though, and of much greater significance still, is the key strategic lesson of this whole argument: that things will actually only begin to change for the better when the manifestly illiberal and still thriving Trumpism (if not Trump himself) is robbed of its implausible moniker as the champion of liberty; that this in turn depends upon the left and centre-ground committing to reclaim liberty themselves, and as *liberty* not just liberty-against-justice; that liberty is simply too important and too much in question today to neglect or take for granted, thereby handing the term to fringe groups on the far right; that the strategic direction for a Biden presidency therefore has to be to privilege arguments for liberty, with justice as secondary, if still crucial, hence as liberty-*with*-justice and justice-*with*-liberty; and that all of this is part of longer-term project of *building on* the liberties already secured in the 'land of the free' – not gleefully *destroying* them – towards open, constructive and probing public debate about what 'liberty' is in an age of complex system problems and how exactly it needs to be upgraded, not abandoned.

In other words, the lesson of this election is clear: we need to talk about liberty.

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