

Some Reflections on the Limits of Liberalism

(Asghar Ali Engineer Memorial Lecture 2017)

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It is an honour for me to give this lecture in memory of Asghar Ali Engineer, one of India's most distinguished and courageous public intellectuals and activists. I didn't really know him, though we had met on one occasion at a conference and snatched an afternoon to talk at some length, a conversation in which I was much instructed by him about the recurring communal riots in India: their common patterns, their regional divergences, and their deeper underlying causes. The meeting had a personal effect on me. I remember that I came away from it with the impression that only someone like him –and not me-- could write about Muslims and Muslim politics in India effectively. His rootedness in his community despite the notorious excommunication, his linguistic mastery of Arabi and Pharsi, his long study of the Quran, all made him an authoritative voice, however heterodox and dissenting his views were considered to be. It's not that he made me feel like a deracine, which by comparison I certainly am, it's just that I realized how important and privileged an utterance's location is. The same thing said by two people from two quite different locations (and I don't just mean geographical location, but the whole social and ideological context) can mean two quite different things, not just in terms of carrying conviction but in terms of the significance of the utterance itself. I had, of course, always known this, but that meeting brought (what I knew only instinctively) home to me in a way that amounted to a non-cancellable fact. Though I have continued to write about secularism, these locational anxieties have arrested my desire to write directly about Islam and Muslims ever since my early article called "What is a Muslim?", which I had in fact written in one feverish night, the night of the fatwah (February 14, 1989) after an interview I gave on

public television in New York.¹ In our conversation, Asghar Ali Engineer had said some shrewd things to say about that article both by way of agreement and criticism with its main claims and argument.

What I mean by the importance of location is obvious in a more specific way, as well. One reason for me, in my location of domicile in the metropolitan West, to be inhibited about writing about Islam in the critical and reformist way that I had in that essay (and as Asghar Ali Engineer had done much less academically but much more extensively and powerfully and urgently in his writings) was this. After Sept 11, 2001, there has been a cold war against Islam and everyone has been demanding of Muslims living in the West that they be critical of Islam. To do so has become a career path for Muslims and any self-respecting Muslim, with critical and reformist views about Islam, should refuse to be careerist in this way, though it has not stopped writers like Hirst Ali and Irshad Manji and others from doing so --and they have been lionized in that location for doing so. That is precisely the lionization that one should be shunning.

Consider Sartre. He is constantly reviled for not having been critical of the Soviet Union. But consider Sartre's location. Why on earth should he in the location of Paris in the context of a cold war where everyone is demanding he be critical of the Soviet Union, acquiesce in such a demand? He honourably refused to join Raymond Aron and others in doing so. Equally, it is said that Sakharov was frequently upbraided in *his* location for criticizing his government but not criticizing the terrible things that were happening in the United States such as the racism and the inequalities there, and no doubt Sakharov had the same honourable reasons as Sartre for not doing so. And I have no doubt that if Sartre was located not in Paris but in Moscow in the context of an oppressive legacy of Stalin, he would have been eloquently critical of the Soviet Union. These are the compulsions that location bestow on one, and I can't help feeling, though I may be wrong (others here would know more about it), that Asghar Ali Engineer was

¹ First published in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 18, no. 4 (Summer 1992). Revised and extended version published in Akeel Bilgrami, *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment* (Harvard University Press, 2014)

more critical of Islam and his own Dawoodi Bohra community's practices when Hindutva was less pervasive here in our country and there was less demand in the air that one shun Muslim beliefs and practices, and instead he began to focus more on his impassioned writing on secularism once Hindutva domination of our polity and society emerged from the very late 1980s on. In other words, the man we are commemorating in this lecture today, understood very well that the duty of the intellectual was to be unpopular, and it is one's locational context that differentially determines which utterance is going to be unpopular.

1. Liberalism and Its Failure to Countenance Commitment

One among many reasons for his effectiveness, I have said, is that Asghar Ali Engineer's criticisms of Islam came from his grounding and commitments as a Muslim. It is very clear from his writings that he never ceased to be a Muslim despite being considered by both his community and no doubt by other orthodoxies to be a very maverick one, and indeed it is the Quran itself and his contextualist reading and interpretation of it, that provided him with the critical resources for his own reformist claims. In fact, it was this enduring commitment that led him, for all his sympathy for free speech, to support the ban of Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* in India (a matter on which we found ourselves in disagreement on that occasion of our conversation). So, the first respect in which I want to approach my subject of the limits of liberalism is to consider the fact that this steadfastness, this tenacity of commitment, is not something that liberalism, at least in its classical and official sense, can countenance without generating real tension within its framework.

Why do I say this?

Here I must turn to a brief scrutiny of liberal doctrine. Obviously, I cannot do that in any detail in a short lecture, but let me convey it to you by way of considering an argument for liberalism, for free speech in particular, by the most eminent liberal of the last half century, John Rawls. In his rightly celebrated work, a *Theory of Justice*,² Rawls pursues one overarching goal: to provide a contractualist method for each individual in a society to choose principles to live by such that if one followed the method one could not possibly arrive at a social contract with principles that were biased in own one's favour. That is what he meant when he called these principles 'justice as fairness'. For him there were two such principles one would arrive at by his method, one of which he called the 'maximin principle' and the other, the 'principle of liberty, which included chiefly the liberty of speech and expression. I will focus on the latter.

The method Rawls's proposes is very well-known, so let me give the briefest of expositions to make my point. He proposes that when each individual contractor in a social contract chooses the principles for his society to live by, he or she must do so without any knowledge of the *substantive* values he has. What he meant by substantive principles was something roughly like this. If someone is, say, a Muslim or a socialist or a lover of cricket, he must simply be denied knowledge of those facts. To use Rawls's term, 'a veil of ignorance' must be drawn over his own Islamic or socialist or cricketing values and he must choose the principles to live by without knowing that he possesses those values. And Rawls claims that principles one chooses in this way could not possibly be principles that would be biased in one's own favour. And moreover, he claims one would --when one follows this method--choose 'the principle of liberty', most prominently free speech.

To put it another way, each individual who enters a social contract via such a method, is given the following instruction: Choose only those principles that you would live by *no matter what you imagine yourself to be when this veil of ignorance is lifted*. In other words, there is no gambling allowed when one is choosing the principles, i.e., one cannot think, 'Oh well there is only about a 10% chance that I will

² John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1971)

be a socialist, so why don't I choose the principle of private ownership of property'. Rawls doesn't allow that because if it does turn out that when the veil of ignorance is lifted, he finds that he *is* a socialist, he will regret having chosen that principle. But there should be no regret once the veil is lifted, one should be able to live by what one has chosen wholeheartedly, and that is why each contractor is disallowed gambling and is told instead: chose that principle to live by, *no matter what you imagine yourself to be* when the veil is lifted. In that sense, the method is one of risk-aversiveness. And free speech, he claimed, was a principle that would be chosen if one followed this risk-averse method.

Immediately after this work was published there was a chorus of protest by philosophers calling themselves 'communitarians', who claimed that there is no reason to think that someone behind the veil of ignorance who imagines himself to be a devout Muslim when the veil is lifted would choose free speech since he may well imagine that one day he might want to ban the book of an Indo-Anglian novelist which trashes his most cherished religious feelings and values. Now, I don't want to discuss at all to day the debate between communitarians and liberals. I am neither a liberal nor a communitarian. I mention this criticism of Rawls by the communitarians only so as to lead into the notion of commitment, which I think liberalism cannot really accommodate without intolerable tension within itself.

In subsequent writing, Rawls's counter to this obvious and simple objection by the communitarians was to point out that these critics were missing a crucial point in his liberal doctrine. He points out that the 'veil of ignorance' only banishes knowledge of one's own substantive values (such as to Islam or to socialism or to cricket, etc.), it does not banish general knowledge of human beings and their tendencies, and one tendency possessed generally by human beings is that we, each one of us, often *change our minds and revise our values*. That is a general truth we know about ourselves and this knowledge is allowed to us when we choose the principles to live by behind the veil of ignorance. And he concludes that, on the basis of this knowledge of our tendency to revise our own views from time to time, even a person behind the veil who imagines that he will turn out to be a devout Muslim when the veil is lifted, would still

choose the principle of liberty of speech because he will want to protect *his future possibly revised* beliefs and values which may not include Islamic beliefs and values. In short, he would choose the principle of free speech as an insurance policy for his future revised beliefs and values that may be non-Islamic. Free speech thus is rational given the human tendency to revise and change our minds.

I think that this centrality that Rawls gives to revisability in his argument for liberal notions of free speech has a long history. John Stuart Mill, in his own famous argument for free speech, had formulated a cousin of revisability in his notion of fallibility and I, in fact, believe that Rawls's revisability is just Mill's fallibility formulated in a contractualist scenario.³ It is something that goes deep in liberal attitudes towards public reason and rationality.

And it is this this absolute centrality that liberalism gives to revisability, I would argue, that goes against the very idea of commitment in the deep sense that values such as those of Islam and socialism etc., harbour (I won't cite cricket here because I actually think cricket lovers have basically abandoned their deep commitment to cricket since the inception of the illiterate slogging that is found in shorter versions of the game.) What, then, is it to have deep commitments?

I don't believe it is just to have strong or intense commitments. For one thing, intensity is too vague an idea and is not really theoretically tractable. For another, one can have intense commitments that one disapproves of in oneself. I think the only seriously theoretical way to characterize a deep commitment is as follows: It is a commitment that one has and one approves of one's having it to such an extent that if one ceased to have that commitment, one would be so disappointed in oneself that one would not really even be able to recognize oneself -- so what one does is protect those commitments in us against forces

³ I have argued that Mill's fallibilist argument for freedom of speech is fallacious in my chapter "Liberalism and the Academy" in *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment* (Harvard University Press and Permanent Black 2014). Rawls's argument that I am considering now, for all its affinities with Mill's, cannot be repudiated by the argument I gave there and I will present below a quite different argument, albeit very (much too) briefly against it.

that might make one change them, in the way for instance that Ulysses did when he bound himself to the mast to protect his family values of fidelity (to Penelope) when he felt they would be threatened by the songs of the sirens.

And so here at last we can show what I think is the first limitation of liberalism, its failure to countenance the depth of commitments, so understood, which I would argue is the most theoretically sound way to understand the nature of commitments. This is a point missed by all the communitarians who stressed the notion of community in their rejection of liberalism rather than this more abstract feature that exposes the limits of liberalism.

If I am right, notice that there is now a complete impasse that faces Rawls in his argument for free speech. He had said that one would choose free speech behind the veil of ignorance even if one imagines oneself to be a devout Muslim when the veil is lifted because of the general knowledge that is permitted behind the veil of our tendency to revise our values and beliefs. Free speech is an insurance policy that protects our future beliefs and values against our present ones. But if I am right and someone imagines himself behind the veil of ignorance to be a devout Muslim in the sense of having deep commitments to his values in the Ulysses-like sense I have just characterized commitments to be, then precisely what he will seek is a principle that protects our *present* commitments *against* revised future ones, for that is what it is to have a commitment, that is what Ulysses exactly does in tying himself to the mast of his present commitment against future revisions. The plain fact, one that liberalism simply misses, is that there is no greater rationality to wanting an insurance policy for one's future revised beliefs against one's present beliefs than there is to wanting an insurance policy for one's present beliefs against future changes of mind. It is the latter that define the nature of our deepest and most fundamental commitments.

I want to be clear about two things. First, I am not saying that Asghar Ali Engineer had this reasoning in particular that lay behind his support of the ban of Rushdie's novel. Perhaps he would find my entire argument too much of a philosopher's artifice. And second, I am not saying that my argument shows that one should not be committed to free speech. Not at all. But what I *am* saying is that liberalism in stressing revisability, fallibility, etc., as central to its doctrinal version of liberal rationality, does not have the resources to accommodate this notion of deep commitments, such as to Islam, of the sort that were exemplified in intellectuals like Asghar Ali Engineer, whether or not my theoretical frameworking of the notion of commitment is what Engineer had in mind. It may well be that if we are to provide an argument for free speech that is of a piece with deep commitments of this kind we would have to give up on the *ism* in liberalism and recover liberty outside of liberalism. After all, there is no reason why liberalism should be granted *exclusive* claims to the notion of liberty. What Asghar Ali was seeking in fact was to salvage notions of reform and of liberty within such a deep commitment to Islam.

2. Liberalism's Funk about Positive Liberty

That leads to a more general question about the nature of liberty, over and above the particular liberty attaching to speech, which is often categorized as a negative liberty or liberty conceived as non-interference rather than liberty as self-realization and self-governance. So, I want to turn briefly now to another limitation of liberalism, which is its consistent and insistent and almost panicky rejection ever since the late eighteenth century of any idea of what Isaiah Berlin⁴, a liberal cold warrior if ever there was one, came to anxiously call *positive* liberty, an idea associated first with certain ideas in Rousseau and then more explicitly in Marx, and also, as I have argued elsewhere, in Gandhi.⁵

⁴ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (

⁵ See my chapter "Gandhi (and Marx)" in Bilgrami, *ibid.*

In my work on Gandhi and on Marx, I had begun by observing that it is a very striking fact that liberal political theory of the Enlightenment never really gave any central role to the ideal of *overcoming alienation* in a way that both Marx and Gandhi did. It is this lack, I have argued, that lies behind the fact and that accounts for the fact that liberty in the liberal framework has been theorized in such a way that it is forced to be in chronic tension with liberalism's own commitment to equality, so much so that we are constantly under the zero-sum tension of being told that we can only make advances on the front of equality at the expense of not fully retaining the advances that we have made in the realm of liberty, as the latter is understood by liberal political and economic doctrine. The rhetoric of the cold war, with one side accusing the other of promoting equality at the cost of liberty and the other side claiming the vice versa of this, is just a crude manifestation of a tension that is theoretically pervasive in the familiar framework that we have inherited from the European Enlightenment. Because he rejected both liberty and equality as bourgeois ideals and instead invoked the ideal of overcoming alienation, that is to say, the ideal of an unalienated life, as being the more central goal of politics, Marx, I have argued, is not really a figure in the trajectory of the Enlightenment but in a quite different trajectory of Romantic thought in which Gandhi was a much later figure, who also similarly gave no central role to liberty and equality, but instead also stressed the ideal of an unalienated life --though (obviously) he developed that idea very differently from Marx. I do not have the time here to spell out the precise ways in which making the unalienated life central to our understanding of politics allows for a notion of liberty that is *not* at odds with equality in the way that it is within a liberal framework. I have written about this at length elsewhere recently and there is no point in repeating myself.⁶ But I will say this. The transformation of the notion of liberty when it is situated in the even more fundamental ideal of an unalienated life is plausibly described as the construction of an ideal of positive liberty that Rousseau was seeking and that some of Marx's and Gandhi's ideas made possible.

⁶ See my "Value, Rationality, and Alienation" with a comment on it by Sanjay Reddy in Akeel Bilgrami (ed.) *Nature and Value* (forthcoming Columbia University Press, 2018).

I believe that the alarms that that ideal creates in liberals would be hushed if the details of this particular transformation are properly appreciated, but once that is done, it would not amount to an internal improvement within liberalism but a transcending of it and its theoretical limitations. Though, as I said, I cannot expound all this here, I do want to say just a little bit about what exactly causes those alarms about positive liberty to go off in the liberal mind, so as to explore further what the doctrine's limitations are.

What is the source of this abiding funk on the part of liberalism regarding what Berlin called 'positive' liberty? Notions of positive liberty are basically committed to freedom as a form of self-realization in which one is emancipated in some sense by the flowering of what one's self or identity really, and more deeply, is than often appears on the surface. Both Marx and Gandhi described this as a form of emancipation through an overcoming of alienation from oneself and from others in a social formation – in Marx's case the focus was on conditions of labour in the modernity that capitalism had ushered in as the particular source of the alienation to be overcome, whereas Gandhi, though he also focused on the harms of modernity, spoke of alienation in much more general terms as owing to the centrality that had been given in the modern period to a scientific and intellectualizing relation to the social world, an oligarchy of 'expertise', as he put it, and he sought to overcome it not through a socialist revolutionary transformation but by a sense of practical engagement through the habits and dignity of quotidian work in an unself-consciously cooperative ethos, and through acts, often self-sacrificing acts, of moral exemplarity. But for both Marx and Gandhi such an overcoming would result in a form of a form of freedom in the positive sense, a flowering of a deeper self that was not always immediately available to one's conscious understanding of oneself, at least not until its release as a result of this emancipation via the achievement of this ideal of an unalienated life.

The anxiety that such a conception of freedom generates in liberalism is that it presupposes a conception of a self or an identity that we may not even be aware of. Isaiah Berlin, in his essay is particularly fearful of this idea as it surfaces in Bolshevism. As Berlin sees it, the idea has it that you are something you

don't even know you are until a Leninist vanguard, who alone knows the forward march of history, reveals your true self to you by peeling away the layers of false consciousness that protected you from knowing it. That is, it reveals your true consciousness that is given to you objectively (even if you are not aware of it) simply by the class to which you belong in the particular period of history you are born in. Basically, it is an anxiety about objectivity. Your *subjectivity* is being passed off as an *objectivity* by those who claim to know something you don't (a theory of history) and therefore know something you are that you don't yourself know. In other words, in the name of liberty or freedom, you are being deprived of your own agency in the subjective sense. The cliché in Rousseau's unblushingly paradoxical slogan: 'forcing you to be free' is invoked as a mantra to express this anxiety.

Let's explore this anxiety with a very obvious and specific case that we are all familiar with. In any oppressed group of people in a society, whether that is understood in class terms or caste terms or gender terms, the claim is that there is an objective identity that this group has which its members may not even be aware of and they may instead be pursuing a life and values that are quite at odds with their deeper identity. Thus a proletarian may be aspiring to a life of bourgeois luxury or pursuing merely economic demands for improved wages, but shunning all revolutionary aspirations. To make things vivid, let us say he or she is actually *opposed* to such aspirations and is quite explicitly committed to class docility. Or an oppressed dalit is simply accepting of a caste hierarchy as an inevitable given of his life. These descriptions of false consciousness are utterly familiar to us, yet they are the site of one of the deepest issues of philosophy because they go beyond notions of equality --which they are seemingly about on the surface-- to questions of agency which underlie them at a deeper level.

This issue of agency emerges in the fact that there is a theoretical assumption regarding positive liberty, which says that *nothing in the subject's behavior* need reveal the true self. That true self survives even the explicit denial of its existence by the subject who is said to have it. Others (the vanguard, in Berlin's polemic) know one but we don't know ourselves. And moreover, they know one better, not on the basis

of one's behavior, not even one's unconscious behavior (and so on this point Marx is more radical than Freud, it is said, since the latter at least requires unconscious behavior as revealing of oneself.). Rather they know it because they are armed with an objective account of history and each person or groups place and role in it.

And what liberalism repudiates in repudiating this picture is the methodological assumption that nothing in one's behavior is required to be the source of one's being attributed a certain identity or self. In short, liberalism presupposes a methodological assumption of 'behaviourism' in some broad sense of that term, some notion of what decision theorists call 'revealed' preferences. If one does not attribute properties to someone on the basis of their behavior in even the broadest sense of the term 'behaviour', i.e., if it is not attributed to them on the basis of what they do or say or think (or, as some decision theorists might say, their choices in the bets you offer them), you are depriving them of their agency.

Now, why do I say such a behaviourist methodological assumption of liberalism is a sign of its limitations? In answer to this question, it is tempting to say something simple and intuitive by way of a response: that it is preposterous to deny that a subject is oppressed, even if the behaviour of the subject reveals that he acquiesces in its oppression, because its being oppressed is to be measured by standards that go beyond what the subject may himself may grasp or express in any way. This response is too simple because it is not taking seriously at all the tug of argument from agency that the liberal is appealing to. It is openly conceding that there may be no need to rely on the oppressed subject's agency when it comes to defining what counts as oppression. But must we concede this in order to find the liberal wanting. Might there not be a more sophisticated response that shows the liberal's behaviouristic outlook has crucial limitations and yet take more seriously the liberal's demand that a subject not be made into an object. Or to put it differently, by taking more seriously the importance that liberalism places on a subject's agency?

Here is one way one might explore such a more sophisticated response.

Frequently, in history, populations that have been acquiescent in their oppression have transformed abruptly and in very large numbers and joined movements of social and political transformation and even revolution. This could, of course, be a change of mind on their part, a change from acquiescence to dissatisfaction and revolutionary consciousness. That is how the liberal opponent of objectivism would insist on presenting it --one subjectivity being replaced by another. But one does not have to be an objectivist to point out that both the abruptness and the large numbers to whom this sometimes happens suggests that a 'change of mind' is not a plausible explanation since changes of mind tend to emerge through deliberation or acculturation towards something new, processes that are both slow and proceed from small numbers of people to larger numbers via a variety of accumulated efforts at public education. A better explanation, indeed I would think the only explanation, of the volatility and numerical strength of such transformations is to attribute *retrospectively*, a *latent* dissatisfaction in the population even when they were explicitly acquiescent in their behavior and avowals. Without it there would be no explanation of the phenomenon. And to the extent that one can generalize from the successive revolutionary movements in the modern period (starting with the English revolution of the mid-seventeenth century and through the remarkable watershed of 1789 in France onwards) the recurring possibilities of such volatile mass mobilizations suggests that this way of conceiving the subjective mentality of oppressed peoples is far more revealing of political consciousness and identity than is found in the liberal's dismissal of the ideal of positive liberty. In fact, since it is precisely the presence of these possibilities which underlie the plausibility of the ideal of positive liberty that explains the liberal funk about the ideal.

This attempt at a more sophisticated response to the liberal challenge to the notion of positive liberty I have offered does not give up the link between agency and behavior. It simply does not require that the link be simultaneous. It may be thought that if there is this link to behaviour something of the 'objectivity' in, the objectivist position is compromised. But it should not be seen as a wholesale

cancellation of objectivity since objectivist positions that do not require even this minimal theoretical link with behavior and agency are, in any case, marred by an ulterior form of transcendence in the understanding of self and identity that seems irrelevant to the study of society and history. What both Gandhi and Marx believed in believing that revolutionary transformation is possible (and Gandhi believed it as much as Marx, though he did not think of it in socialist terms, as we all know) is precisely that it allowed for the attribution of such a form of latent consciousness to explain its possibility, something that liberalism simply does not have any space for partly because it is a doctrine that got formed (in the articulation we have come to know it by) as a result of being spooked by the aftermath of two revolutionary transformations, the Jacobin aftermath of the French Revolution and the long Stalinist aftermath of the October Revolution, a spook that is everywhere evident in the orthodoxies that are reflected in Berlin's quite accurate summary of liberal notions of freedom.

I believe that it is this subject –broadly speaking, the subject of false consciousness-- that is never far from the surface in the contemporary emergence of populisms in different parts of the world, though since all liberals are so angered (and often rightly angered) by such populisms they fail to focus on the topic of false consciousness and instead see it in utterly superficial terms. So, it is to this more topical phenomenon of populism that I now turn to expose yet another limitation of liberalism.

The Cramping of Possibilities: Populism versus Liberalism

The topic of populism has spawned an endless amount of punditry in the newspapers and even in books and journals. And part of what makes it a complex subject today is that one needs to analyze not just the nature of populism itself but the shortcomings of the voluminous chatter about it since the latter contributes greatly to our inability to see through to what is fundamental in populism. In a way the

harder problem given the incessant liberal hysteria against it, is to raise the right questions on the topic than it is to give answers to them.

Some preliminary, ground-clearing points first.

The first and obvious thing to notice about the subject is that there are distinctions to be made within populism. There is the *anti*-globalization populism, as for example in the United States and Britain, and there is the *pro*-globalization populism in countries like India which got the present government elected and keeps it sustained.

Then there is the distinction between Right-wing and Left-wing populism, i.e., between, on the one hand, someone like Trump or Modi or Farage and, on the other, the leaders on the Left who are labeled (and *dismissed* by liberals as) populists, such as Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. And the very fact that the punditry which repudiates the Right-wing populists is equally dismissive of the Left-wing populists is a sure sign that these two populisms do not just target each other but (more deeply) target the liberal political establishment which this punditry represents. That Left-wing populists are strongly opposed to the populist Right is no reason at all to think that they are to be equated with the liberal political establishment that opposes Right wing populism as well. I repeat: when they are clear-eyed about what is needed and what the really ambitious tasks that lie ahead for them are, the ultimate and most difficult enemy of Left-wing populism is not the Right-wing populists but the liberal ideology that has accumulated over the last three centuries.

One last preliminary point. These two distinctions within populism (pro/anti-globalization, and left/right) do not, by any means, coincide since one can oppose globalization from the point of view of the right or the left. Yet, despite these non-coinciding distinctions within populism, it would be a sign of a lack of theoretical ambition if we failed to seek a common element in all these different populisms that the

distinctions identify. But that is no easy task since it is not at all obvious what the common element is; and what the pundits in the media and the academy have identified as the common element is utterly shallow. One can say obvious things about the common element such as that they all appeal to ‘the people’, but then so does democracy and populism is different from democracy even though it may share some properties with it; and populism is also to be distinguished from revolutionary movements that also appeal to the people. What may also rightly be said about the common element is that all populisms, however different, seek to identify an orthodoxy or an establishment in politics and oppose it, whether it be Trump and Brexiteers opposing the congealing orthodoxies of the two parties in their countries of the last many years or whether it is Modi’s opposition to the orthodoxies of the Congress dominance of Indian politics in the past and the immediately preceding decade before Modi’s victory. But what is the exact nature of the orthodoxy and why and how are they opposing it in the form of populism is the hard question.

What is missing in the highly reactive analysis by the punditry of these movements today is that they don’t really seek answers to these questions *from the point of view of the working people* who to a very considerable extent dominate these movements. Edward Luce, who was until quite recently a journalist assigned to South Asia but is now on the American desk of the *Financial Times* reported on Donald Trump’s inaugural ceremony by saying this: “Obama’s inaugural eight years ago radiated hope, Trump’s inaugural by contrast channeled hatred.” (*Financial Times*, January 20, 2017) This statement is actually perfectly accurate. But in his typically shallow way, Luce, proceeds in the rest of the report to express his liberal dislike of Trump, a dislike one may well share even if one is not a liberal, but he does not once draw the obvious lesson from this contrast which he has accurately presented –that the hope that was placed in Obama by working people was never fulfilled, and *hence* the rage. As a result, Obama comes off in the report as the figure who will be recalled by posterity as the angel who was displaced by the devil because of the prejudices of the racist, misogynist, xenophobic, white working population of the country. But there is no indication anywhere in the article of what should be obvious to anyone who

looks at the contrast from the point of view of the working people among the electorate who voted for Trump, which is their perfectly sensible refusal to believe that Obama's anointed successor in the Democratic party, nor even the orthodox core of the Republican party, would fulfill the hopes that Obama had not fulfilled.

Brexit, as we know, channeled much the same rage against Britain's political establishment.

But the political establishment is not a self-standing class. Even a glance at the lineup of support for the Remain vote and for Clinton (both in the primaries against Sanders and against Trump in the presidential elections) shows the extent to which what underlies the political class is a parade of corporate and banking elites, ranging from the IMF, Wall Street, OECD, and Soros, to the Governor of the Bank of England.

That leads into the subject of how to understand the meaning of 'populism' as a term of opprobrium. The term is defined by dictionaries as 'ordinary people's opposition to elites'. So defined, it is too underdescribed to be a term of opprobrium. After all, *democracy* is intended to give ordinary people a chance to counter elites through representative politics. What populism adds to democracy is that it opposes the power of *unelected* officials with specific economic interests to dominate the formation of policies --with the general acquiescence of elected representatives. But this still does not capture what we instinctively recoil from in populism. How can it be wrong to oppose the voluntary implicit surrender of sovereignty by elected law makers and policy makers to unelected wielders of elite financial interests?

Brexit is a good example of 'populism' to focus on to get clear about the issues that we face and also to get clear about why 'populism' has come to mean something pejorative. If we look at the issues from the point of view of working people, the underlying issues raised by Brexit are about the British working class's relation to the European Union. What prompted the larger part of a working, voting population of

a nation to opt out of a supra-nation? Well I am not going to answer that question in a short lecture but instead I want to step back and ask a much more fundamental question which is: why should they have wanted to be part of a supra-nation like the European Union in the first place. Let's put ourselves in the shoes of a working (or workless) person in the Thames Estuary or in Liverpool. Suppose such a person were to ponder the humane policies that his country came to embrace since the Second World War, policies which provided safety nets (whether of health or education or housing) for people like him. He might ask: what was the site where these safety nets were administered and implemented? And he would answer: well, the site of the nation. He might scratch his head and wonder: Has there ever been a supra-national site at which welfare was ever administered? What would a mechanism that dispensed it at a supra-national site even so much as look like? Now, as Joseph Stiglitz says in his book on the European Union⁷, there are two ways to respond to the present crisis that prompts the populist response in Europe – to withdraw from the union or to strengthen the ties with the union. But given these excellent questions that the worker from Liverpool is asking, why would he acquiesce in the strengthening of the links with the European Union? The worker's questions, reflecting fundamental and absolutely elementary sceptical concerns that working people should generally have about greater integration, reveal the good side of populism, the side of populism which is the opposition by ordinary people to the elites, in the case of Europe, the banking elites that have set themselves up in Brussels.

Now, of course, such a person might go on beyond these shrewd questions to associate supra-national affiliation with immigrant hordes who not only deprive him of economic opportunities, but dilute the centuries long national culture of which he is so proud. But there is no logical link between those excellent former questions and these latter trumped up anxieties. One may rightly ask the questions without having these anxieties. The linking of the two is quite confused and uncompulsory and it is the bad side of populism.

⁷ Joseph Stiglitz, *The Euro: How a Common Currency Threatens the Future of Europe* (Norton, 2017)

But the link is constantly made. So, a question arises: whence the compulsion to make this *uncompulsory* link? And here we must resist the temptation to blame the people themselves. The assumption they make of such a link is not due to their feebleness of mind but to a wide variety of distortions not only by the media they read and watch, but by the political class, and not just the extreme elements of that class but the political establishment. We cannot forget that the British Prime Minister's Remain campaign ratcheted up the immigration theme to prevent its being owned by his more extreme Right opposition, just as Obama in his first campaign was far worse on immigration than John McCain, again with a view to gaining ownership of a Republican platform, for electoral gains.

So the lesson is this. Even if we identify what we recoil from in populism as the uncompulsory linking of sound questions with unsound anxieties, this cannot simply be attributed to an *intrinsic incapacity* in the judgement of ordinary people, but must be attributed to the failure of public education provided by the media, the universities, and the political class. One cannot believe in democracy and dismiss the electorate as vile or stupid. For the electorate is shaped by what *knowledge* it possesses.

For twenty hundred years, philosophers have said that the central ethical question is: What ought we to do? Or, How ought we to live? But in our own complex time, the more crucial prior question has become: What ought we to know?

And the chief point I want to make is that whatever it is that one ought to know is precisely what is either denied or masked and hidden from view in liberalism's response to populism, indeed there is nothing in liberalism's theoretical repertory that allows for the necessary knowledge to surface in the political culture of liberal democracy. What liberalism fails to identify in identifying what is wrong with populism is that it is a *failure of inference*, an illogical linking of two unconnected things. Instead it entirely focuses on the xenophobia about immigration, and dismisses it wholly as a form of racism. The point is not to deny that it is xenophobic to be against immigration as white working people very often are in these countries, the point is rather that if you focus on that entirely and not see it is as a false conclusion due to

a *flawed inference* from a *true* premise, a premise which has to do with the inability of supra-national political economies (or globalization, in general) to speak to the needs and conditions of working and workless people, one is refusing to face up to something very deep about our present crises. It is shallow in the extreme to focus on the xenophobia on the part of a population without seeing it as something flawed *not just intrinsically* but *because it is a bad inference* from the *very good* questions that they are asking about globalization and supra national sites of economy which take away the sovereignty of national governments to shape the future of their own people. It is this shallowness of focusing on a conclusion and not the premise and (mis) inference from the premise that yields the conclusion, that reveals the limits of liberalism.

I want to just stay with this abstractly made diagnosis that stresses the importance of logical and illogical links for a moment longer so as to further expose these limitations of liberalism by looking at a case that is quite the inverse of what I have been saying, a case of liberalism itself equally failing to make a *good* logical inference.

To do this, consider now another populist phenomenon, the denial of climate change by Donald Trump's populist supporters. It is a remarkable fact about liberalism today that it has become greatly exercised by the severe and dramatic environmental crisis that is faced by the entire globe. This is, of course, an entirely good thing (though I have often wondered why those who had not for decades said a single angry word about global poverty are the very people who are now all worked up about the global environment - -perhaps the answer is obvious: climate change effects them whereas poverty was experienced most in distant lands). To be fair, I don't want to deny either that the Left ignored climate change issues for a very long time. I think this is because the Left never really has focused on '*future*' generations as a category of moral concern. But what is a scandalous gap in *liberal* concern about future generations and climate change in particular is that there is nowhere any acknowledgement of the fact that this is a crisis

that is simply not going to be solved unless there is an end, and I mean ‘end’, a *complete terminus*, of capitalism as we know it. I am not denying that socialist countries through the cold war contributed greatly to the conditions that have created the environmental crisis. But it is not endemic to socialism that it do so, whereas it is at the heart of capital that it will not tolerate its drive for profit by the very serious constraints that would inevitably be placed upon it if the crisis is to be sufficiently addressed.

It is not a widely known fact that Bolivia walked out of the Copenhagen climate talks a few years ago, taking other Latin American representatives with them, declaring that there was no understanding by any of the other participants that climate change would never be sufficiently addressed unless it was acknowledged that the chief cause of the crisis came from global capitalism, an acknowledgement that was entirely missing from the proceedings in Copenhagen. And it is not just world leaders in a summit who do not mention it, it is just not part of the framework of thinking in the endless hand-wringing about the environment that is pervasive in liberal circles. There is, of course, the usual disdain for Trump and the Right-wing populist denial of climate change. And that leads me to return to my point about inferences again. If p is true and q follows as a truth from the truth of p (where what substitutes for p is ‘there is a serious environmental crisis’ and what substitutes for q is ‘only a serious undermining of capitalism will sufficiently address the crisis’), why is it any less irrational to deny the proposition “If p, then q” (as the liberal does) as it is to deny the proposition p (as the Trump-supporting populist does)? Or to put it in ordinary English, is it any more irrational to deny that there is crisis of climate change that needs to be overcome, then it is to deny the inference that “if climate change is to be overcome, then we must transcend capitalism”? I don’t see that the Right-wing populist climate change deniers are any more irrational than the liberal who accepts p, who accepts that there is a crisis to be overcome, but refuses to countenance what is absolutely necessary to overcome it. This is the same shortcoming in the liberal but in inverse form, of the liberal response to the anti-globalization populist, condemning him for his xenophobia while refusing to see that what is most deeply wrong with the populist is not just his

xenophobia but the *inference* that he fallaciously draws *from a sound instinct against financial globalization* --to his xenophobia.

Why have I insisted on formulating the limits of liberalism along these abstract lines as failing to focus on failures of inference -- in the one case the populists wrong inferral of xenophobic conclusions from his good premise about the inefficacies of supra-national governance by Brussels' banking and financial elites, and in the other case the liberal's own failure to infer from his own correct disdain for the populists denial of an environmental crisis to the radical questioning of the capitalism that has generated and sustained that crisis? Because I think this failure reveals a lot about liberalism. The liberal fails to focus on the mis-inferences because he does not accept the soundness of the populist's premise in the former inference, nor accepts the unsoundness of his own refusal to countenance what needs to be addressed to sufficiently address the problem of climate change. *Why are these two very specific things not being accepted by the liberal?* The answer is obvious: because they each require a radical critique of contemporary capitalism. In other words, liberalism, is complicit in the very source of problems that generates today's populism while it fraudulently disdains and dismisses the populism that it generates. We cannot understand contemporary populism unless we understand that it is, as a result of liberalism not allowing a *vocabulary* of radical dissent from capitalism in its current form to be available in our political culture, that the 'people', which populism speaks for, turn to quite 'irrational' tendencies, even including fascistic tendencies.

I have deliberately put the term 'irrational' in scare quotes in the previous sentence. There is a widespread instinct on our part to dismiss these contemporary populist tendencies as the tendencies of 'unreason'. But I think this is a mistake. When very large sections of the population feel that the elites have set up a completely interlocked system of interests which can never be penetrated and overturned, and for which there is not even a conceptual critical vocabulary available in the mainstream of politics by which to confront it, leave alone overturn it, then they will see the whole game as rigged and will want to

kick over the whole board on which the game is being played. If that means voting for figures like Trump or Modi, so be it, they will think.

If ‘rationality’ as it is available in the discourse and the options available in politics is so cramped by liberalism’s failure to make (or even allow) any radical critique of capitalism and globalization, then ‘the people’ that constitutes populist movements will increasingly declare themselves to be ‘irrational’. I believe it is quite literally true, as Frederic Jameson the literary critic once quipped, that ‘the people’, whom populism invokes today, find it easier, with the concepts available to them in the public and political air, to conceive of the end of the world than to conceive the end of capitalism.

The blame for this at least partly lies in these limits of liberalism.
