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Against Virtue and For Modernity: Rebooting the Modern Left

Steve Fuller, University of Warwick

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My holiday message for the coming year is a call to re-boot the modern left. When I was completing my doctoral studies, just as the Cold War was beginning to wind down, the main threat to the modern left was seen as coming largely from within. ‘Postmodernism’ was the name normally given to that threat, and it fuelled various culture, canon and science wars in the 1980s and 1990s.

Indeed, even I was – and, in some circles, continue to be – seen as just such an ‘enemy of reason’, to recall the name of Richard Dawkins’ television show in which I figured as one of the accused. However, in retrospect, postmodernism was at most a harbinger for a more serious threat, which today comes from both the ‘populist’ supporters of Trump, Brexit et al. and their equally self-righteous academic critics.

Academic commentators on Trump, Brexit and the other populist turns around the world seem unable to avoid passing moral judgement on the voters who brought about these uniformly unexpected outcomes, the vast majority of which the commentators have found unwelcomed. In this context, an unholy alliance of virtue theorists and evolutionary psychologists have thrived as diagnosticians of our predicament. I say ‘unholy’ because Aristotle and Darwin suddenly find themselves on the same side of an argument, now pitched against the minds of ‘ordinary’ people. This anti-democratic place is not one in which any self-respecting modern leftist wishes to be.

To be sure, virtue theorists and evolutionary psychologists come to the matter from rather different premises – the one metaphysical if not religious and the other naturalistic if not atheistic. Nevertheless, they both regard humanity’s prospects as fundamentally constrained by our mental makeup. This makeup reflects our collective past and may even be rooted in our animal nature. Under the circumstances, so they believe, the best we can hope is to become self-conscious of our biases and limitations in processing information so that we don’t fall prey to the base political appeals that have resulted in the current wave of populism.

These diagnosticians conspicuously offer little of the positive vision or ambition that characterised ‘progressive’ politics of both liberal and socialist persuasions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But truth be told, these learned pessimists already have form. They are best seen as the culmination of a current of thought that has been percolating since the end of the Cold War effectively brought to a halt Marxism as a world-historic project of human emancipation.

In this context, the relatively upbeat message advanced by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man* that captivated much of the 1990s was premature. Fukuyama was cautiously celebrating the triumph of liberalism over socialism in the progressivist sweepstakes. But others were plotting a different course, one in which the very terms on which the Cold War had been fought would be superseded altogether. Gone would be the days when liberals and socialists vied over who could design a political economy that would benefit the most people worldwide. In its place would be a much more precarious sense of

the world order, in which overweening ambition itself turned out to be humanity's Achilles Heel, if not Original Sin.

Here the trail of books published by Alasdair MacIntyre and his philosophical and theological admirers in the wake of *After Virtue* ploughed a parallel field to such avowedly secular and scientifically minded works as Peter Singer's *A Darwinian Left* and Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate*. These two intellectual streams, both pointing to our species' inveterate shortcomings, gained increasing plausibility in light of 9/11's blindsiding on the post-Cold War neo-liberal consensus.

9/11 tore up the Cold War playbook once and for all, side-lining both the liberals and the socialists who had depended on it. Gone was the state-based politics, the strategy of mutual containment, the agreed fields of play epitomized in such phrases as 'arms race' and 'space race'. In short, gone was the game-theoretic rationality of managed global conflict. Thus began the ongoing war on 'Islamic terror'. Against this backdrop, the Iraq War proved to be colossally ill-judged, though no surprise given that its mastermind was one of the Cold War's keenest understudies, Donald Rumsfeld.

For the virtue theorists and evolutionary psychologists, the Cold War represented as far as human rationality could go in pushing back and channelling our default irrationality, albeit in the hope of lifting humanity to a 'higher' level of being. Indeed, once the USSR lost the Cold War to the US on largely financial grounds, the victorious Americans had to contend with the 'blowback' from third parties who suffered 'collateral damage' at many different levels during the Cold War. After all, the Cold War, for all its success in averting nuclear confrontation, nevertheless turned the world into a playing field for elite powers. 'First world', 'second world' and 'third world' were basically the names of the various teams in contention on the Cold War's global playing field.

So today we see an ideological struggle whose main players are those resentful (i.e. the 'populists') and those regretful (i.e. the 'anti-populists') of the entire Cold War dynamic. The only thing that these antagonists appear to agree on is the folly of 'progressivist' politics, the calling card of both modern liberalism and socialism. Indeed, both the populists and their critics are fairly characterised as somehow wanting to turn back the clock to a time when we were in closer contact with the proverbial 'ground of being', which of course the two sides define in rather different terms. But make no mistake of the underlying metaphysical premise: We are ultimately where we came from.

Notwithstanding the errors of thought and deed committed in their names, liberalism and socialism rightly denied this premise, which placed both of them in the vanguard – and eventually made them world-historic rivals – in modernist politics. Modernity raised humanity's self-regard and expectations to levels that motivated people to build a literal Heaven on Earth, in which technology would replace theology as the master science of our being. David Noble cast a characteristically informed but jaundiced eye at this proposition in his 1997 book, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention*. Interestingly, John Passmore had covered much the same terrain just as eruditely but with

greater equanimity in his 1970 book, *The Perfectibility of Man*. That the one was written after and the other during the Cold War is probably no accident.

I am mainly interested in resurrecting the modernist project in its spirit, not its letter. Many of modernity's original terms of engagement are clearly no longer tenable. But I do believe that Silicon Valley is comparable to Manchester two centuries ago, namely, a crucible of a radical liberal sensibility – call it 'Liberalism 2.0' or simply 'Alt-Liberalism' – that tries to use the ascendant technological wave to leverage a new conception of the human being.

However one judges Marx's critique of liberalism's scientific expression (aka classical political economy), the bottom line is that his arguments for socialism would never have got off the ground had liberalism not laid the groundwork for him. As we enter 2018 and seek guidance for launching a new progressivism, we would do well to keep this historical precedent in mind.

Contact details: S.W.Fuller@warwick.ac.uk