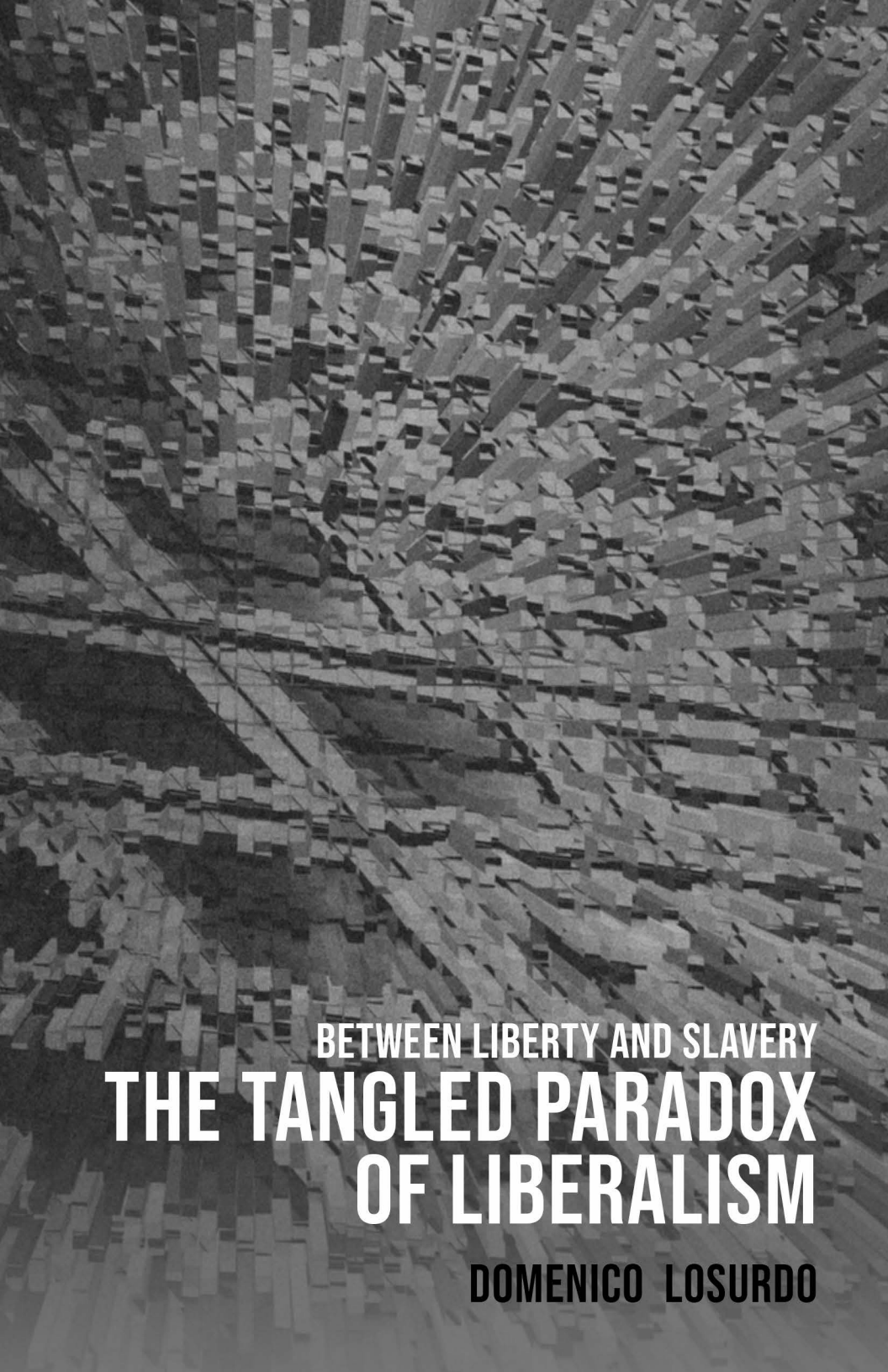

BETWEEN LIBERTY AND SLAVERY

THE TANGLED PARADOX OF LIBERALISM

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This article originally appeared in
International Socialist Review
July-August Issue 2012

Between Liberty And Slavery

The Tangled Paradox Of Liberalism

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In this brief presentation, I will try to explain the content of my book, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*. This book aims to answer a key question: what is liberalism? This question may sound superfluous and provocative at the same time. Everybody knows that liberalism is the tradition of thought and the political movement whose central concern is the freedom of the individual, of every individual. But is this the answer to my question, what is liberalism? Is this answer correct?

If that is the case, how should we situate John C. Calhoun? This eminent statesman, the vice president of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, appealed to John Locke and made an impassioned ode to individual liberty, which he vigorously defended against any abuse of power and any interference by the state. And that is not all. Along with "absolute governments" and the "concentration of power," he unstintingly condemned "fanaticism" and the spirit of "crusade," to which he opposed "compromise" as the guiding principle of genuine "constitutional governments," With equal eloquence. Calhoun defended minority rights. Unquestionably, we seem to have all the characteristics of the most mature and attractive liberal thought, On the other hand, however, Calhoun disdained the half-measures and timidity of those who restricted themselves to accepting slavery as a necessary "evil." No, Calhoun declared slavery to be "a positive good" that civilization could not possibly renounce. He repeatedly denounced intolerance and the crusading spirit, not in order to challenge the enslavement of Blacks or the ruthless hunting down of fugitive slaves, but exclusively to brand abolitionists as "blind fanatics." Blacks were not among the minorities defended with such vigor and legal erudition. So is Calhoun a liberal? We face a dilemma. If we answer this question in the affirmative, we can no longer maintain the traditional (and edifying) image of liberalism as the thought and volition of liberty. If, on the other hand, we answer in the negative, we find ourselves confronting a new problem and a new question, which is no less embarrassing than the first.

How should we situate John Locke? As the renowned historian of slavery David Brion Davis stresses, Locke was "the last major philosopher to seek a justification for absolute and perpetual slavery." He had a hand in drafting the constitutional provision according to which "every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his Negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever." If Calhoun was a slave owner, the English philosopher too had sound investments in the slave trade: he was a shareholder in the Royal African Company. We cannot exclude Calhoun from the liberal tradition, while considering Locke a liberal. The paradox we are analyzing is growing stronger: the father of liberalism is not a liberal at all?

The problem we are discussing is not restricted to some individual figures. The increase of the slave population marked the classical age of liberalism. As Robin Blackburn notes in *The Making of New World Slavery*, "The total slave population in the Americas reached around 330,000 in 1700, nearly three million by 1800, and finally peaked at over six million in the 1850s." In the mid-eighteenth century, it was Great Britain that possessed the largest number of slaves (870,000). The fact is unexpected. Although its empire was far more extensive. Spain came well behind. Second place was held by Portugal, which possessed 700,000 slaves and was in fact a kind of semi-colony of Great Britain: much of the gold extracted by Brazilian slaves ended up in London.

As for the United States, it was one of the last nations in the Americas to abolish slavery. Slavery played a very important role in the history of the country born out of the liberal American Revolution. For thirty-two of the first thirty-six years of existence of the United States, slave owners occupied the position of president, including George Washington (the great military and political protagonist of the anti-British revolt), as well as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison (authors, respectively, of the Declaration of Independence and the federal Constitution of 1787).

In brief, the thesis according to which liberalism is synonymous with liberty and defense of liberty doesn't hold water. While reconstructing the history of the two liberal revolutions, we see a tangle of the rhetoric of liberty and the reality of Black slavery.

Tangle of rhetoric and reality

This tangle is paradoxical and embarrassing. We can therefore understand the tendency to repress it. For example, Hannah Arendt argues in this way: admittedly, slavery played a great role in American society, but at the time the "indifference toward the conditions of Blacks was the historic norm on the two shores of the Atlantic. This statement is far from correct. At the time of the American Revolution, we can read a strong criticism of this institution in authors such as Condorcet in France or John Millar in Scotland. Condorcet observed. "The American [colonist] forgets that negroes are men, he has no moral relationship with them: for him they are simply objects of profit ... and such is the excess of his stupid contempt for this unhappy species that, when back in Europe, he is indignant to see them dressed like men and placed alongside him." Millar denounced "the shocking barbarity to which the negroes in our colonies are frequently exposed." But the most significant witness is perhaps a French defender of slavery, Pierre Malouet, who bitterly noted his isolation: "The extremely powerful empire of public opinion ... now offers its support to those in France and England who attack black slavery and pursue his abolition."

In fact, the thesis formulated by Arendt can even be inverted. In the classical age of liberalism, we see not only the flourishing of slavery, but the flourishing of a slavery characterized by the complete and unprecedented dehumanization of the slave. With the triumph of the market, the slave became chattel: the family of the slave was nonexistent; every individual member of this family could be bought and sold. The triumph of the market was the triumph of chattel slavery. With the flourishing of liberalism and secularism, the crown was no longer able to impose respect for the slave family or other limitations on the slave owner in the name of religion: the interferences of the political power over property disappeared completely. The property owner could dispose freely of his property, including his slaves, without restriction. At the same time, with the advent of representative bodies and self-government, we see the passing of ever stricter laws prohibiting interracial sexual and marital relations, making them a crime. We see the codification of a hereditary caste of slaves, defined by the color of their skin. The

triumph of chattel slavery is therefore the triumph of racial chattel slavery.

Many contemporaries were conscious of this new development. The British abolitionist John Wesley wrote that, "American slavery" was "the vilest that ever saw the sun." This was acknowledged by James Madison, one of the founding fathers of the American Revolution, a slave owner, and a liberal, who observed, "The most oppressive dominion ever exercised by man over man" -power based on "mere distinction of color" -was imposed "in the most enlightened period of time."

Intellectual challenge

The tangle of liberty and slavery was already an intellectual challenge in the aftermath of the American Revolution. In order to explain this point, we can compare two trips to the United States made by Alexis de Tocqueville and Victor Schoelcher. The first is well known. The second one is not less important. After the revolution of February 1848, Schoelcher became minister of the French government and was the protagonist of the definitive abolition of slavery in the French colonies. The two figures visited the United States at roughly the same time, and both noticed this tangle we speak of. On the one hand, for the white community, you have rule of law, self-government, participation in political life, and so on. On the other hand, both notice not only the enslavement of Blacks but also the decimation and extermination of the indigenous population, as well. While analyzing the social relationships and contradictions of this society, Tocqueville and Schoelcher both gave a demonstration of intellectual honesty. But their conclusions are opposite one another. While paying attention above all to the white community, Tocqueville in the tide of his book speaks of "democracy in America" and celebrates the United States as the freest country in the world. On the contrary, Schoelcher is very indignant at the "skin prejudice" of the whites and writes that the people of the United States could be considered "the most ferocious masters on earth." They are authors of "one of the most upsetting spectacles the world has ever offered" he noted, adding, "There is no cruelty of the most barbarous age that is not been committed by the

slave states of North America." Which one was right, Tocqueville or Schoelcher? Perhaps they were both wrong. Neither one can explain the tangle of liberty and slavery.

So, how can we define this political and social order? Following the suggestion of several distinguished US historians and sociologists, we should speak of a "Herrenvolk democracy," a democracy that applied exclusively to the "master race." Only in this way are we able to understand the tangle of liberty and slavery that has characterized US society and the history of liberalism.

Negative consequences for whites, too

I have said that in the evaluation of American society Tocqueville and Shoelcher were both wrong. But now I must add that the first was more incorrect than the second. Why? Even if we abstract from the condition of the Blacks and of the indigenous population-even if we consider only the white community-the comfortable conclusion of Tocqueville is flawed. The reason is very simple. The absolute power exercised over Black slaves ended up having negative and even dramatic consequences for whites, too.

Let us heed Tocqueville: Blacks had been "forbidden ...under severe penalties, to be taught to read or write." After Nat Turner's slave rebellion, it became a crime in Georgia to provide a slave with paper and writing materials. But these racist measures had consequences for whites as well as Blacks. Particularly significant was the legislation that banned interracial sexual relations and marriages. Take Pennsylvania in the early decades of the eighteenth century (in the decades following the Glorious Revolution and the birth of liberal England). Any free Black caught violating the ban on miscegenation (as it later came to be called), risked being sold as a slave. This involved serious consequences for his white partner, who had to suffer forced separation from her loved one and the terrible punishment inflicted on him. More summary was New York legislation that treated all children born of a slave mother as slaves. As has justly been noted, in enslaving "their children and their children's children," white people were in fact "enslaving themselves."

And that is not all. According to the provisions made in Virginia at the start of the eighteenth century, not only those directly

responsible for the sexual or marital relation were to be punished: "extreme severe penalties" were prescribed for the priest guilty of having consecrated an interracial family bond. And hence religious freedom itself was in some sense affected.

We can now understand better the deep truth of the observation of Marx and Engels that a people cannot be free while oppressing another. The measures needed in order to perpetuate slavery ended with severely restricting the liberty of the white freemen themselves. As Schoelcher noted, lynching threatened anyone who dared to challenge the "iniquitous property" and "demand freedom for all members of the human race."

We can make a comparison. The situation in Virginia immediately after the 1831 slave revolt was described as follows: "Military service [by white patrols 1 is performed night and day, Richmond resembles a town besieged ....[T]he negroes '" will not venture to communicate with one another for fear of punishment." In a letter written at the end of 1850, Joel R. Poinsett described the situation in the South in the years preceding the Civil War: "We are heartily sick of this atmosphere redolent of insane violence .... There is a strong party averse to violent men and violent measures, but they are frightened into submission-afraid even to exchange opinions with others who think like themselves, lest they should be betrayed." A contemporary historian who cited Poinsett's testimony concluded that even the mildest dissenters were impelled by terror into "holding one's tongue, killing one's doubts, burying one's reservations."

British Empire and slavery.

Until now I have spoken above all of the United States. Is master race democracy a peculiarly American institution? Let us analyze the political and social order of England. Slavery has played an important role in British history, too. Until at least the abolition of slavery in the colonies, in the British Empire we see something like the master race democracy at work. It is true, the abolition of slavery in the British colonies took place thirty years before -the emancipation of the US slaves, but we must not lose sight of the fact that in the British colonies the "coolies" from India and China took the place of the former Black slaves. Not by chance, on their arrival in the British

colonies, the coolies were settled in the accommodation reserved for slaves. In Britain in 1840, Lord John Russell expressed his unease at he advent of a "new system of slavery:' But already in 1834, the year of the abolition of slavery in the British colonies, the liberal author Edward Gibbon Wakefield acknowledged that "yellow slaves" (coolies) were beginning to take the place of "Blacks," just as the latter had taken over from the "red slaves."

In reality, master race democracy marks the history of the liberal West as such. Take for instance liberal France in the 1830s and 1840s and the classical liberal author, Tocqueville. In order to fulfill the conquest of Algeria, he was ready to enact the strongest measures. He criticizes those in France who consider "reprehensible that crops are burned, silos emptied, and lastly that unarmed men, women, and children are seized. For me, this is a regrettable necessity but one to which any people that wants to make war on the Arab will have to submit:' Tocqueville had no hesitation in issuing a radical watchword: "To destroy anything that resembles a permanent gathering of population or, in other words, a town. I believe it is of the utmost importance not to allow any town to survive, or arise, in the region controlled by Abd-el-Kader" (the leader of the resistance in Algeria).

In recommending such a radical approach, Tocqueville follows the US model both for war and peace. In a letter to a US friend. Francis Lieber, he wrote: "It is impossible to consider colonization in Africa without thinking of the great examples furnished by the United States in this field." In Algeria, too, "the common property of the tribe is not founded on any title." There is no problem in expropriating the natives and in reserving "the most fertile land" to the French colonists. In order to attract the colonists, "it is first of all necessary to give them great opportunities to make their fortunes." Of course, there is no equality between French colonists on the one hand and natives on the other.

In Algeria, the introduction and implementation of "two clearly distinct sets of laws" is needed "because we are faced with two clearly separate societies. When one is dealing with Europeans, absolutely nothing prevents us from treating them as if they were alone; the laws enacted for them must always be applied exclusively to them."

Theory for the minority

In the French colonial empire, we again see the logic and the reality of master race democracy. By celebrating the first Opium War as a demonstration of the irresistibility of Western might, Tocqueville speaks with enthusiasm of "the enslavement of four·fifths of the world by the other fifth." Here liberalism explicitly assumes the form of a theory mat denies liberty to the overwhelming majority of humanity. On a different occasion. Tocqueville stressed that "some millions of men" (Westerners) were destined to become "the dominators of their whole species" (humanity in its entirety), an outcome mat was "clearly preordained in the sight of Providence."

John Stuart Mill may be more sober than Tocqueville. But not even he entertained any doubts that the West had the right and duty to exercise "despotism" over "races" still in their "nonage," which were obliged to observe "absolute obedience" in order to be set on the path of progress. This is a point Mill stressed firmly: a "vigorous despotism" by the West over backward peoples or "barbarians" was in the interest of civilization. "Direct subjection" of "backward populations" by "the more advanced" was already "common," but would become "universal." Once again we see the dialectic whereby the liberal theory of freedom turns into a justification and celebration of the despotism that the Western "community of the free" is called upon to exercise on a global scale.

Until now I have not spoken of the metropolitan working class. We must now focus on this subject while analyzing the condition of the working class above all in England. Marx commented that the modern industrial workers under capitalism are the modern slaves-wage slaves. Is it only a literary metaphor? In 1864, the *Saturday Review* observed that the poor in England formed "a caste apart, a race," placed in a social condition that underwent no alteration "from the cradle to the grave ... ·and which was separated from the rest of society by a barrier similar to the one existing in America between whites and Blacks.

> The English poor man or child is expected always to remember the condition in which God has placed him, exactly as the negro is expected to remember the skin which God has given him. The relation in both instances is that of perpetual superior to per-

> petual inferior, of chief to dependent, and no amount of kindness or goodness is suffered to alter this relation.

The social divide is at the same time a kind of racial divide. In fact, a social-racial apartheid seems to divide the working classes from the upper classes. In eighteenth century England, the Duke of Somerset had his coach preceded by outriders who were charged with clearing the road in order to spare the nobleman the annoyance of meeting with plebeian persons and glances. A century later, when the English economist Nassau William Senior visited Naples, he was outraged by the mixing of the classes: "In cold countries the debased classes keep at home, here they live in the streets." Worse, they were so little removed from the upper classes that they lived in the cellars of the aristocratic palaces. The result? "You never are free from the Sight, or, indeed, from the contact of loathsome degeneration."

Working classes excluded from liberty

Like the colonial peoples and the peoples of colonial origin, the metropolitan working classes were not part of the community of the free, either. The metropolitan working classes were excluded from both negative and positive liberty.

This exclusion appears very clear for the inhabitants of the workhouse where the unemployed, vagrants, and beggars were imprisoned. Jeremy Bentham tirelessly praised the benefits of the workhouse, which he aimed to further perfect, locating this institution in a "panoptical" building, that is in a building that allowed the director to exercise secret, total control by observing every single aspect of the behavior of the inmates at any point in time. In this way the economical efficiency of this total institution will increase:

> What hold can any other manufacturer have upon his workmen, equal to what my manufacturer [in the workhouse] would have upon his? What other master is there that can reduce his workmen, if idle, to a situation next to starving, without suffering them to go elsewhere? What drunk other master is there, whose men can never get unless he chooses that they should do so and who, so far from being able to raise their wages by combination, are obliged to take whatever pittance he thinks it most for his in-

> terest to allow? ... [A]nd what other master or manufacturer is there, who in appearance constantly, and in reality as much as he thinks proper, has every look and motion of each workman under his eye?

Without negative liberty, the inmates of the workhouse can even be objects of experiments. The best material for experiments are the children of popular extraction, Bentham wrote: "An inspection-house, to which a set of children had been consigned from their birch, might afford experiments enough." One experiment is worth remembering. Locking up the children of delinquents and "suspects" in the workhouses, one could, observed Bentham, produce an "indigenous class" that would be distinguished for its industriousness and sense of discipline. If early marriage was promoted within this class, treating the offspring as apprentices until they attained their majority, the workhouses and society would dispose of an inexhaustible reserve of manpower of the highest quality. In other words, through the "gentlest of all revolutions"-a sexual revolution-the "indigenous class," propagating itself in hereditary fashion from one generation to the next, would be transformed into a kind of indigenous race.

At this point we can make a general observation. How many books had been written which strongly condemn the transformation of the revolutionary utopia into a repugnant dystopia? The same process took place within the history of liberalism, but with an important difference. The "gentlest of all revolutions" imagined by Bentham displays disgusting characteristics from its beginning. Always for the purposes of producing a class or race of laborers as docile as possible. In France, Abbe Sieyes indulged in a eugenicist utopia (or dystopia) that is even more radical than Bentham's. The French liberal imagined a "cross" (*croisement*) between monkeys and "Blacks" in order to create domesticated beings adapted to servile work: "the new race of anthropomorphic monkeys."

While a class or race of docile workers is very useful, the underclass can be harmful or totally intolerable for society. In 1764, Benjamin Franklin wrote to a doctor: "Half the Lives you save are not worth saving, as being useless; and almost the other Half ought not to be sav'd, as being mischievous. Does your Conscience never hint

to you the Impiety of being in constant Warfare against the Plans of Providence?" A century later. Tocqueville dreamed of a massive fire that hopefully will burn the "prison rubble" like "rats."

Social-Darwinist streak

As we can see, what we would now call a social-Darwinist streak ran through liberal thought from the start. However, the social-Darwinist element was accentuated as the popular classes, shaking off their traditional subalternity, intervened directly on the political scene to assert their rights. Herbert Spencer condemned any state interference in the economy with the argument that one should not frustrate the cosmic law that required the elimination of the unfit and life's failures: "The whole effort of nature is to get rid of such-to clear the world of them, and make room for the better." All men were subjected to a divine judgment: "If they are sufficiently complete to live, they do live, and it is well they should live. If they are not sufficiently complete to live, they die, and it is best they should die." We can read the same attitude in many other liberal authors.

Every step of workers' struggle for recognition met the opposition of the liberal elites. For instance. Tocqueville condemned the constitution of trade unions and the regulation and reduction of working hours as violations of liberty.

And who were the protagonists of the struggle against racial discrimination and the racial state? Not the liberals. As it is well known, the abolition of slavery in the French colonies rook place in the wake of the great slave revolution in San Domingo, led by Toussaint L'Ouverture. As for the abolition of slavery in the British colonies and in the United States, in these cases too, the decisive role was not played by liberals. In fact, in liberal circles the criticism of abolitionism or, at least, of abolitionist radicalism, was widespread. Perhaps the mainstream opinion of the liberal circles is best expressed by Francis Lieber who, after condemning the abolitionists as "Jacobins; concluded: "If people must have slaves it is their affair to keep them." A very liberal vision indeed: property, including property in slaves, is a private question.

Liberalism in the modern era

Until now, I have spoken about the history of liberalism. But someone could object: what is today's significance in the history you have drawn? The partial emancipation of the working class, of colonial peoples, and of women, has not been the spontaneous result of the evolution of liberalism. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, before the October Revolution, discrimination based on property and wealth had not disappeared (in England, for example, the House of Lords was still the monopoly of the nobility and of the high bourgeoisie); everywhere women were without political rights; and the regime of white supremacy characterized not only the United States, but also the relation between the West and the rest of the world. In the twentieth century, in the aftermath of radical revolutions, everything has changed: at least in the letter of the law and in theory, the three great discriminations (against popular classes, colonial peoples, and women) were abolished. But now, after the retreat or weakening of the challenge represented by the workers' movement of socialist inspiration, we cannot neglect the tracks of counterrevolution in the West. In Europe, step-by-step, the welfare state is being destroyed. The practical destruction goes hand in hand with a shift in the theory, too. Already in the 1970s, Friedrich Hayek criticized the "economic and social rights" proclaimed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of the Human Rights in 1948 as the result of the devastating influence exercised by the "Russian Marxist revolution."

On the international leve1 we have seen the return of war as a "normal" instrument of foreign policy. These wars are legitimized and even celebrated as "humanitarian interventions." In short, the targeted countries are considered without sovereignty, in practice as colonies.

Nowadays we see a resistance, sometimes timid sometimes strong, against the destruction of "economic and social rights" and against colonial or neocolonial wars. This struggle has as a target a ruling class and ideology that boasts of its liberalism. It is for this reason that I believe a true picture of liberalism and of its history can be helpful for the movement of resistance we need now more than ever.