

Nobody has to be vile

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Since 2001, Davos and Porto Alegre have been the twin cities of globalisation: Davos, the exclusive Swiss resort where the global elite of managers, statesmen and media personalities meets for the World Economic Forum under heavy police protection, trying to convince us (and themselves) that globalisation is its own best remedy; Porto Alegre, the subtropical Brazilian city where the counter-elite of the anti-globalisation movement meets, trying to convince us (and themselves) that capitalist globalisation is not our inevitable fate – that, as the official slogan puts it, ‘another world is possible.’ It seems, however, that the Porto Alegre reunions have somehow lost their impetus – we have heard less and less about them over the past couple of years. Where did the bright stars of Porto Alegre go?

Some of them, at least, moved to Davos. The tone of the Davos meetings is now predominantly set by the group of entrepreneurs who ironically refer to themselves as ‘liberal communists’ and who no longer accept the opposition between Davos and Porto Alegre: their claim is that we can have the global capitalist cake (thrive as entrepreneurs) and eat it (endorse the anti-capitalist causes of social responsibility, ecological concern etc). There is no need for Porto Alegre: instead, Davos can become Porto Davos.

So who are these liberal communists? The usual suspects: Bill Gates and George Soros, the CEOs of Google, IBM, Intel, eBay, as well as court-philosophers like Thomas Friedman. The true conservatives today, they argue, are not only the old right, with its ridiculous belief in authority, order and parochial patriotism, but also the old left, with its war against capitalism: both fight their shadow-theatre battles in disregard of the new realities. The signifier of this new reality in the liberal communist Newspeak is ‘smart’. Being smart means being dynamic and nomadic, and against centralised bureaucracy; believing in dialogue and co-operation as against central authority; in flexibility as against routine; culture and knowledge as against industrial production; in spontaneous interaction and autopoiesis as against fixed hierarchy.

Bill Gates is the icon of what he has called ‘frictionless capitalism’, the post-industrial society and the ‘end of labour’. Software is winning over hardware and the young nerd over the old manager in his black suit. In the new company headquarters, there is little external discipline; former hackers dominate the scene, working long hours, enjoying free drinks in green surroundings. The underlying notion here is that Gates is a subversive marginal hooligan, an ex-hacker, who has taken over and dressed himself up as a respectable chairman.

Liberal communists are top executives reviving the spirit of contest or, to put it the other way round, countercultural geeks who have taken over big corporations. Their dogma is a new, postmodernised version of Adam Smith’s invisible hand: the market and social responsibility are not opposites, but can be reunited for mutual benefit. As Friedman puts it, nobody has to be vile in order to do business these days; collaboration with employees, dialogue with customers, respect for the environment, transparency of deals – these are the keys to success. Olivier Malnuit recently drew up the liberal communist’s ten commandments in the French magazine *Technikart*:

1. You shall give everything away free (free access, no copyright); just charge for the additional services, which will make you rich.



2. You shall change the world, not just sell things.
3. You shall be sharing, aware of social responsibility.
4. You shall be creative: focus on design, new technologies and science.
5. You shall tell all: have no secrets, endorse and practise the cult of transparency and the free flow of information; all humanity should collaborate and interact.
6. You shall not work: have no fixed 9 to 5 job, but engage in smart, dynamic, flexible communication.
7. You shall return to school: engage in permanent education.
8. You shall act as an enzyme: work not only for the market, but trigger new forms of social collaboration.
9. You shall die poor: return your wealth to those who need it, since you have more than you can ever spend.
10. You shall be the state: companies should be in partnership with the state.

Liberal communists are pragmatic; they hate a doctrinaire approach. There is no exploited working class today, only concrete problems to be solved: starvation in Africa, the plight of Muslim women, religious fundamentalist violence. When there is a humanitarian crisis in Africa (liberal communists love a humanitarian crisis; it brings out the best in them), instead of engaging in anti-imperialist rhetoric, we should get together and work out the best way of solving the problem, engage people, governments and business in a common enterprise, start moving things instead of relying on centralised state help, approach the crisis in a creative and unconventional way.

Liberal communists like to point out that the decision of some large international corporations to ignore apartheid rules within their companies was as important as the direct political struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Abolishing segregation within the company, paying blacks and whites the same salary for the same job etc: this was a perfect instance of the overlap between the struggle for political freedom and business interests, since the same companies can now thrive in post-apartheid South Africa.

Liberal communists love May 1968. What an explosion of youthful energy and creativity! How it shattered the bureaucratic order! What an impetus it gave to economic and social life after the political illusions dropped away! Those who were old enough were themselves protesting and fighting on the streets: now they have changed in order to change the world, to revolutionise our lives for real. Didn’t Marx say that all political upheavals were unimportant compared to the invention of the steam engine? And would Marx

not have said today: what are all the protests against global capitalism in comparison with the internet?

Above all, liberal communists are true citizens of the world – good people who worry. They worry about populist fundamentalism and irresponsible greedy capitalist corporations. They see the ‘deeper causes’ of today’s problems: mass poverty and hopelessness breed fundamentalist terror. Their goal is not to earn money, but to change the world (and, as a by-product, make even more money). Bill Gates is already the single greatest benefactor in the history of humanity, displaying his love for his neighbours by giving hundreds of millions of dollars for education, the fight against hunger and malaria etc. The catch is that before you can give all this away you have to take it (or, as the liberal communists would put it, create it). In order to help people, the justification goes, you must have the means to do so, and experience – that is, recognition of the dismal failure of all centralised statist and collectivist approaches – teaches us that private enterprise is by far the most effective way. By regulating their business, taxing them excessively, the state is undermining the official goal of its own activity (to make life better for the majority, to help those in need).

Liberal communists do not want to be mere profit-machines: they want their lives to have deeper meaning. They are against old-fashioned religion and for spirituality, for non-confessional meditation (everybody knows that Buddhism foreshadows brain science, that the power of meditation can be measured scientifically). Their motto is social responsibility and gratitude: they are the first to admit that society has been incredibly good to them, allowing them to deploy their talents and amass wealth, so they feel that it is their duty to give something back to society and help people. This beneficence is what makes business success worthwhile.

This isn’t an entirely new phenomenon. Remember Andrew Carnegie, who employed a private army to suppress organised labour in his steelworks and then distributed large parts of his wealth for educational, cultural and humanitarian causes, proving that, although a man of steel, he had a heart of gold? In the same way, today’s liberal communists give away with one hand what they grabbed with the other.

There is a chocolate-flavoured laxative available on the shelves of US stores which is publicised with the paradoxical injunction: Do you have constipation? Eat more of this chocolate! – i.e. eat more of something that itself causes constipation. The structure of the chocolate laxative can be discerned throughout today’s ideological landscape; it is what makes a figure like Soros so objectionable. He stands for ruthless financial exploitation combined with its counter-agent, humanitarian worry about the catastrophic social consequences of the unbridled market economy. Soros’s daily routine is a lie embodied: half of his working time is devoted to financial speculation, the other half to ‘humanitarian’ activities (financing cultural and democratic activities in post-Communist countries, writing essays and books) which work against the effects of his own speculations. The two faces of Bill Gates are exactly like the two faces of Soros: on the one hand, a cruel businessman, destroying or buying out competitors, aiming at a virtual monopoly; on the other, the great philanthropist who makes a point of saying: ‘What does it serve to have computers if people do not have enough to eat?’

According to liberal communist ethics, the ruthless pursuit of profit is counteracted by charity: charity is part of the game, a humanitarian mask hiding the underlying economic exploitation. Developed countries are constantly 'helping' undeveloped ones (with aid, credits etc), and so avoiding the key issue: their complicity in and responsibility for the miserable situation of the Third World. As for the opposition between 'smart' and 'non-smart', outsourcing is the key notion. You export the (necessary) dark side of production – disciplined, hierarchical labour, ecological pollution – to 'non-smart' Third World locations (or invisible ones in the First World). The ultimate liberal communist dream is to export the entire working class to invisible Third World sweat shops.

We should have no illusions: liberal communists are the enemy of every true progressive struggle today. All other enemies – religious fundamentalists, terrorists, corrupt and inefficient state bureaucracies – depend on contingent local circumstances. Precisely because they want to resolve all these secondary malfunctions of the global system, liberal communists are the direct embodiment of what is wrong with the system. It may be necessary to enter into tactical alliances with liberal communists in order to fight racism, sexism and religious obscurantism, but it's important to remember exactly what they are up to.

Etienne Balibar, in *La Crainte des masses* (1997),

distinguishes the two opposite but complementary modes of excessive violence in today's capitalism: the objective (structural) violence that is inherent in the social conditions of global capitalism (the automatic creation of excluded and dispensable individuals, from the homeless to the unemployed), and the subjective violence of newly emerging ethnic and/or religious (in short: racist) fundamentalisms. They may fight subjective violence, but liberal communists are the agents of the structural violence that creates the conditions for explosions of subjective violence. The same Soros who gives millions to fund education has ruined the lives of thousands thanks to his financial speculations and in doing so created the conditions for the rise of the intolerance he denounces.

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