The Threat to Liberal Humanism

Brian McClinton

IN the last 2,500 years there have been four main periods of western Humanist hegemony. The first was the Graeco-Roman Enlightenment, which lasted roughly from the 6th century BCE to the 4th century CE. It was destroyed by imperialist politics and reactionary Christianity. In his book *The Closing of the Western Mind* Charles Freeman describes how the emperors from Constantine onwards used the Christian church for their own political ends, but were in turn used by the church.

Whereas the Greeks and Romans were rational and tolerant, Roman Christendom was dogmatic, irrational, oppressed women and generally made life difficult for scientists. As a result, human development stultified and Christianity held back progress for a thousand years. Petrarch, the 'father of Humanism' referred to the period as 'The Dark Ages'.

The second wave of liberal Humanism came in the Renaissance, which ran roughly from the 14th to the early 17th centuries. The Renaissance was an intellectual and artistic awakening and rebirth. It was, above all, a secular culture which revelled in Graeco-Roman writings, art and values. It stressed classical culture, the secularisation of education, free inquiry and the importance of scepticism, reason and science – much the same values that were found in the Greek-Roman Enlightenment.

Again, the Renaissance project was destroyed by politics and religion. A nascent nationalism, combined with a conflict between the Puritan Reformation and the Counter-Reformation of the Catholic Church, served to destroy the Renaissance and inaugurate wars of religion and nationalism. Both Puritanism and Catholicism were essentially anti-freethought and anti-humanist and intolerant of each other. The result

was the 17th century wars of religion, which were not for the cause of freedom but for particular sects of doctrines.

The 18th century witnessed the third wave in the Enlightenment. It stressed freedom and autonomy, tolerance and scepticism, reason, compassion, science, education, our common humanity, universal rights and peaceful progress. But it too was largely betrayed, even as soon as it had begun.

Its ideas did not gain hegemony throughout Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries, despite the spread of secular ideas. Critics argued that, in holding humankind to be naturally good, the Enlightenment ignored the evidence of human nature. It also mistakenly held every problem to be resolvable partly by reason, ignoring the role of emotions, and partly by science and technology, ignoring the fact that they could be put to evil uses.

Last, but not least, by maintaining that secularism was the way forward, it also ignored humankind's need for religion or its derivatives.

Nationalism, imperialism and militarism developed during the 19th century as the ruling ideas. Many liberal thinkers in Europe, anxious not to defend autocratic monarchies and empires, latched on to nationalism as the political embodiment of 'liberation' and 'self-determination' because, after all, the entire basis of the Enlightenment was the liberation of the individual from traditional beliefs.

Yet in most western societies nationalism was initially a romantic, militaristic, closed, exclusive ideology which subsumed the individual into the 'nation' and stressed the differences between 'nations', rather than an open and inclusive philosophy that promoted the essential unity of humankind, despite their differences.

In short, a counter-Enlightenment emerged in opposition to the Enlightenment ideals. In opposition, it advocated tradition and religion, a spiritual dimension, a suspicion of science and education, an emphasis on instinct and feelings, divisions between people on grounds of culture, language, ethnicity, religion, and a belief in force and war as purging and liberating characteristics of the human condition.

It was these counter-Enlightenment ideas that were eventually followed through in all their brutal logic by the totalitarian regimes of the early 20th century. National Socialism – a peculiar and virulent form of fascism – was the nadir of counter-Enlightenment philosophy.

If the Enlightenment was an attempt to promote the use of reason and science, to liberate the individual from arbitrary authority, and to establish a compassionate and humane morality, the counter-Enlightenment was an exaltation of the opposite values of emotion, superstition, collective authority and an aggressive ethic of power and dominance.

Hitler had a way of putting it. Culture, he argued in *Mein Kampf*, was opposed to civilisation and superior to it. "Civilisation means the application of reason to life", he wrote but, opposed to this universal principle was what he called 'life forces'. These were the 'irrational impulses' which were 'more characteristic of the German mind'.

After six bloody years, these counter-Enlightenment values were crushed. The post-war era has witnessed the fourth wave of Liberal Humanism in western Europe. The horrors of the early 20th century have reawakened the western world to the values and ideals of the 18th century philosophers. Since 1945 many of their principles are now enshrined in law. We have international organisations which —-›

promote our common humanity. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights".

Of course, counter-enlightenment values haven't gone away, you know. As Sam Harris puts it, the world is simply ablaze with bad ideas, many of them connected with religion. Religious belief is resurgent in several countries, encompassing Christianity and Hinduism as much as Islam. Richard Dawkins has declared that "the enlightenment is under threat. So is reason. So is truth. So is science".

Some people believe they will be rewarded in paradise if they kill themselves and others. Some clerics declare that floods and earthquake are God's punishment on politicians who support gay rights. Some teachers and some politicians are convinced that the earth was created 6,000 years ago.

WHAT of Europe? Once the site of painful divisions and murderous conflicts, it is has been in recent decades the continent that embodied tolerance and mutual respect. The major problems – climate change, poverty, overpopulation, exploitation, prejudice – were seen as the responsibility of all of us. The young, who are generally well educated and globalist in their outlook, enjoyed the freedom of moment that the EU offered them.

Yet in Europe, too, reaction is on the march. Resurgent right-wing populist groups are shouting anti-immigration and Eurosceptic slogans across much of the continent. In France, the far right **National Front** won 6.8 million votes in regional elections in 2015 – its best ever result. The National Front have been a significant political force in France since the 1980s. Its leader, Marine Le Pen, currently leads in presidential election polls ahead of next year's elections.

In Greece and Hungary, neo-Nazi members of **Golden Dawn** and **Jobbik** have attacked migrants, Roma and their political enemies, and at the same time been able to gain parliamentary representation. In the last national elections, Golden Dawn won 7 percent of the vote, and Jobbik won 20 percent.

The candidate of the **Freedom Party** of Austria (FPÖ) came within 31,000 votes (less than 1%) of winning the presidency in May. Austria's fascists have been the most electorally successful in Europe.

The **AFD Party** in Germany made an unexpected surge in local elections held in three states in March 2016, and in one state it picked up around a quarter of the votes. And while it did not win any of the three states outright, it has sent a clear message to Germany's political elite.

Most prominent progressives – whether politicians, trade unionists, economists, intellectuals or media figures – were in the 'Remain' camp

---

WHAT of the UK? The rightward trajectory is clear from recent votes. In the 2010 general election, parties of the left and centre (Labour Lib Dem, SNP and Green) received 16 million votees, while those of the right (Tories, UKIP and BNP) received only 12 million. In the 2015 election, however, the left and centre vote fell to 14.3 million while the right rose to over 15 million. In the referendum, the left and centre represented largely by the remain parties received 16.1 million, while the right received 17.4 million. For the first time in 60 years the combined parties of the right outnumbered the others.

In the EU referendum, most prominent progressives – whether politicians, trade unionists, economists, intellectuals or media figures – were in the 'Remain' camp. The 'Leave' camp was dominated by the right and the far right, including the DUP in Northern Ireland. A week before the vote, the *Financial Times* rightly stated that a British vote to withdraw from the EU would be nothing less than 'a grievous blow to the post-1945 liberal world order' that would strike at 'the coherence of the west'. It contrasted the liberalism of 'Remain' with the 'pinched nationalism' of Brexit.

The Brexit result is a triumph for ethnic English nationalism, arrogance, racism and neoliberalism. These counter-Enlightenment values have been fostered by a poisonous combination of self-serving demagogic politicians, right-wing newspaper proprietors, and blighted centenary commemorations of Britain's perceived greatness in World Wars, fostering nostalgia for a 'great' British past.

It is always easier to promote simple certainties over complex realities. That is what referendums do. Attlee described them as only too often 'the instrument of Nazism and fascism'. Hitler held four between 1933 sand 1938, all resulting in massive majorities for his policies of leaving the League of Nations, abolishing the presidency, the incorporation of the Rhineland and Union with Austria.

Simplification, repetition and misrepresentation were the mantras of the leading Brexiteers, and restricting immigration and the prospect of independence were stressed as the two basic issues. "We want our country back" was a constant slogan of Little Englanders.
The referendum has revealed a deeply divided Britain, especially in terms of class, age and region. Scotland, which voted 62% to 38% to remain, will seek a second referendum on independence and all the signs are that the vote will be a nationalist victory the next time.

Northern Ireland also voted 56% to 44% to remain, partly because the majority have been happy to have closer links with the Republic and do not want the return of a 'hard border. This is likely to happen if it is to be heavily policed in order to keep EU migrants who have entered the Republic from moving into the UK. Once again, Ireland could prove to be Britain's backdoor. The majority of unionists, however, voted for Brexit, even though they would hardly feel secure with the break-up of the UK that might result from it. Brexit could therefore prove to be a blessing for Irish nationalists. Unionists should be careful what they wish for.

The Brexit result has dealt a savage blow to Liberal Humanist values, and there is much to be done to restore their dominance in Europe.