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Ross Douthat

The Liberal Order Can't Heal Itself

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Over Thanksgiving week the talk of the economically focused internet was a viral essay claiming, absurdly, that the real poverty line in America for a family of four is $140,000 a year.

If you were inclined to generosity, you would say that the essay resonated because it emphasized real problems, from the rising cost of child care and housing to the distorting effects of welfare benefit cliffs as people climb up from poverty. But its basic claim was still completely wrong, as are most apocalyptic accounts of the American economic situation. Beware of anyone, left or right, trying to persuade you that middle-class Americans have all plunged into poverty or that young Americans have no prospects anymore.

I doubt the author, an asset manager named Michael W. Green, considers himself a post-liberal, but his essay is relevant to the arguments over post-liberalism that I covered in my preholiday newsletter. In the great wrangle between defenders of the liberal order and their would-be successors, a key liberal claim is that populists and nationalists and socialists just misunderstand the economic landscape — catastrophizing about what globalization or neoliberalism has supposedly done to the common person when in fact the common person is doing pretty well.

In this reading of our era, the entire populist revolt looks like an internet-abetted, misinformation-fueled own goal. Not because everything is economically perfect under

liberal conditions — maybe growth is too slow, maybe inequality is a problem, maybe technological progress isn't what was hoped. But overall, Americans got richer across the neoliberal era, the populist and socialist alternatives yield slower growth and more corruption and a lot of the specific economic problems cited by neoliberalism's critics (housing costs, say) would actually be ameliorated by a stronger dose of deregulation and free markets, the old liberal prescription made new.

In which case the restoration of a liberal consensus is simply a matter of people abandoning bad ideas — perhaps after a dispiriting experience with tariffs? — and returning to good ones, and the struggle with populism is essentially a struggle to persuade people stuck at the end of a blind alley to turn around and head back to the sunlight.

I think this perspective is fatally incomplete — more on that in a moment — but it gets enough right to win some key debates with post-liberal thinkers. In particular, the liberal case wins on the following points:

1) Relative to the realistic counterfactuals, the big neoliberal reforms of the 1970s through the 1990s (deregulation, tax cuts, freer trade, modest limits on the growth of government, and so on) prevented a deeper stagnation in the developed world and made almost everybody at least somewhat richer.

2) America today is an extremely wealthy country that has generally outpaced rivals with more dirigiste or social-democratic economies, and for all its problems, our economy still offers plenty of opportunities for active, ambitious young people.

3) To the extent that there are obvious reforms that would increase economic opportunity right now, a lot of them belong to the "more neoliberalism" category of lighter regulation and cuts to entitlement spending rather than any obviously "post-liberal" category of policymaking.

4) To the extent that there is a truly different, truly post-liberal economic vision — with, say, more industrial policy, mercantilism or targeted redistribution — that might yield a better future, it exists more in broad sketches than in detailed programs, and any kind of implementation would be a high-wire act across obvious pits (corruption, cronyism, kakistocracy) that most populist policymaking keeps falling into.

Taken together, these points look like a reasonably robust defense of post-Cold War liberalism's program. So why, then, do I keep arguing that post-liberalism is here to stay and the liberal order requires some sort of profound reinvention to come through the current period of crisis?

The simplest explanation is this: We have entered a world in which having a system that generates more growth than the available alternatives does not adequately

address the challenges that are throwing the system into crisis. And you have to understand the crisis of liberalism and the rise of post-liberalism in terms of problems that economic growth alone does not resolve.

A few examples. First, growth alone does not solve the return of great-power conflict, even perhaps civilizational conflict, as a force disrupting the frictionless ideals of globalization. The liberal model of trade and exchange works best in a world of broadly shared values, where governments and peoples are all at least somewhat Lockean in their perspectives and desires.

But if that world seems to be defunct or in retreat, then just insisting over and over again that *global trade makes everyone richer* can be an evasion of national responsibility. It's a true-enough statement that doesn't tell you what to do when some of the powers getting richer are using the wealth to prop up authoritarian and totalitarian systems, buy allies across the developing world and underwrite wars and potential wars against their neighbors.

In this environment, you can't just answer questions like, "Is it a great idea for Europeans to buy so much oil and gas from Russia?" or "Is it a good idea for so much of the U.S. industrial base to have relocated to China?" or "Should we let our A.I. companies sell chips and technology to all comers while we're barreling toward superintelligence?" with reference to G.D.P. statistics and consumer purchasing power.

A second example: Growth alone doesn't tell you what to do about the social costs of liberal individualism. This is an old reactionary critique of liberalism — that what's gained in wealth and freedom might be lost in alienation and anomie — but it's garnered new force in the last two decades because of a very specific interaction between technological change and libertarian values.

In our time, political liberalism has pushed the envelope on individual liberties (around drugs and gambling and suicide, as well as sex and sexual identity) at exactly the same moment that technological progress has given us radical new means for exploiting and amplifying addictive behaviors. The results are a world that's richer and more technologically proficient — and also seemingly unhappier, more despairing, more addicted, more deranged. And while this may be a temporary situation, and hopefully culture and politics will adapt, those adaptations will not themselves be liberal in either a philosophical or a post-Cold War political sense of the term. They might be post-liberal in the sense of political regulation of technology or in the sense of religious-moral regulation of individual choice — but they will not just emerge organically from the proper application of John Stuart Mill or Milton Friedman.

Finally, crucially, the shadow over everything: There is simply no obvious liberal answer, in economic policy or otherwise, to the confluence of wealth and technology

and individualism leading to lower birthrates, which incentivizes mass migration to keep the economic system running, which leads to native resentment, ethno-religious separatism and roiling social conflict.

All the political post-liberalisms of our time, including not just right-wing populism and nationalism but also the managerial-bureaucratic style of centrist speech suppression and anti-democratic maneuvers, have emerged because post-Cold War liberalism doesn't know how to manage the internal divisions of aging societies with large immigrant populations. The liberal prescription is a normative exhortation — *natives shouldn't be bigoted and migrants should assimilate to our values, whenever we figure out what those are* — that has failed so far in all its forms, center-left and center-right and "woke."

The fact that the post-liberal models also look pretty unsuccessful gives liberalism a consistent lease on life, an ongoing opportunity to recover power. But I don't see any current resources inside liberalism commensurate with the destabilizing interaction of plunging birthrates, societal aging and immigrant-native conflict. Nor do I think the next 25 years will provide easier solutions. To the extent that the birthrate collapse is going global, you may have fewer migrants but at the price of a general stagnation and decline; to the extent that A.I.-driven automation makes it easier to sustain overall growth without immigration, it may create a novel set of socioeconomic problems, intensifying the already powerful sense of human obsolescence; and so on.

These are the dynamics that defenders of the liberal order are up against — not just a confusion about how difficult it is to live on $140,000 a year. If an accurate assessment of wealth and opportunity in the America of 2025 settled all debates, I would bet on post-liberalism as a passing force, a purely temporary reaction. But the crisis is wider and deeper than that, and the future more perilous — for liberalism and its champions, for would-be post-liberals, for us all.

Breviary

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Ross Douthat has been an Opinion columnist for The Times since 2009. He is also the host of the Opinion podcast “Interesting Times.” He is the author, most recently, of “Believe: Why Everyone Should Be Religious.”
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