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Making Liberalism Sexy (Again) with Sven Gerst [PODCAST]

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What makes an ideology sexy? What does the liberal utopia look like? What does it mean to be a ‘good liberal’ politician, bureaucrat, or a think tank? And how to make liberalism sexy (again)? Leszek Jazdzewski (Fundacja Liberte!) talks with Sven Gerst, a philosopher with an interdisciplinary background in philosophy, politics, and economics. He holds advanced degrees from King’s College London, the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), and the University of Mannheim and has previously studied and worked at Harvard University, Duke University, St. Petersburg State University, and National Taiwan University.

Leszek Jazdzewski (LJ): Can an ideology

actually be sexy?

Sven Gerst (SG): First of all, we need to consider what does *sexy* mean. Sex is very physical, it is an animalistic desire. Clearly, an idea cannot be that. However, when we talk about an ideology that is *appealing* – and not necessarily *sexy* – then it can be, if it offers a vision. This observation already gives us an idea about what might be wrong with liberalism in particular.

What makes ideologies appealing? They bring something new, and they offer a big vision. Meanwhile, liberalism is currently considered the *status quo*. It does not really give us something new, at least not so much. Therefore, it is not so sexy.

On the other hand, it does offer a vision that states that it is up to the individual. Everybody can create their own society. Although it is very true, it is not very visionary. It is thus not very utopian.

Therefore, what makes a *sexy* political theory, is the fact that it is visionary and radically new – one that people have not heard of before.

LJ: Does this mean that, at the beginning, fascism could be considered *sexy*?

SG: Allow me to evade the question about fascism and make it more robust. Let us have a look at communism in the 1920s instead. Was it sexy? Sure. F.A. Hayek made the fundamental point (that is still underrated today) that the appeal of socialism was that it is fundamentally utopian. We see that in the way socialism is communicated – it is always in the utopian way.

What happened in the Soviet Union was not real socialism, because in theory, we have the utopia of what it might look like, but how it turned out, it was not real socialism. And so, the utopian ideal, the dream world, that was always communicated. That is something that we see in socialism, which we do not have in other

ideologies. It is present in fascism, certainly, as there is an end goal – to a certain degree. Clearly, a lot of connotations come up when uttering that word. But there is a dream world, a utopian standard, that we can aspire to, a vision that is outlined.

Meanwhile, we need to ask ourselves: What is the vision of a political theory such as liberalism? What is the liberal utopia? Hayek very much asked that question in his essay, *The Intellectuals and Socialism* (1965). According to him, liberalism does not have a utopia. Maybe it should have one, or maybe not. I do not know. But this is something that is on the table.

LJ: In his book *A Thousand Small Sanities: The Moral Adventure of Liberalism* (2019), Adam Gopnik makes a very compelling argument that liberalism is like a rhino, it might be massive, a bit slow in the head, it gets angry, and it is not a conventionally beautiful animal, but it is real. Liberalism is not a unicorn, which might be slender and beautiful – an animal that might actually be considered *sexy*. The problem with a unicorn is that it does not exist, right? Do you think that Adam Gopnik is right? Or maybe we should try to make liberalism more utopian and unicorn-like?

SG: First of all, I would resist the analogy to the rhino as being slow in the head – it was a provocation. If liberalism is one thing that it is

not, then it is not slow in its head. It is the most robust intellectual tradition, and, to a certain degree, it is part of its detriment that it has such a canon of intellectual work behind it.

In light of this observation, I would rather suggest making an analogy not between the rhino and the unicorn but focusing on the love language of what is considered *sexy* versus *not sexy*. Most likely we would not use the word *sexy* to describe our partner, because we love our partners. And love is not just about sexiness, there is more to it.

What we have seen with political theories such as liberalism is that they actually occur in the real world. This is most likely why we do not have any passionate desires about liberalism. Instead, what we have for it is appreciation and love – in an ideal case. This is the reason why we might not have fallen out of love for liberalism – at least on a global scale.

We have seen all shapes and sizes of liberalism and how it plays out in the real world. We have seen with without makeup and with makeup on, we had our expectations towards it – especially in the 1990s and early 2000s. Now, we see it when it is already somewhat worn down in our day-to-day life, and so it does not look so appealing anymore.

Still, liberalism is a real-world political institution and a political theory that is worked out and applied in the world. We are already in a long-term relationship with this idea. Therefore, we do not really have to ask ourselves, is it *sexy* or *not*? Instead, we need to consider whether it is *lovable* or *not*. And this really depends on

where we are, geographically speaking.

LJ: If you want to make your relationship sexy, perhaps you should change your partner? Is it possible in the case of liberalism?

SG: Robert Nozick talks very famously about love. According to him, love is a particular concept that is not necessarily tied to sexiness. In light of this observation, I think liberalism does not have to be sexy because liberalism has succeeded – people all over the world are more liberal than ever before. Maybe they do not label themselves as ‘liberals’, maybe they do not vote for liberal parties, but liberalism is the dominant morality of our time.

More people than ever are liberal. Their day-to-day morality is very close to the values of personal freedom, acceptance of human rights, respect for fairness and reciprocity, and democratic decision-making. As such, we are in a deep relationship with liberalism as human societies, so we do not need to make liberalism sexy.

What we need to do is to stay in this relationship with people. Currently, people are disappointed, and this is why we see the rise of illiberalism – people are disappointed with their relationship with this abstract political theory (that is actually not abstract, as it is being played out in the real world).

Liberalism has become intellectually dead, to a certain degree. Academically, I always ask my colleagues and my students, what are some of the most relevant philosophical thinkers of liberalism since John Rawls? We are still talking about John Stuart Mill, Adam

Smith, John Rawls, the authors of some of the last seminal points. A lot of people still refer to Margaret Thatcher or Ronald Reagan – whether we consider them liberals or not, it is a topic for a different debate. But where are the leaders of this particular movement?

We have stalled out as an intellectual and political tradition in the last couple of years, because we were so successful, it seems that the world will eventually become more liberal. This, however, would mean that we do not have to put in any additional effort, like in the case of a romantic relationship.

If we know we will stay with our partners for the next couple of years, we usually do not put too much effort in. But if you know a thing or two about relationships, when things are degrading, easy fixes no longer work, and you have to make some fundamental changes in the relationship's dynamics.

LJ: It appears that the very radical version of the leftist vision of the world and economy is becoming highly attractive for the young. Is it due to the fact that it opposes the mainstream and offers a utopian version of reality? Or maybe it is happening because liberalism is really boring?

SG: Certainly, liberalism is the *status quo*, and nothing is more boring than the *status quo*. Secondly, identity plays a bigger and bigger role in contemporary society and liberalism has always struggled with the topic of identity. So, if we take a look at such

topics as post-colonialism and critical theory, these are questions of identity. Those are the issues that liberals have historically underrated. This is why, at one point, Francis Fukuyama wrote a book on identity, where he says that we should put it on our radar.

However, at that point, it was already quite late in the process. Therefore, again, we are catching up with a development that is already going on. Meanwhile, liberals have a lot to say about the topic of identity, but they have completely missed the fact that we have a new realignment in politics – one that is not about capitalism versus socialism anymore (this is a kind of boomer alignment of how we thought about the world, and it is not the fundamental economic battle anymore).

What we see in politics now, and this is precisely what excites young people all around the world, is that we are at a point of time where all of politics is focusing on the issue of identity. Are we more of cosmopolitan liberals in favor of open society? Or are we more closed off in terms of being identity-based in terms of ethnicity, race, or gender? This is the other side of the spectrum of that debate. And here, people fall on different camps. I am not so pessimistic as to think that most people are identitarians on both sides – either left identitarians or right identitarians, positioning themselves against liberals.

After all, most young people are liberals by their *status quo*. They have been raised in the liberal framework and they are committed to liberal morality. But they are also disappointed by liberals and dislike the fact that we do not have much to say about the issues of migration or identity in the modern world, where old cards of identity

(such as religion or association) are important, but at the same time they are not addressed by this particular theory.

LJ: Should they be addressed?

SG: Liberalism does not struggle to address it. One could raise many criticisms of liberalism, but certainly not that the theory has holes in it. It is a very robust intellectual canon. The fact that we do not engage with certain groups that we should be engaging with seems to have more of a sociological basis. Let us take feminism as a key example here.

The early stages of feminism were determined by liberals, like Harriet Taylor Mill or Mary Wollstonecraft. These were feminists who came out of the liberal tradition, and they came out of it because one of the core values of liberalism is skepticism of power. Nowadays, when we look at feminist circles, there are very few classical liberals (or liberals in general) within them. It is not because we have abandoned feminism as a cause, but rather due to the fact that, sociologically, liberals were diving out of that discourse and then left it altogether.

Similarly, when it comes to issues such as post-colonialism, experimental clusters emerge at universities – this is where all the hip ideas are discussed before they trickle down into mainstream. And that is where we are not present. However, for sociological reasons, it seems that we do not want to engage in these topics, but we easily could do so.

There are spaces where we could address injustices of post-colonial nature from a liberal perspective – through rights violations or detracting of freedom rather than the dimension of a Foucauldian power. Still, we are not doing it. This is the area in which I am disappointed – we are clearly not developing a new class of liberal thinkers that could address these issues with that particular audience.

LJ: In a nutshell, how do we *turn liberalism on*?

SG: It is a difficult project. First of all, liberalism has to recognize that it *is* the *status quo*. Liberalism has succeeded – in most societies, it is the dominant moral and political standard. We need to be respectful of what we achieved already.

Liberalism is a way of life. However, in terms of the intellectual movement, we get counter clashes all the time, which is why we should be prepared for that or even be flattered. After all, the rise of populism and geopolitics are two phenomena that are distinctively illiberal. Victor Orban's populism is even called 'illiberal democracy' – how much more flattering can you be given the fact that you come up with a counter ideology?

Now, liberalism has to finally understand that for 200 years, it has been the progressive movement at the fringes, and it has always fought for various ideals. Now it has become the *status quo*. It is in a committed relationship with most human societies. One of the things that we could do is to finally recognize that we have become lazy in our own relationship with the people, and we have not put

enough effort in. Intellectually and politically, we did not deliver properly, and we need to do better.

In every relationship, at one point, you want to deliver. It seems as if liberalism has disappointed because it was in the position to disappoint, because it was tried out, and it is still present in many societies.

What we need to improve is the delivery. This is why we need state capacity discussions where we discuss what does it mean to be a good liberal politician, bureaucrat, or think tank. This is something we have not done in the last 30 or 40 years, because the innovation on that front is not up to par. And that caused many of the problems that we see in our relationship with liberalism right now.

Sven Gerst was a guest of the last edition of Freedom Games, a festival of ideas held annually in Łódź, Poland, held on October 18-20 in EC1 Łódź. The European Liberal Forum was the Co-Organizer of the festival.

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