

THE STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION: Why Modern Liberal Democracies Fail to Reconcile Class Conflict

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ABSTRACT

Liberal Democracy has been the sole hegemonic ideology for decades, defeating alternatives from the left and right by presenting itself as adaptable and the lesser of all evils. Fundamentally, it appeared to solve the antagonisms of political reconciliation by recognising equality and permitting limited forms of megalothymia – the tyrannical desire to be superior. This unique balance has so far kept class and identity conflicts in check under the auspices of freedom. Nevertheless, this paper argues that contrary to prevailing social beliefs, liberal democracy is failing, as its foundations are based on an unequal class system designed to keep a divide between the ruling and the ruled. This paper develops its argument by analysing modern liberalism's roots in Hegel's idealistic philosophy. I expose Hegel's flaws by developing Karl Popper's critique of the inexorable universal laws within Hegel and Marx's historicist beliefs. However, contrary to Popper's belief in liberalism as an open society, I find that liberalism's internal socioeconomic contradictions constrain universal and reciprocal recognition of individuals, failing to satisfy the basic human desire to be valued equally with peers. Furthermore, while liberal democracy provides the foundations of recognition, its Hegelian roots trap humankind in a dream; it restricts the avenues of individual rationality and ultimately leads to the assimilation of dystopian characteristics through the misappropriation of a desire for superiority. Through an analysis of 21st Century Western political and social movements, I conclude that liberal democracy cannot sustain its dominance due to its internal socioeconomic contradictions, and this will lead to renewed class conflicts in the future.

NOTE

Liberalism and Liberal Democracy are used interchangeably throughout this paper. While there are some semantic differences between each term, both terms are employed in situations where, individually, they contribute better to the flow of the argument.

Contradictions are mentioned in this paper in the Marxist sense insofar as they are two processes that represent systemic irrationality and potentially lead to system instability. While fundamental, severe contradictions render a social system internally unsustainable.

This paper defines the working class as the section of society who do not own the means of production but sell their labour power for a wage or a salary to those that do.

Introduction. A fresh Century and A fresh Class Conflict.

'Hitherto, every form of society has been based, as we have already seen, on the antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes.'

- Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 14

THE SUBJECT OF class conflict has become increasingly contentious within Western liberal political discussion. One only must look at the public dismissal of the many leftist economic and social movements up to the present to see that popular opinion has been driven systematically to the individualist right of the political spectrum (Cammaerts et al. 2016, p.12; Pantazis and Pemberton, 2012). Occurring primarily through dishonest and aggressive media reporting, as well as sabre-rattling by populists (Cammaerts, p. 8), it has resulted in a growing antagonism between the ruling and the ruled. This deep division in western liberal states leaves democracy in an unsustainable crisis.

This crisis has been brewing for some time. The unbridled pursuit of self-gratification has uncoupled the political elite from the working-class electorate. Francis Fukuyama, writing in 1992, argued that modern liberal democracies could not restrict the expansion of megalothymia - the individual drive for tyrannical ambition and superiority - as liberalism desires a rational pursuit of public recognition (Fukuyama, 2020, p. 321). However, the 21st Century has proven that this megalothymia is deeply damaging. It creates an antagonistic struggle for recognition which drives individuals to seek higher value in society through subjugation, contrary to the liberal ideal of universal recognition. This paper explores such ideas of equality and superiority and identifies the resulting inequality as the greatest failure of liberal democracy.

Taking Hegel's dialectical reading of the recognition relationship as my starting point, I show how its rigid idealistic historicism is both self-limiting and irrational and pursues megalothymia at the expense of universal recognition. Through this, I posit that Fukuyama's development of such a dialectic is too orthodox and is a product of the heady optimism of the mid-1990s in its denial of alternative ideologies. As a result, I find that liberal democracy has failed to become the utopian ideology its idealist creators envisaged, even without any real competition. Rather, it fails to equalise the unequal and perpetuates dystopian class and social divides.

However, this argument draws attention to a dilemma. On the one hand, the pursuit of universal recognition fails to satisfy individuals who only receive recognition through being superior to others. But on the other hand, this unchecked desire for megalothymia also denies universal, equal recognition, perpetuating Hegel's master and slave dialectic into the modern era. As such, a

resolution to the question of recognition appears untenable yet necessary to save liberal democracy from a decline into a dying dystopia with paper ideals.

Nevertheless, these contradictions need not leave us with a stark choice between indifference to inequality in the status quo or a violent social revolution. Instead, this paper concludes that Liberal democracy can save itself by adapting away from the feudal hierarchies of the past. By rejecting the old concept of the master and the slave and instead embracing the contributions of the individual, liberalism can walk away from restrictive universal laws and form a new path that creates a satisfying universal and reciprocal recognition arrangement and removes the desire for megalothymia.

Hegel's Liberal Utopia

The roots of the current liberal democratic recognition crisis can be traced back to liberalism's success in its fight against historicism in the 20th Century. The collapse of Marxism in Russia and the capitalist reforms in the other major communist nations by 1989 left the world in a unipolar imbalance, with liberal democracy the overpowering political force. As a result, major Western liberal states like the US and UK, as well as the EU, gained free reign over influencing developing nations as the undisputed champions of the Cold War.

Consequently, the end of meaningful ideological competition post-1989 has allowed western liberal states to reduce their efforts in advancing social causes as they are no longer held to such high standards as the bearers of social freedom. The end of the Cold War was the culmination of a centuries-long epoch of ideological change, from feudalism to monarchism, communism, and finally, liberalism. This evolution was a rational exposition of megalothymia, as the desire to be superior to previous ideas had resulted in positive social changes and a reduction in class inequality through concessions from the ruling class. However, this conclusion of history is deeply flawed as the 21st Century has proven that without competition, the bourgeoisie – the ruling class in capitalism – has taken complete control and has begun eroding the concessions made in a flawed desire to maintain power.

G.W.F Hegel pioneered this liberal idealism which defined the turn of the 21st Century. Writing back during the Napoleonic Wars, Hegel believed that with the arrival of the French political model to the German states, humankind had reached the End of History (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 15, 2020, p. 66; Kojève, 1980). Hegel argued that the realisation of human freedom was the ultimate purpose of history,

which could only be achieved by creating the perfect state. The tension between the pursuit of freedom and humankind's current condition would produce an attempt by humankind to change its condition to one in more accord with its nature (Beiser, 1993, p. 289). Progress was through the 'thymos' or 'Geist', a supernatural force that directs human actions. For Hegel, liberalism satisfied the struggle for recognition through universal and reciprocal recognition (ibid.). The struggle is the desire for individuals to be 'recognised' as contingent entities, capable of self-determination and recognising their value (Fukuyama, 2020, p. 16). In Hegel's time, Europe was a land dominated by a feudal 'master and slave' relationship, so the Napoleonic model emphasised true emancipation through universal political representation in a legislature (Kojève, 1980). It spoke of the feudal 'slaves' liberation and their recognition by the 'masters' as equals.

Hegel's dialectic was formed through a belief in historicism. This belief, as described by Karl Popper, is 'an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their primary aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the 'rhythms' or the 'patterns', the 'laws' or the 'trends' that underlie the evolution of history" (Popper, 1980, p. 3). Hegel's dialectic utilised this historicism in the formation of a 'universal history' which Fukuyama described as a "kind of secular theodicy, that is, a justification of all that exists in terms of history's final end" (Fukuyama, 2020, p. 130). This mechanism is used to justify a directional characterisation of world history, with a clearly defined endpoint, which both Hegel and later Fukuyama argued was liberalism, insofar that even if other ideologies developed over time, ultimately, history itself would vindicate liberalism's own rationality (ibid., p. 339).

However, as this argument revolves around the concept that liberal democracy is the most rational ideology because of its lack of alternatives, it is an argument heavily leaning on the irrationality of human beliefs. While Hegel and Fukuyama came from the Kantian belief in the rationality of humankind, a very positive view of the human condition, I argue that this interpretation of logic fails to accept the independence of actors within a liberal democracy. Moreover, by indicating that humans always appeal to reason with their morality, there appears a dilemma: the conditions of freedom and equality are fundamentally irrational qualities, as the value of each is affected by the irrational emotions of individuals and their perceptions. Nevertheless, Hegel and Fukuyama apply them as rational qualities and implement them in their final universal state as set conditions. Therefore, due to the subjectivity of conditions, I argue that liberal democracy is no more rational than any other political philosophy.

Popper picks Hegel's idealistic historicism further apart, arguing that success does not prove anything and that "Hegelianism is the renaissance of tribalism" (Popper, 1980, p. 30). Hegelianism taught individuals to worship the state, history, and

nationhood (ibid, p. 31). Popper argued that Hegel was the bridge between the great ancient wreckers of democracy, such as Plato, and the modern totalitarian states of the 20th and 21st centuries. Furthermore, he argued that Hegel was a product of Prussian nationalism and convinced the German nationalists, searching for recognition, that the pursuit of a Prussian state was going to the realisation of such an identity (ibid., p. 57). This desire for a state is counter-intuitive to the recognition of the slaves of society and is akin to the idiom 'wolves do not lose sleep over the opinions of sheep'. Hegel's liberal state kept the ruling masters in power while superficially giving universal recognition to the slaves as a class, but not as equals to the rulers.

Fukuyama's (2020) account of the struggle for recognition relies on his understanding of the importance of identity in moral and political life. He highlights how revolutionaries are most free when they realise their freedom and are, therefore, the most human of beings (2020, p. 312). As former 'slaves', those revolutionaries who got their recognition through a bloody battle to free themselves will create a society where the class antagonisms they experienced are abolished (ibid.). Fukuyama believed that this is where humanity is both happy and satisfied with itself – individuals become "animals of the genius homo sapiens" (ibid.).

However, as modern liberalism is inexorably linked to capitalism and nationalism, it currently cannot facilitate universal recognition. The master and slave relationship has been sustained as the prevailing historicist view of liberalism refuses to allow for any change to social hierarchies. While Fukuyama viewed liberalism as freeing the revolutionaries and abolishing class conflicts, Hegel's modern liberalism desires to protect the status quo with limited concessions to such revolutionaries. Contrary to Hegelian idealism, therefore, liberalism is not at the end of history, as the struggle for universal recognition will not end until such socioeconomic contradictions are resolved.

Furthermore, Popper's emphasis on the individual and his dissemination of Hegel as a product of his time exemplifies how the West must start thinking about politics in a truly modern, democratic manner to make any headway in resolving class antagonisms. Fukuyama may have been right for the 1990s, but as the world enters the second decade of the 21st Century, the internal contradictions of modern liberal democracy in trying to facilitate universal and superior recognition have made it internally unsustainable.

The Revolutionary Struggle for Recognition

'Man's satisfaction, as opposed to his happiness, arose not from the goal itself, but from the struggle and work along the way.'

- Fukuyama, *The End of History*, p. 312

An analysis of modern Hegelian liberalism is not complete without drawing from Marx's works, as his focus on class antagonisms and material conditions underpin the struggle for recognition. A cornerstone of Marx's argument is that liberal democratic states are societies dominated by capital. This domination leads the bourgeoisie – the capitalist class – to be the only ones in control (Marx, 2008). For Marx, the state is an agent of capital, doing the ruling classes' bidding. In such a system, the state's goal is to maintain the position of the proletariat – the working class – as wage slaves without the political power to change the social system (Marx, 2008).

Marx is crucial to fully understanding the failure of modern liberal democracy. His dialectical materialism emphasises the irreconcilable contradictions within both class and socioeconomic existence. Furthermore, he posited that the only solution to the problems caused by the contradictions was to completely rearrange the system of social hierarchy (Marx, 2008, p. 21). This revolutionary fervour contrasts with Hegel's idealistic historicism, which viewed contradictions as reconcilable if enough attention was given to them, creating a new foundation on which the essence of the existing social system could be developed.

For Marx, socialism is the reconciliation of these antagonisms. He sees the rise in nationalism and individualism as distractions from achieving universal recognition. The resolution to universal recognition of individuals lies within the abolition of capital and private property, as both only serve the interests of the bourgeois minority (Marx, 2008, p. 10). Through a social revolution, the proletariat can take control of the state and society and remove the control of capital over daily life (ibid., p. 13).

From a Marxist perspective, modern liberal democracy cannot adequately synthesise a response to these socioeconomic contradictions. Evidence from the mid-2010s, in the form of #Occupy, Brexit and the Arab Spring movements, shows how capitalism has failed to recognise individuals. These protests and the rise of identity politics are no coincidence, as the ruling bourgeoisie has full utilisation of the state to dispel any genuine political or economic reform attempts (ibid.). The frustration of the working class at these internal contradictions leads to action, either through social protests, anti-institutionalism, or a desire for populist people's government.

However, the advent of violent revolution is antithetical to universal recognition. Marx wrote in a period of great industrial inequality, right after the 1848 revolutions. Liberal democracy, while dominated by capital, has solid foundations on which it can be reformed to better equalise the unequal. While the universalisation of liberal democracy is critically undermined by its maintenance of a social system based on inequality, exhaustive materialist interpretations of society tend to lead to the same dystopian characteristics as late-stage capitalism.

Rather, through an appreciation of Marx's philosophical work can a political development of the struggle for recognition be developed. By identifying the fundamental contradiction within liberal democracy – its goal of providing both universal equality and superior recognition, we find the true culprit of system instability. While blaming the system does reduce the culpability of individual actors to be in irrational opposition to reform, liberal democracy as a whole has proven that it is largely unwilling to change to solve its contradictions. This makes reconciliation of class and identity politics unlikely without system change.

A Resolution through a Renewed Struggle for Recognition?

“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.”

-Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, 1845

This paper concludes that reform is desperately needed due to the irreconcilable contradictions within capitalist liberal democracy. The resolution to these class antagonisms can only come from within the system itself. Any outside influence from other ideologies will only cause the current ruling class to tighten their grip. Instead, the West must choose between embracing reform or revolution, as the status quo will result in a continual slip into a tyrannical society dominated by megalothymia.

Through analysing Hegel's liberal idealism and Marx's insistence on irreconcilable problems within capitalism, this paper aims to show that ambitious thinking is required to get out of social stagnation. First, I find that as liberalism's internal capital contradictions constrain universal and reciprocal recognition of individuals, it also fails to satisfy the basic human desire to be valued equally with peers. This inadequacy is the cause of the present system instability and is a factor in why democracy appears to be under threat in the West. Then, by picking

apart Hegel and Fukuyama, I highlight that modern states based on Hegel's historicism are self-defeating and inherently irrational, as universal laws deny the human agency to make individual, rational decisions outside existing metaphysical laws. Through this analysis, I conclude that liberal democracy suffers from two internal contradictions: the inequality of capital and the desire for social equality.

Therefore, liberal democracy cannot reconcile class conflicts as it has not overcome the feudal master and slave dialectic it inherited from monarchism. While Fukuyama believed that states were passing into a post-historical phase at the end of the Cold War (Fukuyama, 1989), the rise in identity politics and socioeconomic movements in the early to mid-2010s is evidence that the internal contradictions of being both liberal and capitalist have not been resolved by liberalism being the victor in 1989. Therefore, this paper concludes that the struggle for recognition has proven to be irreconcilable among liberal democratic states, which will lead the world into a future of class-based conflicts.

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