

Liberalism, Hannah Arendt and Latin America

I have been through a development that is similar, I believe, to many intellectuals of my generation. In our youth we were seduced by the revolutionary idea, the socialist utopia, and we believed that Marxism and the revolution would be the magic key for solving the problems of society – injustice, inequality, and underdevelopment. Later we found that socialism was not only a utopia but also a reality, and that in the countries in which it was realised it did solve some problems but at the same time it created new ones that were often much worse, particularly with respect to freedom. Some regimes were created in which the control of the people and the individual took on truly grotesque dimensions, and this brought not only me, but many of us to correct our youthful enthusiasm for socialism, and above all to call for the democratic rights that had been to a large extent devalued by the Left, and to insist that justice could not be separated from freedom, political freedom. You could say that was my first significant development in the mid-1960s – the realisation that there can be no freedom without democracy, that democracy is absolutely fundamental for the rule of law, for the observation of human rights, so that the individual is not oppressed by the state.

Then in a second development I reached the conviction that just as political freedom is fundamental for the existence of democracy, the rule of law, and economic development, it is just as fundamental that alongside political freedom there should also be economic freedom, and that this is a crucial instrument if a country is to overcome poverty and to use the possibilities of an increasingly inter-linked world. That led me to the position that I currently hold, and which is by no means the caricature of «ultra-liberalism» or «neo-liberalism» that



Painted by Fernando Botero

Mario Vargas Llosa, Peruvian writer and politician, narrowly beaten by Fujimori in the presidential election in 1990, is author of books such as *The Green House*, *Conversation in the Cathedral*, *Death in the Andes*, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*, *A Fish in the Water: A Memoir* and the recently published about the Dictator Trujillo, *La Fiesta del Chivo*. Awarded the 1994 Cervantes Prize in Spain, the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 1996, National Book Critics Circle Award 1998; member of the Real Academia Española, and recommended for the Nobel Prize for Literature. This text is an edited transcript of comments made by Mario Vargas Llosa in conversation with Wolfgang Heuer on 9th May 2001.

some on the Left attribute to me. I say caricature because they imagine someone who has no respect for the democratic world and only believes in economic progress, as if economic progress could be separated from a liberal view of political liberty, that is democratic liberty. This was a constant reason to enter into debate, because for me freedom is indivisible. I believe that real progress is by no means only economic progress, and that progress which is not at the same time also social, political, and cultural progress is no progress at all. And this is a form of liberalism, in my opinion, which is authentic and derived from the classical doctrines. It is not a dogma, in contrast to Marxism, but offers room for many alternatives and discrepancies,

starting from the premise that political and economic freedom are inseparable.

For my development in the 1960s, to begin with Raymond Aron was very important. Then Albert Camus, who was always of the opinion that ethics could not be separated from politics, which led to a row with Sartre. This debate was very important for me, because I was a young student when it took place and it made a lasting impression on me. To start with I was on the side of Sartre, and at the end I thought Camus was right. Then there were some very important thinkers such as Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper. Popper was one of the thinkers who has influenced me most, because his liberalism is characterised by humanity. To be sure, there are liberal thinkers who seem almost de-humanised, with a completely economic view of things, even though they are very impressive thinkers. But Popper always seemed to me to be filled with deep humanity, an awareness of social problems, and a deeply humanist view of the form that political and economic freedom should take in a society. There are many others, but I think that those I have mentioned most for the development of my political thought.

Isaiah Berlin wrote an essay that I found very illuminating about what he called contradictory values. We all tend to assume naively that all values are mutually compatible, and that for example equality and justice could not contradict each other. But in fact, as certain times, equality and justice can come into contradiction, because unlimited freedom often makes a level of inequality possible which is not only inappropriate, but unjust. What solution does Isaiah Berlin give for this reality, the fact that unlimited freedom sometimes creates such terrible inequality that in the face of this no justice seems possible? The answer cannot be to sacrifice freedom for justice, because we could see how the communist countries that did this ended up creating terrible injustice while at the same time they suppressed freedom. Rather the answer is to try to remain very alert, and constantly to carry out corrections so that freedom does not destroy justice, and neither does justice destroy freedom. This is what the most developed societies have managed to achieve. The major achievement of these societies is precisely that they have refused to sacrifice any of their values, which are equally important for a civilised society, and have accepted that there are often conflicts between one value and another. For this it

is necessary that there is a democracy and participation and that in society there is very active, critical thought so that corrections can be made and no one value is sacrificed to another.

Hannah Arendt developed her thought in the middle of the capitalist world and acquired considerable sensibility for what she was confronted with. The great contribution of Hannah Arendt was that along with her criticism she never lost sight of the phenomenon of totalitarianism, which she described admirably in its inner dynamics. I believe that her thought, her rejection of dogmatism and sectarianism is enormously fruitful, and this led to considerable conflicts with the Jewish community, which did not feel that it had been presented properly in her description of the phenomenon of National Socialism. The thing that made a particular impression on me is her essay on Eichmann in Jerusalem, and her account of an evil that is not apocalyptic but banal, rudimentary, bureaucratic, and which has enlisted the most mediocre of individuals. I think she discovered a truth there through the phenomenon of National Socialism, but we Latin Americans have experienced something similar in all the dictatorships we have lived through. There was nothing great about our dictatorships, nothing apocalyptic, there was no demonic evil, but rather the evil of mediocrity, of kitsch, insignificance, and shabbiness, and what better example could there be of this than Trujillo! [President of the Dominican Republic 1930–1961] Seen from a distance, Trujillo was a ridiculous person. He was mediocrity in human form, and a whole regime was transfixed in the face of this laughable nonentity, this pathetic manifestation of human existence. And in this sense the work of Hannah Arendt is enormously fertile and valid for tackling authoritarianism in the Third World, and not only for phenomena such as Nazism or Stalinism.

Totalitarianism is the phenomenon of the absolute control of a society. The totalitarian regime wants to control not only people's behaviour but also their most intimate motives, their views of the world, through to their very dreams. It is the total control of the individual and the society. It is true that totalitarianism appears in the forms of fascism, Nazism and communism, and that many authoritarian regimes do not fully fit in with this model, because they allow a certain space for initiative and spontaneity which there would not normally be in a totalitarian regime. For example, many

authoritarian regimes in the Third World leave tolerance in their economy: Pinochet, for example, who was brutal in the political field, left room for economic freedom, competition and initiative, and that is the case with many authoritarian regimes. This does not mean that such regimes were any less corrupt, but that they were able to achieve some things economically which totalitarian regimes in general would find difficult. The case of Trujillo is very interesting because among the regimes of the Third World he was probably closest to totalitarianism. He was able to establish a total control over all the society, similar to that exercised by a Stalin or Hitler. Trujillo not only ruled by fear, but also ruled with the help of collaboration based on a magic, a fascination that this person was able to exercise because an important sector of the society did not regard him as a mere human being but as a Hitler, a Stalin, to whom they knowingly transferred their rights and their ability to criticise – that is they entrusted him with the most important decisions about their life. In this sense, a regime such as Trujillo's was indeed much close to a totalitarianism than, say, that of Fidel Castro, which is a typical Third World authoritarian regime.

Intellectuals love the apocalypse. They love the big earthquakes. Democracy has no sex appeal, except when it is lost. But for the Chinese, it is extraordinarily sexy. If you travelled in the 1960s and 1970s through Eastern Europe, Poland, Czechoslovakia, or Hungary, Russia too, you could experience how intellectuals and people in general regarded democracy with great admiration, with nostalgia. But when you have democracy it seems boring. It is about reaching consensus again and again. The politicians of democracy are not such apocalyptic figures as Fidel Castro, but they are people who are continuously involved in intrigue and manipulation, in petty politics in which they are looking for consensus in order to gain slight advantages. That is the mediocrity of existence. It does not please the intellectuals. They seek here too for perfection, like in an artwork. Therefore it is clear that Marxism is very seductive, very fascinating with its vision of the future, its apocalypse of paradise on earth, and its heroism. I believe that the intellectuals have this inevitable romantic weakness, the longing for the absolute, the paradise, the ultimate, and this is completely incompatible with democracy.

For me, the most admirable politicians are those who respect legality, that is liberty and the law, and who leave the country in a better state than they found it. I would say that such a politician has deserved respect and admiration. I can name a politician, who you probably don't know or cannot remember. But I always mention him because nobody talks of him any more – and that is Cristiani. Do you know who Cristiani is? He was president of El Salvador. He was a businessman, not a politician. But he decided in a certain situation to go into politics, and he was elected in free elections. When he became President of El Salvador, his land was on the verge of breaking up under a civil war that had been going on for many years, and was even taking place on the streets of San Salvador. The country was literally on the brink of destruction. Well, when Mr Cristiani left the presidency after free elections, he had successfully pacified the country. And the guerrillas and the army were not only negotiating, but were also taking part in elections as civilised opponents. Today, former guerrilla fighters are members of parliament or mayors, and the country is not only peaceful but has also begun to develop economically. That would never have been possible without this president, who nobody knows and who never made the front pages of the newspapers, like Fidel Castro for example. He is always in the headlines, isn't he, because he has sex appeal. Cristiani was someone who respected the law, didn't steal, and who was never accused by his opponents of taking a single centavo. That is the sort of politician, I believe, who could save Latin America, if we manage to get people like him, with this attitudes, his efficiency and at the same time with his discretion. Then democracy could take root in Latin America.

