

# Liberals in High Castles

Rossa Ó MUIREARTAIGH

## The Traumas of a Liberal

Liberalism, at its most pure, is the belief that we exist as free individuals invested with natural rights that protect us from other individuals who may seek to curb that freedom. Once I am engaging in an action that does not harm others (a “self-regarding” action in John Stuart Mill’s phrasing (1985)) then nobody has a right to stop me. Whether it be collecting stamps, reading obscene 1920s German literature, tattooing your left arm, or standing in your back garden at midday yodeling, if you are not harming anyone else where’s the harm. This idea that we are all individuals (regardless of caste, race, gender, or creed) and that, as such, we are all free—the basic belief of liberalism—has taken over the world in the last number of centuries. No modern people will argue against this core value, they will seek only to qualify it and complicate it, not to fully negate it. These qualifications and complications are possible because liberalism, like all ideologies, is riddled with tensions and paradoxes. Reality is too complicated for its simple credo.

In essence, liberalism’s view that we are individuals assumes an atomic view of humans that is contradicted in every way by the fact that humans are social beings, shaped by our dealings with one another. This famously warps liberalism into empty sloganeering when set against the merciless exchanges of capitalism. But here I want to focus not on the jagged rocky base of economics, upon which *all* ideologies flounder, but on the tense relationship liberalism has with the world of culture and aesthetics. I will use Philip K. Dick’s novel *The Man in the High Castle* to illustrate the liberal trauma. I love liberalism, and my aim is to save it from itself. I aim to do this with the help of Tanabe Hajime 田辺元 (1885–1962) and his concept of the *logic of the species* (種の論理).

## **Liberalism and Culture**

When humans gather, they create culture. This amounts to bonds of beliefs about the world and coherent valuing of what is in it, created and sustained constantly by rituals, networks, and institutions. (That's my definition of culture. It will do.) Liberalism is about individual consciousness, not culture. But liberalism does not necessarily involve a clash with culture when that culture is liberal. In other words, in a society where everyone has been brought up to believe in the sanctity of individual freedom, liberalism will fit snugly into the everyday doings of its people. They may yodel and tattoo to their hearts content knowing their neighbors will not stop them. As an aside, there is a curious paradox that liberal societies are more than often actually quite conformist. If everyone is a liberal then everyone is alike, and behaves alike. There may be the odd obscene novel-reading, tattooed yodeling philatelist but generally the civility of sameness reigns. We tolerate are neighbors, who, it turns out are very similar to us. This, in fact, is how culture works, according to the definition I just gave.

Liberalism's problem is not the culture of a liberal society but the culture of other societies. How do we tolerate those who do not see the world through the same liberal eyes? They too are individuals. They, too, have their own consciousness, and freedom to enact its desires. What if there are people of another culture who think, for religious reasons, that yodeling is the ultimate satanic abomination. For these people, yodelers are vile and perverted, and must be shunned. Liberals will no doubt illiberally tut-tut these yodel-hating Untermensch in private, and just hope that their yodelphobia never translates into behavior, such as aggressive demos outside the offices of the Yodeling Promotion Association, that would bend the definition of self-regarding action to breaking point. Liberalism can and does survive such clashes of culture, but at the cost of its own consistency.

## **Liberalism and the Arts of Foreigners**

Another inconsistency in the heart of liberalism is the attitude of liberalism

to the art that emerges in the culture of others. Within one's own culture, individual artistic creation and innovation is something to be welcomed and applauded. Tradition is not to be revered for itself and must never be allowed to act as fetters on artistic freedom. However, when it comes to the culture of others, the position is reversed. Tradition is sacrosanct, and creative innovation and adaptation is inauthenticity. How liberalism ends up with this stark contradiction is probably due to the idea that the culture of others is an organic whole, coming in a complete all or nothing package. In a sense, other countries, other societies, other "cultures", are one individual in composite. Our society is made up of free individuals, their society is made up of a "culture" which must be respected and preserved always intact. Let's take the art of cuisine. For many liberal North Americans, sushi must only ever be cooked by racially pure Japanese chefs in the way the Japanese, *en masse*, do it.<sup>1</sup> Otherwise the sin of cultural appropriation has been committed. On the other hand, as far as I know, no North American has ever been offended by the clear act of cultural appropriation that is the MOS Burger fast food chain. Foreigners can play with our culture because ours is the culture of free individuals, but we cannot play with theirs because theirs is the culture of sacred and authentic tradition. Anyone in the world can sing rock and roll, but only the Japanese are allowed to play the shamisen and only the Swiss or Tyroleans may yodel. This concept of "cultural appropriation" reveals a weirdly unliberal liberalism.

### **Liberalism and history**

Why liberals will indulge in this kind of strange inconsistency, seeking to apply quasi-Nuremburg Laws to matters of (foreign) culture stems from the liberal view of history. Liberals reject any grand narrative or positivism in history. History is the product of free individuals doing their own thing. Any notion of growth or evolution in history is a denial of the atomic nature of free humans, and the imposition of a regime of particular norms negating individual consciousness. For liberalism, history is always and only contingent: the product of the accidental whims and creations of free

individuals. Any inequalities between cultures and cultural power are the product of accidental historical outcomes, not innate differences between cultures. That history could have been always alternative is not a reminder for us to thank the heroes of yesteryear who gave us the better societies we live in today, but a declaration that our most cherished values and moral visions are a historical fluke and could have been just as happily different.

In sum, the problem for liberals is that with the contingency of history, liberals have lost the right to promote their culture. Any promotion of truth and universal value in one's own culture is deemed anti-liberal. Instead, the culture of the liberal must be so open that it becomes the blank space or empty vessel in which other cultures can thrive. However, this, ironically, offers the same liberal culture a very special status as the uber-culture for all other cultures, the set of all cultures in which other cultures are mere particular elements. Only one culture gets to be empty, the zero that cannot be divided by any other number.

### **When Childan met Kasoura**

Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* is a novel set in an alternative history where Franklin Delano Roosevelt was assassinated in 1933. Through various resulting chains of events Japan and Germany end up winning World War II, with Japan occupying western United States. Japanese California in this scenario, whilst not a democracy, is fairly liberal, and the residence of California and other states under Japanese rule enjoy a good deal of freedom in their everyday lives. In this world, Japan's political dominance also implies cultural dominance. Japan gets to put a value on American art and culture, and not the other way around. One character in the novel, a Mr. Childan, is the owner of an antique shop selling authentic US artifacts. One of his customers, for example, is a Mr. Tagomi who buys a high-price 1938 Mickey Mouse watch, an illustration of the cultural exoticness that is valued in this alternate world.

What I want to focus on is the relationship between Childan and a Japanese couple, Paul and Betty Kasoura. The Kasouras, as you would expect from any

middle-class people living in a quasi-colonial society, are committed liberals. They have an eclectic taste in furniture, (authentic) cuisine, and literature. They are tolerant and do not like bigoted opinions, such as the anti-Semitic views of Childan. But perhaps the greatest proof that they are bourgeoisie liberals is the fact that they read and discuss alternative history novels: in this case *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* set in an alternative reality where Roosevelt wasn't assassinated in 1934, and Japan and Germany lost the war. At one point in the novel, Childan presents Kasoura with a pin, a piece of newly crafted jewelry by an American startup enterprise called Edfrank. A few days later he visits Kasoura to see how he likes the pin. The dialog that emerges encapsulates everything that is awkward, confused, and traumatic about the liberal approach to the aesthetics of other cultures.

Initially Kasoura is entirely negative about the piece. He says, "Here is a piece of metal which has been melted until it has become shapeless. It represents nothing. Nor does it have design, of any intentional sort. It is merely amorphous. One might say, it is mere content, deprived of form." (Dick 1965: 170) Oh dear! The other culture is getting too innovative. What ever happen to the old traditional, spiritual, authentic Mickey Mouse watches. However, Kasoura then switches perspective. He explains that because he has had time to gaze upon the jewelry, he has begun to see a certain aesthetic value in it. He tells Childan, "Robert, the object has *wu*." (Dick 1965: 170) *Wu*, of course, is the Chinese word for *nothingness* [無]. The realization that the other culture can create newness prompts Kasoura to suggest that Childan mass produce his jewelry: "A line of amulets to be peddled all over Latin America and the Orient. Most of the masses still believe in magic, you know. Spells. Potions. It's a big business, I am told." (Dick 1965: 174) Childan has the chance to be secure and prosperous. But then, Kasoura's liberal sentiments swings back from this appreciation of the creativeness of the other culture to the usual condescending dismissal of the mass production of arts when practiced by those who lack political power and are hence condemned to cultural 'authenticity'. He haughtily pontificates: "You and I-we have no awareness of the vast number of uneducated. They can obtain from mold-produced identical objects a joy which would be

denied to us. We must suppose that we have the only one of a kind, or at least something rare, possessed by a very few. And, of course, something truly authentic. Not a model or replica.” (Dick 1965: 175) The wild pendulums of liberal reactions going on in Kasoura’s mind—condemnation, revelation, in temptation, isolation<sup>2</sup>—shocks, bewilders, batters, shreds, silences Childan. He can only marvel at the unequal cultural power between himself and this liberal Kasoura. “Childan felt stunned. The man’s telling me I’m obliged to assume moral responsibility for the Edfrank jewelry! Crackpot neurotic Japanese world view...” (Dick 1965: 172) (Of course, we must remember that the phrase “neurotic Japanese” is indicating the liberal mindset of the dominant power in this alternative reality. In our own reality, it is not “Japanese” as such.) In the end, Kasoura’s liberal guilt tripping of Childan forces him to give up selling these items. He must submit to the dominant culture’s dictation of what constitutes authenticity. Childan can only despair at the utter uselessness of resistance to the cultural power of the manipulative and pretentious liberal middle classes:

Of course. Whole affair a cruel dismissal of American efforts, taking place before his eyes. Cynicism, but God forbid, he had swallowed hook, line and sinker. Got me to agree, step by step, led me along the garden path to this conclusion: products of American hands good for nothing but to be models for junky good-luck charms. This was how the Japanese ruled, not crudely but with subtlety, ingenuity, timeless cunning. Christ! We’re barbarians compared to them, Childan realized. We’re no more than boobs against such pitiless reasoning. Paul did not say—did not tell me—that our art was worthless; he got me to say it for him. And, as a final irony, he regretted my utterance. Faint, civilized gesture of sorrow as he heard the truth out of me. He’s broken me, Childan almost said aloud— (Dick 1965: 177)

Childan’s anguish is that of yet another victim seeing their culture killed by liberal condensation, creativity murdered by liberal conformity, imagination smothered by liberal piety.

### **The Curse of the Liberal Gaze**

As I have stated, liberals view all cultures as equal, except for their own which is so open it is not even really there. For this to work, the other cultures must be kept rigidly separate from one another, otherwise they too might enjoy the privilege of not really being there. The liberal world is a world where everyone belongs to a culture whose uniqueness is to be celebrated and kept pure from outside hegemony. The model of this world view would be something like the Small World attraction in Tokyo Disneyland where every country is displayed with its own unique authentic cultural look: Irish dolls in leprechaun customs, Swiss dolls dressed as yodelers (probably), and so on. Liberalism must police these borders but hide, also, the illiberalism inherent in this policing: the oppression, for example, of the few Swiss people who want to dress as leprechauns, and (the very many) Irish people who want to yodel. And so, we meet again an ideology banging up against its own incoherence. The only way for it to cope is to sublimate and displace this trauma of self-contradiction. This is done by waving it away with the measly mind-numbing numskull notion of “cultural authenticity”.

The problem with cultural authenticity is that it demands from other cultures the duty to tradition for its own sake, a freedom killing duty that liberals have successfully fought and weakened in their own culture. But even more than this hypocritical betrayal of the liberal fight, is the craven junking of the core liberal view of humanity—that we are born and live as individuals with our own consciousness which should only ever be inhibited for the rarest of reasons. If we believe it for us, we should believe it for all. But we don’t believe it because our beliefs are the open, undefined, empty, zero beliefs that must never be asserted in a particular historically specific form. With this form of bourgeois liberalism, we can and do impose “authentic” culture on others, but never liberal freedom.

### **Tanabe Therapy**

The diagnosis of a trauma, the mere awareness of its existence, is its cure.

Or rather, there is no cure, only a new loving connection with your inner trauma. As with our psyches, as with our ideologies. No ideology can ever overcome its own contradictions (that would be a dangerous auto-genocidal act of insanity). It must just learn to accept and live with them. Liberalism needs its therapist, someone to diagnose and lay bare its inner turmoil so that it can march on emboldened and renewed. Perhaps it is the philosopher Tanabe Hajime who can analyze its woes and lighten its burden.

What is the trauma of liberalism? Deep down, the liberal nightmare is a vision of other exotic cultures having individuals with free consciousnesses and agency just like you. Because if other cultures have this then the historicity and particularness of one's own liberal standpoint is exposed. When individuals from other cultures engage in acts of innovative creation, we can allow for the odd artifact endowed with *wu* to entice the liberal gaze with its exoticness. But we can never allow for exotic works of art to be mass produced or made vulgar since this would mean that any culture could be the open empty global one. It would be as though sushi were to become as culturally neutral as hamburgers—the ultimate American liberal nightmare. And so, to wake from these inner terrors, liberals need to recognize and embrace their cultural specificity, and see that only the individual and the formless universal get to be zero, meaning that free consciousness can crop up in any culture, not just one's own. Which, in turn, implies that other cultures can always be open to being copied and globalized.

Tanabe's logic of the species, in my interpretation of it (which will do), argues that there is never any zero culture. All cultures are species, inhabiting the mediating middle ground between the universal (*genus*) and the individual. No culture can ever be the universal (zero) culture. At the same time no culture can ever eradicate the individual. What this means is that every culture, and not just the bourgeois liberal ones in the politically dominating nations, can give birth to individuals driven to challenge and distort their traditions, see the *wu* behind the culture forms, and even mass produce those distortions.<sup>3</sup>

At the other prong of the logic of the species, we must recognize that the universal appears in any culture, since it only can ever take form in



cultural particularity. If all cultures can be universal, no culture can be exclusive. All humans are naturally endowed with the right to play with other cultural forms. To say otherwise would be to condemn cultures to universal abstraction, ignore the fact that they are particular creations of free individual consciousness, and violate the logic of the species.<sup>4</sup>

At the end of the day, no culture, even the most liberal one can ignore the fact that it has a particular form, that it has a certain species of values that has arisen in history and not from abstract principles. However, as Tanabe points out, there are open and closed cultures. Liberals must recognize that this inequality between cultures does exist and that open is better, more liberal. The open societies are the ones that recognize that universal truth is the product of individual consciousness, but that this universal truth can only ever appear in the messy impure world of cultural species.

In the *Man in the High Castle*, the mistake Kasoura has made is that he does not allow individual Americans to play with their consciousness and produce messy unorthodox forms. What would America be like if the liberal Kasouras of *that* world allowed the colonized population to forsake and forget liberal notions of cultural purity. Well, it would be like the mad, rock and rolling nation of America of *this* world, and from which our world derives so much enjoyment and inspiration. For all our haughty chastisements, us Europeans, like everyone else, love America for its crass craziness. It would be a very dull world without the US.

Now, my discussion here so far has been a philosophical one which means that I am under no obligation to say anything practical or give the reader any concrete idea of what I am talking about. But even so, let me finish with one clear opinion. I believe that all those who call themselves liberal, and are worthy of the name, must condemn with full-on fury the anti-liberal bigoted, and profoundly ignorant idea that cultural appropriation is wrong.

### Notes

- 1 For an example of such liberal attitudes see: Conor Friedersdorf, "A Food Fight at Oberlin College," *The Atlantic*, December 21, 2015, accessed October 19, 2020,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/the-food-fight-at-oberlin-college/421401/>.

- 2 This desperation, dislocation  
Separation, condemnation  
Revelation, in temptation  
Isolation, desolation, isolation  
Let it go, uh huh, and so fade away  
To let it go and so fade, fade, fade away  
Ooh.

(From the song *Bad* by アイルランドの U2)

- 3 As Woody Allen said of his artistic ambition: “to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race. And then to see if I can get them mass-produced in plastic.” Quoted at *EBooksBag*, accessed October 19, 2020, <https://ebooksbag.com/pdf-epub-without-feathers-download/>.
- 4 Tanabe wrote: “What I have in mind is a plurality of ethnic nations, each of which possesses a human universality in the sense that each mediates the rational individuality of the citizens that make it up, so that the nation is ethnic and at the same time correlative to the individual. The idea is not to exclude the specific control of a nation’s people, which is impossible, or to combine ethnic nations into an international federation, but to restore it to what Bergson calls an “open society” by mediating it through the absolute negating character of the individuals that comprise it, so that the nation indirectly acquires the characteristics of the human race.” (2011: 679)

He also wrote: “In the aesthetic instance, in so far as rational thinking prior to action does not become mediation, the antinomies of reason, and the self-breakthrough of it attained through the mediation of them, cannot be realized. Therefore reflection concerning the results of action is associated with immediate contemplation. However, actual historical practice belongs to the activity of Other-power. It is not exhausted by aesthetic creations which are unmediated identities. In history, a fundamental antinomy ever destroys the identical unity and perfection of self-power. The abstractions of culturalism consist in neglecting that fact.” (1969: 284–285)

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