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François Boudreau

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François Boudreau

Liberalism in its corporate form triumphed by the end of the 19th century. It marked the definitive end of the era of the great European revolutions of the 18th century that relegated the traditional world to history and launched the era of individualism. By liberalism, we mean both representative democracy in its parliamentary form and private enterprise capitalism. The latter in its corporate form acquired the status of a legal entity, pursuing its own interests in the world. This deployment of corporate liberalism reached the four corners of the planet before being slowed first by the First World War and then the Great Depression of the 1930s. It reached the limit of its incoherent spread in the second great armed conflict that arose in Europe in two generations. The use of the atomic bomb on civilian populations culminated in the United States and its allies becoming the world's policing and economic powers.

The end of the Second World War meant: left to its own stratagems, the conflicting interests of private corporations had led the world to a violent confrontation over those interests. In response, the Keynesian compromise, also known as social democracy, was adopted, according to which capitalism must be regulated and framed by social policies for the redistribution of wealth, because the primary interest of corporations is not naturally compatible with the well-being of the population. This new social paradigm presided over the extraordinary economic and technological growth of the third quarter of the 20th century: populations were educated, women emancipated, social mobility increased, poverty decreased, colonialism was challenged, and its advance was slowed, all in the context of the Cold War with the USSR.

Liberalism proved resilient, however, and a powerful deregulatory movement against state intervention in the name of collective ethics, under the guise of private enterprise efficiency, unfolded in the last

quarter of the 20th century. Supported by the spectacular growth of information technology, this neoliberalism, under the relentless leadership of large corporations and billionaires, launched the world into a new wave of market globalization, delocalization of production sites and internationalisation of social relations to the point where, faced with the Covid-19 pandemic, the world realized that no country had the means of self-sufficiency anymore, except perhaps China, which was itself seeking to supplant the United States as the dominant world power. The development of new spheres of alliances and influence is leading to new tensions in increasingly militarized forms.

The emergence of Chinese power on the world stage is not the only element that points to a new paradigm of social relations on a planetary scale. The magnitude and incredible complexity of climate change seem to be playing an increasingly important role in the world order, both in the disruption of food production conditions (droughts, floods, disappearance of ecosystems, collapse of species) and in the conditions under which land is occupied (rising oceans, amplitude and frequency of storms, displacement of populations). Further, this new climate seems conducive to the spread of new viruses: HIV since the mid-1980s; Ebola and SARS since the beginning of the century; and Covid-19 recently. The polarization of wealth, both globally and within countries around the world, is manifesting itself in huge migrations of people from poorer regions (Africa, Central and South America, the Middle East) to richer regions (Europe and North America). These movements are accompanied by immigration policies whereby developed countries literally recruit the richest and best educated individuals from poor regions to foster their own development, to the detriment of poorer regions. To denounce the effects of company relocations and 'job thieves,' to incite discontent and foment hateful exclusionary policies we see the emergence of reactionary movements, generally populist, which are very attractive to the declassified populations of rich countries. To make matters worse, social media makes everyone an expert in everything and, together with movements based in hatred, sabotage modern democratic institutions, starting with public information and the conditions for informed political debate.

The neoliberal version of human action in the world thus remains very problematic, because it still places the individual before society and property before solidarity. Everywhere on the planet, individualistic interests and that of corporate entities are generally placed above the ethics of collective life and the well-being of the people. This way of seeing and organizing society has, in an accelerated way since the end of the Keynesian compromise, led humanity into an alarming impasse, especially with regard to the depth, diversity and dignity of human cultures and the ecological conditions of existence. It is society as a whole that loses its humanistic content, and it brings social relations back to its simplest utilitarian and instrumental expression of the individual: we could think

here of a friendly fascism in the manner imagined by Huxley, where society pushes the idea that happiness is to be found in consumption.

Somewhat different are the complex and multifaceted cases of various authoritarian political regimes. The adoption of a capitalist economic development model without its political corollary, as China does, leads to extraordinary economic development, but without individual liberties, proposing an inverse version of liberalism, where the individual is nothing compared to the institution, as Orwell imagined it in his famous novel. But there too, happiness is proposed in the form of consumerism. The Russian equivalent, economically less efficient, takes an even more dictatorial political form, and has proved to be extremely aggressive and blindly violent, as demonstrated in the recent cases of Chechnya, Syria and Ukraine.

What do we understand today about the world we live in? What is the order of the problems to be solved in order to bequeath to future generations a world that is still undetermined, a world where there will remain a freedom of choice on the orientation of society? Should we prioritize ecology and ensure that we leave a liveable world where resources remain available, or is the growth of the population even more important to address due to the pressure it places on nature? Should we invest political efforts in a better redistribution of wealth, both within and between countries? Or should we focus on preserving individual freedoms? How do we ensure that the technical capabilities to destroy the world do not destroy it? How do we deal with “i” technologies so that everyone does not withdraw into themselves, confining their relationships to those who think the same way, and civil society disappears as a place for discussion and resolution of divergent ideas and controversies? How to act politically and in a concerted way against climate change and pandemics? How do we ensure free health care and education, international aid, regulation of violence? How to do all this when a growing number of people reject science, no longer believe in politicians and the current political system, in the public and collective information that should make the public sphere work? How to do this when so many see conspiracies where human action itself has created constraints and contradictions? What are the respective roles, relationships and effectiveness of citizen action, state intervention and corporate involvement in relation to democracy today? Is there today a collective way of understanding the world?

Here is where we stand: humanity as a whole is now faced with a new paradigm, truly global and profoundly worldwide, in all the meanings and implications of these terms. This new paradigm raises many, many questions. It is to some of these that the authors of this forum have focused on. But there is still a lot to be done to clarify and unify our collective understanding of the world we are moving towards. For now, we are fumbling at high speed towards a menacing unknown.