
RETHINKING THE ROLE OF KIERKEGAARD'S 'AUTHENTIC INDIVIDUAL' IN LIBERAL CAPITALIST DEMOCRACIES TODAY

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Abstract

Most people in the present are convinced that liberal capitalist democracy embodies the best socio-economic system and human political governance available. While this may be the case, for this socio-political system to function well there needs to exist a robust culture where certain values and normative concepts originate and are sustained. S. Kierkegaard helps us understand that human person's dignity is inalienable and indisputable, for in their necessary albeit often unrecognized relatedness to God, human selves have a transcendent source and eternal destiny. This article explores Kierkegaard's later work *The Sickness unto Death* (1849), arguing that his relational understanding of a human (authentic) *self* can serve as an antidote to the malign processes that threaten current liberal democracies. Kierkegaard's authentic individual, actualizing his potential in an intentional participation in voluntary associations, can help cultivate the kind of normative culture needed to sustain a liberal capitalist democracy on its course between fascism and communism.

Keywords: liberal, capitalist, democracy, relational self, individual

1. Introduction

The situation of post-totalitarian European societies seems to inadvertently spill over into the questions about liberal capitalist democracy and/or neoliberalism (known as neo-conservatism in the Anglo-Saxon world), since these aspire to be the natural and only viable alternatives to neo-fascist and neo-Marxian tyrannies. A liberal capitalist democracy may indeed embody the best socio-economic system and human political governance, provided some crucial conditions are met. At the same time, this celebrated 'socio-political contract' moves dangerously close to the abyss of the next totalitarianism, stemming from unchecked consumerism and media manipulation. A growing number of contemporary analysts [1-7] point out that global media corporations have a great deal of control over what goods, news, and information people have access to. These corporations spend vast amounts of money to figure out what

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buzzwords and cultural mirages their target audiences will respond to. Their goal, though unarticulated, is clear: to be more efficient in marketing whatever it is they (the new political aristocracy, social engineers, and/or economic oligarchs) wish to sell – products, services, values, or general outlooks.

Ensuing from this precarious political-economic reality is a peculiar oxymoron, a ‘mob individualism,’ in which the chaotic and seemingly autonomous inner self of an individual is latently herded within an intentionally designed crowd mentality toward a desired goal. Human individuals thus end up trapped in unsatisfying, mediocre lives of narrow horizons and an acute lack of depth, experiencing their existence as mere numbers in a mindless crowd.

Uneasiness over the prevalence of this sort of individualism in the Western societies has deep roots. In our day and age, this uneasiness seems to be more than ever justified by what appears to be an unchecked atomization of our social, economic, and cultural realities. Recent collectivist and etatistic solutions have not worked and will not work. I wish to argue that in order to promote the things we hold dear – such as personal responsibility, stable families, the wellbeing of local communities, as well as a healthy measure of social empathy on a national level – we need to support voluntary action whereby individuals, families and groups of people (including the religious ones) can freely come together for a shared purpose [8]. Rather than an increase in individualism and fragmentation, we will witness the growth in social cohesion and accountability. A social-engineered dictate of the state apparatus can never achieve this; and neither can arbitrarily clustered mobs of solitary individuals without a shared vision of life and ethos. History offers us a stark contrast in this respect, i.e., the contrast between the French and American revolutions. Both followed and embodied the ideals of individual rights and freedoms, yet while the former degenerated into a brutal anarchy (followed by Napoleon’s autocracy), the latter established a basis for a reasonably free society.

It is obvious that trying to portray Kierkegaard as one who supports a particular kind of politics or government policy would be a misunderstanding of both the content and style of his criticism. Nevertheless, his ideas, properly understood and reflected relative to contemporary challenges, might prove to be a very useful resource for current reflection. It is Kierkegaard, among others, who help us understand that individuals are substantial, personal beings, constituted as free and responsible agents [9] meant to live in creative and altruistic relations with others. Their dignity is inalienable and indisputable precisely because their human selves have a transcendent source and eternal destiny (in their necessary albeit often unrecognized relatedness to God), because the divine is their ground of existence as well as their ultimate concern [10]. The ‘positive existentialism’ of Søren Kierkegaard, with its ability to interweave the aspect of acute immanence of human self-awareness with the reality of transcendence – as both the anchor and goal of an individual’s existence – carries a great potential for contemporary philosophical, religious, and social-ethical discourse [11].

In my article, I am exploring this potential on the basis of Kierkegaard's later work *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) [12], arguing that his relational understanding of a human (authentic) *self* can serve as an antidote to the acute sense of loneliness and alienation of postmodern humans, over-burdened with freedom. Moreover, I argue that it is the Kierkegaardian authentic individual, actualizing his potential in an intentional participation in voluntary associations, who can help cultivate the kind of normative culture needed to sustain a liberal society on its course between fascism and communism.

2. Terminological issues - 'liberalism' vs. 'neoliberalism'

The terms 'liberalism' and 'neoliberalism' are somewhat elusive. The main reason for this has to do with the fact that they have meant different things to various people at different points in time. For example, striving to find a 'third way' between the Scylla of fascism and Charybdis of communism, Konrad Adenauer's 'neo-liberalism' of the 1960s was an attempt to combine liberal democracy with market economy while adding certain elements of Catholic social teachings. Hence, Germany's marvellous 'Socialized Market Economy.' In contrast to this, 'neoliberalism' today has rather different connotations. In more recent literature, neoliberalism has begun to be viewed as a return to the earlier, classical liberal economic theories of Adam Smith and his contemporaries, with a more 'laissez-faire' stance on economic policy issues. Thus, it will be useful to define what we mean when we refer to 'Liberal Capitalist Democracy' and/or to 'Neoliberalism.'

'Liberalism' as a political ideology is defined by the *Advanced English Dictionary* as a political orientation that "favours social progress by reform and by changing laws rather than by revolution; an economic theory advocating free competition and a self-regulating market" [C. Chong, *Liberalism*, in *Advanced English Dictionary*, Windows 8 electronic edition, 2014, <http://apps.microsoft.com/windows/en-us/app/advanced-english-dictionary/3206ef20-ac28-4001-926b-005a4b5dad2e>]. John Locke (1632-1704), Adam Smith (1723-1790), Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), Friedrich August von Hayek (1899-1992) might be counted among the proponents of classical liberalism – representing the conviction that the state ought to play a truly minimalist role in society; whereas Benjamin Constant (or: Henri-Benjamin Constant de Rebecque, 1767-1830), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), John Dewey (1859-1952), William Henry Beveridge (1879-1963), and John Bordley Rawls (1921-2002), among others, might be counted among the proponents of 'Modern liberalism' – holding the view that in order to create a more equitable and just society, the state should regulate the market and employ some (though limited) measures of redistribution of wealth. Referring to a shared heritage that elevates the pursuit of such goals as freedom and democratic governance, Einar Thorsten and Amund Lie from the University of Oslo have come to define 'Liberalism' as "a political programme or ideology whose goals include most prominently the diffusion, deepening and preservation of constitutional democracy, limited

government, individual liberty, and those basic human and civil rights which are instrumental to any decent human existence” [D.E. Thorsen and A. Lie, *What is Neoliberalism?*, [Manuscript], University of Oslo, Oslo, 2006, 7, <http://folk.uio.no/daget/What%20is%20Neo-Liberalism%20FINAL.pdf>].

‘Neoliberalism,’ on the other hand, is by the *Advanced English Dictionary* defined as “a political orientation originating in the 1960s [which] blends liberal political views with an emphasis on economic growth” [<http://apps.microsoft.com/windows/en-us/app/advanced-english-dictionary/3206ef20-ac28-4001-926b-005a4b5dad2e>]. David Harvey (1935-), an influential anthropologist and social critic (of a neo-Marxist vein), argues in his often cited book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* [6] that the formerly liberal democratic societies in the West have moved away from what we might describe as a prevailing ‘democratic governance’ with an intentional exercise of political authority, to a new social paradigm, in which a select few enjoy immense benefits at the expense of many. This happens by what Harvey calls ‘accumulation by dispossession,’ an unjust taking advantage of the less successful majority of individuals. Such a situation spawns a new set of ‘conditions for politics,’ these having been drastically limited by an ever-growing push for neoliberal reforms almost exclusively targeted on economic prosperity. Traditional liberal demands for ‘equality of liberty’ have in this situation thus been morphed into a unilateral demand for total entrepreneurial liberty (individual and corporate) along economic lines. Wacquant thus argues that “[n]eoliberalism is a transnational political project aiming to remake the nexus of market, state, and citizenship from above. This project is carried out by a new global ruling class in the making, composed of the heads and senior executives of transnational firms, high-ranking politicians, state managers and top officials of multinational organizations.” [13]

If this is truly the case, then it follows that neoliberal policies could be implemented in autocratic, totalitarian regimes as easily as within liberal democracies. It is no wonder, then, that contemporary neoliberals are sometimes portrayed as sceptics of democracy. Thorsen and Lie offer a sobering prediction/analysis of this socio-economic dynamics: “if the democratic process slows down neoliberal reforms, or threatens individual and commercial liberty, which it sometimes does, then democracy ought to be sidestepped and replaced by the rule of experts or legal instruments designed for that purpose. The practical implementation of neoliberal policies will, therefore, lead to a relocation of power from political to economic processes, from the state to markets and individuals, and finally from the legislature and executives authorities to the judiciary.” [D.E. Thorsen and A. Lie, *What is Neoliberalism?*, p. 15]. It is no wonder that when referring to liberal capitalist democracy as ‘the best socio-economic system’ and the best model of ‘human political governance,’ I do not have in mind the above-described, corporate neoliberalism. By liberal capitalist democracy I am referring to a shared heritage of human striving to sustain and uplift individual freedoms and democratic governance, which aims at deepening and preserving of “constitutional

democracy, limited government, individual liberty, and those basic human and civil rights which are instrumental to any decent human existence” [D.E. Thorsen and A. Lie, *What is Neoliberalism?*, p. 7]. Nevertheless, even with this optimistic (or ‘optimized’) view of liberal capitalist democracy, this political-socio-economic system is potentially fragile and can become oppressive. As we experience it today, it exhibits signs of profound decay [14].

3. The potential of liberal capitalism and its ambiguous role in Western societies

In its struggle against the curtailment of personal freedom, liberal capitalism could so far rely not only on the ‘invisible hand of the market’ and the reality of personal property (with its corresponding responsibilities) but also on its intertwining with the general culture of human rights and freedoms, including the freedom and practice of religion. This created the much needed social fabric, a complex system of checks and balances fertile with practiced virtues, which precluded the spawning of totalitarian moods and solutions. Where liberal capitalism seems to be weak is in the lack both in clarity and in complexity of its value foundations and political goals. It adjusts too readily, perhaps, to certain changes in social moods and political structures rendering its future political course impossible to anticipate.

This seeming arbitrariness in implementing values and concrete sociopolitical goals becomes most visible in the third-world countries and emerging economies with a fragile, or entirely absent, democratic heritage. In her recent article – ‘What if Russia and China don’t become more liberal?’ – Chrystia Freeland observes that “both countries are attempting to demonstrate a novel proposition: that economic freedoms can be severed from political and civil freedom, and that freedom is divisible” [12]. But are they indeed? And is this a pressing question for us, at all? Or is Freeland right in bringing to our attention Michael Ignatieff’s assertion that “[f]iguring out how to deal with ...[the question analyzing the correlation between economic and civil freedoms] is the greatest strategic and moral question the West faces today,” stating further that “[h]ow we answer it will determine the shape of the 21st century, much as the struggle with Communism and Fascism shaped the 20th”? [C. Freeland, *What if Russia and China don’t become more liberal?*, Reuters Column, June 29, 2012, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/06/28/column-freeland-idINL2E8HS8 CV20120628>] If Ignatieff is right that “history has no libretto” (We are using here Freeland’s summary of Ignatieff’s argument that played its role at the 2012 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum) and we thus cannot be certain of the course of development of any society (long term), or, if we put it in Freeland’s words, history “isn’t marching toward any particular destination, including democracy” [<http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/06/28/column-freeland-idINL2E8HS8 CV20120628>], then what other forces are at work here and what other criteria (besides purely economic ones) must be met in order to attain a free, peaceful, just, prosperous, and sustainable society? What about the cultural

forces? And what about the power which operates in the heart of a culture – religion? [15] Is liberal capitalism (i.e., liberal democratic governments) taking the power of culture and religion seriously as a major driving force, motivating the wills and the hearts of individuals and communities (for better or worse)? Or should we rather self-critically admit that our Western societies' regard for and cultivation of liberal capitalism exhibits signs of self-indulgence, a certain measure of arbitrariness in its criteria and goals, and a dangerous disregard of culture and religion when it comes to its constitutive agency in cultivating and sustaining the very system of liberal capitalism and democracy?

Liberal capitalist democracies certainly face many serious problems. The most pressing seems to be the issue of “acute structural violence” [16] that liberal democratic societies struggle with as the divide between the successful and the excluded reveals its abysmal depth. The Enlightenment's dream of an inevitable human progress based on deliberate engagement of objective reason had lost much of its original splendour in the trenches of WW I, only to receive its seemingly ultimate death blow in the death camps of Hitler's ‘Dritte Reich,’ Stalin's gulags, and over the radioactive ruins of Hiroshima, to name but a few unimaginable disasters, utilizing humanity's most advanced scientific and technological achievements. And while in the realms of Philosophy, Hermeneutics, and Ethics the prevailing mood bears clear signs of a postmodern ‘Shattered Visage’ [17], the socio-economic model of neoliberalism continues to present itself, at least in Western liberal democracies, as the indisputably best model (self-evident, with little or no prerequisites!) for a better future of economic prosperity. Has postmodern scepticism avoided the realm of socioeconomic interactions? Or are we with growing urgency beginning to notice a dangerous schizophrenia of wishful thinking and harsh reality? As Anne Allison and Charles Piot (Editors of *Cultural Anthropology* Journal based at Duke University) argue in their Editor's note on ‘Neoliberal futures,’ “the architecture of time under regimes unilaterally focused on economic growth, individual responsibility, and state pullback can be remarkably schizophrenic” [16]. The schizophrenia is manifested in the tension between believing in the modernist promise of a ‘progressively-better future’ and the focus on the ‘immediacy of survival’ with the corresponding ‘ethics of immediacy’. It is not that the people in neoliberal societies have stopped dreaming altogether but their capacity of casting a hopeful vision of the future has been tainted by the grimness of the new situation. According to Allison and Piot: “...in the precariousness and risk such dream-making now inhabits, attachments to the present have intensified. Embedded in rhythms of truncated work, interrupted life cycles, and the arrival of foreign migrants or military incursions, imaginings are often radically presentist, collapsed or imploded into the immediacy of survival (especially in today's global peripheries and margins).” [16] We seem to be inhabiting a world in which “the horizon of expectation is turned to the present, to getting through the here and now rather than imagining a there and beyond” [16]. However, such a desperate and necessarily narrow-minded outlook on life spawns feelings of frustration, feeding a sense of hopelessness

and encouraging morally shallow solutions. Divested of a hopeful and meaningful life narrative, “[s]uch a refiguring of temporality is accompanied by an intensified attention to the materiality of everyday existence, one focused on shelter, food, and body — on an everyday here and now that has become little more than the struggle to survive” [16].

The economically and socially ‘successful’ individuals – who constitute a critical majority in most developed Western economies (especially in those of the social-democratic type, such as Germany) – are far from being beyond dangerous waters. They face the dangers of ‘flattening’ and manipulation. Human individuality and personhood seem to be lulled by the omnipresent slogans of freedom, especially in its economic and moral senses, only to be consumed and ‘flattened’ by the ‘soft’ totalitarian power of consumerism. The loss of authentic individuality (in Kierkegaard’s sense) goes unnoticed in this process, as individuals are being subconsciously influenced by the omnipresent normative images and messages of economic, political, and cultural marketing ads and media content [18]. People are invited to celebrate their freedom of choice, ridden of the burdensome task of a true self-reflection. They are to devote their time and energy into solving ‘practical issues’ at hand and shy away from the ‘impractical issues’ of spiritual integrity and deep moral responsibilities. These seemingly less tangible realities become less and less intelligible and increasingly perplexing, as individuals lose grip with the inner core of their being (their ‘authentic selves’), which urges them even more to flee into the more ‘intelligible’ and ‘real’ world of economic choices and instantly available gratifications. Thus the vicious circle of economic realities intertwined with human insatiable desires and unquenchable fears closes in upon us [19].

It is here where we might sense the heretical, pseudo-religious essence of liberal capitalist democracy, devoid of its proper cultural and religious roots and context, left to be governed solely by its own regulative principle – the invisible hand of the market and through it, the invisible but very much real force of human greed and desire to dominate. Or, as it often happens, “[t]he invisible hand of the market and the iron fist of the state combine and complement each other to make the lower classes accept desocialized wage labour and the social instability it brings in its wake. After a long eclipse, the prison thus returns to the frontline of institutions entrusted with maintaining the social order,” [20] as Loïc Wacquant prophetically warns us. To become such pseudo-religious nightmare, ripe to morph into a neo-Fascist totalitarianism at the sign of a major crisis, this ‘naked’ liberal capitalism must first in still two basic illusions in the people’s minds: (1) the illusion of a natural, intact freedom of a human person in the shape of a true freedom of choice; and (2) the illusion of attaining true happiness in the sense of a deep, inner contentment, which supposedly naturally follows upon the enactment of one’s intentional choices aimed at satisfying immediate (or, in some cases, more ‘elevated, noble’) desires. A unilateral promotion of economic and cultural freedoms (i.e. the freedom to legally obtain and own property) in the context of what has been described above may thus be considered a new idol of our liberal society. Ironically, authentic individuality

remains a mere illusion in this chase after personal happiness. Instead, mindless crowds consisting of ‘mob-individuals’ rule the day, believing to live in a free, liberal democracy. The fact is, they are far from being free and even farther from being truly content.

4. Kierkegaard’s ‘authentic individual’ in his sickness unto death

I argue that the way to a genuine, fulfilling, and lasting sense of contentment leads through the perils of one’s personal ‘existential revolution.’ To be able to begin coping with the pressing question of ‘existential revolution,’ one needs to first deal with the fundamental question of Anthropology [21]: What is a human being? What constitutes the human individual? How do we bring together the psychosomatic, intuitive, passionate, social, cultural, spiritual (etc.) dimensions of his/her existence? Building on the tradition of Biblical anthropology, Kierkegaard serves as a resource in our contemporary attempts to answer this question.

Kierkegaard regarded *Sickness unto Death* (together with his *Practice in Christianity*) as “the most perfect and truest thing I have ever written” [22] (Kierkegaard makes this remark in his journal entry from 1849). In this theological masterpiece, Kierkegaard provides a relational account of the self, thus offering a groundbreaking anthropological perspective. He conceives the self being constituted in the very act of relating to itself and, subsequently, relating its own relatedness to the divine source of its being (a personal God). Rather than speaking of a ‘given,’ or static authentic self, Kierkegaard talks about a ‘becoming’ or an ‘emerging’ self. Indicative speech thus gives way to an edifying speech. “Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another. ... The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another.” [12, p. 13-14] The self of a person is a true self precisely because it comes to a self-realization, which in turn enables it to enter into an inner dialogue with itself. According to Kierkegaard, this would not be possible, if the human being were not conceived of dynamically (relationally). We may, therefore, say that the static (essential) conception of the self is overcome by discerning and establishing a constitutive relation to the Other. “A self directly before Christ is a self intensified by the inordinate concession from God, intensified by the inordinate accent that falls upon it because God allowed himself to be born, become man, suffer, and die also for the sake of this self. As stated previously, the greater the conception of God, the more self; so it holds true here: the greater the conception of Christ, the more self.” [12, p. 113-114] For Kierkegaard, especially according to his mature writings after 1848, it is the God of Christianity who alone is able and willing to open up the human self from the inside and to re-centre his whole existence. However, there is no redeeming system of religious thought, nor a consecrated structure that would automatically lead people to this new, authentic (redeemed) existence. The truth is revealed in and through subjectivity, for, as Kierkegaard

says provokingly, 'truth is subjectivity'. This is valid not only in religious discourse but also in education, for "man always finds himself as a concrete person who verifies theoretical reflexion in life experience as every single educational act presupposes certain vision of purpose, possibly certain ideal final image of the educated one" [23]. As a unity of finite and infinite, the human being is an individual, a beautiful, self-aware, creative, reflecting and self-reflecting, and yet contingent self that stands before God as the source and ultimate goal of his/her existence [24]. This reflective freedom, actualized in concrete attitudes and actions within complex social relationships, experiencing passion and anxiety, love and doubt, fear and ecstasy – this dynamic tension between autonomy and contingency, the immediate and that which transcends her – is a good basis for the kind of existential revolution we are hoping for.

5. Concluding remarks

What we find in Kierkegaard, is a deliberate "focus on the individual as a responsible subject before God", which directly ensues from Kierkegaard's "conceiving of Christianity as 'existence-communication'" [25], rather than mere set of doctrinal formulations. Kierkegaard's calling the human self to what we may call a 'relational authenticity' may constitute the much needed inception (or inculcation) that will then grow to fuller complexity and beauty of transformed individuals and societies. This calling, however, must be clearly and intentionally communicated to human individuals [26]. To do this effectively, two crucial things (among other) need to be taken into consideration: (1) the role of 'influencers,' i.e. primarily educators [27] and politicians; (2) the role of traditional (or newly arisen) 'narratives' [28]. John Milbank fittingly reminds us of the 'educative' role such authentic individuals assume in society, pointing out also the challenges that it raises: "The 'educative' dimension cannot be itself democratized without an impossible infinite regression. It is here that, if one regards the role of the few (of educators, of intermediate associations, of political representatives) as but an unfortunate substitutionary necessity, one will undermine and corrupt democracy itself. Instead, for democracy to work, it must be complemented by a non-democratic 'Socratic' sense of the importance of the role of the few as pursuing truth and virtue for their own sake." [8, p. 264] The second powerful factor is that of the culturally constitutive force of narratives. In our attempts to positively shape our society, we should consider and rely on the power of embodied narratives – of cultural and religious traditions – rather than on neo-gnostic intellectual self-seeking (which inevitably remains hopelessly self-referential), self-authentication, or esoteric revelations and experiences. In order to cultivate the much desired 'existential revolution,' I wish to argue, we need to re-discover, re-appropriate, and publically re-emphasize the constitutive character of cultural and religious traditions [29]. This, however, ought to be done not at the expense of the individual but rather conceived as being in a creative tension with the authentic self of an individual, recognizing and cultivating his/her relatedness and contingency as well as his/her uniqueness and

irreducibility. It is not the task of the state to *enforce* any religious or moral consensus, for that would lead to a new communitarian totalitarianism; rather, the state should be open to the cultural influences of extra-governmental institutions and movements, and make it possible for such institutions and movements to exist. For the shared values and practiced virtues of our cultural and religious traditions, as George McLean states ever so eloquently, constitute "... [the] deepest, most penetrating self-understandings and the ultimate commitments which shape [the individuals'] mode of life. ... This is no longer only a fixed body of teachings and practice taken objectively, but *especially also the way these are understood and lived interiorly or subjectively*, personally and socially, and engender a culture or way of life. ... While unique in mode to each culture, this is their shared striving to live in the image of the divine." [30]

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