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Fall and Redemption: the Romantic alternative to liberal pessimism

Adrian Pabst

In his book *Political Romanticism*, Carl Schmitt makes the somewhat surprising claim that the Romantic tradition is complicit with the modern liberal order.¹ By reducing reality to affect, Romanticism supposedly views the given ontological agon in terms of emotive dissonance that can only be overcome by a search for a higher aesthetic unity. If nothing has objective existence and everything is a matter of arbitrary affect, then Romantic self-indulgence induces a flight from reality that is only possible within a liberal, bourgeois system, which views the private personal sphere as separate and opposed from the public political realm. But instead of leading to an apolitical withdrawal from the world, the Romantics are for Schmitt in secretly collusive harmony with the dominant ideology of liberalism precisely because they supposedly proffer a creed of individual anarchy that ironically involves a certain collective conformism to liberal values of negative freedom and absolute equality.²

Just as Romanticism seems to legitimate liberalism by accepting its hegemony over the public sphere, so, too, liberalism requires Romanticism to provide a release for the anarchic desire of the private self. There thus appears to be a hidden convergence at work: since both traditions are indifferent to substantive truth, they deny the need for genuine political decision to resolve conflict, while their failure to embody a clear friend-enemy distinction renders them unable to constitute political community in the first place.³ For this reason, only the state's monopoly to decide on the state of exception can – according to Schmitt – choose an aesthetic structure, which connects popular experience to the transcendent nature of the polity and which thereby establishes legitimacy based not on positive law but on a defining myth of political unity – as with *Staat, Bewegung, Volk*.

However, Schmitt arguably misreads both Romanticism and liberalism. From Machiavelli via Hobbes, Locke and Grotius to J.S. Mill and John Rawls, the liberal (and republican) tradition pivots about the primacy of the individual over all forms of human association and allied to

¹ Carl Schmitt, *Politische Romantik* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1919); trans. *Political Romanticism*, tr. Guy Oakes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 1-21, 29-34, 124-7.

³ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (expanded edition of 1932), trans. George Schwab, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 69-79; *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. E. Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 33-50.

this primacy is the replacing of notions of substantive goodness or truth with the ultimate foundation of society upon subjective rights secured by the power of the central state.⁴ Those rights are grounded in the human will and the artifice of the social contract that has supplanted older ideas of covenantal relationships governed by a logic of reciprocity or gift-exchange. Liberalism is therefore inherently atomistic and oscillates between the isolated individual and some collective unity either objectively compounded or artificially supposed – ‘Leviathan’ was both. By positing an asocial ‘state of nature’, liberal contractualism purports to invent the artificial order of politics.

By contrast, Romanticism – in the works of Novalis, Schlegel, Carlyle, Coleridge, de Biran and Bulgakov – develops in novel ways the ancient and Christian idea that human beings as social, political creatures have a natural desire for objective, substantive values by which to orientate their lives and give them that coherent shape which alone engenders a sense of real fulfilment.⁵ This teleological space cannot be equated with the impersonal, absolute sovereignty of national states and transnational markets but requires interpersonal relations within a mediated polity that has a transcendent outlook.

So whereas liberalism merely regulates the evil and violence which it views as primary (and which therefore it perpetuates and even reinforces), Romanticism offers a vision of partial redemption in this life just because the Fall and original sin never fully destroyed the fundamentally peaceful, ontological ordering of the world. Rather, as fallen creatures equally capable of vice and virtue, human beings can discover their own particular purpose and place in society that is ordered to the good of the whole cosmos ultimately rooted in God’s creative action. By practising virtue, we can be redeemed in this life up to a point and we can begin to redeem the promise of an original harmony.

1. Political liberalism: original sin and foundational violence

As the dominant modern political philosophy and ideology par excellence, liberalism grew out of two fundamental shifts. First of all, a liberal doctrine of universal rights under the aegis of a formal social contract replaced supposedly incompatible and even incommensurable notions of goodness. Secondly, the vision of an overarching unity of both imperium and

⁴ John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), pp. 13-67, 179-204.

⁵ Novalis, ‘Faith and Love’, and Friedrich Schlegel, ‘Ideas’, in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, ed. Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 33-49 and pp. 123-140.

ecclesia gradually gave way to the idea of a violent anarchy within and between nations, which can only be controlled by the coercive powers of the sovereign state and the regulative powers of the transnational market. Underpinning these two transformations is the premise that evil is radical and more primary than the Good, for humankind is in a state of almost total depravity – whether for religious reasons connected with the Fall and original sin or on secular grounds of imperfect, immanent nature. Here one might object that the term ‘liberal’ suggests to many an optimistic vision that celebrates universal freedom, equality, and happiness. Liberalism is associated with the unalienable liberties and rights of the individual supposedly upheld by a constitutional state whose sovereignty derives from the people and whose powers are split between the three branches of government. The liberal tradition is also seen a decisive factor in bringing about popular democracy, enlightened progress, and emancipation from the constricting shackles of theology and faith in God.

Yet to the contrary, at the core of a searching critique of liberalism lies the argument that it is a far too gloomy philosophy.⁶ For liberalism assumes that we are basically self-interested, fearful, greedy and egotistic creatures, unable to see beyond our own selfish needs and therefore prone to violent conflict. This is a profoundly pessimistic view whereby human virtue is not simply redefined, but ultimately dismissed and denied. It is just this view that ultimately informs the three founding fathers of liberalism in the seventeenth century: Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Instead of inherent virtue and reciprocal sympathy, one has in Hobbes and Locke the notion of originally ‘self-possessed’ individuals mutually contracting to ward off the threat of the other and thereby to conserve and even promote by artificial means their supposedly natural self-possession.

At first, Grotius’ political theology seems to be fundamentally different from that of Hobbes and Locke, as he rejects the nominalist and voluntarist conception of God and the cosmic-political order, which can be traced to influential Franciscans such as William of Ockham who argued that God’s will and power can undo the law of nature and subvert the divinely created cosmos.⁷ By contrast, Grotius defended an intellectualist vision according to which God’s reason and creative activity bring about a relational world composed of mutually related things, which is intelligible in terms of the unity of efficient and final cause in the

⁶ Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, pp. 13-67, 93-127.

⁷ Hugo Grotius, *Truth of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Clarke (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012), pp. 30-45; Hugo Grotius, *Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty*, ed. Martine Julia van Ittersum (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006), pp. 20-31.

divine source of all being. Unlike Hobbes' asocial 'state of nature,' Grotius' conception views human beings as naturally desiring life in society and governing the polity as God rules over the cosmos.⁸

However, Grotius – as an Arminian Calvinist – developed a rationalist theology that has the effect of sundering the natural light of reason from the supernatural light of faith and also separating rationality from feeling, habit, and the imagination (a separation that thinkers of the Renaissance and Romanticism sought to overcome). Connected with Grotian rationalism is his emphasis on the formality of the law as the main mediation between individuals within domestic politics and among states in the realm of international relations. This follows directly from his theological argument that God reigns over humankind by legislative command rather than by the outflow of love and the example of virtue embodied in Christ.⁹ While Grotius does define states as particular instantiations of a larger unity which he describes in terms of the universal society established by nature,¹⁰ he nevertheless views this unity in primarily formal, legal terms – not a 'tick', substantive conception of the common good that includes yet also transcends law. Shaped by the experience of the religious wars and by intra-confessional disputes internal to Dutch Calvinism, Grotius invokes natural rights as a means to restore an original community of humankind that was destroyed by original sin and continues to be ridden by the violence between and among confessional states.

Crucially, for Grotius natural law provides the foundation for common norms that govern the polity, but he view man as the bearer of individual, subjective rights, which reinforces rather than mitigates the absolute power of the central sovereign (as for Hobbes and Locke).¹¹ Even seemingly inalienable individual rights like the right to ownership or the power to delegate sovereignty to the ruler are ultimately alienable because property may be sold and delegation is irreversible. For inalienable individual rights are already defined in terms of subjective right (*ius*), independently of the right use (*usus*) and the objective purpose (*finis*). Although Grotius defends a strong notion of divinely ordained purpose such as peace and the unity of humankind, his political theology grants sovereign states such power over individuals and in

⁸ Hugo Grotius, *Meletius Or Letter on the Points of Agreement Between Christians*, tr. Guillaume H.M. Posthumus Meyjes (Leiden: Brill, 1988), pp. 106-112.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106; Hugo Grotius, *Opera Theologica: De Satisfactione*, tr. Hotze Mulder (Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1990), Vol. 1, p. 133; Hugo Grotius, *De Imperio Summarum Potestatum Circa Sacra*, tr. Harm-Jan Van Dam, (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 159-263.

¹⁰ Here I am indebted to the work of Will Bain and his text 'Hugo Grotius and the God of International Society'.

¹¹ Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, ed. Richard Tuck (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), Vol. 1, p. 300, and Vol. 2, p. 393.

relation to other states that this effectively rules out an overarching commonwealth of nations and peoples precisely because there is no commonly agreed authority such as the imperium or the ecclesia.¹² There was still a significant step from Grotius' formalist conception of an international society of states to Hobbes' anarchical 'state of nature', but what binds them together is the rationalist primacy of formally sovereign individuals and states over a more mutualist cosmic-political order.

Arguably, the triumph of liberalism more and more brings about the 'war of all against all' (Hobbes) and the idea of man as self-owning animal (Locke) that were its presuppositions. But this does not thereby prove those presuppositions, because it is only liberalism that has produced in practice the circumstances which it originally assumed in theory. In this manner, liberalism marks the entirely unnecessary and non-normative victory of vice over virtue – of selfishness, greed, suspicion and coercion over common benefit, generosity, a measure of trust and persuasive power.

A similar anthropological and ontological pessimism and the concomitant redefinition of virtue can be found in the republican tradition, which in this sense is not fundamentally different from the liberal one. Already with Machiavelli, vice is more fundamental than virtue because evil has greater ontological and political reality than goodness. Therefore the city, contrary to Greco-Roman philosophy and Christian Neo-Platonism, is not governed by a hierarchy of goods and ends but instead by a competition for survival and power. In Machiavelli's *The Prince* (chapter IX), it is the exercise of violence and the use of fear that regulate civic life, not the pursuit of peace or the practice of virtue. For Machiavelli *virtù* is the military and political excellence required to sustain collective independence, and can notably be fostered by a certain controlled sustaining of factional struggle within the city, which serves as a training ground for the combative spirit. Thus he shares with Hobbes the 'liberal' assumption of a given, ontological agon, which is to be manipulated but not potentially overcome in the name of a more primary and peaceful ontological harmony (as for Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and the Judeo-Christian tradition). This agon is seemingly given a little more instrumental play by the Florentine than by the sage of Malmesbury.

But just this dimension is an aspect of the later much-debated 'politically economic' question of the relation between military virtue on the one hand, and more muted commercial rivalry

¹² Adrian Pabst, 'International Relations and the 'Modern' Middle Ages: rival theological theorisations of international order', in William Bain (ed.), *Medieval Foundations of International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 166-85.

on the other. It follows that the price of the modern secularisation of virtue in Machiavelli is also its re-primitivisation and re-paganisation, which returns virtue understood as *virtù* to its etymological root of male aggressive prowess – not even the notion of excellence (as for Plato, Aristotle and Cicero) that was confined to the aristocracy and only democratised by the Christian fusion of Greco-Roman philosophy with biblical revelation. Arguably, this renders modern virtue actually proximate to liberal norms, whose formal negativity is predicated on the latent violence of an assumed initial lack of consensus (in the wake of the Fall) about anything save individual self-preservation and collective security.

2. Political economy: depravity and the ‘hidden hand’

Original sin is also at work in the other dominant tradition of modern political thought, traceable for example down to Adam Smith, which derives from Calvinist and Jansenist theologies of influential figures such as Pierre Nicole and Jean Domat.¹³ Nicole argued that the evil of sin and moral corruption can be used to serve God’s providential plan, while Domat claimed that God admits evil into the world because God could use evil as a remedy by deriving good from it. For this theological outlook original sin is so extreme that human beings must be considered to be nearly or totally ‘depraved’ and incapable by nature of acting out of generous instincts to produce economic, social or political order. Instead, in a kind of proxy operation, divine providence must manipulate our egotistic wills and even our vices behind our backs. This occurs in such a way as to make will balance will and vice balance vice in order to produce a kind of economic and political harmony, as in Bernard Mandeville’s paradoxical motto ‘private vice, public benefits’ – even though this is never originally intended by self-obsessed individuals.¹⁴ Here is the conceptual root of Smith’s ‘hidden hand.’¹⁵

More important than even Nicole and Damat was Pierre le Pesant de Boisguilbert whose work is now seen as the key origin of both liberalism and modern economic thought.¹⁶ Building on Descartes’ dualism and the Baroque separation of God’s general from His more special providence, Boisguilbert views the economy as an impersonal self-regulating machine. On the

¹³ Jean-Claude Perrot, *Une histoire intellectuelle de l’économie politique, XVII^e-XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Editions de l’EHESS, 1992).

¹⁴ Serge Latouche, *L’Invention de l’économie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005), esp. pp. 154-60.

¹⁵ Adrian Pabst, ‘From Civil to Political Economy: Adam Smith’s Theological Debt’, in Paul Oslington (ed.), *Adam Smith as Theologian* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 106-24.

¹⁶ Gilbert Faccarello, *Aux origines de l’économie politique libérale: Pierre de Boisguilbert* (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1986); Simone Meyssonier, *La Balance et l’Horloge: La genèse de la pensée libérale en France au XVIII^e siècle* (Montreuil: Les Editions de la Passion, 1989), esp. pp. 35-51.

one hand, in anticipation of Mandeville (and much later Friedrich von Hayek), it must be left to run to its own devices, which means that the poor and the weak must sometimes be sacrificed. On the other hand, in anticipation of Smith (and much later John Maynard Keynes), the state must keep demand in balance with supply in order for the market to function naturally, and so high wages must be encouraged and the stockpiling of money by financiers should be especially resisted.

In other words, Boisguilbert argues for a strong state just because market anarchy, which reflects the enduring power of original sin, can be so destructive. As a result he did not share the view that one requires the threat of poverty and the spur of hunger in order to force people to work in a world of lazy sinfulness and constitutive material scarcity, which we owe to the perverted theology of Thomas Malthus and which – it must be said – was entirely alien to the thought of Boisguilbert (or later Smith, Hayek or Keynes). However, Boisguilbert's conception of the interaction between state and market is still little more than a simulacrum of reciprocal charity, as John Milbank has argued.¹⁷ This simulacrum illustrates Boisguilbert's Jansenist and Calvinist pessimism: as with both Nicole and Domat, he argued that after the Fall an ensuing near total depravity ensures that God can only govern the world through the mutual regulation of greed by greed. Later, Mandeville and Malthus would pave the way for modern economic thought to develop the notion that an enlightened utilitarian self-interest will naturally and rationally maximize the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' and so strengthen the operation of an impersonal machine that produces a divinely sanctioned order out of sinful human chaos. For the fundamental liberal assumption is that humans are selfish, greedy, distrustful of others, and prone to violence.

By embracing this pessimistic vision, liberalism ends up abolishing its own early modern origins. The process had begun well back into the Middle Ages but was certainly consummated in the seventeenth century, arising to a large degree because agreement in the transcendent good started to be associated with conflict and warfare. Yet in the face of an increasing exigency for peace at any price, Hobbes and Locke oddly assumed a hyperbolic violence, a war of all against all as the natural human condition, as I already argued. They did so in part because they thought (and unsurprisingly, after the all too many wars of religion) that disagreements regarding the nature of the Good were not subject to rational arbitration.

¹⁷ John Milbank, 'Oikonomia Leaves Home: Theology, Politics and Governance in the History of the West,' this issue.

But this exposes to view a remarkable chiasmus. Both the Greco-Roman philosophy of Plato, Aristotle or Cicero and Christianity believed that reality was originally and at heart peaceful, and only violent because of the irruption of fate or sin, and so in practice had often encouraged warfare. Liberalism exactly reversed this. In the name of reducing conflict, it thought that reality was inherently agonistic and humans naturally egotistic and indelibly prone to conflict. For this reason seventeenth-century liberalism totally rejected Renaissance humanism with its high view of the dignity of man. Here it often assumed the legacy – as with Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith – of Calvinist and Jansenist doctrines of total depravity, as I have already indicated. In detailing the horrors committed in the name of liberalism – slavery, imperialist exploitation, abuse of workers – Domenico Losurdo tries to blame these on the alien influence of a ‘providentialist’ political economy which saw governmental intervention in the social and economic sphere as impious: both the earlier Burke and Tocqueville at every stage used such arguments.¹⁸ But this is not the distortion of liberalism by ancient theology. Instead, it is the influence of a new (largely Jansenist) theology that is part of the very constitutive fabric of liberalism itself.¹⁹

3. ‘The empire of lesser evil’: liberal pessimism and the metaphysics of progress

A profound anthropological pessimism is thus at the heart of the liberal tradition and underpins the belief that liberalism, in the words of the French philosopher Jean-Claude Michéa, is the realm of lesser evil (*l’empire du moindre mal*) – the best of all possible realities in a world of necessary evil.²⁰ Here we can see the constitutive paradox of liberalism: on the one hand, the liberal vision rejects ideology and utopian politics, as it conceives itself as a ‘politics of lesser evil’ and aims to bring about the least evil society possible. This is grounded in the liberal claim that any invocation of positive principles such as truth or goodness amounts to a ‘tyranny of the Good,’ which is taken to be the ultimate source of all evil. On the other hand, the liberal claim to liberate people from this tyranny by upholding ‘negative liberty’ instead of imposing substantive values ends up morphing into a new ‘tyrannical’ order. For the pursuit of lesser evil rather than the common good progressively becomes as authoritarian as the tyranny that liberalism purports to oppose. Paradoxically, liberalism’s anti-ideological and anti-utopian stance flips over into the first and final ideology

¹⁸ Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: a Counter-History*, tr. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011).

¹⁹ Latouche, *L’invention de l’économie*, pp. 117-164.

²⁰ Jean-Claude Michéa, *L’empire du moindre mal. Essai sur la civilisation libérale* (Paris: Editions Climats, 2007), trans. *The Realm of Lesser Evil: An Essay on Liberal Civilisation*, tr. David Fernbach (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

and utopia – the universal reign of individual human rights, democratic politics, and market freedom.

In this manner, liberalism's rejection of all utopian ideologies ends in a utopian promotion of an anti-utopian project: the liberal 'politics of lesser evil' gives rise to a global political order that purports to be the best of all possible worlds – the 'end of history' and the convergence towards liberal market democracy as the final form of human government. Taken together, the liberal priority of the individual, subjective rights and the social contract imply that liberalism privileges progress (towards negative liberty) and 'laws of history' (entailing the necessary 'rationality' and, therefore, logical necessity of this progress) over tradition and contingency. Thus, central to really existing liberalism is a pessimistic anthropology whereby over time liberal institutions bring about in practice the selfishness, greed, distrust and violence that liberal theory presupposes in theory, as I indicated earlier. There is a tendency of liberalism arbitrarily and contingently to bring into historical being the very condition that is its own ontological presupposition – whether the Hobbesian 'war of all against all', or Lockean 'possessive individualism', or else again the Rousseauian loss of original freedom within the social contract.²¹ And equally to realise as a lived cynicism these thinkers' shared pessimism about human nature (whether individually or in association with others). But to repeat, this realisation does not thereby prove that presupposition, because it is the ideas, institutions and practice of liberalism alone which have produced the circumstances that the liberal creed originally assumed and asserted to be universally true and unavoidable.

Yet far from being necessary or normative, liberal ideas and practices were always radically contingent but morphed into 'naturally given' categories that obscure the real opposition between liberalism on the one hand, and conservatism and socialism on the other hand.²² The historic event, which set this process in motion, was the French Revolution. One of the first acts of the revolutionaries was to abolish all the intermediary institutions of civil society and recreate them under the absolute authority of the central state. The Loi Le Chapelier of 1791 banned guilds and fraternities (or *compagnonnage*) defended by figures such as Montesquieu. The law was followed by a decree on 18 August 1792, which dissolved all types of congregations, both of the clergy and of the laity – including universities, faculties and learned societies. Taken together, the law and the decree eliminated the right to strike and

²¹ Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, pp. 13-67.

²² Jean-Claude Michéa, *Les mystères de la gauche. De l'idéal des Lumières au triomphe du capitalisme absolu* (Paris: Editions Climats, 2013).

instituted enterprise as the most fundamental mode of association or corporation. That is why the revolutionaries did not put an end to the power of privilege, whether in the form of patronal clubs or monopolistic arrangements that were ultimately in league with the central state. From the outset, the bureaucratic statism of the French Revolution was complicit with the cartel capitalism that underpins dirigisme at home and mercantilist trade abroad. That is why Colbertism represents one of the numerous continuities between the ancien régime and the various models of republican France from the seventeenth century to the present day.

By thus subsuming all self-governing intermediary institutions under the aegis of the state, it removed all mediation between the controlling centre and the controlled individuals. The revolutionaries thereby abolished any political community outside the formal framework of the secular republic, which did not so much separate religious from political authority as replace free belief in God with the official creed of the Supreme Being (*L'Être suprême*). As part of the revolutionary tabula rasa, substantive notions of solidarity and fraternity were abstracted from concrete roles and relationships as well as disembedded from traditions of thought and practice that forged them over centuries.

Under the control of both state and market, fraternities and other intermediate institutions gradually moved away from mutual duties and reciprocal responsibilities towards a narrower focus on instrumental interest and the formal entitlements of their members. As a result, the revolutionary meaning of fraternity was compatible with the idea of a new citizen as the bearer of individual, subjective rights who is connected to other citizens via principally contractual ties. In this way, fraternity predominantly serves the primary principles of liberty and equality, defined as the negative freedom of each and the total sameness of all. Thus, all three values of the French Revolution are seen in terms of two types of sovereignty – sovereign individuals and the sovereign centre – which diminish and even destroy the autonomous self-determination of groups and associations, leaving the individual exposed to the impersonal forces of the state and the market.

Over time, state and market have converged to form a 'market-state' that further subordinates the intermediary institutions to the combined power of capital commodification and bureaucratic collectivisation. The rise to power of the 'market-state' over alternative models reflects the hegemony of liberalism and the concomitant collapse of both non-capitalist conservatism and non-statist socialism. Indeed, from the 1990s onwards both the centre-left

and the centre-right have fused economic with social liberalism, notably financial and trade liberalisation coupled with a raft of equality legislation in pursuit of abstract ideals such as diversity and inclusivity. This convergence not only exposes the sham opposition between left and right, which was always more nominal than real, but it also reveals the hidden nature of both the liberal right and the liberal left. Right-wing liberalism is so cynical about individual motivation that it entrusts social order to the public mechanism of legally enforceable contract and to an inflexible protection of absolute and invariable property rights by the state. This occurs in the Nicole-like belief that the market will deliver a providential or natural simulacrum of the effect of real interpersonal charity and real distributive justice, in defiance of all the evidence that the simulation eventually delivers a degenerative distancing from ethical goals. The liberal left, on the other hand, so distrusts shared tradition and consensus that it endlessly seeks to release, by the agency of state power, chaotically various individual desires from any sort of generally shared requirements, which it always tends to view as arbitrary. Hence the convergence of the two liberalisms is reflected in the more apparent than real oscillation between the liberal right as the party of greed and the liberal left as the party of lust.

Finally, we can also suggest that the triumph of liberalism over all other modern ideologies is to do with the way it has been doubly promoted by both hedonists and puritans – both those unashamed of egoism as the basis of economic order and those who think the latter is a providential diversion and tempering of our shameful nature. Today the right, which has long since abandoned conservatism for liberalism, remains something of an uneasy alliance between these two different character traits, even if the puritans are fast losing ground. Meanwhile the contemporary left is almost entirely liberal and even libertarian. This is most of all shown by the ‘New Left’, which ever since the 1960s has rarely pursued a politics of solidarity but, rather, predominantly one of ‘emancipation’. Therefore left and right now have in common a preference for negative freedom and ‘laws of progress’ over shared ends and a sense of tradition and contingency – all of which early Romanticism helps us to recover and renew.

4. Romanticism and its critics

The Romantic tradition has been misread and distorted by liberal and non-liberal critics alike. In his book *The Roots of Romanticism*, Isaiah Berlin wrongly claims that the Romantic movement rests on three doctrines that run counter to the Greco-Roman foundations of the West. The doctrine about primacy of expressionism, which is to redefine art as subjective

communication, not objective beauty. The doctrine about the priority of belonging to a specific group (such as the nation) over our common origins in a shared universal humanity. The doctrine about the incompatibility of one set of ideals, such as Romantic culture, with another set of ideals, such as the Greco-Roman universals of the true, the good and the beautiful. This leads Berlin to conclude that Romanticism is characterised by “the denial of unity, the denial of harmony, the denial of the compatibility of ideals, whether in the sphere of action or in the sphere of thought”.²³ In summary, Berlin equates the Romantic tradition with the triumph of irrational emotivism and moral relativism over the whole Western tradition of rational universalism since Socrates, which the Enlightenment rescued from the Dark Ages.²⁴

Schmitt’s book *Political Romanticism* represents the most comprehensive assault on Romantic ideas. He focuses on the supposedly incoherent nature of the Romantic tradition, its misguided metaphysical foundations, and its ‘aestheticisation’ of political conflict. Schmitt’s critique includes a more general attack on Europe’s bourgeois society that supposedly embraced Romanticism and thereby hollowed out the political order by turning public debate into a never-ending conversation about private pleasure, which undermines the collective capacity to decide. Nonetheless, Schmitt is right to acknowledge that Romanticism cannot be equated with three widely shared conceptions: either a set of properties that make different objects ‘romantic’, or a psychological disposition (such as emotivism or a flight from reality), or else the antithesis of classicism and rationalism. All these views define Romanticism as a commitment to some naïve form of realism that assumes that certain objects are inherently romantic, independently of how they are conceived or experienced. Against this misconception, Schmitt contends that Romanticism represents a subjectivist account of reality because it is defined not realistically but rather transcendently – in terms of the romantic subject and its specific mode of existence.

Like Berlin, Schmitt views Romanticism primarily as an aesthetic movement that overthrew the inherited, established order without developing an alternative account of beauty while also elevating art into the new transcendental absolute. In this process, the Romantics aestheticised not just every sphere of culture but also politics. This, coupled with the denial of shared objectivity, reinforced the privatisation of human experience and the subjectification of life. What underpins this thinking is a fundamental metaphysical rupture in the Western tradition –

²³ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Pimlico, 2000), p. 67.

²⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, 2nd edition, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

displacing divine transcendence as the organising principle of the cosmos and the polis. Curiously, Schmitt traces the roots of romantic thinking to a secularized version of Malebranche's occasionalism that sought to challenge Descartes' mind-body dualism, that is to say, the idea that some transcendental power is the cause of physical and mental events as well as interactions between body and mind. For Romantic thinkers, according to Schmitt, it is not the person himself who acts but rather a super-human force – God or some secularised alternative such as a vitalist force – that moves human beings as mere 'occasions' in an otherwise predetermined system – hence notions of fixed fate rather than open-ended destiny. According to Schmitt, the world becomes at the hands of the Romantics little else than contingent material for the actions of the ultimate divine reality.

With the secularisation of European thought proceeding apace, the crisis of metaphysical theism in the eighteenth century heralded the rise of post-theistic ontology as developed by Comte. In this context, Schmitt accuses Romanticism of accommodating two rival conceptions: either the idea of humanity and a 'revolutionary god' (associated with the people, the general will, the public or collectivist society), or else the notion of impersonal order and a 'conservative god' (conceived as the source of civilisations, cultures, traditions or nations). The genius of the Romantics was to root both these conceptions in the subjective imagination of the human person and to elevate the isolated individual into the ultimate arbiter of what is real and true. As a secularised and subjectified variant of occasionalism, Romanticism views reality in purely arbitrary terms as "nothing more than an occasion for the free play of the individual imagination".²⁵

Thus, Schmitt rejects political Romanticism on three closely connected grounds. First of all, ontological aestheticism – the twin claim that subjective emotion determines reality and that the real is what occasions emotional experience. Second, irony and revolution in the sense that the Romantics are accused by Schmitt of denying the primacy of actuality and replacing it with the priority of unlimited possibility. This for Schmitt is evinced by the Romantic focus on the remote, the exotic, the alien and the erotic. Rival possibilities neutralise each other and therefore undercut political decision, which is the greatest affront to Schmitt's own preference for decisionism. Third – and closely connected with this point – the poeticisation of the world, and the destruction of both moral judgment and political action.

²⁵ Guy Oakes, 'Translator's Introduction', in Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, p. xx.

As already argued, Schmitt does not so much posit a Romantic flight from the world as a collusive complicity with the prevailing power of the hegemonic order – liberalism – whereas Berlin equates Romanticism with the dominant counter-Enlightenment movement that brought about nationalism and atavistic ethnocentrism. Either way, the Romantic movement is seen at best as a departure from the primary Western tradition that grew out of Greco-Roman philosophy and at worst as a betrayal of the foundations of Western civilisation of rational discourse.

However, Berlin's and Schmitt's caricature ignores Romanticism's defence of metaphysical and political realism against both idealism and materialism and thus against the extreme liberal fusion of both. Indeed, liberalism combines abstract ideals such as negative liberty and absolute equality with the materialist forces of state and market power in a manner that sunders concrete things from their symbolic significance, starting with labour but extending to the whole of society, nature and life itself – based on an impoverished understanding of reason that is reduced to little more than instrumental rationality. By contrast, the Romantic tradition seeks to reconnect matter with meaning by developing a more holistic conception of reason that is integrated with feeling, habit, passion and the imagination. Art is vital precisely because it has the power to link knowledge to action by fusing reason with sensibility, uniting our natural sense of beauty and goodness and our duty to act accordingly. Building on the works of J.G. Hamann, F.D. Jacobi and Justus Möser, the early German Romantics – Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Daniel Schleiermacher – highlighted the emptiness of modern reason, a negative force is capable of destroying all custom and tradition while lacking the power to create anything positive.²⁶ Novalis' notion of *Heimweh* (homesickness) captures the modern condition of rootlessness and a lack of loyalty that run counter to our desire for belonging – belonging to communities, which reason views as reactionary and oppressive, and belonging to nature, which reason strips of all beauty, magic and mystery.

By emphasising the creative power of the imagination, Romanticism recovered and renewed a much richer conception of reason while avoiding the fate of both rationalism and revolutionism. One example is the notion of 'reverence' in the writings of Goethe: it describes the paradoxical coincidence of passive reception and active agency involved in contemplation and an openness to transcendent beauty that shines forth through the ordering of the universe. In this manner, reverence is more rationalist because it reconnects reason to its cosmic

²⁶ John Betz, *After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J.G. Hamann* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

outlook and it is also more empiricist than what Goethe described as Newtonian science's "gloomy empirical-mechanical-dogmatic torture chamber" because the latter locks philosophy and theology into an iron cage of abstract, general categories.²⁷

And instead of focusing on a vague irrational feeling of the whole, Romanticism shifts the emphasis away from the formal laws and naked self-interest that dominate modern contractualism towards the embodied and the particular in an attempt to perceive the imperceptible and feel the impalpable.²⁸ By contrast with the Gnostic claim of pre-existing matter, the early German Romantics sought to restore and extend the Christian Neo-Platonist tradition of theological poesis. As Michael Martin writes,

he [Novalis] sees the world of the senses in participation with the divine reality undergirding it, a reality he attempts to disclose in his poetry. This participation rises to awareness only in the act of imagination, but it is not, therefore, only an imaginative act, an act of phantasy. Imagination, rather, is an interactive perception in Novalis, what he called "romanticizing," a commerce, a congress at the highest level with the things of this world. "The world must be romanticized," he writes. "Then one will again find the original sense. Romanticizing is nothing more than a qualitative involution".²⁹

Early English Romantics like Blake, Shelley and Coleridge, with their German contemporaries Novalis, Hölderlin and Friedrich Schlegel, or their French counterparts Joseph Joubert, Chateaubriand, Maine de Biran and the young Victor Hugo – for all their diverse and periodic modes of political radicalism – actually refused impersonal pantheism (or panentheism, as in Spinoza) just as much as they refused the worship of monstrous wilfulness (as in the voluntarism of Hobbes and Locke). Instead, they combined a commitment to radical reform with a deep respect for tradition and the legacy of the patristic and medieval Church. Their sympathy for Catholicism was not a reactionary response to the Terror of the French Revolution but rather a recognition of the Reformation's disenchanting of transcendence: as Novalis put it, "the worldly had now won the upper hand, and the feeling for art suffered in sympathy with religion".³⁰ And instead of uncritically defending Christendom, they argued for a re-enchanted transcendence and a reimagined Christianity that "must again become alive and active, and again form a visible church without regard to

²⁷ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, tr. Elisabeth Stopp (London: Penguin, 1998), maxim 430, p. 55.

²⁸ F.R. Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

²⁹ Michael Martin, *The Submerged Reality: Sophiology and the Turn to a Poetic Metaphysics* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2015), p. 119. The quote from Novalis can be found in his 'Fragments from the Notebooks', in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, p. 85.

³⁰ Novalis, 'Christianity or Europe. A fragment', in *ibid.*, p. 67.

national boundaries. Once again it must receive into its bosom all hungry souls and become the mediator of the old and the new world”.³¹ Since pantheism for Novalis is the idea that everything can be the mediating organ of the divine, it is fully compatible with the monotheistic idea that mediation requires a single, central mediator – God become man – which is wholly absent from the pantheism of Spinoza.³² In the words of Schlegel, the Romantics “lifted the veil of Isis” to reveal once more, in Blake’s words, the “countenance divine” which, in the daylight, “doth a human form display”. In this manner, a re-enchanting transcendence was no simple restoration or Counter-Reformation. Rather, it marked an attempt to recover the archaic western wisdom in a more culturally dispersed, imaginatively mediated and feeling-imbued idiom that could unite catholic orthodox doctrine with popular practice.

Thus, Schmitt, like Berlin, was wrong to think that German political Romanticism itself halted at mere political irony – any more than it halted at mere epistemological irony. It rather advocated, beyond the Lutheran-inspired liberal enclosing of religion within the boundaries of the state, more subsidiarist and organic mediating social structures linked to the idea that the Church surpassed in its social purposes the central coercive control of the Leviathan. In this way mere irony was transcended in the name of an obscure glimpse of cosmic unity – Schleiermacher’s ‘intuition of the universe’. Thereby the liberal oscillation between the individual and the collective is by no means necessary or normative but can be mediated by a complex web of interpersonal relations without however destroying the creative tension between the person and society.

5. The Romantic Alternative to Liberal Pessimism

The early Romantics were among the first to recognise the true nature of liberalism. Whereas enlightened absolutism failed to guarantee individual liberty and provide popular participation in government, the liberal tradition elevated the pursuit of happiness over and above the quest for belonging to a political community. Despite these differences, both absolutism and liberalism were united in abolishing the mediating institutions between the citizen and the state, bringing guilds, councils and corporation under direct central control and leaving society atomised and individuals in a state of anomie – stripped of any real possibility for local self-government and personal affiliation to intermediary groups that are democratically

³¹ Ibid., p. 79.

³² Novalis, ‘Pollen’, no. 74, in *ibid.*, pp. 22-23; Friedrich Schlegel, ‘Ideas’, no. 24, in *ibid.*, p. 127.

self-governing. In order to marry personal freedom with a sense of communal belonging, the Romantics recovered and renewed the ancient notion that we are political animals and the Christian conception that we are social beings – rather than the a-social isolated individuals so beloved of liberals. Key to the anthropology of early Romanticism is the twin idea that the relational microcosm of family and community mirrors the ordering of the universe and that the vocation of each person (their place and role in the polity) is more primary than natural individual rights or the social contract: “man should be considered as human society, or as the relation of man to man [... and] the vocation of man is achieved only in society and the community of everyone”.³³

The early Romantics refuted the liberal idea of enlightened self-interest as the best basis to mitigate the Fall and original sin. On the contrary, self-interest legitimates people to disregard the social contract and thereby licenses the state to arrogate to itself exceptional powers of coercion that reduce citizens to bare individuals, provoking unrest and revolutionary violence: “raw self-interest seems to be immeasurable, anti-systematic. It has not allowed itself to be limited at all [...] tis formal acceptance of common egoism as a principle has done untold damage. The germ of the revolution of our day rests nowhere but here”.³⁴ The genuine alternative is not an absolute monarchy that similarly subordinates the person to the sovereign but instead a polity that views love as more primary than either egotism or abstract altruism – the giving, receiving and returning of affection and loyalty. Far from idealising love, Romanticism emphasised the impurity of love: as Schlegel put it, “primal love appears never pure but in various shapes and guises: as trust, humility, devotion, serenity, loyalty, shame and gratitude; but mostly as longing and quiet melancholy”. Contra the moralism of law in the liberal tradition, the ethics of love is for the early Romantics the original bond of social life that binds human beings to one another and to nature: “whoever does not know nature through love will never know her”.³⁵

Crucially, art is vital for the Romantic alternative to both liberalism and enlightened absolutism. Beyond even Aristotle’s notion of *zoon politikon* and Aquinas’ idea of animal sociale, the early Romantics developed the notion of man as an artist. In an apparent inversion of Plato (who in reality saw the philosopher-king as an earthly Creator trying to perfect the ordering within the republic), Novalis and Schlegel develop the idea that art is not the privilege of the

³³ Friedrich Schlegel, ‘Philosophical Lectures’, in *ibid.*, pp. 143-44.

³⁴ Novalis, ‘Faith and Love’, no. 36, in *ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁵ Friedrich Schlegel, ‘Ideas’, no. 104 and no. 103 respectively, in *ibid.*, p. 134.

aristocratic ‘few’ but that the ‘many’ are just as creative if they are treated as artists by the monarchic ‘one’. Indeed, the ideal ruler is a supreme artist who enables his subjects to fulfil their own unique creative vocation: according to Novalis, “a true prince is the artist of artists, that is, the director of artists. Every person should be an artist. Everything can become a fine art”.³⁶ Schlegel takes this further by arguing that a properly Romanticised Christian vision democratises artistic direction:

No artist should be by himself alone the artist of artists, the central artist, the director of all others; but all should be it, each from their own standpoint. None should be merely a representative of his kind, but should relate himself and his kind to the whole, which he should direct and rule. Like the Roman senators, true artists are a nation of kings.³⁷

Echoing Vico’s triad *verum-factum-bonum* (which constitutes a human participation in the Trinitarian generation of the Divine Word – at once ‘true’ and ‘made’ – and the processive donation of the Holy Spirit as eminent goodness), Schlegel also argued we cannot access the truth directly in the book of nature or literally in the book of scripture. Rather, we can apprehend the traces of God’s creative activity everywhere as long as we broaden our reason to include the feeling for nature and religious faith beyond mere mythology. We perfect our God-given nature precisely by mediating the divine in all that is – revealing the beauty and goodness of the universe and human society through the exercise of virtue, defined as “reason formed into energy” and as “geniality”.³⁸ In the writings of the Romantics, virtue ceases to be Machiavelli’s military prowess or the a-political moral virtue of Rousseau and Smith and instead becomes the principle by which we translate the ethics of love into practice. Work as art is central to a genuinely Romantic politics: as the English Christian socialist William Morris argued, “the aim of art [is] to destroy the curse of labour by making work the pleasurable satisfaction of our impulse towards energy, and giving to that energy hope of producing something worth its exercise”.³⁹

For this reason, the vision of the Romantics is indeed an aesthetic politics, though not the caricature painted by Schmitt and Berlin. Against the ‘machine state’ of both enlightened absolutism and liberalism, early Romanticism proposed an ‘organic state’ that fuses individuality with community, liberty with communal belonging and tradition with innovation by dispersing sovereign power among all the persons which constitute society – including the corporate bodies of guilds, corporations and councils. These and other intermediary institutions can combine self-government and popular participation with a sense of shared

³⁶ Novalis, ‘Faith and Love’, no. 39, in *ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁷ Friedrich Schlegel, ‘Ideas’, no. 114, in *ibid.*, p. 135.

³⁸ Friedrich Schlegel, ‘Ideas’, no. 36 and no. 23 respectively, in *ibid.*, p. 127.

³⁹ William Morris, ‘Signs of Change’, in *Useful Work v. Useless Toil* (London: Penguin, 2008 [1896]), p. 34.

purpose and leadership based on excellence and ethos. Such a plural polity outflanks in advance the shared liberal and absolutist extremes of simultaneously collectivising the people and atomising society. By avoiding any abstract utopia imposed by absolutist fiat or a revolutionary vanguard, the 'organic state' of the Romantics protects tradition and continuity while also promoting innovation and change that reflects people's needs and interests. Key to the aesthetic politics of early Romanticism is the Christian fusion of the classical virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and courage with the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. Of these, as St Paul reminds us, love is the greatest. And the Romantics would add labour: as Morris put it, "Love and work, these two things only". By practising virtue, we can redeem the promise of an original harmony that was distorted but never fully destroyed by the Fall. Against liberal pessimism, the early Romantics gave us an ethical rather than an economic vision, which suggests that original sin was only ever ultimately provisional.