Powerlessness and Unfairness
A Letter to Jan Zielonka

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Abstract: Jan Zielonka's *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat* (Oxford University Press, 2018) is a furious, worried pamphlet on the challenges that European democracies are currently facing, on the apparent rise of illiberalism. This article critically reviews the book and seeks to offer a somewhat different and perhaps more optimistic picture of the current predicaments of European politics. The main point of reference in this respect is Finland, a country whose political institutions have managed, by and large, to uphold a sense of coherence in society. A commitment to participatory, equality-based, and freedom-generating institutions can indeed be seen as a primary means to counter the decline of liberalism.

Keywords: democracy, fairness, Finland, institutional trust, liberalism, populism, social hierarchies

Dear Jan,

As you wrote down the contemplations that I am here reviewing in the form of a letter to renowned sociologist and liberal peer, a man who was your mentor, Ralf Dahrendorf (1929–2009), I venture to formulate these remarks as a direct reply to you.

Counter-Revolution continues a historical chain of publications. In 1990, Dahrendorf himself penned a book-length letter named "Reflections on the Revolution in Europe" to a Polish gentleman; he followed the example set by Edmund Burke two centuries earlier in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Dahrendorf's analysis of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe was brilliant – and proved to be personally important to me. I read the reflections in the early 1990s as I was preparing my master's thesis on the Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution of November 1989. Half a decade later, they provided important motivation for me to become a doctoral student at St Antony's College, Oxford, then headed by Dahrendorf, the institution you now make your academic home.

My expectations were thus high as I began reading your analyses, even more so because as a scholar of European democracy I have always

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greatly appreciated your texts. And, just like you, I have been deeply perplexed by the fact that the revolutionary legacy of 1989, the legacy of freedom, has not lasted longer or become stronger but has come under serious threat in recent years. Or at least our belief in this legacy has waned, undermining our ability to reproduce it by way of our daily deeds and stances. We sadly do not refer solely to Poland and Hungary but to Europe as a whole – and beyond.

Absence of Self-Criticism

One seldom comes across a book that is as normative, as furious, as your pamphlet, written with an admirable sense of societal concern and intellectual responsibility. It is this personal dedication, I believe, that also makes your message more convincing than that of the many others who have argued along the same lines. It is indeed self-evident that your reflections belong to the growing body of literature on the crisis of liberalism/liberal democracy and/or the decline of the West, a literature that essentially seeks to take stock of how Brexit, Trump, and post-truth became possible and how these developments (possibly) symbolize the disappearance of the Western liberal order.

Your starting point, however, is different from the mainstream of this literature: the liberals – whoever they are – need to become more *self-critical* if liberalism is to survive in a form that still deserves that name. The basic liberal ideas have not been defended with determination and have too easily been adjusted (or perverted) to meet "populist," counter-revolutionary pressure, both from the "left" and the "right." Nor have these ideas been continuously enlivened and reinvented, but on the contrary have in fact become an unescapable means to exercise power, to rationalize and control people's lives; and yet, in this era of globalization, we do not even know who possesses those mechanisms of control. One comes to think of *an iron cage of liberalism* in Weberian/Parsonsian terms (although that concept is not mentioned in your book), a profound paradox given the idea of openness that should underlie any liberal society.

Your list of the major failures of liberals appears comprehensive, though certainly not exhaustive: the metamorphosis of democracies into oligarchies, uncritical belief in neoliberal economic dogmas and the inequality-enhancing consequences thereof, the inability to transform the European Union into a truly democratic polity, the shortage of meticulous policies for coping with people's sense of insecurity and vulnerability with respect to the problems of migration. Taken together, one wonders

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whether it would be possible to compress these into just two mutually connected meta-factors: 1) people's increased sense of powerlessness in determining the course of their lives in our complex, crisis-driven, culturally non-homogeneous world; and, even more importantly, 2) a prevailing sense of unfair inequality[1] in society, resulting in the creation of a new sort of *Klassengesellschaft* (class society). Both issues point to a problem that seems to be eroding today's European polities; it can even be seen as the third meta-factor (Dahrendorf was, after all, able to name just three major reasons for the collapse of communism), which is that 3) citizens feel that their concerns do not resonate in the public sphere; the communicative bridges between the elites and the rest, between the winners and losers of the global societal system – between the classes – remain too weak. You put this in sharp words in what I find to be a key formulation of the entire book (p. 46): "Unless liberals are able to make citizens feel that their voices really count, the counter-revolutionary forces will push for a pure electoral democracy with no respect for minority rights, checks-and-balances, and the division of power principle."

The Difficulty of Defining Liberalism

It is not easy to challenge the accuracy of your analysis: the combination of these factors surely can go a long way towards explaining the rise of nationalist-xenophobic parties in Europe, or the dramatic fluctuations in electoral results in many countries, or the continuing decline in citizens' electoral participation, perhaps in the appreciation of citizenship more generally. There are, nevertheless, two substantial objections that I wish to take up in order to at least somewhat complicate the mostly satisfactory picture you offer. First of all, I am in the end not quite sure what you mean by liberalism or whom you refer to when you talk about "liberals" (often without a definite article). You seem to have an ideal type in your mind – *an egalitarian version* of liberalism, mentioned only in passing (e.g. on p. 22) and once supported, in your view, by Dahrendorf as well. "Egalitarianism," however, is almost as evasive a political concept as "liberalism" – its connotations and interpretations often lead to conflict. Many right-leaning liberals might in fact argue that you emphasize egalitarianism far too much, to the extent, some might say, that you yourself no longer qualify as a liberal. Your fierce attack on neoliberalism echoes nicely the views of, say, Yanis Varoufakis, economics professor and former minister of finance of Greece representing the counter-revolutionary(?) Syriza party, who recently even published a piece entitled "Liberal Totalitarianism" (2018).

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The problem is that if one seeks to utilize your book as a guideline for assessing individual political acts in terms of liberalism or illiberalism, this proves very difficult, although you explicitly state that: "We need to understand what liberalism is and what it is not. We need to decide which streams of liberalism we want to refute and which to support." To offer a random example: on 4 May 2018, as I was reading your reflections, Sweden's social democratic Prime Minister Stefan Löfven announced that his party will tighten its immigration policies. The official party statement read: "Sweden shall take its fair share of the EU's total intake [of refugees], not more."[2] Protesting against the party's decision, one of Löfven's party comrades, Sara Karlsson, immediately decided to resign her position as Member of Parliament in the Riksdagen. On the surface, and reading your analysis, this social democratic policy change undoubtedly appears illiberal – the party effectively yields to the demands of the counter-revolutionary right-wing Swedish Democrats – whereas Sara Karlsson scores points by acting as a steadfast defender of the liberal values of free movement and tolerance. It is, however, hard to believe that Löfven actually wishes to undermine the basic liberal tenets of Swedish society or of his party. Contrary to what your above formulation indicates, in real-life politics it often appears very difficult, if not impossible, to determine "What is liberal and what is not"; the verdict is bound to be situational and contextual and dependent upon the interpreter. In this case, Löfven's social democrats simply argue that in addition to appealing to fairness within the EU, the country should be able to guarantee good conditions for all those who are actually granted asylum; it is a matter of people's equal treatment, which is surely a central value of egalitarian liberalism.[3] Moreover, needless to say, a single policy plan or measure should not lead one to draw hasty conclusions about the larger picture.

But your point may, of course, simply be this (cf. pp. 116–117 in particular): if we are to defend liberalism, we need to constantly assess what the (potential) consequences of our political/societal deeds with respect to its basic ideas are, including, above all, *both* freedom and equality. If we impose stricter immigration policies, for instance, when and on which counts do we cross the line between liberalism and illiberalism? This may also require that we as citizens seek to make clear for ourselves what kinds of elements constitute our ideal type of good society – and whether this is in the end compatible, as we both hope, with liberal principles writ large.

The Finnish Experience

My second main objection is that in the end, your explorations strike me as too gloomy (unless one considers the environmental threats humanity

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currently faces, but you hardly mention those) – which you repeatedly suspect yourself and therefore try to offer the reader a happy end of sorts. One could easily emphasize a range of positive developments. In most Western European national elections, the upper limit of public support for the counter-revolutionary parties seems to remain 20%, although they have in a few cases attained somewhat higher figures. There is an increasing awareness of the excesses of neoliberal policies; for example, in Germany, where I am currently residing, efforts to alleviate the problems of the Hartz program of neoliberal "minijobs" and unemployment benefits have received a great amount of (necessary) attention. A number of major European cities have already taken significant steps to foster new forms of local citizen involvement (as you note in passing, p. 125) and have thereby managed to transform formerly drab suburbs into vibrant, economically innovative communities. All in all, using the traditional Eastonian framework, it does not seem far-fetched to argue that *diffuse support* for liberal values is still generally high across the European continent, although *specific support* in terms of the performance/appearance of the liberal political systems presents difficulties – and people do protest. This is even the case in most Eastern European countries, as Ivan Krastev (2016) notes, for example, with respect to Bulgaria.

But perhaps my understanding of the world is simply too rosy, perhaps I have been blinded by the (relative) successes of my *Heimat*, Finland. The country tends to top major international (and often problematic!) rankings in a number of central societal fields.[4] The most recent example of these is the World Happiness Report – although many Finns, after the pole position had been made public, remarked with gentle irony that "the situation must be pretty bad elsewhere." In spite of the severe economic crises/difficulties in the 1990s and over the past decade, the country has managed to adjust the foundations of its economy and maintain the basic elements of its (essentially social democratic) welfare system. The country's infrastructure is generally in good shape and new digital public services truly make citizens' lives easier. People's sense of security and interpersonal trust have remained very high; there is less street violence than at any point in time since the early 1990s. There are, of course, still serious social problems – young men dropping out from the system are currently one particular concern – but on the whole, your book's dark tones hardly seem appropriate.[5]

One can, of course, list a number of reasons for this essentially positive condition, most of them shared with the other Nordic countries, such as the legacy of Protestantism or the low number of inhabitants that guarantees much physical space for each individual, thereby ensuring a sense of freedom. There are, however, two specific features of Finnish society that

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deserve to be discussed at some length here (in spite of the difficulty of providing an objective analysis of one's country of origin and at the risk of being almost nationalistic). These traits might, at least in theory, be useful for curing the problems that you so enthusiastically diagnose.

First of all, hierarchies between individuals and even between different strata of society have remained low, at least in relative terms, and are currently so. A trivial anecdote appears telling in this respect. The country's president, Sauli Niinistö, became a father for the third time – he has two adult sons with his late first wife – a day after he had sworn the oath of his second consecutive term in February 2018. A couple of weeks later, the Finnish media reported that the president himself had been seen standing in an ordinary supermarket's cash queue buying a pack of diapers for the baby (with no mention of bodyguards; *Aamulehti*, 25 February 2018). Reporting an incident of this nature certainly represents an act of banal nationalism (with no mechanism of exclusion, though), but it can nonetheless be a force for good: striving for normality, for normal "Finnish" life, concerns "us" all, it undermines hierarchy between the powerful and the powerless – and "we" are left wondering whether anything like this could be possible in other countries. The weakness of hierarchies has historical reasons, such as the virtual absence of nobility, and the country's late industrialization and urbanization, as a consequence of which most people's roots are in the rural countryside, in a relatively homogeneous setting. The primary explanation is more modern, however: public institutions have managed to treat the country's residents in an equal(izing) manner and make social mobility possible – and in fact reproduce citizenship simply by this very ability to function well. The school/educational system has been primarily important in this respect; the importance of education has almost become a national founding myth. Research now indicates, unfortunately, that education-based social mobility has begun to decline.

I wonder whether the liberal political revival that you call for should concentrate on concrete efforts to minimize hierarchies between individuals, also by way of courageously reforming institutions, instead of the current vague talk of the harms of (unjustified) inequality that often tends to focus too much on identities rather than on actual socio-economic unfairness (cf. Lilla 2017). Horrendously expensive private schools in Britain, for example, have nothing whatsoever to do with liberalism; they should simply not be tolerated. The prime purpose of liberal freedoms and rights is, after all, to undo existing hierarchies between individuals and to treat everyone in a similar manner.

The first point almost encompassed the second: there is a strong belief in public institutions in Finland, possibly stronger than in most other

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(European) states (one can easily find survey evidence of high levels of institutional trust in the country). Institutions – schools and universities, health care, security services – are truly thought to serve each and every citizen and they therefore need to be looked after well. This attitude, this mental orientation towards fostering institutional structures rather than individual esteem, is historically induced. Unlike in many other countries based on myths of past glory, institutional development as an autonomous duchy of the Russian Empire (1809–1917) – for example, the creation of the system of primary schools, the introduction of its own currency and central bank, as well as the establishment of schools of art and music – was key to the country's procession towards independence (achieved in 1917) and also to the fact that the democratic system survived during the interwar years, exceptionally so in the Europe of those decades. The storyline can hardly be challenged: school history books habitually reproduce it, adding perhaps that during the Second World War, although the war against the Soviet Union was lost, the country was never occupied and was able to maintain its state institutions and general institutional framework (cf., e.g., Rentola 2017: 185). Societal institutions, indeed, created the space and conditions for freedom for the country's residents and a solid foundation for coping with the demands of the age of globalization.[6]

Given these two points, and primarily the latter, it does not appear far-fetched to refer to Axel Honneth's (2011) recent inquiries about what he calls *social freedom*; for him, it represents the third main category of freedom along with the negative and reflexive classifications. Large socio-political institutional arrangements, to the extent that they are based on mutual recognition and ultimately shared interests, can function as realms of social freedom, as instances for the realization of an individual's personal objectives *together with* other individuals. Communicative action between individuals is an elementary condition of such institutions, but because of the permanence of that very arrangement, the role of the individual is in the end only secondary. By way of these institutional structures, the collective, the community in question, seeks to be more than the sum of its individuals. Honneth uses the public sphere and even a well-functioning market (which commentators have repeatedly criticized), among others, as examples, but I should think that the scale could also be smaller, say, within the scope of the university system.

Frameworks for Thinking Further

Where does this lead us? You emphasize various (new) mechanisms of political participation, locally in particular, as a, or perhaps *the*, central

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means for reinvigorating liberalism; nation-state-based parliamentary representation no longer suffices (p. 123). Yes, certainly you make a valid point, but we already live in the age of participation in which deliberative citizen councils, participatory budgeting, regional referenda, and shared governance are all being increasingly utilized in the polities of the more or less liberal world. As Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Ernesto Ganuza recount in an excellent novel book on popular democracy: "Across the political spectrum and across policy domains [participation] has become a privileged prescription for solving difficult problems and remedying the inherent problems of democracy" (2017: 4). I believe, however, that the current efforts to create innovative mechanisms of participation should more systematically concentrate on *institutional permanence* (as opposed to ad hoc solutions) – a truly tall order, given our current social constellation dominated by metaphors of ever faster change and the (un)social media of abrupt instant reactions. Only institutionalized practices can guarantee a sufficient degree of continuity so that necessary knowledge will transfer from generation to generation. Only institutions can become truly shared for a significant number of people and eventually constitute their identities, as the example of Finland is meant to demonstrate – and thus produce true domains of social freedom. Indeed, as a map, as a visualization of sorts for thinking about the future of liberalism, I have a quadrangle in mind, *a quadrangle of participation, institution, freedom, and equality*. The point is to find, and subsequently reproduce, a functioning balance between these four principles.

Let me end with an argument that you do not consider: we need to exercise a significant amount of careful contemplation with respect to the time perspectives of political decision-making, including the deliberative participatory institutional designs that we in any case ought to try to develop.[7] Myopia, the short terms of electoral cycles, demoralizes the institutions of political decision-making. In an age characterized by the necessity to find sustainable solutions to complex global-scale problems, this near-sightedness breeds skepticism vis-à-vis the possibilities of politics, thus making the job of counter-revolutionaries easier. The success of many political ideologists, be they Nordic-style social democrats, post-1945 communists, or post-1989 liberals, rested on their ability to offer an appealing alternative that cared for future generations, that sought to make the world better for children and grandchildren, a non-myopic utopia if you will. If the mechanisms of participation were, in a systematic manner, more mindful of the fates and wishes of the next generations, this would certainly improve people's commitment to democracy. Perhaps a pentangle after all, with time as the fifth corner of the figure, a time that also encompasses the environment.

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Thanks for a brilliant thought-provoking pamphlet, Jan. Expectations fulfilled.

Yours sincerely,
Henri

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NOTES

1. Well-functioning democracies are, in fact, based on *just/justified inequality* (coupled with the maxim of equality of opportunities). On the one hand, the perceptions and personal experiences of such inequality continually provide society with a sufficient amount of stability, while on the other hand they supply societies with transformative, critical energy as people seek to attain higher levels of justice (see, e.g., Heller 1999.)
2. Declaration on the homepage of the Swedish Social Democratic Party: "Sverige ska ta emot sin andel av EU:s totala mottagande sett till vår befolknings storlek, inte mer." The incident was reported by all major Swedish newspapers (e.g. *Svenska Dagbladet*, 4 May 2018).
3. You also take up an example from the ranks of social democracy/Labour, by noting, somewhat confusingly, that Jeremy Corbyn is, despite his many liberal political commitments, a counter-revolutionary but "of a special kind" (p. 15). Whether it is strategically wise for the social democratic parties to follow ever stricter policies with respect to migration, possibly (and worryingly) with nationalistic undertones, would be a matter worthy of some reflection. It is likely then that a significant proportion of potential social democratic voters will have immigrant origins in future. I owe this point to Pasi Saukkonen.
4. For a listing, see the website of Statistics Finland, www.stat.fi/ajk/satavuotiassuomi/suomimaailmankarjessa_en.html.

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5. The Finnish version of nationally inclined "populism" has also proven relatively mild. In fact, unlike you, I would not be willing to categorize Timo Soini, the long-time former leader of The Finns (formerly True Finns), currently serving as foreign minister, as a counter-revolutionary. He is a value conservative Catholic – a minority religion in the Finnish context – but one cannot doubt his broad commitment to Western liberal democracy. In fact, his party offered a channel of influence, a mechanism of participation, for those from both left and right whose voice was not otherwise heard in Finnish society (17.7% of the vote in the 2015 elections, 19.1% in 2011); in this respect, the party *strengthened* the country's democracy. However, The Finns, since 2015 a member of the government coalition, split in two in the summer of 2017. The "moderates," including Soini and the majority of the parliamentary group, formed a new party, Blue Reform, and were allowed to continue in the government. The "radicals" with views close to those of, say, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders, took over the mother party under the leadership of MEP Jussi Halla-aho and moved into opposition. According to the newest polls (June 2018), The Finns now enjoy popular support of approximately 8%, whereas Blue Reform struggles to gain over 2%.
6. This is, of course, not to say that all institutions function flawlessly in Finland. There is currently a major reform of social and health care institutions underway in the country, the so-called SOTE, initiated, above all, to better share the costs of intensive medical care within the public sector and ease people's access to health services. This institutional reconstruction has proved exceptionally difficult to execute politically – it is probably *the* most complex political issue of the past three decades and can lead, given the visible controversies in recent weeks (spring 2018), to the collapse of the current government. This may, however, also reflect the appreciation of the institutional dimension; it is hardly ever argued that it is the individuals, for example the employees, who determine how well (the restructured) institutions in the end work.
7. This point reflects the aims of the large Finnish strategic research framework "Participation in Long-Term Decision-Making" (PALO, 2017–2021) that I am part of. The project seeks to develop institutional mechanisms for countering myopia in representative political systems.

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