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LIBERAL PROVOCATIONS: WHY CARLO ROSSELLI IS STILL RELEVANT TODAY

ABSTRACT

Liberal and socialist worldviews are often seen as being in a fundamental opposition. This is reinforced immensely either by Francis Fukuyama's apostrophised end of history or by the thesis put forward by authors such as Patrick Deneen that liberalism has failed. The question that arises on closer examination of this assumption is whether or not it is accurate. Based on Carlo Rosselli's work *Socialismo Liberale* (Liberal Socialism), this article attempts to systematically challenge this thesis. Against the backdrop of the rise of fascism in Italy, Rosselli comes to the realisation – contrary to many representatives of orthodox Marxism – that the liberal and socialist worldviews are not necessarily antagonistic to one another. In fact, they may even be mutually dependent – an important insight to think social change anew.

KEYWORDS

Liberalism, Socialism, Rosselli, anti-fascism, Geuss, Horkheimer, freedom, democracy, economy, Marxism

Introduction

When Max Horkheimer claimed that those who do not want to talk about capitalism should remain silent about fascism, he primarily intended to say that there is an undeniable connection between the capitalist system and fascism, in that the latter attempts to maintain the former – albeit by violent and despotic means (Horkheimer 1939: 115-116). Even if Horkheimer's formulation is inextricably linked to the rise of Nazism in terms of content, it nevertheless points to an important idea that can also be applied to other thematic contexts. Horkheimer's thesis points out that many areas that are perceived as disparate can be structurally related to one another. With reference to Carlo Rosselli's thinking, this article pursues nothing less than the goal of applying the dictum apostrophized by Horkheimer to a different context: those who do not want to speak of socialism should remain silent on liberalism.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate, in particular with reference to Carlo Rosselli's work *Socialismo Liberale*, that both liberalism and socialism



share a common goal: human freedom. Socialism, however, can be understood as an extension of the basic liberal idea in that it assumes that the liberalism advocated by the bourgeoisie was unfaithful to many of its universalist principles – and that socialism (as a continuation of the basic liberal idea) is subsequently able to realize these ideals inherent in liberalism.

Carlo Rosselli's concept of liberal socialism – which Rosselli developed at the time as a critical distinction from many representatives of Marxism – is not only able to provide guidance in readjusting the relationship between the political currents of liberalism and socialism. In addition, Rosselli also points to a crucial insight that is also of immediate relevance today: a left that views values such as freedom and democracy only as a bourgeois ideology is hopelessly lost when it comes to the question of how social change can be initiated.

The primary aim of the following discussion is to highlight the contemporary relevance of Rosselli's liberal-socialist theoretical approach and, in doing so, to move beyond a purely historical contextualization of Rosselli's thought. While Nadia Urbinati's seminal preface (1994) establishes Rosselli's historical and theoretical foundations, this article extends his framework by applying his critiques to contemporary debates about liberalism's decline – a lens unavailable to Urbinati writing in the 1990s. Furthermore—and this is a central motif underlying the following contribution—the constant rediscovery and re-interpretation of ideas in light of a new present is an essential prerequisite for clarifying the practical implications of political-theoretical approaches. This modest, though important, goal is what the argumentative elaborations presented below set out to achieve.

First, I will address the relationship between the liberal and socialist worldviews at a more general level (1). Then (2), I will examine in greater detail the historical background and the genesis of Rosselli's groundbreaking work, *Socialismo liberale*. Subsequently (3), I will explore why, according to Rosselli's liberal-socialist theoretical approach, the liberal and socialist worldviews do not represent a contradiction. Following this (4), I will analyze the extent to which Rosselli's conception of the “liberal method” must be seen as formative for the liberal-socialist approach. Section (5) will then be dedicated to the question of to what extent Rosselli's conception of the liberal-socialist theoretical approach can be fully understood against the background of his critique of Marxism.

1. Liberalism and Socialism: Friends or Foes?

In his book *Not Thinking like a Liberal*, Raymond Geuss draws attention to the idea that the frequently cited comparison between liberalism and authoritarianism is a false dichotomy (Geuss 2023: 27).

While authoritarianism negates all possible varieties of what can be subsumed under the term liberalism, liberalism itself, according to Geuss, can be seen as ‘[...] an amorphous and changing collection of things with a distinct ability to renew itself, to change shape and to revise the formulation of its basic convictions’ (ibid.).

While the anti-liberalism inherent in authoritarianism thus negates all varieties of liberalism – and consequently culminates in fascist worldviews – the liberal worldview cannot be directly reduced to a uniform definition (*ibid.*). Even if Geuss does not speak in favour of liberalism, since his thesis is that neither liberalism nor authoritarianism need to be the alternative, the question can also be raised as to whether the image that characterizes liberalism really offers a meaningful basis for discussing the potential that the political theory of liberalism possesses.

First, however, Geuss's basic consideration that the juxtaposition of liberalism or authoritarianism is a false dichotomy can be agreed with in principle. The crucial question that arises at this point, however, is whether the alternative resulting from the establishment of such a false dichotomy can take place without recourse to the basic theoretical assumptions of liberalism itself. It should be noted, however, that the dichotomous juxtaposition of liberalism or authoritarianism draws its explanatory force from significant historical developments. Not least when Francis Fukuyama proclaimed his famous dictum of an "end of history," the idea that liberal capitalism was on a clear triumphal march became popular for the first time.

Due to the prevailing global crises we face today, however, Fukuyama's view of an end to history can increasingly be called into question. Fukuyama originally developed his thesis against the backdrop of the thesis that liberal democracy and global capitalism are inseparable. Against the background of this assumption, Fukuyama developed the argument that liberal democracy should be classified as the superior system to all other alternatives, both politically and morally. The collapse of state communism in the Soviet Union and the accompanying collapse of the Berlin Wall strengthened Fukuyama's thesis of an end to history (Zissimos 2022: 372-376). Fukuyama's thesis offers an extremely insightful explanation for what Geuss calls false dichotomies.

Against the backdrop of increasing global crises – COVID-19, war, climate crisis, etc. – the question of whether the world has really reached the "end of history" is increasingly gaining attention. Much more interesting, however, is the question of how the global left is reacting to these global phenomena – which undoubtedly also have an impact on nation states. The more the crises we face increase, the more the tendencies of division within societies seem to increase as well. These divisive tendencies can also be found within the socio-political left-wing forces – as can be seen from numerous examples. Increasing authoritarianism on a global level is leading to a new competition between systems, which amounts to the false dichotomy of authoritarianism vs. liberalism apostrophized by Geuss. In 2019, for example, none other than Vladimir Putin argued that the basic idea of liberalism is now superfluous and blatantly contradicts the interests of the majority population – it goes without saying that Putin only uses this argument as an ideologically underpinned justification for his increasingly authoritarian oligarchic capitalism (Barber et al. 2019).

However, there are also less controversial voices than Vladimir Putin who state that the liberal project can be considered to have largely failed. Patrick

Deneen, for example, argues in his book *Why Liberalism Failed* that it is above all the false anthropological assumptions underlying the liberal doctrine that can be used to explain the failure of liberalism – and why liberalism subsequently cannot be regarded as the “end of history” apostrophized by Fukuyama (Wright 2023). However, Deneen’s thesis is characterized by some nuances. For example, although Deneen points out that the liberal project can be considered to have largely failed, he also mentions that it is important to recognize its achievements. Put differently, i.e. more precisely: It is important to recognize the dialectic of the liberal project itself by realizing that some of the greatest advances that liberalism has brought with it have been accompanied by regressions in other areas of society. In this context, Deneen cites the argument often made by proponents of liberalism that it was liberalism that was able to emancipate women from pre-liberal forms of domestic servitude (Deneen 2018: 187). However, Deneen raises the not entirely unjustified question of whether one can speak of real emancipation in this case, as the liberation of women essentially amounted to them having to submit to new forms of oppression by having to integrate themselves into the competitive capitalist economic system and assert themselves within this system. Thus, Deneen brings this thought to its precision with the correct consideration that true human freedom consists not only of freedom from a king (or in this case: a spouse), but also of the freedom not to have to submit to an employer to earn a living (*ibid.*).

One crucial question that inevitably arises in light of Deneen’s observations, however, is whether they lead him to the right conclusion. Among other things, Deneen’s argument boils down to the conclusion that, regardless of the failure of the basic liberal idea, it is still important to understand its original appeal. At this point, it seems worthwhile to cite Deneen himself:

Liberalism arose by appeal to an ennobling set of political ideals and yet realized new and comprehensive forms of degradation. Put less charitably, the architects of liberalism intentionally appropriated widely shared political ideals and subverted them to the advantage of those most capable of benefiting from new definitions of liberty, democracy, and republicanism. Building on liberalism’s successes means recognizing both the legitimacy of its initial appeal and the deeper reasons for its failure. It means offering actual human liberty in the form of both civic and individual self-rule, not the ersatz version that combines systemic powerlessness with the illusion of autonomy in the form of consumerist and sexual license. Liberalism was both a boon and a catastrophe for the ideals of the West, perhaps a necessary step whose failures, false promises, and unfulfilled longings will lead us to something better (*ibid.*: 187-188).

At this point, it is indeed worth taking a closer look at Deneen’s statements. If we want to present Deneen’s remarks as precisely as possible, we must first recognize that both the failure and the success of liberalism have the same origin. On the one hand, the success of the liberal idea can be explained by the fact that the ideals on which it is based – Deneen lists the principles of freedom, democracy and republicanism among these ideals – certainly represented

the ideal basis for a significant progress of the social conditions. On the other hand, one of the historical problems of liberalism from the outset is that those who benefited most from the newly acquired ideals of liberalism – *eo ipso* the bourgeoisie – proclaimed these rights for themselves alone (ibid.).

The question that inevitably arises at this point, however, is whether Deneen, against the background of these quite correct considerations, reaches the right conclusion when he states that the liberal project can be considered to have largely failed. It is worth bearing in mind – an aspect that Ed Rooksby has rightly emphasized elsewhere – that the ideals of liberty and equality (which seem to describe the ideals of liberalism in an even more accurate way), in whose name the bourgeois revolutionaries brought down the *ancien régime*, initially only benefited the bourgeois revolutionaries themselves and continued to exclude other groups – i.e. the poorer population, women, slaves, etc. – from the project. In the further course of his argument, however, Rooksby correctly points out that the actions of the bourgeois revolutionaries themselves thwarted the implicit universalism inherent in the ideals of liberalism through their privilege-securing and interest-driven actions (Rooksby 2012: 509). At the same time, this implicit universalism offered the still excluded groups a theoretical point of reference with which they could justify the struggle for their own participation in those liberal ideals. In other words, the injustice felt by the groups that continued to be excluded can be explained specifically by the fact that the ideals underlying the liberal worldview – freedom and equality – were refuted by practical conditions, in that these initially only benefited privileged groups of society (ibid.).

At the same time, the awareness of one's own exclusion has offered the opportunity to fight against these very forms of exclusion and to realize an increasingly higher degree of equality on a social level. According to Rooksby, this also highlights the subversive nature of the liberal idea itself: the tension between reality – and thus the institutions that purport to protect the fundamental liberal values – and the ideals (freedom and equality) that underpin the liberal worldview, simultaneously represents the engine of progress towards a truly freer and more equal society (ibid.).

Against the background of these considerations, it seems appropriate to criticise Deneen when he claims – as has already been shown – that the '[...] failures, false promises, and unfulfilled longings' of liberalism '[...] will lead us to something better' (Deneen 2018: 187-188). This brings us to the real core of the problem: from a left-wing perspective, it is more than easy to criticize liberalism as a bourgeois ideology. This can be explained not only by the fact that the most blatant forms of economic injustice are justified in the name of liberalism.

However, a question which does indeed require deeper discussion is whether the political currents of liberalism and socialism are really such a blatant contradiction. Probably no one has dealt with this idea more aptly than the Italian politician and historian Carlo Rosselli (1899-1937), who fell victim to the fascists in 1937. During his exile on the island of Lipari, Rosselli wrote his

only work *Socialismo Liberale (Liberal Socialism)* which is widely underestimated and neglected in today's left-wing circles.

In broad terms – as Nadia Urbinati aptly points out in her foreword to Rosselli's work – *Socialismo Liberale* is based on two main lines of argument. First, Rosselli expresses an explicit critique of both Marxism and Marxist revisionism. On the basis of this critique, Rosselli conceives his political idea of liberal socialism (Rosselli & Urbinati 1994: XXXIII).

2. *Socialismo Liberale: The World at a Crossroads*

Urbinati aptly points out that there are not only historical, but also theoretical reasons that show why Rosselli's *Socialismo Liberale* should be regarded as a thoroughly serious and fundamental work (ibid.: XXXIV) – also (or especially) in view of the multiple crises facing today's political left. One of the historical reasons for this is that Rosselli's treatise served as the theoretical basis for the anti-fascist resistance movement *Giustizia e Libertà*, which was co-founded by Rosselli – making Rosselli's work, alongside Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, one of the most important works of the anti-fascist resistance movement in Italy at the time (ibid.).

In this context, it should first be emphasized that Rosselli's development of the liberal-socialist approach itself must be regarded as the product of an intellectual evolution. Here, Rosselli's early enthusiasm for the British labour movement is particularly noteworthy. Above all, the guild socialism developed by G.D.H. Cole aroused the interest of the young Rosselli—not least because Rosselli saw in Cole's principle of industrial self-management a promising approach for future socialist movements (Calabrò 2020: 193-194). However, even independently of Rosselli's engagement with the concept of guild socialism, it can be stated that the 1920s were characterized by Rosselli's intensive preoccupation with the British labour movement in general. Especially after the collapse of Italian socialism, Rosselli saw in the British labour movement a viable alternative (ibid.: 196). This can be explained above all by the fact that the British labour movement clearly distinguished itself from the ideological premises – keyword: centralization – of the continental European Marxists and, as a consequence, advocated for a more trade union-centred socialism (ibid.).

2.1 European Fascism

The theoretical foundation of *Giustizia e Libertà* was also based on a new interpretation regarding how to classify the phenomenon of fascism, which was emerging in Europe at the time. According to Rosselli's conception, *Giustizia e Libertà* represented the first political movement on the European level to fully recognize fascism as a central phenomenon and to consciously break away from traditional party-political strategies for combating fascism (Pugliese 2007: 31).

Rosselli's elaboration of the liberal-socialist theoretical approach is inextricably linked to his analysis of the rise of fascism at that time. In other words:

both Rosselli's conception of the liberal-socialist approach and the anti-fascist resistance movement he co-founded, which was based on this approach, can be traced back to significant intellectual influences on Rosselli's thought—above all, Gramsci and Gobetti (ibid.: 32).

2.2 Influences on Rosselli's Thought: Gramsci and Gobetti

From Gramsci, Rosselli primarily adopted the idea that the proletariat, as a political and socially transformative force, is of decisive historical significance (ibid.). Gobetti, by contrast, shaped Rosselli's view that the proletariat as a political actor represents a consistent embodiment of liberal principles – and not, as commonly assumed, the bourgeoisie. This idea is particularly developed in Gobetti's *La Rivoluzione Liberale* (ibid.).

It is also important to highlight – returning to the previously discussed influence of the British labor movement on Rosselli – that the liberal-socialist approach, as it was developed in Italy at that time, can only be fully understood through the anti-fascist stance adopted by many opposition figures, including Rosselli, Gobetti, and Calogero. In contrast to its British counterpart, which was more influenced by a social-evolutionary hypothesis of gradual progress, resistance against the fascist regime was central to the self-understanding of Italian liberal socialists (Bastow & Martin 2003: 72-72).

These historical circumstances – to take a first step towards the theoretical implications of Rosselli's work – also explain why Rosselli attributed a significant share of the blame for the rise of fascism to the orthodox Marxists. According to Rosselli, the fatalism that became apparent in the Marxist doctrine (which assumed, to put it simply, that capitalism would perish in the future due to its inherent contradictions) ensured that those parts of the workers' movement that were ideologically committed to orthodox Marxism felt themselves to be in a state of passivity, which subsequently led to their capitulation to the fascists (Rosselli & Urbinati 1994: XLI).

3. Liberalism and Socialism: A Contradiction?

At first glance, the term *liberal socialism* can easily lead to the assumption that it appears to be an oxymoron, as it brings together concepts that are fundamentally at odds with each other in terms of their basic normative essence. However, just as Geuss points out that the juxtaposition of liberalism vs. authoritarianism appears to be a false dichotomy, according to Rosselli it can also be assumed that the contradictory elements that one might be inclined to ascribe to the liberal-socialist approach also appear to be based on false assumptions. Rosselli impressively points out this aspect in the preface to his treatise:

From the historical point of view this formula might seem to contain a contradiction, inasmuch as socialism arose in reaction to the liberalism – especially the economic variety – that characterized bourgeois thought at the outset of the nineteenth century. But we have traveled a long way between then and now

and accumulated a great deal of experience. The two opposing positions have gradually been drawing closer to one another. Liberalism has gradually become cognizant of the social problem and no longer appears automatically bound to the principles of classical, Manchesterian economics. Socialism is stripping itself, though not easily, of its utopianism and acquiring a new awareness of the problems of liberty and autonomy (ibid.: 6).

According to Rosselli, the contradiction that is easily attributed to the formula of liberal socialism can simply be explained by specific historical development processes. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was an extremely one-sided interpretation of liberalism, shaped by bourgeois thinking, which applied the underlying idea of freedom more to the sphere of economic structures than to the areas of human action (ibid.). Even if Rosselli speaks of opposing positions, his considerations give reason to believe that these are by no means truly opposing positions. Rather, according to Rosselli's reasoning, the moment of self-reflexivity inherent in the basic liberal idea has ensured that the insight has increasingly come to the fore that a full realization of human freedom requires that material and social conditions are reshaped in such a way that the greatest possible number of people can develop their freedom in a meaningful way. Against the backdrop of these considerations, Rosselli then arrives at an apt definition of what constitutes the concrete essence of the fundamental liberal idea:

Liberalism in its most straightforward sense can be defined as the political theory that takes the inner freedom of the human spirit as a given and adopts liberty as the ultimate goal, but also the ultimate means, the ultimate rule, of shared human life. The goal is to arrive at a condition of social life in which each individual is certain of being able to develop his own personality fully. Liberty is also the means in the sense that the final stage cannot be bestowed or imposed; it has to be earned through hard personal struggle, as the generations succeed one another in time. Liberalism conceives of liberty not as a fact of nature, but as becoming, as development. One is not born free; one becomes free. And one stays free by retaining an active and vigilant sense of one's autonomy, by constantly exercising one's freedoms (ibid.: 85).

On closer examination of this passage, it is interesting to note that Rosselli's definition of liberalism is based on the fundamental assumption that liberalism itself is *both the means and the end*. When Rosselli speaks here of a target state, this remark indicates that the goal of liberalism is specifically to provide the social structures that enable individuals to develop their personal talents in the greatest possible way.

4. Socialism and the Liberal Method

At the same time, however, this raises the question of the way (or the means) by which such social structures can be brought about. According to Rosselli such an objective can only be achieved through the methodology of freedom

itself – which of course excludes the option of authoritarian leadership (ibid.: 85). Here, Rosselli is already taking up – at least to some extent – an important idea that Zygmunt Bauman will spell out later in his work *Socialism – The Active Utopia*. Bauman assumes that the approach to a utopian state of society (even if this may never fully succeed) that is preferable to the currently prevailing social conditions can only take place through an active and critical confrontation with the prevailing empirical/social circumstances; a form of activity that can only take place out of the impetus of freedom. According to Bauman, ‘[...] each moment of human history [...], to a greater or lesser degree, is an open-ended situation; a situation which is not entirely determined by the structure of its own past, and from which more than one string of events may follow [...]’ (Bauman 1976: 10).

According to Bauman, every historical situation is initially to be regarded as a moment with an open outcome. If one takes the effort at this point to read between the lines in Bauman’s work, it also becomes clear that from this apostrophized openness it can be concluded that any form of assumed determinism of historical developmental tendencies (‘This event had to happen, history wanted it that way’) has to be rejected – not least because such a determinism can be regarded as incompatible with the epistemic modesty that, consequently, follows from the fact of historical openness (ibid.).

It may seem unusual to introduce a thinker like Bauman here – nevertheless, such intellectual parallels demonstrate how influential the critique of determinism in the understanding of history has remained in later debates within leftist political theory.

Rosselli has already recognized the insight resulting from the bias of the respective historical or social figuration, which, according to Bauman’s reading, leads to people beginning to act as an active and voluntaristic subject, when he advocates the “liberal method.” Through the liberal (or democratic) method, Rosselli attempts to take account of the fact that both liberalism and socialism can only find to their own realization in a meaningful way if the principle of freedom – and thus also of autonomy – should be both the means (and thus also the methodology) and the end of political action (Rosselli & Urbina-ti 1994: 94). For Rosselli, this consideration also goes hand in hand with the insight that any form or imagination of a better society can only be brought about through the methodology of freedom and autonomy and never through authoritarian forms of rule – here, of course, the historical context, which in Rosselli’s environment was characterized above all by the predominance of Mussolini’s fascism, can be used as a decisive explanation:

Liberty can never be won through tyranny or dictatorship, or even through being granted from above. Liberty is a conquest, a self-conquest, which is preserved only through the continual exercise of one’s faculties and individual autonomies. For liberalism, and hence for socialism, observance of the liberal method, that is, the democratic method, of entering the political contest is fundamental. This is the method that in its essence is utterly permeated with the principle of liberty. It can be summed up in a single word: self-government. The liberal method

intends peoples and social classes, like individuals, to administer their affairs by using their own capacities, without coercion or paternalistic intervention. [...] On the political level, it can be defined as a complex of rules of the game that all the parties in contention commit themselves to respect, rules intended to ensure the peaceful coexistence of citizens, social classes, and states; to restrain competition, which is inevitable and indeed desirable, within tolerable limits; to permit the various parties to succeed to power in turn; and to guide the forces of innovation that will arise from time to time into legal channels (ibid.).

A closer look at this passage reveals two particularly interesting aspects: (I) Rosselli clearly points out that the liberal method is also the democratic method and (II) that this method must be regarded as indispensable for both liberalism and socialism. The first aspect can be better grasped if we consider the basic mechanisms that characterize the principle of freedom according to Rosselli's reading. According to Rosselli, freedom is characterized by a never-ending process, in that it can only be asserted and maintained through constant conflict with oneself and with the social environment – and thus also with one's fellow human beings (ibid.). Freedom is thus, as Rosselli puts it, a form of conquest, which at the same time can only be practiced in a meaningful way against the background of specific forms of self-overcoming. If the liberal method is subsequently also the democratic method, Rosselli draws attention to the fact that – just as the practice of true autonomy is always linked to the overcoming of one's own first nature, which is characterized by heteronomy – the practice of political freedoms also requires the overcoming of one's own particular interests in order to comply with the fundamental democratic rules of the game. For true political freedom (in the form of the realization of one's own political interests) can only take place against the background of generally accepted democratic rules of the game, so that *everyone is granted this opportunity*. When Rosselli says that the liberal method is characteristic of both liberalism and socialism, this statement draws attention to the fact that the two political worldviews are not necessarily contradictory (ibid.: 87). Rosselli goes on to explain why the liberal/democratic method defies any form of political categorization:

The liberal method of taking part in the political contest cannot be qualified; it is not and cannot be either bourgeois or socialist, conservative or revolutionary, though its very nature tends to make it favor the forces of progress. As a bond prior to any political tendency, it requires of those who enter into it faith in reason, sacred respect for mankind, the recognition that each citizen enjoys an infrangible sphere of autonomy, and the rooted conviction that nothing strong and lasting is built with brute force, even when it is employed in the service of fine ideals. Like all refined instruments, it naturally implies a high degree of civilization; rather, it is itself the product of civilization (ibid.: 94-95).

According to Rosselli, the belief in reason, autonomy and a strict rejection of any form of violence are not only to be regarded as central characteristics of the liberal method itself, but also as central characteristics of civilized

coexistence in general. From a radical-left perspective, one could of course feel compelled to accuse Rosselli of a certain form of reformist naivety. This accusation can be understood against the background of the frequently encountered assumption that the liberal method itself is based on a form of illusion, in that it assumes that the capitalist classes, i.e. the bourgeoisie, would part with their wealth without any form of resistance as soon as a certain social majority were in favour of this. Rosselli had already been able to anticipate this accusation during his lifetime – which greatly reinforces the timelessness of Rosselli's ideas (*ibid.*: 95). At the time, Rosselli was confronted with the reproach of other socialists who emphasized that '[...] the democratic method is the method proper to bourgeois society, that it answers to the conservative and governmental needs of the bourgeoisie' (*ibid.*). This argument, in turn, is based on the assumption that the liberal method and the associated recognition of the democratic rules of the game are fundamentally in favour of the bourgeoisie, whose fundamental interest remains focused on the primacy of material and financial property preservation (*ibid.*).

Against the background of these considerations, Rosselli rejects even more strictly that some of the socialists – although some socialists admit that some liberal institutions should first be utilized in the early stages – regard violence as a legitimate means:

This sort of talk, which democratic socialists have been hearing for thirty years, reveals a complete incomprehension on the part of those who utter it of the spirit and the essence of the liberal method, a physiological incapacity to cut themselves loose from notions that may have had some rationale at the origins of the socialist movement, when the proletariat was without political rights and had nothing to lose but its chains, but that have no more reason for being now that the proletariat has attained its political adulthood in every country. The working class in Europe today finds itself face-to-face with a bourgeoisie that, drawn along by the logic of its own principles and above all by the irresistible pressure of the proletariat, has been forced to give itself (what it did not have in the first place) a democratic constitution. The bourgeoisie today acknowledges explicitly that power has its only source of legitimacy in the people, in the entire people, which expresses its will in parliament, through universal suffrage (*ibid.*: 95-96).

In Rosselli's view, the liberal/democratic method is indispensable not least because the working class – in contrast to earlier times, when it was still in 'chains' and had no political and economic rights – has now achieved such a degree of political rights that it is able to confront the bourgeoisie on an equal footing, i.e. through political competition. Of particular interest here is Rosselli's argument regarding the origins that explain this newly won equality (at least at the democratic-participatory level). When Rosselli points out that the bourgeoisie was forced to recognize democratic competition primarily by the logic of its own principles, this repeats (at least in part) Rooksby's previously discussed argument: According to Rooksby, the realization of the basic liberal

idea can be considered a failure precisely for the reason that the bourgeoisie, having brought down the *ancien régime*, was unable to realize the ideals of liberty and equality – in whose name the old regime was brought down – on a practical level (Rooksby 2012: 509).

5. Rosselli's Turning Away from Marxism

One question that inevitably arises at this point, however, is what conditions led Rosselli to advocate the concept of liberal socialism. In order to fully understand the development of Rosselli's basic theoretical assumptions, it is advisable to start with Rosselli's criticism of Marxism.

Rosselli's criticism of Marxism is initially based on the assumption – in accordance with Bauman's previously discussed reading – that the future is to be regarded as an open process on an empirical level. With this assumption, Rosselli explicitly opposes the view held by many Marxists that socialism (or communism) is ultimately the most meaningful of all systems; and that this meaningfulness can be proven entirely on a scientific level. Rather, the basic attitude of the liberal socialist is characterized by the fact that he/she does not assume historically determined laws that ensure that socialism will find its realization due to supposed contradictions underlying these very laws. Rather one of the central borrowings that the liberal socialist takes from liberalism is the capability of self-reflexivity. This self-reflexivity leads the liberal socialist to the realization that he/she also does not have an epistemic standpoint that negates the will of man and according to which it can be anticipated with certainty that socialism represents the best of all systems (Rosselli & Urbinati 1994: 102). Thus, according to Rosselli, socialism describes nothing more than a different possibility of social organization – which is certainly to be welcomed on a normative level. Whether this other possibility will actually occur remains an open question according to the liberal-socialist interpretation (*ibid.*).

5.1 A Plea for Voluntarism

According to Rosselli, the question of whether this ideal (socialism) will find its own practical realization depends not least on whether people will manage to convince the social majority of the practicability and advantages of such a system. For Rosselli, this leads to the succinct statement that for the liberal socialist, the will is the primary factor (or the basic condition) for social change:

In this doubt, in this virile relativism that gives a powerful impulse to action and wishes to leave plenty of room for human will in history; in this critical demon that obliges one continually to review one's position in the light of fresh experience; in this faith in the supreme values of the spirit and the marvelous animating force of liberty, end and means, climate and lever, lies the state of mind of a socialist who has sailed away from Marxist seas and touched land on the shores of liberalism. Action is his true standard. He is a socialist because of a whole ensemble of principles and experiences and because of convictions

formed in the study of social phenomena; but he is a socialist above all out of faith, sentiment, active attachment - this is the point, the real criterion - to the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Whoever adopts this cause as his own can act only in the spirit of liberalism and in the practice of socialism (ibid.: 94).

It is particularly interesting when Rosselli points out at the end of the quoted passage that the true socialist - i.e., according to Rosselli's reading, the socialist who was able to emancipate him-/herself from Marxism - is liberal in spirit but loyal to the basic socialist idea in his/her practical actions. What may initially sound paradoxical is not as contradictory on closer inspection as one might initially assume.

The actions of the liberal socialist arise from a feeling of solidarity with the poor and oppressed. In contrast to Marxism, however, the conduct of the liberal socialist is not characterized by the conviction that the contradictions of capitalism will lead to the victory of the proletariat. Rather - and this explains the adjective *liberal* - the liberal socialist attempts to practice active solidarity with the poor and oppressed based on a mindset that starts from the basic assumption that the human will, in combination with the ability to constantly re-examine one's own point of view in the light of diverse experiences, is the basis for any sort of political action. This shows once again, how the liberal/democratic method can be characterized: that freedom is both the means and the end in the actions of the liberal socialist. The conviction of the liberal socialist - this becomes more apparent in the quoted passage, if one is prepared to read between the lines - is that he/she assumes that a full form of freedom will only be achieved when the poor and oppressed have emancipated themselves from their condition. However, this goal (or purpose) can only be achieved through a methodology that is also fully imbued with the spirit of freedom. In other words, only an active voluntaristic commitment, which makes the principle of experience the touchstone of one's own actions, is most likely to achieve this goal (ibid.). According to Rosselli, this aspect is completely neglected in Marxist thought:

The core of Marxism lies in the concept of the historical necessity of the advent of a socialist society by virtue of an objective and fatal process of transformation within the material world. Human will appears in a secondary, not to say determined, role. Problems of consciousness, of autonomy, of the formation of free personalities, do not exist for Marx. They are all postponed to the new day following the social transformation. Nothing could be more Utopian and antiliberal than this abrupt and messianic shift of position, this switch from a realm where inexorable necessity dominates to one where sovereign liberty reigns (ibid.: 106-107).

According to Rosselli, the primary problem of Marxist fatalism lies in the fact that man is no longer conceived as an active subject of action who is capable of intervening in social grievances in a formative way by means of his/her own autonomy. According to Marx - and this is Rosselli's precise criticism - the day of freedom only comes after the revolution, whereby the power of

the human will and the resulting ability to act is endlessly postponed (*ibid.*). For this reason, the Marxist idea of such an abrupt change also has something utopian about it and negates the basic liberal idea: the change from a realm of determination to a realm of freedom requires that long-term processes have already taken place, which have contributed to that realm of freedom (socialism) being able to find to its practical realization. The emergence of these long-term processes is in turn inextricably linked to a power of education and will arising from human freedom. Against the background of these considerations, Rosselli also comes to the concise conclusion that ‘[...] history for the Marxists is a gigantic and tendentious drama, with scripted roles’ (*ibid.*: 123).

5.2 Against Marxist Determinism

It is also worthwhile to consider the influences that contributed to Rosselli’s critique of Marxism. Particularly significant is Rosselli’s engagement with Hendrik de Man’s critique of Marxism, which also left a lasting mark on his own criticism: that Marxism – though it may contribute to an adequate analysis of capitalist economic dynamics – lacks a normative foundation and that the emergence of a socialist society is explained in terms of deterministic historical developments (Bastow & Martin 2003: 80).

Gramsci’s influence on Rosselli’s thinking regarding historically deterministic explanations for political development processes is unmistakably clear at this point. For example, Gramsci notes in the eighth of his Prison Notebooks that deterministic tendencies projected onto the course of history negate human agency. However, Gramsci also points out that for socially disadvantaged groups, a mechanistic-deterministic explanation of historical events can still serve as a hopeful narrative to compensate for the lack of their own agency in changing social conditions. Ultimately, according to Gramsci, it is important that people understand themselves as acting subjects capable of influencing social and historical circumstances (Gramsci 2007, PN 3: 353). Even though Gramsci is less critical of historical materialism itself, Rosselli’s critique of supposedly deterministic historical trajectories resembles that of Gramsci in many respects.

Rosselli’s criticism of Marx’s seemingly deterministic (or even fatalistic) theory of historical development processes even goes so far as to argue that historical materialism benefits the capitalists rather than the emancipation of the working class:

Let me say something that may appear paradoxical: it seems to me that at the present stage of social relations, historical materialism is a philosophy much better suited to the capitalist class than to the proletariat. The capitalist, particularly the entrepreneur, being in charge of the production process, dominating and linking its elements, sharing actively in technical progress, possesses an awareness of his active participation in the transformation of the process of production. He is able concretely to insert his will into history, and his relation to economic life is typically one of action-reaction. The proletarian (and the intellectual who joins the cause of the workers on his behalf), however, since

he only feels the effects or is forced to assist passively in the process of production, sees the forces of production merely as controlling factors against which, at present, he is powerless to react. Historical materialism, when he applies it, becomes not a liberating philosophy but a philosophy that shows him his chains, and in doing so induces him to make vain attempts to get free of them (ibid.: 61).

The paradox that Rosselli addresses here is that historical materialism places the exploited worker – as well as the left intellectual who defends his/her interests – in a state of passivity, in that the hope for his/her liberation depends entirely on historical trends that elude his/her active and voluntaristic agency. The capitalist, on the other hand – which is why Rosselli's assumption that the Marxist doctrine is a huge drama with prefabricated roles seems more than accurate – takes on an active role against this theoretical background, in that the concrete historical developmental tendencies can be traced back to his/her own actions. Technical progress (and the associated production process) thus follows a pattern of cause and effect. The shaping of economic progress is therefore in the hands of the capitalists and not in the hands of the socialists – the latter are unconditionally at the mercy of this circumstance in the Marxist framework.

Concluding remarks

The discussion of Rosselli's theory of liberal socialism should not lead to the assumption that it necessarily results in a position against Marxist thought. Anyone who has read *Capital* knows that Marx can be regarded as one of the most astute observers of the capitalist system – and its signs of decay. What Rosselli's approach to liberal socialism can offer, however, is a call for more active and voluntaristic engagement, without which social change is difficult to achieve. Against the backdrop of Mussolini's fascism, Rosselli had to realize at the time what happens when the value of freedom recedes into the background and large sections of the labour movement subordinate themselves to such a dangerous ideology. This also holds an extremely important lesson from Rosselli's work: the value of freedom is not something that only neoliberals and conservatives can claim for themselves. Rather, it is a central goal of every left-wing movement, and Rosselli's 'liberal method' provides a framework to reclaim it.

Whether the topic is the previously discussed post-liberal theoretical approach, authoritarian regimes, neoliberal logics of subjectification, or even Marxist critiques – there are many reasons to rediscover Rosselli's work. Not least because, in Rosselli's liberal-socialist theoretical approach (even if this may initially seem paradoxical), two worldviews are effectively preserved at once: the liberal and the socialist.

Rosselli's work endures not only as a historical intervention but as a method – one that insists political theory must be perpetually reimagined in light of new struggles. The central motif of this article has been to demonstrate how such reinterpretation, far from a merely academic exercise, is an essential

precondition for rendering political thought actionable. Just as Rosselli transformed liberal and socialist traditions to confront fascism, his framework today offers tools to diagnose the crises of neoliberalism, post-liberal authoritarianism, and the left's search for a unifying praxis. This, perhaps, is Rosselli's most vital lesson: that the 'liberal method' is not a fixed doctrine but a practice of critical engagement, where freedom and solidarity are continually rediscovered through their application to an ever-changing present. The modest but urgent goal of this article has been to advance that practice.

This perspective is particularly relevant for those interested in the intellectual history of political movements, the relationship between liberalism and socialism, and the legacy of thinkers like Rosselli, Gramsci, and Gobetti in shaping both antifascist resistance and the ongoing debate on political agency and social transformation.

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Florian Majvald

Liberalne provokacije: zašto je Karlo Roseli i danas relevantan?

Apstrakt

Liberalna i socijalistička shvatanja sveta često se posmatraju kao međusobno fundamentalno suprotstavljena. Ovu predstavu snažno učvršćuju i Fukujamina teza o „kraju istorije“ i tvrdnja autora poput Patrika Dinina da je liberalizam propao. Pitanje koje se javlja prilikom bližeg ispitivanja ove pretpostavke jeste da li je ona tačna. Na osnovu dela Karla Roselija *Socialismo Liberale* (Liberalni socijalizam), ovaj članak nastoji da sistematski ospori tu tezu. U kontekstu uspona fašizma u Italiji, Roseli dolazi do zaključka – suprotno mnogim predstavnicima ortodoksnog marksizma – da liberalno i socijalističko shvatanje sveta ne moraju nužno biti međusobno suprotstavljena. Štaviše, ona čak mogu biti međusobno zavisna – važan uvid za ponovno promišljanje društvenih promena.

Ključne reči: liberalizam, socijalizam, Roseli, antifašizam, Gojz, Horkhajmer, sloboda, demokratija, ekonomija, marksizam

