



DOCUMENT

UFD0059  Vincent Garton

# Language Inhuman

**Picking up from ‘Leviathan Rots’ and anticipating his chapter ‘Automaticity and the Mystery of State’ in Machine Decision is Not Final, Vincent Garton drills down into the bloodless viscera of liberalism and comes out the other side**

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At the turn of the twenty-first century, liberalism appeared almost everywhere triumphant. The arch-reactionary Joseph de Maistre had once asserted in the midst of revolutionary turmoil in France that the restoration of the old order would come imminently, naturally, without resistance, ‘because it will be favoured by a secret force whose action is wholly creative.’<sup>1</sup> He expected that history itself would necessarily assert the rights of legitimacy. Two hundred years would prove him wrong: whatever secret force it is that acts through the history of liberalism, it has not been much inclined to hinder it. Yet, however many victories have been ascribed to liberalism, as a rigorous intellectual system it has remained as difficult to define as ever. Historians remind us that the ‘liberal canon’ with which we are now familiar has a much more recent pedigree than it is typically attributed. John Locke, whose place in the pantheon of liberal thinkers now seems incontrovertible, was long viewed with embarrassment or reluctance by the triumphant Whig Enlightenment tradition in Britain.<sup>2</sup> By the late 20th century, on the other hand, Hegel—long the bugbear of antiliberal theologians and philosophers; dominant, too, in British universities by the end of the ‘liberal’ Victorian era—had for the most part been unceremoniously cast out as the lackey of Prussian authoritarianism. Many would

now seek to move on from liberalism. But it is hard to see how this can be accomplished without a coherent sense of the object itself.

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The interpretations of the label are manifold. Among the leftist writers for whom ‘liberalism’ is a term of abuse, it represents an ideology of superficial critique, a cringing unwillingness to take meaningful action. Alternatively it is the vindication of the rights of property-owners, which began by rendering in polite rhetoric the bloody interests of slaveholders, enclosures, and bourgeois oppression. For others, on the other hand, liberalism—‘classical liberalism’—denotes constitutionalism, rights to freedom from repression, and the restriction of government intervention. Yet again, and especially in the US itself, ‘liberalism’ may instead stand for the active support of state intervention in favour of substantive, social and economic rights. If these interpretations often seem contrary, they still seem to approach, or at least orbit, a single historical phenomenon. Tentatively, we may identify it as the supremacy of language. The property rights that liberalism promotes are the inscription of social relations in the crystal language of law. The unwillingness to undertake meaningful

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1. J. de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, tr. R. A. Lebrun (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 105.

2. D. Bell, ‘What Is Liberalism?’, *Political Theory* 42 (2014): 682–715.

political action perceived by certain socialists is a consequence of the eclipse of action by language. The central point on which government must be restrained is in the freedom to express oneself—or it must be extended so as to enable the same.

The pre-eminence of language may not be a sufficient explanation of liberalism as a total phenomenon, in all its glitteringly varied forms. Certainly it is not how many of its protagonists would have described their work. Yet it is compelling.

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In considering any such linguistic theory of liberalism, law must take centre stage. The ‘rule of law’ is an archetypally liberal ideal. It is an inversion of the age-old dictum according to which the monarch was the law incarnate. Rather than king or emperor speaking the law into existence, it is law itself that must speak through the judge—in language that is objective, precise, transparent. It is the norm, embodied in the written word, which prevails over the decision. Older understandings of justice now seem barely comprehensible. Assyriologists, for instance, have now adduced that Hammurabi’s ‘code’ was intended not as law in the modern sense, nor even as a systematic record of precedent, but merely as a triumphant yet arbitrary set of examples, to be esteemed in their own right as demonstrating the generous justice of the sovereign.<sup>3</sup> And if Chinese legalists sought to abstract from arbitrary will to transparent, written law, the dismal record of the Qin dynasty showed the practical limits of their ambitions in the circumstances of the time. The liberal concept of the rule of law is, in many respects, historically unique—whether it is embodied in definitive code or in the byzantine printed records of the court cases of common law.

The most fundamental political claim of liberalism has always been the right to freedom of speech, to tolerance of the expression of opposing opinions. Liberalism is parliamentary politics, and parliament is the ‘place of speech’. Implicit in this claim is the assumption that the questions discussed can never be finally decided: liberalism, then, is the joke that

3. See the overview in L. S. Fried, *The Priest and the Great King: Temple–Palace Relations in the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 34–35.

never gets to the punchline. It has in any case been liberalism’s signal triumph to canonise reasoned language, written and spoken, as the pivot, even the objective, of political life. This much has certainly been perceived by its critics. Carl Schmitt writes witheringly of freedom of speech as the characteristic obsession of the middle class;<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, too, disparages the politics of ‘parliamentary nonsense’, with its respectable ‘duty to read one’s newspaper at breakfast’.<sup>5</sup> Once the arcane privilege of leisured aristocrat and clerical literatus, to read, write, and speak politically is now the fundamental duty of the liberal citizen. Political demonstrations, from this perspective, serve principally to express viewpoints, and are only in a secondary sense tactical actions undertaken to achieve a concrete end. Writing, too, is essential, even where it amounts to no more than a check mark. In the Napoleonic plebiscites at the start of the nineteenth century, a blot on a ballot paper could serve as a sign of acclamation—the embodied representation of a collective interjection. In this form it was not far removed from the age-old formulaic acclamations known from imperial Rome. In the epoch of liberalism, the ballot must instead be read as a vehicle of reasonable, individual communication. Every vote is an authentic statement of its own—as is everything else. The world is inscribed in linguistic simulation.

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The apparently contradictory importance of language to liberalism has a philosophical significance. Conceptually its advent is tightly bound to an

4. C. Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, tr. G. Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 62. See also C. Schmitt et al., ‘Diskussion über “Presse und öffentliche Meinung”’, in *Verhandlungen des 7. Deutschen Soziologentages vom 28. September bis 1. Oktober 1930 in Berlin: Vorträge und Diskussionen in der Hauptversammlung und in den Sitzungen der Untergruppen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1931) 57–58.

5. F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. I. Johnston, Part VI, §208, <<http://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/nietzsche/beyondgoodandevil6html.html>>.

intellectual configuration once labelled by Alexandre Kojève the 'synthetic parathesis' of dialectics. If the history of human thought has been driven by the interplay of opposing responses to its most fundamental questions—the much-rehearsed antagonism of 'thesis and antithesis'—'parathetical' reasoning is the style of compromise that seeks to assert multiple, at base contradictory positions at the same time. It is St. Paul who provides the clearest statement of this type of argument in negative form. 'We preach Christ crucified', he writes in the first letter to the Corinthians, 'unto the Jews a stumbling-block, unto the Greeks foolishness': 'unto the Jews'—for whom the substance of the world is nothing more than the arbitrary will of God, 'unto the Greeks'—for whom reality is an eternal cosmic machinery of cause and effect. The vast majority of recorded philosophy has, in fact, been 'parathetical' in one form or another, striving to reach a medium that will recover and transcend the dangerous objections of the extremes. Long after St. Paul, Christian theologians would spend long centuries in splendid struggle to reconcile the competing claims of a 'Jewish' theology and a 'Greek' science. But in philosophy, at least, it was Kant who brought the endeavour to its conclusion—its synthesis. In the Kantian system, philosophy is defined not by the object it strives to attain, but as a method, namely the critical method by which thought considers thought. All philosophical positions are, in the end, reduced indifferently to the various articulations of this critical method. It is a method without a finishing line. Hence, 'to speak with Kant', writes Kojève, 'is to speak endlessly, to speak forever without ever contradicting oneself.'<sup>6</sup>

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6. A. Kojève, *Essai d'une histoire raisonnée de la philosophie païenne. 1: Les Présocratiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 160.

reality. If liberal democracy is based on representation, a language of identification with the people, the pre-eminent response of radical democracy is to tear apart that chain of symbolism, and to press the claims of an unmediated, unrepresented general will. Generations of political economists have sought at the same time to demonstrate that liberalism's formal rhetoric of justice and equality serves only to paper over the unjust and brutal material reality furnishing the machinery needed to sustain its simulation. Cognisant of these criticisms, many who considered themselves partisans of liberalism in the 20th century made great efforts to assuage the substance of popular demands and to conform that material substructure to the aspirations implied by their own language—a turn that historians have justly labelled the 'embedding' of liberalism. Of course, the formalities now associated with liberal democracy still have little inherent relation to the substance typically claimed for them: to the ancient Greeks, representative elections were clearly oligarchic, not democratic procedures; alternation of powerholding was likewise practised comfortably by medieval Italian patricians who had little intention to involve the broader population in politics. Yet in an important sense the familiar criticism of the unreality of liberal language misses the point. Liberalism is not merely a failing attempt to unravel the physics of necessity. In that role it has in fact been quite successful. It has been relentless in finding new spheres of life to remove from the dominion of necessary facts and dissolve in the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. If anything, this process tends prophetically towards the dismantling of given reality itself.

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The simulation has not proven flawless. On the one hand, various refractory forces have continued to make themselves felt, producing self-contradictions that have resisted the onward sweep of linguistic flux. A central problem of liberal political theory has been the need to assimilate into its abstract syntax

the collective rights of groups whose origin is perceived to lie firmly in the world of given necessity—ethnicity, nation, family, to name just a few. There is, of course, one partial and long-established strategy for overcoming this challenge ready to hand in the language of minority rights. Another, more recently developed, is the practice of ‘deconstructing’ these fundamental qualities, that is, evaporating them into arbitrary linguistic predicates. Yet the first solution is not total, and the latter has not been successfully generalised, not least since to do so would imply directing it against itself. Without this completion, the most ancient political forms will continue to re-emerge within the liberal network of signs. To take an obvious present example, whatever other causes it may have, the Western, or at any rate American, fear of Chinese labour has above all manifested the age-old pagan impulse to retain one’s inherited superiority as an immutable fact. This has had the consequence that even as the expression of this superiority attains an ever more imposing grandeur in its abstract formalism—the ‘rules-based international order’—its practice has necessarily digressed from the essential achievements of liberalism, tightening and reshaping the circulation of free commerce, resembling more and more the old regime that it once supplanted.

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Yet ultimately this is merely a problem of lack of development, or of under-sophistication. A more important, genuinely internal contradiction faced by modern liberalism is a consequence of its very extension: the reigning eclipse of sign over signified has resulted in a condition of meaninglessness. The simulation no longer simulates. A joke without a punchline is liable to become a series of words, mere sound and not language, even when it still manages to command its listeners’ interest. The de-reasoning of language has proven difficult to slow, not least because it has so often been associated disingenuously with the ambitions of political opponents. The advent of instantaneous social media has enormously

accelerated the proliferation of reactive and more or less uncritical linguistic response to phenomena condensed and presented as headlines, though this is merely the next step in a process that began with the invention of the printed journal; their speed has developed alongside the loss of real significance. The last word may well be the enthronement of the large language model as the archetypal form of ‘artificial intelligence’, a circumstance that could only have been accomplished under liberalism. The LLM represents, after all, the definitive automation of liberalism’s central activity: the production of language. Yet, whatever form it takes, the acceleration of that process invariably entails the desolation of its results, and since a work can become a work only once it is completed, the impossibility of completion can imply disastrous consequences. Many sceptics, of course, have argued that the products of LLMs are mere simulacra of human reasoning—though this is to say less than they presume—but in any case such models routinely generate outputs that resemble human writing in form and not in content, artefacts that have quaintly and anthropomorphically been designated ‘hallucinations’. Exposed to their own output, LLMs are observed to rapidly decohere—so it is troubling that their output now makes up more and more of the data available for their training. Signs accelerated lose their meaning, and the eye of day is weakening.

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### **Building on both the legacy of Christian universalism and the conceptual development of a dehumanised machinery of state, liberal democracy has instead constructed a highly efficient mechanism for the diffusion of responsibility**

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There are two ways in which the endless speech of the liberal philosopher, or sophist, may come to an end. One is death. Endless debate must presuppose aeviternal life, and liberal society has indeed shown a remarkable insistence on banishing the old spectre from its counsels—beginning with the expulsion from the cities of the bodies of the dead. It is the shadow of death, the willingness to stake one’s life, that secures the mutual recognition that is a prerequisite of any freedom worth the name, and there is

nothing less liberal than the knife poised over Isaac. Its absence, by contrast, has lent the liberal political sphere its characteristic game-like unseriousness. The ancient Roman, the Tamil dynast, and the Chinese scholar were once alike expected as a matter of course to take their own lives in case of failure. Building on both the legacy of Christian universalism and the conceptual development of a dehumanised machinery of state, liberal democracy has instead constructed a highly efficient mechanism for the diffusion of responsibility. Whatever the other consequences of this fact, it has proven a great boon for its systemic political resilience. Yet by itself the exclusion of the possibility of death as the condition of meaningful speech must in the end tend towards that decoherence of unlimited language we have already noticed. Finally—more than finally—human extinction, indeed the extinction of intelligence in general, is the exact and comfortable negation of an ‘end of history’ constituted by the endless despotic repetition of mere existence, a negation so exact that it is virtually identical. Such an eventuality would certainly mean the definitive exclusion of infinite speech, and in the absence of external intervention it would be a tedious but logical conclusion both to the liberal epoch and to the narrative of human history as such.

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**An authentic ‘postliberal’ must appeal instead from the residue of phenomenal necessity to the perfection of simulation, to a regime of experimental reconfiguration that can generate new realities and definitively replace the working of necessary fact by arbitrary linguistic decision**

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Physical life, of course, is conditioned radically by death. The simulacrum of human life without death—life in aeviternity—cannot ultimately represent life at all. The point is banal enough, but the error and the unreality are, in this sense, inherent. To fail to reckon seriously with death is the symbol of one-sided thinking, to side stubbornly with a single proposition over its equivalent negation.

The other means by which the liberal speech-flow may be ended is by its perfect completion. In

this case, the network of symbols would become self-sufficient. Rather than meaninglessness and decoherence, however, the simulation would attain self-referential significance. This is the posthistorical possibility that Hegel saw prefigured—yet recoiled from—in the Confucian universe of signs. Instead of asserting different viewpoints according to the formal transformations of a single linear method, it would already be capable truly of expressing anything, and as such would be impossible to contradict. One can continue, with the Kantians, to speak incessantly: but without novelty, that is, in a circle. Because it is unparadoxical, because it cannot encompass death, the liberal regime cannot ever fully recuperate every possible contradiction—though it is more successful in doing so than any other system before it. Simulation must instead be pushed further. To establish the identity of A not just with A but with not-A through the medium of time constitutes the decisive move from synthetic parathesis to authentic synthesis. Formal contradiction then becomes impossible. ‘Debate’, in any particularly meaningful sense, comes to an end because everything has already been said. Such a circumstance becomes possible only through the completion of the process of simulation.

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So far I have suggested that liberalism is a regime of language, that as the reign of symbols it is also the reign of simulacrum, but that this simulation is necessarily incomplete or defective. It is time to be clearer about the nature of simulation as such. To assume the necessary inferiority of the simulacrum to the simulated is a prejudice. The nature of simulation as process is that it combines the ‘magical’ and arbitrary character of linguistic signification—the free will ascribed to Adam in his assignment of names—with the objective working of physics in generative fashion. Creation, in this sense, is ultimate simulation: a thaumaturgical principle. With generations of critics, then, we may agree that liberalism is mere simulacrum—but our emphasis must be on ‘mere’. For long centuries the opponents of liberalism have



appealed from language to reality. An authentic 'postliberal' must appeal instead from the residue of phenomenal necessity to the perfection of simulation, to a regime of experimental reconfiguration that can generate new realities and definitively replace the working of necessary fact by arbitrary linguistic decision. In political and juridical terms, this is the third path that lies beyond the monarch who speaks the law and the inanimate and transparent law that speaks through the judge. It is the decision to render the objective law itself *animate*—that is, to institute artificial intelligence as state-form, and thus radically to combine language with action; a course that is only very incompletely foreshadowed in the form of the stagnant and linear language-production of the LLM. If all of this sounds unreal, it is because there is no solution that is not unreal. Nevertheless, to transform reality into unreality is the task at hand. Then we may talk genuinely about the surpassing—not simply the collapse—of liberalism. And this indeed will amount to an end to history.

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