

Bossy Liberals and Fascism: 100 years of mutual hostility

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13,000 words

11 June, 2017

Introduction, [apologia](#) and [sources](#)

This is a four part study in the history, ideas and current picture of the opposition between Fascism, authoritarianism and their clearest opponents, the Bossy Liberals.

[Bossy Liberals and Fascism Part 1: *What Fascism was and wasn't*](#)

[Bossy Liberals and Fascism Part 2: *Imagined contemporary fascisms*](#)

[Bossy Liberals and Fascism Part 3: *The conflicted Liberal history*](#)

[Bossy Liberals and Fascism Part 4: *The rise and fall of the Bossy Liberal*](#)

What the essay says

My “Big Idea” is that 21st Century Bossy Liberals wrongly identify their populist political foes as authoritarian and, worse, as Fascist.

Along the way, I propose that Bossy Liberals betray (have always betrayed) the core feature of Classical Liberalism: its attempt at empathy for everyone; and that 100 years ago, Fascism’s supporters mostly had a reasonable fear that liberal democracy would let them down.

I insist that in the 21st Century most ordinary populist opinion – that of the mythic White Van Man in the UK, or the Flyover States Redneck in the US – is not Fascist, or even “authoritarian” (though it is unsurprisingly bitter). Indeed, the WVM or FSR are often remarkably true to Classical Liberal ideals and it is the Bossy Liberals who are curiously authoritarian (as well as being infuriatingly smug).

Fascism and liberalism know themselves to be polar opposites. The evidence, however, shows that most supporters of Fascism were not half as stupid or wicked as is usually assumed and I argue that Bossy Liberals are not half as clever or virtuous as they think.

In a little more detail...

Part 1, *What Fascism was and wasn't*, looks at the history of Fascism, the better to show why its core propositions were quite banal.

Part 2, *Imagined contemporary Fascisms*, looks at the lack of Fascism in the modern West and explores the way modern Bossy Liberals (the mainstream liberal elite) falsely characterises many non-Fascists as Fascist. BLs also manage, disingenuously, to taint any populist argument with the label Authoritarian (or “Authoritarian Populism”) the better to play the Fascism card without exposing themselves to the charge of scare-mongering.

Part 3, *The conflicted Liberal history*, looks at the history of the various liberal tribes, in order to show how Hands-off Liberals differ from Bossy Liberals, but also how Isaiah Berlin (himself an

impeccable liberal) described the drift of liberalism from its freedom-loving Hands-off starting-point and toward authoritarianism and even totalitarianism.

Part 4, *The rise and fall of the Bossy Liberal*, describes the several ways in which Bossy Liberals, including their lazy clones, the Auto-liberals, often detach themselves from serious politics (and so weaken government), but have seriously damaged culture. It also discusses how we may have reached Peak Bossiness, and can contemplate a better future.

Apologia

The audience I would most like for this essay is the one least likely to reach or enjoy it. That may be my fault, or it may be theirs. I can't say which. But I regret it and wish that there was something at my end that I could do about it. Still, some of the Bossy Liberals, whose relations with Fascism, proto-Fascists, and the uneducated populists I discuss here, will read the essay, recognise themselves, and reconsider some of their views. I hope they will see that I have tried to get my head straight about these matters, and to express them with a liveliness which is not intended to be provocative but illuminating.

One last thing on this apologia business: 20 years ago, I wrote quite a large book which I thought was a moderate and well-evidenced account of my doubts about the merits of every aspect of Green thinking. It almost failed to find a publisher: those who turned it down tended to say either that it could not be a good book (not with those lines of argument), or that it might be good, but its only market might be the Greens, who would not buy it because they would hate it.

Still, one way or another, since then, scepticism about Green verities has grown in a pretty satisfactory way, and I hope my work played its part. By some similar process of changing fashions, and the slow chipping away by rational argument, I am tolerably sure that the Bossy Liberal verities are being challenged. That will be a good thing, I think, mostly because an intellectually, emotionally and spiritually thin creed is always worth challenging.

A note on sources

My observations begin pretty much where my recent research has taken me, not least after a lifetime of rather unorganised reading (the curse of the autodidact). I think my conclusions are uncontroversial and flow from ordinarily-balanced reading of uncontroversial sources. I may get round to providing page-by-page references (and quotations) from the sources below, as to fact or opinion.

My reading list includes:

Carr, William, *A History of Germany, 1815-1990* (First published 1969; Arnold 1997)

Conrad, Peter, *Modern Times, Modern Places: Life and Art in the 20th Century* (Thames and Hudson, 1998) A good account of the pessimism and nihilism which really were a feature of

much modernism. An interesting if over-egged account of the conformism and even the “soft totalitarianism” of consumerism.

Cowling, Maurice, *Mill and Liberalism*, Cambridge University Press, 1963 (and 2nd edition with a striking new preface, 1990) A vigorous (even furious) re-reading of J S Mill showing the origins of Isaiah Berlin’s “positive” (or bossy) liberalism in the great master’s own work. The 2nd edition has a marvellous polemic on the dire influence of the “liberal” 1960s social revolution and the intellectual conservative, and Conservative, resistance to it.

Eatwell, Roger *Fascism: A History* (Vintage, UK, 1996)

Firth, C B, *From Napoleon to Hitler*, Ginn and Co, 1946 An interesting school text book history of the European themes – especially the imperial and national insecurities – which led to the two bookending strongmen of the title.

Harris, Robert: *Imperium, Lustrum, Dictator* (Random House, 2006 -2015). A readable but educated trilogy of an imagined biography of Cicero which provide a sketch of the first known cycle of failed more or less liberal politics leading to more or less Fascist strongman rule.

Hooper, John, *The New Spaniards* (Penguin, UK, 1995) A sharp journalistic history of the Spanish democratic bounce-back after Franco’s not-quite Fascist strongman rule.

Hughes, Richard, *The Fox In the Attic* (UK, 1961) One of the finest literary productions of the 20th Century, this poetic novel packs great punches. Above all it is a portrait, wholly without judgmentalism, of German 19th and 20th C militarism and of Adolf Hitler’s personality.

Kirkpatrick, Ivone, *Mussolini: Study of a demagogue* (Odhams, 1964) An informed account of Mussolini’s life and Fascist rule of Italy from a point of view which is properly critical whilst allowing that Mussolini was an impressive and, surprisingly, rather a poignant figure.

Levy, Bernard-Henri, *Left in Dark Times: A stand against the new barbarism* (USA, Random House, 2008) A powerful account of the soft-left Liberals’ failure in France (and Europe more widely): they betray the Enlightenment and despise the US which nonetheless everywhere defends the liberal values they won’t defend themselves.

Lipset, Seymour Martin, *Political Man*, Heinemann, 1960 An important account of the early and crucial role played by “the centre” (rather than the left or the right) in initiating Fascist success in Europe. It is fascinating on the varieties of Fascism and near-Fascisms, from left to right: there was working class support for the socialist kind called Peronism; the lower middle classes (even liberals) supported Nazism’s corporatism; and the upper middle class supported Spain’s traditionalist Falangism (and France’s Gaulism). There is a discussion of the propensity of the 20th Century working class to extremism of left or right, which makes one speculate whether there is, in fact, a new general mildness.

Fisher, H A L, *A History of Europe*, Volume II, 1936 (Fontana, 1961) Contains a brainy, passionate account of the rise of Fascism and Nazism as they had emerged and could be assessed in the mid-30s – crucially before Nazism's Holocaust.

Prospect, (anonymous), 22 December, 2007, "The Advanced Liberal", a Review of *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand*, by Richard Reeves. A cooler account of Mill than Cowling's, but it doesn't contradict – indeed it clarifies – the view from Peterhouse.

Schama, Simon, *Landscape and Memory* (UK and US, 1996) Includes a useful guide to the "jgreen" mindset of the German culture, including the dark side of its folksiness.

Shub, David, *Lenin: A biography* (UK, 1966)

Short, Philip, *Mitterrand: A study in ambiguity* (Bodley Head, 2013) An account of a fascinating man (he was nearly an orthodox Roman Catholic and socialist) as he operates in a political scene which is strikingly French: a fragile and fissiparous political scene produces a febrile, shifting, unprincipled approach to power in which Mitterrand remains attractive, and even morally driven.

Schuddekopf, Otto-Ernst, *Fascism* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, UK, 1973)

Thompson, Mark, *The White War: Life and death of the Italian Front, 1915-1919* (Faber and Faber, 2008) An account – at once military, political and cultural - of the Italian experience of WW1: it helped form Italian Modernism and Fascism alike, and certainly made Mussolini understand the power of nationalism and militarism, and thus the core difference between socialism and his emerging creed of Fascism.

Weber, Eugen, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s*, (Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995) A story of national humiliation, disappointment and exceptionalism which at times looks like fertile territory for Fascism, but turned out not to be.

Bossy Liberals and Fascism Part 1: What Fascism was and wasn't

Background

Zoe Williams, from the liberal left, blithely assumes, and is only one of many in doing so, that Marine Le Pen is keen on Fascism, or what ZW calls a “new Fascism”. President Trump has been routinely castigated as Fascist. But, actually, do they look like Fascists? The answer is no.

To be Fascist was to be quite popular (as well as populist) but also to seek to rule – and, crucially, actually to rule - by force rather than within democratic constraints. That's about it: in a world of more-or-less liberal (individualist) democracies (run through the ballot box), Fascism declared itself to be neither liberal nor democratic.

There is a further, pragmatic, point about Fascism's character. In the 1920s and '30s, large powerful elites supported classical Fascism, though they also believed they could manipulate and even tame this violent creed. In *Bossy Liberals and Fascism Part 2, Contemporary Fascisms*, I expand on the idea that neither France nor America has those forces at work, though perhaps Turkey does.

Fascism as ordinary – even banal

Fascism was and would now be a disaster, certainly for a civilised country and probably for any. But whilst Italian Fascism was arguably wicked in its outcomes, most of its followers – perhaps even its founder, Mussolini - were not. History shows us that pretty unexceptional citizens will vote for or give into a pretty unexceptional dictator in certain fairly unexceptional circumstances. For a while at least, Fascism's Italian dictatorship could be seen by many and perhaps most of its citizens to be successful. Fascism was not weird, or monstrous, or even a sickness. It grew in societies which were troubled or confused.

Italy's support for Fascism was perhaps deluded, but hardly pathological. Germany's Nazism, a coeval of Fascism which was from the start a cruder, crueller belief, seems more obviously a sickness: its leaders seem have been depraved, perhaps as Mafiosi are, and surprisingly large numbers of its followers at least seemed to be subject to a sort of mass hysteria. Italy and Germany both suffered from a period of what 30 years ago would have been called an inferiority complex. Their peoples sought uniqueness and greatness through nationhood, and Fascism and Nazism seemed to provide them in a form as vivid as it was also capable of being dark.

It is important to note that no Fascist leader was succeeded by another (except perhaps in the interestingly complicated case of the two Primavera's and Franco in Spain); and indeed that Fascist regimes were the unintended progenitor of democratic regimes. Fascism was conceived as an answer to the failures of liberal democracy; instead it seems to have provided a sense that one could opt for extreme socialism or have yet another go at making representative, pluralist democracy work. The alternative of strongman rule and statism had been tested to destruction and seemed like a busted flush.

Fascism: Racist, nativist - and the patriots

Hitler was rabidly racist and was novel in little else; but he was also a nationalist, and a nativist. Mussolini was, at least until he needed to agree with Hitler as much as possible, only the latter two of this trio. These three ideals (and they are ideals to those that hold them) are almost equally disliked by modern liberals of any stamp, and are disingenuously conflated, the better to make the rest of us fear what may flow from anything like a policy of favouring one's own countrymen. Hitler's racism was more successful, in its own terms, than Mussolini's nativism: Germany was purged of its Jews (though the country presumably remained a fair muddle of genotypes), but Mussolini did not leave Italians any more militaristic, imperial, or nobler – though they were a little more organised - than he found them.

The enthusiasm for Fascism in Germany and Italy was in part pragmatic: the citizen sacrificed some freedoms in exchange for order. But it was also thrilling, psychological, and had an element of hysteria. Reaction to this Fascist enthusiasm made common or garden patriotism a little suspect even in countries where loyalty to the flag had done little harm (perhaps in stultifying people's individuality a little) and had done much to ennoble them (in providing the rallying cry with which to defeat Fascism).

Fascist pragmatics anti-politics

Considering their reputation (deserved in the latter case) as fanatics, Mussolini and Hitler were both remarkable (the latter especially) in pragmatically manipulating the powers-that-be, the power elites, in their countries. Mussolini and Hitler (and Franco) brokered the power, variously, of monarchs, parliamentary parties, and industrial and agricultural elites. Mussolini and Franco also played the Roman Catholic Church well. None of these elites were especially naïve and few seemed to take the Fascists at their own evaluation; all decided to go along with what was, at least in their eyes, the lesser of various evils; most seemed to think – wrongly – that they could manage the Fascists right back.

Germany's case seems the most misunderstood, but Italy's was also widely misread. Hitler and Mussolini were masters of the technologies of mass manipulation, and because we have the vivid evidence of that branch of their dark arts, we are inclined to be terrified that any political populism (whether in the hands of Ukip, the Tea Party, the French National Front, or the Twittersphere) may swing out of control, and into control. The Mob, that scourge of the 17th, 18th and 19th Century mind, may well become, in the 21st Century, a new sort of terror, and one that was presaged in the 20th Century. But it is worth remembering just how wide, as well as often covert, and elitist, were many of the forces which really worked to make Fascism all-powerful, and usually by mistake.

Fascism: left or right?

Fascism conceived of itself as the sworn opponent of liberal democracy and of communism alike. Its appeal indeed was, quite early on, to more-or-less middle class people and to some elites who were prepared to trade democracy (which many of them liked, but which was failing) in order to avoid socialist revolution (whose threat was sufficiently real, in their minds). Put

bluntly: Fascism would keep the working class in order. It might be peculiar, radical, extreme or vulgar – but Fascism seemed the nearest thing to business-as-usual to be on offer.

It does not follow that Fascism was “far-right”. Mussolini, in particular, was a disappointed trouble-making socialist, though not of a particularly orthodox Marxist stamp. He framed his new movement as anti-capitalist and most of the other Western governments as plutocratic pacifists. Their materialism and pusillanimity – as well as their condescension toward Mediterranean countries – irked him.

One of Mussolini’s leading supporters framed the movement as providing a Middle Way between capitalism and communism. It was a term which, as it happened, soon became popular amongst moderates of right and left in Britain, though it might not have been had people recalled its first use. An early Fascist manifesto wanted to empower workers in a new corporatist compact to provide an alternative to leftist unions and control the dominance of capitalists. Italian Fascism was not socialist in a thorough-going way, and though it took a good many institutions into state ownership, it left most firms in private hands; it had ambitious plans for a welfare state, though they were largely unfilled. Fascism’s own word for its intentions was that it wanted to be corporatist.

Hitler’s Nazism – National Socialism – was so similar to Mussolini’s Fascism, except by being more virulent, that it seems sensible to regard it as a variety of the Italian’s more coherent creed, though their birth dates overlap completely. It was not obviously socialist at all. As in Italy, The People in Germany had no stated power, having vested it in their leader; some workers got good working conditions, but more because they were crucial to the arms race than because of principle. It happened that Nazi economics were a precursor to aspects of Keynesianism, but their entire rationale was to fulfil Hitler’s militarism, and even its millenarianism. Whereas Mussolini wanted Italy to flourish, to become an ordinary imperial power if possible, and to have a future, Hitler wanted purity at home and war abroad, to build a sort of unholy Roman Empire, and was nihilistic in the totality of his ambitions.

It seems fair to say that if Fascism was not socialist, it was statist. It was not especially egalitarian or welfarist and certainly didn’t listen to the masses (except as its own expediency required). But it started with what socialism only achieved by mistake: a mighty and intrusive state. Many modern right-wingers – whether Conservative or libertarian – base almost all their ideology and policy on reacting against, and reducing (or at least refining) the state as it became under Fascism or socialism.

Fascism: totalitarians and authoritarians

One study of Fascism said it was not a totalitarian dictatorship, because it left too much to a wide range of powers within society, provided they were largely obedient. But it was totalitarian in making no distinction between public and private: Fascism wanted to run everything, and it wanted one’s soul. Mussolini and Hitler abominated human or individual rights; they abominated pluralism in society or politics; they insisted that the state embody the nation, and the leader embody them both. The new states demanded a new sort of man and

woman: the Italians wanted the ancient Roman with a Modernist twist; the Germans wanted the ancient Aryan with some millenarianism (theirs was a Reich for a thousand years, but also the end of days). The Russian Soviets were even more ambitious for the state's role in remaking the human type: theirs was the first society to propose that its bedrock was a book not the family.

The majority of the right-wing – in its Conservative and, very differently, its libertarian modes - does not like this sort of enthusiasm. It does not do vision or visions. (Ayn Rand, perhaps following Nietzsche and Carlyle, did love visionaries. Though she is admired, and even adored, and on a wide scale, her modern enthusiasts are more likely to be found in Silicon Valley than in any mainstream political party of the right in the West.)

Fascism is often conflated with authoritarianism, and so is the unspecified and undifferentiated right, in the eyes of its opponents. Certainly, Fascism believed in the giving of orders and in the obedience of the masses. But in this, it was not like the vast majority of the right: whether one is a believer in Constitutional Monarchy or in republican representative democracy – and most right-wingers admire or accept one or other – one has invested in systems which explicitly oppose authoritarianism. It is true that many conservatives have traditionally been patriarchal, hierarchical and moralistic in their thinking; few modern conservatives – or Conservatives – are any of those, at least not oppressively or repressively. And of course the libertarian right is profoundly opposed to authoritarianism (though some hate its economic manifestation more than they hate its social manifestation).

Fascism: Strongmen and ideals

Fascism requires strongman rule; but not all strongman rulers are Fascist. Besides, to be Fascist was to believe in a creed which was, if defiantly unintellectual and warped, nonetheless idealist. The Soviet Union and China make peculiar cases: Stalin and Mao were dictators and perhaps took their Communism seriously, as being both right and necessary. It is tricky to know where to place most Middle Eastern or African rule into that matrix: it seems, on the face of it, to be unredeemed even by misplaced ideals.

Did Spain's Franco have ideals, and were they Fascist? Spain's Falangism is usually differentiated from the Fascism of Italy and Germany on the basis that it was too ostentatiously traditional – even, right-wing – to qualify. Italian Fascism was explicitly Modernist and Futuristic, though it was also devoted to Ancient Rome's imperium. Nazism, similarly drawn to old Rome, was an odder beast: it reached back into Germany's afforested paganism and the cod-science of racist Social Darwinism. Nazism also reached into the northern soul of Nietzsche and all the rest: one might say that Germans took their philosophers seriously, and much good did it do them. Both Italy and Germany had creeds which were determinedly a-historical, in the sense of disliking the brainy, cool, sceptical, individualist, cultured western civilisation of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Spain's Falange, on the other hand, looked back to religious and aristocratic regimes which could be revived and made relevant to modernity. The elements of the radical and revolutionary in Fascism were more like a reactionary restoration in Spain.

For a few decades before WW2, France's polity seems to have exhibited a good deal of violent protest and some potential for violent takeover. Even after the War, France seemed to long for a strongman, and granted de Gaulle extraordinary power. But historians seem to agree that France was not fertile ground for Fascist takeover: its politicians were too individualist, or perhaps fissiparous, to allow any of their number much power for very long.

Bossy Liberals and Fascism Part 2: Contemporary Fascisms

Background

Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission (mourning Brexit and arguing for the EU) in the FT quoted Brecht to remind us that the European “womb” – presumably of the Fascism Brecht feared - is still “fertile”. I very much doubt that Fascism’s erstwhile homes in Italy, Germany, or even Spain, are currently very vulnerable to Fascist takeover. Neither there or in the rest of western Europe do we see the range of symptoms which made for classical Fascism. In other, more easterly European countries, democracy and the rule of law may be more fragile. But they are also places with recent experience of totalitarianism and to that extent may have some inoculation against its return.

Zoe Williams said on TV recently that the thing to fear in le Pen was that she wanted “authoritarian” government. It was an interesting observation in two ways. Firstly, we see the idea of the “authoritarian” as it has been used frequently and sloppily ever since Mrs Thatcher’s creed was so described, or as it is now applied, say, to Ukip. It is the word Bossy Liberals use when they want to conflate anything they dislike a great deal with what they dislike most. Secondly, we are reminded of the plain fact that Fascism was at the very least about a very strong authoritarianism; it was defined by personal dictatorship running a very powerful state, and resorting to force whenever persuasion failed. We see that, perhaps, in Turkey, but it doesn’t seem to be promised by, say, Marine le Pen, or any of the other so-called western authoritarians whom the Bossy Liberal despises.

It is a familiar riff or trope in modern discussion – amongst journalists, academics, politicians and campaigners, and of course on (un)social media – that there is a new ugly populism which is close to Fascist in tone. Two questions arise: does this populism deserve the Fascist label, and is there a serious chance that the talk will turn into Fascistic rule?

Actually, there is a third possibility. There may be populist novelties in Western politics and they may turn out to be very unpleasant, and to invite comparison with Fascism, but actually turn out to be something quite different.

My tentative conclusion is that the populisms in our age – and their range is wide without being especially amenable to a left-right matrix - do not look very like historic Fascism. The 21st Century may produce thuggish, stupid, herd politics of its own kind, but it would probably be a mistake – though it would be a huge temptation – to see them even as the child of Fascism.

These are bad times for Fascism

Across the Western world, there are signs that many voters – often rather lazily – feel disconnected from politics. This applies to rather a lot of young people who are mostly Bossy Liberal, but can’t be bothered to understand party politics. They are non-players politically. More active, but not easy to pigeon hole politically, are the mostly working class non-graduates who feel left behind by globalisation and all sorts of cultural phenomena. These are White Van Man and Flyover States Rednecks. A substantial number of them are badly-educated, and some

but by no means all are economic failures. Indeed many are the entrepreneurial working class. Many like to blame immigration for their predicament and have the beginnings of a point when they do so. Most would “like their country back”. They know the Bossy Elite think they are variously racist, stupid, ugly, nasty and undeserving. They are slightly outnumbered by the sections of society which make up the mainstream middle class, the Establishment and the elite. The two main parties would both like to have them as voters and are right in thinking that encouraging these dissidents away from insurgent politics and toward the traditional would be a sign that professional politicians were fulfilling their main role, which is to civilise the unruly.

The disjunction is serious and needs fixing. But it represents nothing like the political failure which afflicted Italy and Germany in the 1920s and 30s. It seems fair to label the new-ish anti-elite mass voices of the disenchanteds as populist. But this populism constitutes nothing like a majority in society; it is not all that coherent; and it is vigorously opposed. For a start, the Bossy Liberal elite – and I believe it is worth the label – has the hearts and minds of such a deep swathe of modern people that the populists can only chip away at their hegemony, with no chance of overwhelming it. The dissident populists are as fractured as the incumbent mainstream, and have none of the commanding cultural heights occupied by the Bossy Elite.

As important, modern populism is not reinforced by the self-interested economic elite anxiety which was key to the success of Fascism 100 years ago. So it seems that modern populism is not sufficiently extreme, coherent, manipulable or popular, nor the capitalist elites anywhere near sufficiently desperate, coherent, or powerful, to produce Fascism, even if the dissident leaders were anti-democratic in aspiration, which they show no sign of being.

Bad thinking: “Fascism” and Authoritarian Populism

The new populism in the West has a ragbag of themes to pick from, and these have usually been described, rightly, as being, variously, nationalist (right-wingers might translate that as patriotic), nativist (they should insist that is not the same as racist), illiberal (they might think was merely no-nonsense un-PC), economically protectionist (many of them would dispute the wisdom of that creed). It less often said that the populists are keen on benefits for white, older people (and thus, quite socialist in spite of themselves). The Tea Party, Front National, and Ukip, and the rhetoric of Trump, le Pen and Farage, all display some of these features. As much as these campaigns and politicians permutate a good few of any of these characteristics, they are united in a determination to show that they are insurgent: they all claim to be outsiders, speaking for outsiders, against a supposed Elite or Establishment (mostly the educated and PC capitalist, and bureaucratic). None of this suggests, and there is very little evidence to support the idea, that any of the main populist leaders are obviously un-democratic in impulse. None celebrates violence or force in politics.

We are witnessing an important and quite fierce struggle, as much cultural as political, between two tribes, one the “left”, the Bossy Liberal and on the “right”, the populists. The BLs are educated, or have at least been to university, and are equipped in various ways to run things in the modern world. The populists, on the whole, are not university-educated, or if they are, have

shaken off the liberal ethos of their education. Many of them are equipped for entrepreneurship, but not for bureaucratic or professional life.

The BLs are inclined not merely to disparage or disapprove of the populists: the Bossy Liberal feels richly superior to the White Van masses; dislikes and even fears them. It suits the BLs to reach for very linguistical device to hand to signal that their working class and suburbanite neighbours are not merely flying the red and white of St George but, if not signed up to Fascism, at least prone to its charms.

Thus, there is all sorts of sloppy talk that links “far-right” populism, or even mild White Van, non-metropolitan, non-cosmopolitan talk as vaguely “fascist” or actually Capital F Fascist.

This extremist talk about extremism is to some extent self-defeating. The idea that Nigel Farage, say, is a seriously Fascist, or even that his movement is, seems sort of obviously absurd. And yet, in the culture wars now going on between the soft-left liberal mainstream and the insurgent populists, the mainstream bolsters and disciplines its own faction by casting the populists as beyond the Pale, nasty, and even wicked, as well as unwashed and dim.

I had been casting around for a single word which would sum-up and capture the liberal-left’s sense of the populist right’s defining and dangerous characteristic. It was Zoe Williams, a stalwart of the soft-left liberal mainstream, who provided it: she described le Pen’s politics as “authoritarian”. This seems to me to be a blissfully handy adjective for the modern liberal-left purpose: it was certainly one of the characteristics ascribed to historic Fascism; it was sufficiently vague – mild, even – to be likely to escape serious challenge. In short, to describe the right as “authoritarian” was easily done, was not vicious, and yet rather effectively hinted at the Fascism which the liberal-left liked to hint at as lurking within the right.

I hadn’t realised before a recent (April, 2017) trawl that the idea of Authoritarian Populism has been gaining traction in rather serious quarters. David Sanders, a politics professor at Essex University, has done some research (with the polling organisation YouGov) and provides an account of the distinctions it draws.

Prof Sanders makes various moves which seem disingenuous. He claims that his use of the term Authoritarian Populism is deliberately a-political (unlike its previous coining in the Thatcher era), and on the other he lists various “authoritarian” characteristics which – as propounded by, say, Farage, le Pen or Trump - are not obviously or seriously authoritarian.

Here is what I think is his key passage:

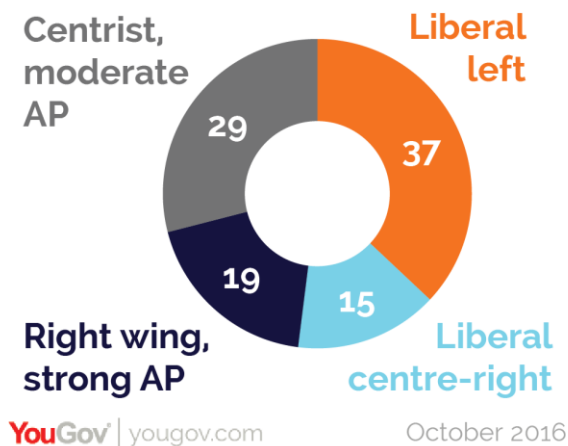
‘Populism’ is often used imprecisely to describe anti-establishment political movements which propose simple solutions to complicated problems and which advocate popular policies that liberals find uncomfortable. We have tried to avoid any such usage here. Rather, we have described what we characterise as authoritarian populist sentiment among European mass publics as a mindset that combines a preference for strong national foreign policies with

opposition to immigration, antiEuropeanism, an antipathy to the liberal human rights agenda and a right-wing political orientation.

One could readily recast his list as: preference for liberal intervention overseas (or indeed for isolationism); a desire to limit future mass immigration; a dislike of the EU integrationist project or UN corruption; a tolerant dislike of PC witch-hunts.

The Sanders/YouGov enterprise casts the European political scene as a matter of four competing tribes. I don't altogether trust the categories as coherent or accurate, and it is certainly very peculiar to see the media parroting YouGov's headlines proclaiming that "48% of British voters hold 'authoritarian populist' (AP) views". YouGov actually claim that less than 20% of voters are "Right wing, strong AP". I wouldn't blame them if the populists did fall into this phoney category, and I wouldn't suppose them actually to want "authoritarian" rule if they did. But it is even odder to find that 29% of voters are supposed to be "Centrist, moderate AP", which is a surely a pretty obvious contradiction in terms.

48% of British voters hold "authoritarian populist" (AP) views



You Gov rightly sees some similarities between various populist tendencies within the UK and around Europe. But it makes two moves which are suspect. Firstly, it seems to suppose that populists everywhere are more or less similar in their appetite for extremes. Thus, it seems to say, for example, that being a bit sceptical about the rule of political correctness is the same as being antagonist to human rights; or that being troubled by welfare dependency is the same as wanting to crash welfare programmes. Secondly, it blithely discerns extremism where there seems to be none. How else do we interpret its claim that the modern populism is authoritarian? In order to be so, populists would have to have a taste for dictatorial rule, for the

suppression of democracy and the abandonment of the rule of law. We see none of that in the real world.

So far as I can see, one would have to be soft-left liberal, or quite hard-left liberal, or – just possibly - what used to be called Wet Tory, to escape the “populist” tag. And once so tagged, is impossible – in this mantra – to avoid the tag of “authoritarian”.

Luckily, at least one thoughtful commentator who is close to this process has drawn attention to the deficiencies of the Authoritarian Populist tag, and to the seriousness of the mis-identification. Joel Rogers points out that most “populist” talk and politics is not authoritarian at all. And he points out that this sort of mis-lebelling has done a great deal to fuel the sense amongst the not-especially liberal, non-metropolitan, non-elites that they are misunderstood and disparaged.

We can note that many on both the populist “far-right” and the rather un-populist “far-left” agree on hating economic neo-liberalism, even if on nothing else. But equally, some on the “far-right” are merely very dry Tories, and economically libertarian (and sometimes socially permissive too). This category, including, say Dan Hanan and perhaps Duncan Carswell could hardly be described as populist, though the latter has actually been the populist Ukip’s only MP.

Fascism? The new insurgent politics

Let us suppose that representative democracy (wherein the masses elect an elite to rule) is widely perceived as failing, and that the disenchantment turns into a mass abandonment of the ballot box, or the emergence of insurgent, novel political and electoral forces.

We seem to see the last of those features in President Trump’s success. Populist and insurgent, but not remotely Fascist, it seems at least possible that his presidency will be something of a success. That is, he may govern America to the moderate satisfaction of large numbers of people including those not obviously in his camp. Even so, after one or two terms, someone would have to replace him and it will be interesting to see what sort of Republican (or even what sort of Democrat, or other partisan) might seem to be a suitable heir – or a suitable successor whose charm would perhaps be that he or she was not Trump-like.

Marine le Pen might offer the same sort of prospect for France. Either of these politicians may demonstrate that modern populist insurgent movements can be quite a shake-up, but not Fascist, and fulfil two political purposes. Firstly, they might either show that the “far-right” is capable of ruling well, or that it isn’t. Secondly, they might encourage others usefully to follow in their style, and/or encourage “traditional” parties to find ways of presenting alternatives to vulgar populist insurgency.

We should presumably also be on the look-out for new forms of populism. Might we not identify them in the Twittersphere’s hysteria, or in some Facebook swarm, or herd, or wave? These sorts of movements so far look febrile, narrow and not as popular as they are clamorous and well-covered by the old media. They look at their best a little like the single-issue

campaigns which first started to flourish with 19th Century anti-slavery, Suffragette, clean air and rural access campaigns, and which went on to flourish – at least in the 1970s, 80s and 90s – as environmental campaigns. They look, again at their best, a little like the anti-capitalist and Occupy campaigns of the 2010s.

So far, the (un)social media have produced sporadic, temporary, inchoate but often ill-tempered noise. To some extent, traditional politics has absorbed them by, for instance, offering a link between online petitions and actual political debate; and they have had a link to old political processes through stimulating debate in the old media. But it seems fair to say that campaigns and protest movements can be rated as political or policy successes only in the degree to which they influence real legislators.

It is possible that there is a further IT threat to old-style representative democracy. A very few years ago, there was a good deal of talk of a sort of Google-government. Even David Cameron, perhaps prompted by his then-guru, Steve Hilton, talked of a post-bureaucratic way of doing business. This seemed to line-up with the idea that on-line voting might find a new way of doing government by plebiscite. This latter talk had, it is worth noting, a sort of cousin-ship to Hayek's "catalaxy". All sorts of notions were mangled up in the new ideas: peer-to-peer dealings, popular involvement, the wisdom of the crowd, even Big Society.

One way or another, this sort of talk seems to have died down. So it may not be necessary to mention that lurking in all this bottom-up talk was the obvious possibility that we might find we were ruled by various sorts of majoritarianism, in which it might be hard to preserve the pluralism which grew alongside government by representative elites.

It would be almost funny if various liberal-minded moderns, keen to over-throw old elites, but deeply allergic to a real or imagined Authoritarian Populism, oversaw the introduction of Google Government and alongside it a new horrible mob-rule.

More likely, anyway, would be realisation that Google Government would mostly show that the old tribes, and some new ones, were still a fact of political life and that we would still need a system for mediating between them. We might find that the old, real-world systems of ballot box and talking shops, stable terrestrial bureaucracies, and respected courts of law were as valuable as ever.

Post Modern politics, delusionism and Fascism

Modern politics does feel a bit different to the post WW2 model. It is, I am inclined to suggest, more delusional.

In our Post Modern age, we are aware that all sorts of phantasms, and fantasies seem to have traction. The "far-right" Left Behinders' nationalism and illiberalism – their anger at modernity - shake the Conservative and Labour parties alike but in part look like daft nostalgia trips. The far-left takes over the Labour Party with dreams of a Marxist proletarian rule; it is joined by the dreamier, idealistic Corbynista left who vaguely want a "fairer", "nicer" economic life, but with

barely any interest in how wealth might be generated. The Scottish Nationalists flourish in Braveheart myth, as though shaking off serfdom. And there is a very large swath of Bossy Liberal professionals (especially in the media, the welfare professions and academia) who have a secular religion of sorts, and sense themselves to be on the left whilst taking no interest at all in wider politics or even the public sphere.

Perhaps it is a function of the lack of real attention paid to what they said, or of the power of the media they did not control but did dominate, but the politicians of the 1990s and 2000's seem to have responded efficiently if heartlessly to the new delusionism. George Bush and Tony Blair seem to have developed a post-truth means of manipulating their democracies. Each man invented himself, and then pursued courses and causes which had scant real-world following. I rather agreed with their Iraq war, but could hardly admire the political process by which waging it was masterminded.

For all sorts of reasons, President Obama was bound to promise far, far more to the white liberal (and even the black liberal or illiberal) voter than he could possibly deliver.

President Trump cultivates the idea that he is the victim of Fake News, but both he and Russia's Putin thrive by messing with the perceptions of their supporters (and the latter thrives by messing with Trump's democracy).

The truly Post Modern dimension of these novelties is not merely the degree to which a false perception can be foisted on millions of people who then become manipulable: in Bush, Blair and Trump we seem to have had leaders who have had or have a rather fragile grip on their own personae, whether in private or as projected by modern media.

The post modern Trump seems to be a little bit Walter Mitty, with a dash of Citizen Kane. Politically, he seems a bit like Silvio Berlusconi, another celebrity billionaire (with an even more rewarding media career and a similarly hands-on approach to women). But even Berlusconi seems not to have posed the sort of threat to representative democracy that fulfils any serious use of the word Fascist.

And yet there is something in the anxiety expressed by Adam Curtis that the dystopias posited by Reich and Chomsky, and mirrored by Putin's media control, may have produced a populace stunned by consumerism, media distraction, hyper-entertainment, and populist messaging. Western representative democracy, so strong for several centuries, may yet dissolve itself. The forces of consumerism, the vacuous forcefulness of post modern political dissembling, and even the mind-numbing religion of the Bossy Liberalis' Umma (and the self-censorship imposed by its Omertas), may yet fatally undermine the real-world democratic state and the pluralism of civil society, at least so far as they depend on the public-spirited, free thinking, stropky individual.

If these horrors unfolded, they would indeed amount to a failure of politics, and we have seen that that is the main precursor of Fascism. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that the

post modern and the new world of the Internet may produce the political chaos and the social unease which led sensible Italians and Germans to prefer the rule of a strongman.

Bossy Liberals and Fascism Part 3: The conflicted liberal history

The word “liberal” notoriously has several deeply contradictory meanings. In its crudest, emptiest formulation – very popular in our times - I am not a liberal because I am a right-winger. But it is easy for me to show that the ordinarily civilized right-winger is a “true” liberal: one who insists that one should at least “privilege”, or try to protect, the rights of the individual over those of interference from authority, or bigotry, or polite society, or even from educated opinion. The mere statement of this minimalist Hands-off Liberalism reminds us that “liberalism” has many strands, and that what I call Bossy Liberalism – the power-liberalism which generates and appeals to the left – is just one member of a large and diverse family.

However you cut it, liberalism requires a respect for liberty. It should at least raise a sardonic smile to see liberalism of any kind lying at the heart of repression of any kind. We will see how Isaiah Berlin shows that it’s there, at the heart of Soviet repression. Following Maurice Cowling (whom we will soon meet), I argue that it is there too in the permissive puritanism of much of the Twittersphere.

Bossy Liberalism is coined to describe the most powerful wing of modern liberalism, and to capture the contradictoriness of creed of the modern young. To be fair, many Bossy Liberals are like the boiled frog: they are ignorant and inexperienced and didn’t notice the gradual developments of which they are the inheritors. Much modern respectable thought, the mantra of almost anyone engaged in retail argument, was handed down from the so-called social revolution of the 1960s, which had the extraordinary effect of embedding both intolerance and relativism in the engine-rooms of the Western mind.

Reconciling human society with human individuality is complicated to the point of logical impossibility. Still, it is our daily task, undertaken with a good deal of success, perhaps especially if we do not over-think it. In the old battle between those who espouse the cause of “order” as against those who insist that only “freedom” matters, I am at least somewhat on the side of order.

I frame it thus: liberty is the admirable condition of living with many freedoms which are happily moderated by order. That means, by the way, that I see the merit of Fascism, at least in the sense that I think I understand why millions of perfectly nice Italians, Germans and Spanish endorsed versions of the creed when they thought the alternative was chaos or repression.

My internal contradictoriness is this: I am a bit of a libertarian liberal (what I call a Hands-off Liberal) who thinks that we have forgotten how important order – authority of one sort or another – is. But it is a comfort to me to see that my main opponents – the Bossy Liberals whose arguments I would most like to repair – make the mistake of not even spotting how their creed of kindness turned into a totalitarianism which is sometimes no less brutal for being unacknowledged, linguistic and self-policing.

My journey between liberalisms

When I was a teenager I formulated the view that modernity brought with it an inevitable engine toward liberalism. I was, to put it simply and in terms I didn't use, what I now call an Empathy Liberal. I thought that modern insights from psychology (since then they have been augmented by insights from neuroscience), and from evolutionary science, produced a mutually-reinforcing mechanism – a pincer movement. Firstly, as we grow to know more about each other, we are forced into knowing that everyone's actions and thoughts are, ultimately, caused. It follows (the other bit of the pincer) that no-one is especially admirable and no-one especially despicable.

It also follows that we can find no moral distinctions between us. Psychopath and saint are just the product of circumstance. So: in being like us, the other person is hard to ignore; in being a cultural, physiological and psychological phenomenon, the other person can be neither condemned nor admired. On the other hand, each and any individual is the only unit of value we have. If we are to take a moral interest in one another (and how else are we to live?), we must do so without discrimination.

I may have known something of the development of the liberal idea. The Classical Greeks and the Pauline Christians developed a sort of Divine Humanism, in which all men, any man, had value because they partook in something transcendental. Renaissance Humanism (with its religious wing, in Erasmus, say) saw – in its new confidence, it positively felt - all men, any man, as the measure of all things. Enlightenment Humanism (in, say, Locke or Voltaire) put all men, any man, at the centre of the polity: the ultimate source of authority. All these humanisms headed toward Classical Liberalism: individual rights trumped or at least challenged divine, or even majoritarian, authority. These developments were powerfully reinforced by an increasing awareness that developments in humanism went with an increasing understanding that each of us had invaluable, and unavoidable, understanding and fellow feeling, empathy, with everyone else, whether in actual contact, or abstract understanding.

All that was in the acknowledged western baggage when 19th science lobbed in the extraordinary problem of humans who were highly adapted apes living in a material world. What sort of freedom was available to persons living like trams on rails rather than as free agents? How could we now discern – to what should we attribute - the individual value which had underpinned pre-Darwinian man?

In part, as Adam Smith had recognised in a thoroughly Enlightenment way, our moral life hung, not on something abstract about goodness, but on the lived experience of our feeling empathy for those whom we might harm or benefit. Here was the key to maintaining the old understanding of the value of individuals, but modernizing it to take account of our growing understanding of the origins, types and motivations of our fellows. In a scientific age we had to accept that we were very much like anyone else, and – but for luck, or genes, or even God's grace – we might have been in the shoes of the murderer or saint.

But how to organise our behaviour? Bentham's solution was to propose, in effect, that the moral value of a person resided in a sort of sociological – almost a mechanical, or statistical -

rating. One's duty was to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This produces a huge, public burden on each of us: it is an engine of Bossy Liberalism.

J S Mill, the author of *On Liberty*, and the most famous exponent liberalism, as Maurice Cowling brilliantly, polemically, pointed out, is the vital figure in the formation of the soft-left liberalism of the socialists and "progressives". He was the father of what I call Bossy Liberalism. Firstly, this great man and great thinker, inhabited a terrible muddle. Secondly, this great reasoner promoted a blind faith. Thirdly, Bossy Liberals follow him in these obvious self-contradictions but will not acknowledge them.

Liberalism's oldest etymological origins were on the Roman, Latin, uses of the terms. These were revived in the Spanish distinction between the *liberales* and *serviles*: the party which stressed civil liberties and the party which stressed the value of the order bestowed by the *ancien regime*. Mill added the crucial, invaluable, thought that majorities and other social forces could be as despotic as monarchs. It was about liberty, first and foremost. Or that is how it appeared to me, until a chance remark by Roger Scruton (of whom more in a moment) told me to look rather closer at the contradictions in Mill's liberalism.

If I knew about Mill when I was a teenager, I certainly did not know how important sympathy (in effect, empathy) was to the author of *On Liberty* and its case that neither the state nor anyone else had the right to interfere with one, unless one was harming others. Nor did I know how Mill's Utilitarianism differed from that of its inventor, and his hero, Bentham. In stark defiance of that principle, Mill wanted the quality of happiness to matter more than its quantity. Where Benthamism brilliantly stripped moral thought of detailed moral proscription, Mill trucked it right back in. We know our fellow man; we care about our fellow man. What was to replace religion in telling us how to read the well-being of our fellow man? For Mill, the answer was that those who had progressive ideals plainly had the obligation and right to interfere to advance them.

Back to me....

These various expansions of one's moral horizons seemed to the 20 year-old me to be powerful or attractive, if difficult. And yet, along the way, I noticed and was suspicious of, most of the loud new liberalism which burst on to the early 1960s scene. The Bossy Liberals' tendency to respect and privilege any distant person over any close one was of long-standing, though. It had since the 19th Century at least been fighting the old, unthinking order which was family-first, and then community, country, race. In the 1960s the Bossy Liberal (following the Bloomsbury bohemians who were their immediate precursors) did not quite dismiss the family (though they were keen on working mothers, nursery schools, old people's homes and so on), but they seemed to dislike their own country (its mores, food, history, variety), and preferred any foreigner. Culinary and sexual matters were better done in the Mediterranean; spiritual ones in the East. The Bossy Liberal liked victims and aliens, especially those who could be seen as being or having been oppressed by the non-liberals of the Bossy Liberal's own country.

The essence of my retreat from the increasingly fashionable and even compulsory 1960s Bossy Liberalism (I thought of it as Sunday Magazine liberalism) was that I was shocked by how little empathy the Hampstead literary and cultural elite (amongst whom I lived) actually felt for the working and – more particularly – the lower middle class masses (amongst whom I worked). The Bossy Liberals' moral code and political creed were clear, but their snobbery was intact. What is more, the Bossy Liberal seemed to think that socialism was compulsory and that conservatism was wicked. None of any of that seemed ordinarily empathetic or realistic or even socially useful.

Had I known it, this Bossy Liberalism flowed directly from Mill, though he would have hated its easy supremacy: he would have disliked its overt authority, and its absence of self-doubt.

The fightback against Bossy Liberalism

Two writers of very different stamp took the lead in wrenching the intellectual wheels off the Bossy Liberal wagon, though it ploughs on regardless.

Every large intellectual nostrum has its internal contradictions and its unintended consequences. The liberal confusions and the backfires were beautifully identified by Isaiah Berlin and his understanding, in his *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958), that what he labeled as Negative Liberalism is, as it were, the Hands-off Liberal (or libertarian, or even neo-Liberal) branch of the creed, readily backfired into what he called the Positive Liberalism, or my Bossy Liberalism. Positive Liberalism is the creed which supposes that extending freedom can be empty if the recipient is merely free of personal oppression, but remains oppressed by circumstance. The Positive Liberal seeks to liberate people so they can be better, as Mill (and maybe God) intended.

Berlin's insight was to see how the Enlightenment's dream of liberty became the mandate for the revolutions and totalitarianism of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. He was an intellectual historian whose was stung into anatomizing the liberal backfire, perhaps in part because of his Jewish family experience. He was just the first of many Jewish writers to have seen the blindness of Bossy Liberalism, especially in our time when it comes to standing up to Islamic dictators, or Islamic "fascism".

It happens that Berlin was a social liberal of his time, and I suspect that he would have been rich in the cultural snobbery of the Bossy Liberal (or Mill), if not actually a soft-left liberal. I imagine that one of his intellectual heirs, Tom Stoppard, is of a similar cast of mind.

Alongside Berlin's important refinement of the intellectual history of liberalism and its illiberalisms, there was another, very different but gorgeous, highly-intellectual full-on emergence of opposition to Bossy Liberalism. It was based in Peterhouse College, Cambridge and included the philosopher Roger Scruton, the only right-winger to earn the respect of the Radio 4 commissionariat. Its intellectual leader, Maurice Cowling, wrote a sharp attack on J S Mill's thought, but did so not from Berlin's basically liberal starting point, but from a gloriously reactionary, traditionalist, fully conservative point of view. In his *Mill and Liberalism* (1963),

Cowling says the great liberal hoped to replace Christian morality with a modern scientific version, which would be just as proscriptive. Cowling claims that Mill's doctrine from the start was (in Cowling's various formulations) a "tyranny of liberalism", "carefully disguised intolerance", "a peculiarly exclusive, peculiarly insinuating moral doctrine", and a "moral totalitarianism".

This is not ordinary, or even merely giddy, invective. It is a quite accurate and forensic read-across from real, self-described dictatorships of the Fascists and the Soviets to the invisible and often-self-imposed power of the Bossy Liberalism which is just as propagandist and has no need to resort to violence.

I don't share Cowling's version of Conservatism, and I even resist the English elegiacs of Roger Scruton, but I acknowledge that most insurgent values are fatally inadequate because they do not recognise the merit of inherited values, and – yes - prejudices. Cowling and Mill are at one in that faith.

Indeed, back in the 1960s and 70s I thrilled to the way that amongst a tiny group of writers in *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Times* (echoed in the US by William F Buckley Jnr) all the buzzwords of the age were thrillingly challenged. Why, they asked, be "progressive", when one could so easily see the real merit of the traditional? Wondering what to think? Why, just be reactionary: opposing this new guff at any point would probably turn out about right. Stick up for grammar, the history of one's tribe or country, the Queen: to do so upset the right people and was surprisingly sound in its own right.

Neither Berlin nor Cowling were libertarians. Intellectually, that strand of 20th Century liberalism really got going in the US (via origins in Vienna) in the 1970s, and especially amongst economists who saw profound dangers in almost all state interference in the market. Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) is the clearest – and one of the earliest - examples. It was overstated: it saw the welfare state as a precursor to something almost Stalinist, whereas actually it merely generated a new, dreary corporatist fudge – and marked the birth of the Bossy Liberal hegemony.

Anyway, in the UK and US, free-market liberals (they vigorously resisted the "right-wing" tag) began to construct arguments against the economic, welfare and social interference which ruled the politics of left and right in the UK from the end of WW2 until the emergence of Margaret Thatcher. They remain very strong, as one sees in the Conservative party's pragmatic adherence to fundamentally socialist welfare policies.

It is important to note that most of the original proponents of what is now called right-wing, or libertarian, or neo-Liberal thought (Hands-off Liberalism, in my book) were Continental Europeans (Hayek is a classic case) whose mid-20th Century mission was to combat the totalitarianisms of left or right (communism and Fascism) which had blighted the Continent of their youth.

So we see that liberalism is, like any other human idea, incapable of 360-degree, once and for all coherence: theories spawn and their offspring head off in perverse and paradoxical directions. In Mill's concern for liberty and morality we see the beginning of a licence for the state, or socialists, or communists, or Fascists, and all sorts of other people – especially Bossy Liberals – to first define and then impose their view of what makes for people's well-being.

From the 1960s, we see the emergence of the Bossy Liberal elite. Clinging to the language of insurgence, progressive (socialist) policies, freedom-fighting and libertarianism, we now see a Western world in which check-box rectitude is a prerequisite to power in centrist politics, the marketplace, the media, academia and the professions. And we see the emergence of a Self (with its head in The Cloud) which assumes it is immensely important, often on no earned evidence, and with terribly little real-world resilience.

Bossy Liberals and Fascism Part 4: The rise and fall of the Bossy Liberal

Bossy Liberals think they have the right, probably the obligation, to interfere with other people's behavior. They take Classical Liberalism, with its twin pillars of empathy and individual rights, to be a creed of niceness, especially toward the "disadvantaged". Bossy Liberalism assumes that it cannot be bad to compel the poor to spend their youth in education (of a style designed by Bossy Liberals), since that will ennoble them; it cannot be wrong to compel the advantaged to pay for the education of the poor, since that will ennoble both parties.

Immediately we see what is so attractive, and unattractive, in the Bossy Liberals. They are compassionate, at least by creed and intention. But they are smug and superior: like Christian illuminati, they know the truth and can shove it down our throats. Bossy Liberals do not realize quite how much they have made their creed of empathy into a matter of self-congratulation rather than feeling for the other person; they do not notice how much they trample on in their rush to improvement.

Bossy Liberalism comes into its own when it insists on making empathy compulsory, and claims that human uniqueness - one's unique qualities and value, and everyone else's - should be shouted from the rooftops. Indeed, says the Bossy Liberal, we are so special we should not have the duty to self-help; rather it is the state that should have the duty to help us, lest we fail ourselves for any reason.

The potential merits of Hands-off Liberalism are quite different. It resists proscribing what happens next. It has no machinery of compulsion. It insists only that being of unique value in a material universe means we have a right to be left alone, not least - perhaps - with a duty to improve ourselves (a thought replete in paradoxes a Hands-off Liberal is free to contemplate).

The Bossy Liberals' comfort zone

How can it be wrong to propose that education should be compulsory (let alone affordable)? How can it be wrong to censor hate speech (or even to censure resentment toward immigrants)? Well, the problem is only partly the tough one of trying to decide where to draw the line between recalcitrant freedom and virtuous bossiness. The more important thing is to get across the simple fact that to care about liberalism - to want to be liberal - is to be determined that one should be keen on the freedom of others. The test is to extend freedom to those of whom one disapproves. Bossy Liberals fail that elementary test.

The Bossy Liberal, from J S Mill to the vast soft-left liberal heartlands of our day are illiberal in being smugly, unthinkingly, assertively sure that they know so well what is right (and nice); sure that their creed should be the orthodoxy; and sure that deviation from its positions is not "transgressive" (that bit of the anti-social of which Bossy Liberals affect to be approving), but wicked.

Almost everyone in history fails the Bossy Liberal test but is not cut the bit of slack which might be allowed to those who were born before the Bossy Liberal orthodoxy. Now, all conservatives, and especially political Conservatives, White Van Man (in the UK), Flyover State Rednecks (in the US) fail it right now.

In these aversions we see two illiberalisms in the Bossy Liberals. Firstly, they are failing in empathy in not valuing the point of view of so many of their fellow humans. Secondly, they are failing in the liberal's intellectual obligation to value the freedom of others. Both require them to be open to empathising with social illiberalism and to engaging intellectually with economic neo-Liberalism. (We can leave aside for now how many WVM and FSR types have died and will die defending freedom on distinctly liberal lines.)

The character of the modern Bossy Liberal

There have been Bossy Liberals for as long as there has been liberalism. But the creed has developed over the decades.

In our day we see (this 71-year old Hands-off Liberal near-Bohemian sees) a generation of Bossy Liberals who are the right side of 45 and yet seem curiously virginal. They have lived in a uniquely pleasant period of Western history. They have not known exigency, rudeness, dirt or pain; they have been offered more interesting livings and have paid less tax on higher salaries than any other recent generations. They have travelled widely and been offered ample scope for entertainment and distraction; they have felt uninhibited about sex and drugs; they have been educated but not to the point of being challenged as to their core beliefs. They have been encouraged to value self-esteem, personal space and above all the sanctity of their own feelings. They are rightly charged with being whining, entitled, snowflakes. The best of them has a lurking understanding that they are dominated by personal ambition, for themselves and their offspring.

None of that is particularly attractive, but if it is a recognizable portrait of a generation of educated people it is worth saying that these Bossy Liberals are also prone to an economic and political naivety. Put roughly, here are people who can confidently expect to be comfortably in the top 10 percent of society; whose livings are entrepreneurial, creative, bureaucratic, professional or managerial; whose experience tells them to see the social value of elitism, freedom and capitalism. But their Bossy Liberalism trumps all that and so they espouse a thin left-wingery, affect an anti-Establishment dissidence, and positively renounce the responsibility to become an elite.

So what matters about Bossy Liberalism is that it has neutered much of the social usefulness of a generation of potential leaders of thought, social movements and firms.

Bossy Liberalism in politics

Bossy Liberalism quickly becomes political. It thinks that good people should band together and get the state to do the good things which do not seem otherwise to arise in society. In effect, tax-and-spend is born. Bossy Liberal assumptions come to dominate any sort of leftist-politics.

But their influence spreads, even politically: their creed seeps into those on the centre-right as nominal conservatives seek to be attractive to centre-left floating voters.

Even those liberals for whom their creed is primarily socially permissive (or progressive), or who are very keen on human rights, and who are sceptical of state power, will often nonetheless accept that tax-and-spend welfare is self-evidently worth imposing on society. The UK's Liberal Party of old was a very complicated animal, the product of a complicated Whig and radical history. In more recent years its latest incarnation as the LibDems is defined as socially liberal, keen on welfare, but less keen than Labour on state interference in the economy, or the "politics of envy". (The Greens are not so different, though more obviously leftist, and with their take on the environment making a further ingredient.)

Now, social permissives – social liberals of one variety of Hands-off Liberal - are found nearly everywhere on the political spectrum, and so are social conservatives. Capital "C" Conservatives could, logically, or reasonably, declare they feel the empathic obligation, and indeed that it is the empathic obligation which makes them resist the highly selective empathy they see operated by Bossy Liberals. Conservatives could reasonably declare themselves to be Benthamite Utilitarians, and consistent in declaring that the greatest happiness for the greatest number would be slower to come under socialism than conservatism.

But rather few people in the public realm (especially on the right of that domain) feel strong enough to roll the huge boulder of public misunderstanding up the hill of enlightenment. It requires a bit of thought to see that conservatism and (a little differently) the Conservatives can be a better variety of liberalism than Bossy Liberalism, or its usual manifestation as soft-left policy, or full-on socialism. Tories are as aware as anyone else that generations of propaganda by educators have anchored the Conservative party in the public mind as being opposed to liberalism, as though it were offering a diluted Fascism.

Similarly, neo-Liberal or free market economics, and neo-Conservative foreign policy, are likewise firmly anchored as "right-wing" (and therefore tagged as crypto-Fascist), though both are as a matter of historical fact rooted in pretty reasonable understandings of core liberal principles (and not even just Hands-off Liberal principles) and indeed were often promoted by people who had been of the Bossy Liberal left before they saw the light.

Bossy Liberalism in culture

Bossy Liberalism is an immense cultural force. It becomes, for a start, a sort of community – one that is virtual, international, even unspoken. I call this the Liberal Umma. The label is borrowed from the Muslim term for a worldwide, invisible, but real bond amongst co-believers. It is an attractive idea, with few of the connotations of a caliphate.

But there is arrogance in the Liberal Umma. It sneers at the patriotism of the White Van Man (and in the US, of the Flyover States Redneck). It mocked Mrs May for pointing out that one cannot be a citizen of everywhere. An umma cannot replace one's nation. A country's flag may

have vulgar or horrid connotations, but people have died for it, for good reasons and bad, and it represents their polity, the place where they vote and pay taxes.

There is also, secondly, what I call the Liberal Omerta: Bossy Liberals must of course keep the faith, and one must obey and if possible impose a code of correct speech. (I use the Mafia word to capture my disapproval of such a code.) There are, under omerta, codes of silence. Under the Bossy Liberal code, we have seen the erosion of free speech and even free thought, especially with pragmatic self-censorship in academia, the arts and media, but in wider society too. We have seen Bossy Liberals demonise those who break its omerta in the gloves-off free-for-all of the (un)social media.

The Liberal Omerta precludes all sorts of honesty, by shutting down the critical freedom to challenge everything, and especially conventional wisdom or accepted verities. You see it in the simplest mechanism: someone who makes a judgment is now open to the knock-down charge of being “judgmental”.

This is a good place to introduce relativism. In the 1960s, Continental public intellectuals, mostly of the left (and epitomised in the US by Noam Chomsky) put the workings of language at the heart of utterance. The main and rather peculiar and contradictory upshots of this view were that, firstly, it was argued that writers and speakers were not masters of their own remarks but were mouthpieces for elite narratives; secondly, that no-one’s utterance had any greater value than anyone else’s; and thirdly, the utterance of disadvantaged persons – women, blacks, colonials – automatically bucked the trend of the first and second upshots.

Whether what is roughly labeled post modern linguistical analysis was a Continental product of Bossy Liberalism is moot; what is sure is that Bossy Liberals adored it. It dominated the humanities because it gave an academic veneer to everything the Bossy Liberal university elite wanted to achieve but which otherwise lacked an intellectual framework or engine.

It should go without saying that this sort of thought militates against the historic virtue of discernment and excellence, and thus crippled education from the top to the bottom, from PhD to the nursery. Its dangers were quite quickly spotted by educationists, not least by grammar school boys who had fought their way to literacy and weren’t about to concede their struggle and success didn’t matter. One of the most striking moments of conservative fight back against 1960s relativism was the Black Book movement, in which the rather Powellite head-teacher Rhodes Boyson allied with the erstwhile socialist novelist Kingsley Amis and others to blast away at the child-centred dumbing-down of education then in full-swing, as it was until recently. They were dismissed as right-wing blowhards, but their thinking has matured into at least the possibility of a revival in educational standards. It may even be that the cult of Bossy Liberal relativism in university teaching may be fatally wounded: we may have reached Peak Foucault, and even Peak Said. The academy is now more concerned to be a place safe enough for unchallenged minds than to be a bastion of structuralist theory.

Hygeinic thought and speech has become the rule very widely.

Because corporations have driving ambitions and little commitment to intellectual coherence, their public statements – their public self-definitions – are even more contradictory and revealing than those of political parties. Firms buy a lot of air-time and page-acreage: they have bought mind-share, and are thus both philistine and cultural.

For years, a tiny number of PR professionals and a few academics have valiantly and intelligently struggled against the double-speak of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), on the basis that it flows from several category errors, including the idea that corporations are – like people – required to “care”, rather than to have – at best - intelligent, enlightened self-interest. Indeed, modern firms are required to be and do good in thoroughly Bossy Liberal ways. Like Conservatives who court Bossy Liberalism, firms even feel themselves required to pretend to be quite socialist.

CSR has drifted out of fashion. Instead, firms are now more than ever pretending, mendaciously, to be in empathic community and communion with their customers who are all supposed to specially deserving. Lloyds claims always to have stood by their account holders (though less than a decade ago it nearly bankrupted itself and, presumably, many of them); the Halifax claims to reward its customers because they are special; M&S has proclaimed that it is “exclusively for everyone”, and L’Oreal croons that all its customers “are worth it”. All these are similarly mangling the language, and if the ploy is successful then we see that many consumers are, so far from special, or worth it, merely dreaming, or simply stupid.

The point about these advertising lies is that they are different from the old false claims that this or that product did the physically impossible, or did anything much different from any others. Those were merely the small change of boastfulness. These new claims are a corruption of the beautiful liberal truth that we are all of equal value. That is indeed a final, grand truth, but it does not help us describe a student’s intellectual achievements, or one’s relationship with a bank, or with cosmetics and clothing companies.

These are amongst the most important enfeeblements which Bossy Liberalism has wrought. The language of individual rights – in which we are all equal and each of the highest value – has become so dominant that it is no longer possible to describe anyone as being other than exceptional; and to describe nonentities or mediocrities as exceptional is now so normal that the very idea of the average or below average is close to illegal.

The rather ordinary are the obvious victims of some of these processes. If every child is billed as having limitless potential, the obvious failure of some of them may strike them as a double whammy. If a person’s self-esteem has been delivered to them in a package rather than earned, then it should not be surprising that it turns out to be fragile, but it may be very painful anyway.

(Un)social media compounds this sort of issue by encouraging everyone to venture into a public domain where their vulnerability becomes more obvious, and more a target for bullying, than

their smaller private terrestrial sphere might have been. And we need to address the way that billions of people now seem to feel that their self-absorbed and self-aggrandising engagement with one another in fleeting online exchanges is somehow as interesting, as worth hours of their time, as dealing with real people in the real world. This probably matters culturally and socially, but it may matter even more politically, not least because online there is seldom the space to show how little (or how much) evidence there is for one's opinion on policy.

Social media and its problems need not depress us as though we were in the grip of a technological imperative (even an Artificial Unpleasantness to match Artificial Intelligence). The advances in nuclear physics once seemed to present issues which society could not thoroughly comprehend or command. Well, the Bomb hasn't got us yet, and the Cloud may not either. Much more than the technologies of the selfie, we should deal with the culture of the Self, which Bossy Liberalism has simultaneously over-valued and undermined.

We can sort out Bossy Liberalism provided we remember that it is a fashion, a fad, a phase. It has roots which we can recognise and analyse. It may be a religion, and therefore seem powerful, but faiths come and go.

In the real world, where people have their physical being, Bossy Liberals believe they have the creed which gives them the opinions and impulses which validate them. They do not have to bother with the public realm beyond what they find personally gratifying. A charity run, for instance, ticks all the boxes: good is done, virtue is signaled, the body is honed, longevity made probable.

My anxiety about Bossy Liberalism is that it is such a waste of the impulse to be and do good, and to see the varieties and complexity of virtue. But I am tolerably sure that we may already be past the peak of its power. The left has recently lost its automatic claim to virtue, and by a sort of miracle, as it must seem, capitalism has escaped more or less unscathed from what looked like a quite catastrophic threat to its reputation in 2008. An intelligent Bossy Liberal in our time might consider any wing or the Conservative or the merely conservative as having merit. I am not sure that such a liberal would even have to lose the "Bossy" tag, but merely refashion the label.

The great news is that some young people seem now to be getting free of some crippling shibboleths. Even – or especially – the mass culture may be getting the point. Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* satirised parish pump peer pressure and eulogized long-form non-conformity. A good few kids must have got the liberating message. And in civilization's endless culture wars it only takes a few to make the crucial difference.