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Sigurd Skirbekk:

The limitations of the New Liberal Ideology as a response to future challenges related to moral anomie, demographic reproduction and an ecologically responsible economy .

Summary

At the turn of this century a new liberalism became a dominant ideology in public debates regarding society. Like the old laissez faire liberalism, the new ideology emphasizes individual freedom as a supreme value for social development, and it defines the mutuality between society and the individual as "external relations". Unlike old liberalism this new ideology emphasizes positive human rights and the duties of a welfare state.

These kinds of policies might lead to positive effects on several areas of life, but the new liberal ideology has its limitations which, on its own premises, the ideology will obscure. From an analytical point of view, however, it is possible to identify a shortcoming in the understanding of the character of culture on these premises. This can easily lead to inadequate measures for upholding moral motivation and cohesion as a counterbalance to social anomie. It can also lead to fragile frames for family formation and reproduction. At the same time, liberal concepts of individual rights may prove inadequate for necessary means for limiting demographic growth in some parts of the world and unlimited growth of consumption in other parts of the world. The New Liberal Frame for understanding Human Rights will inevitably lead to conflicts with those ecological conditions that are necessary for a safe future.

Modernization and Ideology

As a sociologist I will address "ideologies" as cultural and political attempts to respond to the challenge of modernity, rather than mere legacy of ideas derived from philosophers. The first question will then be: What is the challenge of modernity?

By the end of the 18th century England and France carried out two revolutions that changed the conditions for traditional social order and cultural authority in Europe. The industrial English revolution led, gradually, to societies characterized by an increased division of labor and social *differentiation*, which made traditional cultural transmission, through concrete social identification, more and more difficult. The political and cultural French revolution made inherited authority illegal, unless it had passed a *test of rational acceptability*. Tradition

should be replaced by theory. Together these two revolutions led to a need for easily understandable models of society for dealing with order in a modern way.

The political thinking of the nineteenth century was characterized by the growth of ideologies, claiming to give adequate answers to these challenges. *Liberalism* came first, teaching that individual freedom would lead to progress, prosperity and peace. *Conservatism*, as an ideology, came as a reaction to the egotism and social atomization which seemed to follow liberalism. *Socialism* came as a class protest against the social injustice that seemed to follow the bourgeois ideologies. By the turn of last century a new ideology arose in several parts of Europe, as a protest against the national split which followed the class conflicts between bourgeois and proletarian interests. *Fascism* also proclaimed the rule of one leader instead of democratic procedures.

If the nineteenth century was the century of the birth of modern ideologies, the twentieth century became the century of the death of dominant ideologies. In his book *Ideology and Utopia*, from the end of the 1920, Karl Mannheim wrote about four major ideologies referring to *Weltanschauungen* in Germany by that time, in addition to a pragmatic bureaucratic conservatism. These were bourgeois democratic liberalism, historic conservatism, socialism/communism and fascism. Before the turn of the century they had all lost their credibility. Laissez faire liberalism lost its former political support after the economic crisis in 1929. Fascism and national socialism lost a war in 1945. Authoritarian conservatism lost its previous position around 1968. Marxist socialism lost its competition with capitalism in 1989.

So, we might ask, what is left for modern ideologies facing not only a new century, but even a new millennium? To claim that ideologies are dead and that modern men do not need ideologies any longer, is hardly a convincing answer. Even if the historian Francis Fukuyama and others have written something like that, I will argue that even he uses ideological references for his judgements. The same could be said about many of the papers on this conference.

We do have a dominant ideology even today. It is possible to name it, characterize it and analyze its weaknesses. I will go one step further and predict that the New Liberal Ideology, dominating contemporary culture and political orientation, will be the next major victim among ideologies, at least if we are not able in due time to supplement this ideology with a more comprehensive understanding of modern challenges.

Before I say more about this prediction, I should clarify what I, as a sociologist, mean when I am talking about *ideologies*. I should then say why the New Liberalism should be regarded as an ideology, and why it can hardly correct itself beyond certain limits. I will end up in mentioning three fields of unavoidable challenges where we can expect to experience serious conflicts between the solutions proposed by liberal spokesmen and the character of the challenges. This, I will argue, will lead to some sort of crisis and to a loss of credibility in the contemporary dominant new liberalism. (I have recently written a book about this, printed in Norwegian, as a manuscript in English.)

What is meant by ideologies?

The concept of "ideology" is over 200 years old; and though, from a purely etymological point of view, it has always meant the study of ideas (from *idea* and *logos*), the political meaning of the word has undergone considerable changes. Destutt de Tracy, a theoretician of the French Revolution, used the term to denote a program for the scientific study of the spread of ideas. Napoleon used it as a term of derision for impractical and far-fetched ideas. For others, the term has been a badge of honor, meaning something along the lines of an idealistic unified view. Karl Marx regarded ideologies as social agents of rule. More recent social scientists have looked upon ideologies as socially determined perceptions of reality, formed more by social interests than by epistemology.

It is not easy to find recurring hallmarks of ideologies that do not fundamentally favor one political position over another. It is nevertheless possible to arrive at specific analytical criteria for an understanding of ideologies that can be used for more than justifying preconceived ideas; but then the criteria must be based on a certain level of abstraction. In Marxist and anti-Marxist literature alike, we find at least five formal criteria for ideologies: a system of thought, interest-dependency, reality distortion, an adversely affected part, and self-immunization. We shall take a closer look at each of these five hallmarks:

1. *System of thoughts*. In order for thoughts or interpretations to be categorized as ideologies, they must comprise a continuous stream of perceptions in which one claim enhances the reliability of the other. Situation-governed devices for justifying a standpoint do not qualify as ideological analyses.
2. *Interest-dependency*. Social arguments do usually have some connection to interests and personal motivation. What is decisive here is that particular interests are presented as universal interest, or as beneficial for society as a whole.
3. *Distortion of reality*. Ideologies should be exposed and recognized as such because, in some way or other, they represent a distorted perception of reality, a kind of "false consciousness", rather than a completely conscious falsehood on the part of their advocates. To claim that something is false and not merely at odds with our own perceptions and interests, we must at least be able to show that a stated claim is clearly inconsistent with experience or with a logical way of thinking, or that the interpretations in question are clearly less functional than plausible alternative interpretations. Demonstrating that we are up against arguments with non-falsifiable metaphysical and axiomatic principles does not, in itself, qualify as ideological determination.
4. *The adversely affected party*. In the literature on ideologies, the notion that some people will be downtrodden or adversely affected if a reigning ideology remains predominant is a recurring theme. The adversely affected parties in a reality-distorted ideology are not necessarily social groups with a potentiality for power. It can just as well be nature itself, future generations, a specific society or civilization on a grand scale, for that matter.
5. *Self-immunization*. Since, analytically speaking, ideologies enjoy a different ontological status than the one they invoke, it is reasonable to expect that people who benefit from a particular ideology will do their best to deflect close scrutiny and criticism. However, the point here is that it is not only individual defenders of an ideology who are capable of concocting situation-governed means of deflecting criticism. The ideology itself leads to arguments for not taking threatening critique seriously. Political incorrect arguments are often dismissed by references to a

supposed *facticity*, a social or psychological background, of those holding such arguments.

A clarification according to this definition of ideology enjoys two advantages over a looser use of the word. In the first place, there is nothing in the foregoing five criteria that inherently favors one political position over another; in principle, the analysis can be kept distinct from personal political preferences. In the second place, these criteria are so exclusive that they cannot be used to dismiss common rational and scientific analyses.

The five criteria in question are not merely five independent hallmarks. They are mutually related: There is reason to believe that a distortion of reality will follow a systematic defense of particular interests and that such an orientation is bound to claim victims. The fact that a given ideology can have a reality-distorting effect is due to a number of factors. In the first place, a given ideology can become preeminent through the agency of a specific thought system. Distorted perceptions of social reality can result, more or less logically, from the categories and interrelationships which characterize that ideology as a system.

The upholding of the system character of an ideology is vital for its appeal and creditability. Therefore its defenders will very seldom incorporate interpretations and data threatening the ideology. This, in turns, becomes a motive for not correcting an ideology in due time when facing challenges that are threatening the ideology.

Why is New Liberalism an ideology?

What then justifies to regard contemporary "New Liberalism" as an ideology, with inherent limitations for acceptable thinking? According to spokesmen for liberalism it should represent openness for all kinds of arguments.

Let me first recall that by new liberalism I do not mean certain right-wing political groups, trying to reestablish a kind of libertarianism. The new liberalism is the dominant ideology also for parties calling themselves conservative or social democratic. It is the characteristics of thinking about and understanding society which determine the classification of an ideology, not what its spokesmen call themselves in order to emphasize small differences as a contrast to their political competitors.

Liberalism has always been characterized by valuing individual freedom, market freedom, democratic freedom. But so do others, even if maybe to a more moderate degree. What makes the liberal tradition unique, is the way freedom is understood within the greater context of relations between individual and society. For more than two hundred years liberal spokesmen have seen "society", or *the state*, as an opposing pole to the individual. No one has denied the existence of relations between individual and society, but within liberal philosophy these have been understood as "external" relations; empirical relations that could in principle have been different. Both the individual and society is seen as originally independent of the other. This is not just something said by certain philosophers, it is a necessary precondition for making the rest of liberal philosophy coherent.

Individual freedom is understood as independence or as a liberation "from society". This has implications for a liberal understanding of *individuality*, which will essentially be seen as an entity determined by will/decisions or as expressions of nature/the body. This way of thinking gives little room for understanding collective culture as something forming both the individual and society. Culture can be understood as art, a way of life, as a mark of identity, or a series of entertainment options – but *not* as something that defines society or its social fabric. This is a prerequisite for understanding the privatization of cultural issues as a neutral policy.

This way of thinking can legitimate many types of particular interests, not least interest connected to marketing. If media policy is completely determined by what the greatest sum of individuals are willing to consume, this will hardly promote the highest cultural quality or the realistic social orientation.

According to many non-liberal spokesmen, a maximization of individual liberty will lead to egotism, exploitation, and ultimately to the breakdown of vital social arrangements. Liberals feel exempt from this objection, based on their belief that the individual - potentially, at any rate - is good and reasonable. This philosophy assumes that when individuals are set free, social responsibility will eventually follow. Historical myths about how human beings were "born free" but subsequently enslaved, along with contemporary myths about how social development represents a liberation from all constraints, can enhance the credibility of this line of thought.

Society, in a liberal perspective, can either be seen in a subjective context, as springing spontaneously from joint action, or as having been adopted as convention or accepted as a body of regulations. Society can also be interpreted objectively, without having to break with the liberal thinking - for example, as a technical-economic framework derived from historical developments.

What makes "new liberalism" new, is primarily its references to the state as an entity for social services. The modern welfare state, as well as politically guaranteed "human rights" for the individual, are developments from the last half century.

Throughout history, the liberal philosophy has had many critics; some have pointed out dubious assumptions and dubious consequences of an individual-centered social philosophy. In more recent times, various "communitarians" have criticized the notion of individual choice as a fundamental ethical objective. There is a thoroughgoing criticism of liberal thought in Hegel's rights philosophy - for example, regarding the regulation of the relationship between religion, the state and the individual. From a liberal viewpoint, a neutral understanding of this relationship would be to understand religion merely as a matter of private faith. This was thought to be a politically neutral program, without substantial commands, and one that was supposed to promote rationality and freedom. But Hegel maintained that this program contained hidden premises. If the program was to cohere, religion had to be perceived as a private matter, regardless of its doctrinal content or what the believers themselves felt; or, for that matter, regardless of what social scientists might have to say about the collective functions of religion. The principle of privatization thus became a substantial command, not a topic of discussion, nor a private matter.

What Hegel wrote about religion, others wrote about cultural understanding in general. Liberalism is not liberation man from culture; it is rather defining culture in new ways to fit liberalism. This has several implications.

Three challenges

Previously domination ideologies have failed, partly because of a contradiction between the limits of acceptable corrections of the ideologies and the character of the challenges facing them. The liberal tradition is also a system of thinking, which cannot be corrected indefinitely without losing credibility. But, some of the challenges we can foresee for this century would require responses that transcended these boundaries. I will briefly mention three such challenges: the conflicts between liberal concepts of morality and a growing cultural anomie; the conflict between liberal concepts of sex and family formations and cultural and biological reproduction; the conflict between a liberal order for economic activity and a nature depending upon ecological systems.

The first conflict has to do with the inadequate understanding of culture on liberal premises. If culture is seen primarily as a matter for entertainment and lifestyle-identities, its moral functions will be overlooked. In perspective this will lead to some sort of anomie, a state of affairs characterized by weak supraindividual morality. Whatever might be said about moral, its functions for civilized societies should at least include norms for hampering individual egotism, for promoting achievements and for upholding institutions necessary for a collective identity.

Even if liberal philosophers of an earlier age were quite strong in their moral teaching, new liberal spokesmen have lost many of the references for why an individual liberation would lead to moral improvements – this losses can partly be traced back to an indirect influence of liberalism itself. New liberalism also fails to meet the challenge of institutional differentiation in modern societies. Individual freedom to choose on a market may have economic functions, but the market norms are hardly adequate for solidarity formation, for family solidity or for that matter for scientific, moral and religious institutions.

Anomie may appear as a latent dysfunction if an exalting individual happiness become the only all-purpose, indisputable value. Indirectly, such a prioritization of values can encourage many people to make use of chemical and electronic means for living in a tragedy-free emotional state. Instead of stronger and more reality oriented personalities, we get individuals with narcissist attitudes.

Our kind of individual-centered guidelines for the Good Life may also have unforeseen consequences for society's macrostructure. The decimation of familiar, local and national cultural community may be the most conspicuous factor. Rather than entities to which the individual was to adjust in order to obtain a social identity, these same social entities become something that the individual can choose to relate to as he or she sees fit. But in the process, these entities are changed into something that has no supraindividual authority.

Weak morality and strong egotism is also a characteristic of contemporary sexual attitudes and patterns of family formations, particularly in the most liberal societies. This has led to falling rates of marriages combined with increasing divorce rates, and also to birth rates

below the replacement level, in the Darwinian tradition a commonly used measure for dysfunctional adjustment.

The most serious challenge facing us in the 21st century is what has been called the 'ecological challenge'^a. The term 'ecology'^a (from the Greek words *oikos* and *logos*) could be translated as the doctrine of our stewardship with nature. In real terms, it involves those problems that have arisen in the balance between human culture and natural systems, by the development of an anthropocentric ethic, an instrumentalist science, and a technological manufacturing system, all legitimated by a liberal ideology

Modern human beings become a threat to nature by their overconsumption of resources that are non-renewable in the short term, and by their disruption of nature's various systems of renewal. Nature is being subjected to a double-barreled attack from the human race: a depletion of scarce natural resources, and an infringement of nature's capacity to renew its resources. In part, this can be ascribed to a rise in the number of people, and in part to the fact that increasing numbers of people wish to consume more products and thus more natural resources. A common feature of these attacks is that they are legitimated by ideologies based solely on human rights, and not on nature's requirements. It is only a question of time before these policies boomerang on our way of life, including our ability to sustain a New Liberal society.

Liberalism has been useful as an incentive for correcting totalitarian ideologies. Today we should be aware that liberalism as an ideology is built upon several contradictions and distorting consequences. If we are not able to recognize and supplement this ideology in due time, it may promote processes that are destructive even for liberal value. Eventually could we see totalitarian potentialities built into the ideology.