

The Death of Liberalism Has Been Proclaimed Before¹

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Vladimir Putin's suggestion in June 2019 that liberal values were 'obsolete' sounded familiar to many observers.² This was not the first time the death of liberalism has been announced; as George Dangerfield put it in a classic study, the early years of the 20th century saw the 'strange death' of liberal values in England, reflecting a pattern of disillusion across Europe.³ The current wave of populism naturally prompts recollections of this moment and its consequences. As often chronicled, a *fin de siècle* sense of cultural division and loss was only intensified by the Great War; in retrospect it seems to herald the emergence of fascist ideology, as authoritarian measures, fueled by popular passion, seemed to many a desirable solution for an enervated West. Expanding electorates, newly literate and vocal, generated a new mass politics that to many seemed threatening and unruly; doubt was cast on the principles of freedom and democracy.⁴

That said, many thinkers remained resolutely progressive; for those in Britain, for example, working in the "Whig" tradition, history continued to move, together with human reason, to the best possible outcome. Borrowing from Darwinian and German Idealist thought, liberals modernized this sense of inexorable progress: sometimes gradual, sometimes revolutionary; some prioritizing the "negative" freedom of capitalism's "invisible hand"; others calling for state guidance in the "New Liberal" tradition.⁵

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- 1 Research for this article was supported by a European Research Council Starting Grant (TAU17149) "Between the Times: Embattled Temporalities and Political Imagination in Interwar Europe".
 - 2 Barber, Lionel, Henry Foy, and Alex Barker, "Vladimir Putin Says Liberalism Has 'Become Obsolete,'" *The Financial Times*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.
 - 3 Dangerfield, George, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, UK: Constable, 1936).
 - 4 See Potter, Rachel, *Modernism and Democracy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007); North, Michael, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* (New York, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Sutherland, John, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (London, UK: Faber, 1992); Huyssen, Andreas, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1988).
 - 5 See Freedman, Michael, *The New Liberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1978) and Collini, Stefan, *Liberalism and Sociology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Den Otter, Sandra M., *British Idealism and Social Explanation* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996).

And yet another narrative of European history, traceable to another current of German romanticism, presented a more complicated notion of organic growth. In this view, unique cultural formations and tendencies shaped the emergence of nations as seeds grow to fruition.⁶ This view remained essentially optimistic in finding God at work in the destinies of peoples, but by rooting this providence in locality and circumstance precluded generalization about progress in any abstract or rational sense. The emphasis here was instead on the specifics of identity and their development over time. This was the root of a nationalist historiography. From Herder through to the Prussian School of History there developed a sense of the incommensurability of national character and destiny to any general pattern.⁷ Such attempts to relocate value in local conditions, circumstances, peoples, were radicalized in early 20th century attacks on liberal abstraction. The rejection of an atomizing liberalism is again familiar in the current rejection of a globalized market place and movement of peoples, and the celebration of rootedness, of specificity, of community. This could result in a politics of blood and soil, no doubt. One countervailing influence lay in the old schism across Europe between temporal and spiritual power—a battle whose outcome has never been clear.

Forms of subsidiarity—the distribution of power back to persons—were reimagined in the early 20th century as a response to this crisis of liberalism; to reassure communities and families that their special circumstances would be recognized, celebrated, and granted an autonomy unavailable under the liberal state. Yet paradoxically, in many cases, this conceptual process by steps revised the goal of pluralism, proffering a recognition of local, ethnic feeling in emotive, irrational form while disguising what was an unprecedented centralization of such power, ultimately demanding total loyalty and subordination of persons and families to state control. Against this we might note the resistance put up against an excess temporal power by those keeping in mind the older tradition of European Christendom, and indeed “totalitarianism” was first named and criticized by Christian commentators.⁸

Just as a chorus of populisms swell again across Europe and the United States, the negligent, abstracting habits of liberal progressivism

6 See Iggers, Georg C., *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, USA: Wesleyan University Press, 1968).

7 Iggers, *German Conception of History*; Southard, Robert, *Droysen and the Prussian School of History* (Lexington, USA: University Press of Kentucky, 1995).

8 Chappell, James, “The Catholic Origins of Totalitarianism Theory in Interwar Europe,” *Modern Intellectual History* 8, no. 3 (2011): 561–590.

have been identified and attacked, conceded and regretted, by commentators across the political spectrum. The same impulse that generated radical new proposals for power distribution as a replacement for both classic and statist liberalism is at work again in forms of post-liberalism on the left as much as the right. The question remains whether critics of liberalism can find the delicate balance that permits a genuine reorientation of government, an invigorating new pluralism, without falling for the emotive, irrational romance of national and ethnic identity and thus the confidence trick that renders the “left behind” merely pawns moved by insidious top-down forces, gradually re-installed by a new populist elite.

One notable precedent in the earlier crisis of liberalism of the early century was the British school of guild socialism, identified with the work of G.D.H. Cole, represented an undeveloped history.⁹ The idea was first developed in the radical *New Age* periodical, a testing ground for heterodoxies of the left—and to some extent of the right—edited between 1907 and 1922 by A.R. Orage. The journal was also the venue for many modernist writers establishing the theoretical grounds of that movement in the arts; perhaps, as Roger Griffin has suggested, we should taxonomize such simultaneous ideological and artistic ventures as forms of ‘political’ and ‘cultural’ modernism.¹⁰

The guild idea, recurring in British historiography as a distinctive feature of an often-romanticized middle age, was promoted notably by John Ruskin from the 1860s. In essence, it sought a return to the small guild structures whereby networks of self-regulating producers—guilds based around a variety of crafts, arts and trades—would achieve ownership over their own labour. Ruskin advocated such a system notably in his 1860 work *Unto This Last* and in *Fors Clavigera*, his letters to workmen and labourers written between 1871 and 1884. In 1871 he established the Guild of St. George to support work in crafts. His advocacy and similar arguments proposed by William Morris and Edward Carpenter were key sources when the guild idea attained a new lease of life in the early 20th century through the concerted efforts of a group of heterodox socialist thinkers based in Leeds and later London.

9 Carpenter, Niles, *Guild Socialism: An Historical and Critical Analysis* (New York, USA: D. Appleton and Company, 1922).

10 Griffin, Roger, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2007).

Arthur Penty's *Restoration of the Guild System* (1906) was a key text in bringing these ideas into the 20th century. Penty, an architect, remembered a decisive moment when he learned that the competition to choose a building design for the new London School of Economics had been evaluated purely on the calculation of maximum classroom space. This reminder of the utilitarian equations—the so-called statistical method—favored by the British intellectual left (led by Sydney and Beatrice Webb) over aesthetic or spiritual values, repelled him from its practices.¹¹ Penty wrote his short 1906 book—its title spelt “guild” significantly to distinguish his idea from other versions—after much discussion with his Leeds friend Orage, a leader of the Leeds Art Club, a group of radical intellectuals that exemplifies, as Tom Steele has put it, the provincial Northern avant-garde.¹² The two men had by this time moved to London where they were attempting to instill their ideas in the Fabians' network in the capital. Penty and Orage differed greatly in their worldviews. Penty's uncompromising pursuit of a medieval guild idea generated a resolute hostility to modern industry; he sought a militant rejection of mass production and a reversion to pre-industrial arts and crafts. Orage was open to an adaptation of the guild idea to technological realities, and this led him toward speculations on new forms of industrial guilds—a marriage of old and new that led to intriguing proximities to Sorelian syndicalism as well as the Janus-faced experiments of the London avant-garde.¹³

The other incompatibility between the two men lay in Orage's spiritual thinking. His guild idea was linked intrinsically to spiritualist or occult tendencies, which linked the investment of spirit in labor to the fruition of the individual on a spiritual plane, an idea he expanded on in lectures to the Theosophical Society in these years, resulting in his 1907 book *Consciousness, Animal, Human and Superman*, written while he and Penty shared a flat for a year in Hammersmith. While Orage's investment in Penty's economic mission is clear from a 1907 article in *The Contemporary Review* championing a return to the guild idea,¹⁴ his book and regular pieces for the *Theosophical Review*¹⁵ would suggest that these flat mates

11 Carpenter, *Guild Socialism*, 92–93.

12 Steele, Tom, Alfred Orage and the *Leeds Arts Club*, 1893–1923 (Solar Press, 1992), 9–12.

13 Mead, Henry, T.E. Hulme and the Ideological Politics of Early Modernism (London, UK: Bloomsbury 2015), 57–102.

14 Orage, A.R., “Politics for Craftsmen,” *The Contemporary Review* 91 (1907): 782–794.

15 For samples of Orage's writings, see *Orage as Critic*, Wallace Martin, ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).

made a somewhat odd couple: as regards religion, Penty's medievalism inclined him toward an integration of Catholicism as the unifying force to bring together the small networks of producers.

A third figure in this network was S.G. Hobson, an Irish-born socialist who imbibed similar Ruskinian ideas to Orage and Penty, and added insights of his own deriving from managerial experience in various business enterprises. He too felt himself at odds with his colleagues' ideas, immediately with Penty's refutation of industry and, over time, with Orage's monetary theories. Yet as the main author of a series of influential articles on guild economics that appeared in *New Age* from 1912, he was a decisive contributor to the development of the idea. Later he would espouse what he called a 'Functional Socialism' that combined aspects of Orage's thinking with those of the Spanish intellectual Ramiro de Maeztu, whose Catholicism colored his belief in a society shaped by conservative ethical principle.¹⁶

Marc Stears has usefully dissected this field of guild socialisms to show how a genus of ideas can host numerous species, with potential developments in multiple directions.¹⁷ What one might identify as the distinguishing feature is the attitude to temporality: These writers shared a sense of modernity as having created a division, a break between a unified older society and a new world in which both the economic and the internal life of man was divided from itself. This prefigures the notable medievalist streak that runs through British modernism in work by T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and William Butler Yeats, among many others.

Yet fractures run through the movement separating proximate writers' work in myriad small ways. Penty's idea is clearly emphatic in its description of a fall, but also envisions a 'restoration'. Orage wrote of the significance of man's fallen condition, but also posited the possibility of redemption.¹⁸ Cole's version, by maintaining a sense of individual worth, indicates a sense of promise in history that was compatible with mainstream Labour and liberal thought. What is noticeable about the guild idea is that it sees history as having suffered a fundamental moment of division in the rise of modernity, and proposes a return to a prelapsarian state.

16 See Hobson, S.G., *Pilgrim to the Left: Memoirs of a Modern Revolutionist* (London, UK: Edward Arnold, 1938).

17 Stears, Marc, "Guild Socialism and Ideological Diversity on the British Left, 1914–1926," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 3, no. 3 (1998): 289–30.

18 Mead, T.E. *Hulme*, 57–102.

Factionalization of the guild idea

Over time, the guild movement broke into factions.¹⁹ Cole's circle distanced themselves from the journal, preferring to work under the aegis of the Fabian Research Department. The National Guilds League, founded by Cole in 1915, struggled to gain traction within a Labour Party concerned primarily with parliamentary representation. Meanwhile the Russian Revolution of 1917 created a split within the National Guilds League between those who admired and feared Bolshevik theories and methods. Members of both factions left, some like Reckett seeking to refine a Christian version of the Guild idea, others to join the new Communist Party of Great Britain.

Stripped of much of its membership, the league was wound up in 1923. It is telling that a number of political writers in recent years have looked back to the guild idea and sought to resurrect an Edwardian ideology they see as prematurely discarded and denied its true fruition in practice.²⁰ But other aspects of the guild socialists' legacy are troubling. Some members of the guild socialist circle were attracted to Italian fascism: the Hungarian intellectual Odon Por and the American poet Ezra Pound were two prominent cases. These former *New Age* contributors worked together to transfer elements of the idea into an Italian Fascist context.²¹ The Spanish journalist Ramiro de Maeztu considered himself to guild socialist, and was proud of his place in the history of that movement.²² Others, however, saw his position as fascist; indeed, he was a founding member of the nationalist group *Acción Española*, and was shot dead by Republicans in the lead up to the Spanish Civil War.²³

Many of Maeztu's friends in Britain continued to identify themselves with the guild tradition, distancing themselves from fascism, although their thinking was sometimes perceived as tinted with authoritarianism. These writers included Reckett, Orage's biographer Philip Mairet and the

19 Stears, "Guild Socialism," 289–230.

20 See Blond, Phillip, *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (London, UK: Faber, 2010); Geary, Ian and Adrian Pabst, eds., *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics* (London, UK: I.B. Tauris, 2015); Milbank, John and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

21 See Redman, Tim, *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

22 Caballero, Giménez, "Conversación con un Camisa Negra, Ramiro de Maeztu," *La Gaceta Literaria* 4 (1927), 1.

23 See Nozick, Martin, "An Examination of Ramiro de Maeztu," *PMLA* 69, no. 4 (1954): 719–740.

Anglican clergyman Vigo Demant—central figures in the intellectual networks known as the Christendom Group founded 1921 and the Chandos Group, named after an informal gathering at the Chandos restaurant in St. Martin's Lane, around 1931.²⁴ Eliot met Reckitt at the 1933 Anglo-Catholic Summer School held at Keble College, Oxford, and gave Reckitt's "Christian Sociology for Today" a favourable review in his journal *The Criterion* in July 1934. Eliot praised Demant's works in his *Criterion* commentaries of January 1932 and January 1934 and acknowledges a debt to his work in "*The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939).²⁵

These interwar groups explored the possibility of a Christian politics.²⁶ Reckitt and Demant had become acquainted with Orage and other guild socialists as contributors to the *New Age*. They wrote for Orage again when he returned to London in 1934 as editor of the *New English Weekly*. Both had a notable link to a brand of Anglican thinking that preceded the *New Age* debate. As Matthew Grimley has shown, the Edwardian network of Christian pluralists laid the foundations for interwar discussions regarding the guild idea.²⁷ Influenced by John Neville Figgis, Reckitt and Demant were involved with the Christian Social League prior to their contact with Orage, Hobson and Cole at the *New Age*.²⁸

Figgis was a key figure in Christian social thinking who, influenced by Lord Acton (his tutor at Cambridge) and the German thinker Otto von Guericke, advanced a kind of pluralism, emphasizing the role of faith communities in balancing the power of the state. Attentive to modern thought, notably the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, his work reacted against weak forms of liberal theology. Intellectually advanced, he was at the same time drawn to a traditional austerity, leading him to join the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield, an Anglican monastic order and seminary that remains influential to this day. Reckitt and Demant both

24 Reckitt, Maurice, *As It Happened: An Autobiography* (London, UK: J.M. Dent, 1941), Mairet, Philip, *A. R. Orage: A Memoir* (London, UK: J.M. Dent, 1936); Kenney, Rowland, *Westering: An Autobiography* (London, UK: J.M. Dent, 1939).

25 Eliot, T.S., *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London, UK: Faber & Faber, 1939).

26 Collini, Stefan, "The European Modernist as Anglican Moralizer: The Later Social Criticism of T. S. Eliot," in *Enlightenment, Passion, Modernity: Historical Essays in European Thought and Culture*, Robert L. Dietle and Mark S. Micale, eds. (Stanford, USA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 99–120.

27 Grimley, Matthew, *Citizenship, Community, and the Church of England: Liberal Anglican Theories of the State between the Wars* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2004).

28 Collini, "The European Modernist," 99–120.

benefitted from long conversations with Figgis toward the end of his life, as did the left-leaning Church historian Alec Vidler.²⁹

Figgis, like contemporaries across Europe, rejected the liberal ‘boneless Christ’ of the 19th century. An accomplished preacher who was invited to prominent churches in London between the wars, he argued³⁰ that the idea of historical ‘progress with a capital P’ has been ‘torpedoed by the man who sunk the Lusitania’, strangely foreshadowing his later experience as a passenger on a ship sunk by U-boats, an incident that shortened his life.³¹ This mood of dissatisfaction with a complacent progressivism that blurs history and theology echoes themes in the cultural modernism of T.E. Hulme and T.S. Eliot, who knew and shared ideas with guild socialist intellectuals.

Tangentially, Figgis’s ideas appear also to echo the turning away from liberal theology apparent in the work of Karl Barth, whose commentary *The Epistle to the Romans* (2nd ed. 1922), in its withdrawal from the liberal German tradition of Schleiermacher, had a profound impact. As the theologian Karl Adams put it in another resonant metaphor, ‘the bomb that fell on the playground of the theologians’.³² The martial metaphors interestingly recall the impact of cultural modernism at the same moment—Desmond MacCarthy’s famous description of the ‘artquake’ of the Post-Impressionist exhibition of 1910, among various imaginings of new art and literature as a revolution or moment of anarchy.³³

For Figgis, the interwoven fabrics of communities, families, guilds and faiths provide a form of protection against a centralizing hubris and the worst forms of political religion. His case for a form of subsidiarity that distributed power among multiple communities, thus thwarting the accumulation of state authority on one side and the ill-effects of liberal atomism on the other is powerfully resonant today. This English writer echoes the attack on “totalitarianism”—a word coined by Catholic critics of the fascist, Nazi and Soviet regimes of the interwar. An antagonism between Jacques Maritain and Carl Schmitt is representative this debate, Maritain leading the charge against totalitarianism having distanced himself

29 Nicholls, David, *The Pluralist State: The Political Ideas of J.N. Figgis and his Contemporaries* (London, UK: Palgrave, 1975).

30 Neville, John, *Antichrist and Other Sermons* (Charleston, USA: BiblioBazaar, 2016).

31 Figgis, John Neville, *Hopes for English Religion* (London, UK: Longmans, 1919), 15.

32 McConnachie, John, “The Teaching of Karl Barth: A New Positive Movement in German Theology,” *Hibbert Journal* 27, no. 385 (1926).

33 MacCarthy, Desmond, “The Art-Quake of 1910,” *The Listener* (1945), 124; Green, Christopher, *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry’s Vision of Art* (London, UK: Merrell Holberton, 1999), 59.

from the radical right group Action française's similar tendency to centralized authority.³⁴

Figgis can be seen as part of this collision of ideas across Europe. This brief sketch merely introduces some past ideas that stood in reaction against totalitarianism, with a view to how current attacks on liberalism might be addressed through the renewal of lost, alternative political systems, even those short-lived experiments that fell foul to the perils of nationalism in an earlier age. This interwar pluralist logic is poignantly elusive. Urging a re-investment in persons within a community, neither negligently abstract nor poisonously emotive in clannish union, it was never achieved in practice. Yet the guild idea, however brief its earlier expression, might contain useful aspects in its glimpsed, prelapsarian state, as it was before some catalyst transformed it to an uglier alloy.

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34 Chappell, James, "The Catholic Origins of Totalitarianism Theory in Interwar Europe," *Modern Intellectual History* 8, no. 3 (2011): 561–590.