

LIBERAL THEORY IN THE XXI CENTURY:
IDENTITY, TENDENCIES AND PERSPECTIVES
A REVIEW OF A SECTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL
«FUTURE WORLD/WORLDS» CONFERENCE
OF THE SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURAL STUDIES
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On October 7th, 2023, during the traditional annual conference of the School of Philosophy and Cultural Studies, this year named “Future World/Worlds,” a section dedicated to liberalism both as a theory and a political approach was held at the Higher School of Economics. Graduate and Undergraduate researches who took part in this section, titled “Liberal Theory in the XXI century: Identity, Tendencies and Perspectives,” covered a wide range of topics, from the history of political thought to the current decline of liberal principles in actual politics, as well as the benefits and disadvantages of different attempts to reformulate liberalism or combine it with other theoretical frameworks. Although it lacked renowned experts in the field as guests, the event still managed to attract the attention of both the specialists who presented the results of their research and an interested audience, who stayed for the discussion that ended the section. All six presentations raised intense debates among the participants and guests, and this, along with the complex and rich contents of the addresses themselves, points to the fact that liberalism, although often considered a theory of the past, is still relevant and perspective.

DOES A UNITARY LIBERAL THEORY EXIST?

The first presentation by NIKITA KHARCHUK, a HSE Political Science student, was dedicated to the problem of internal contradictions within liberalism, which, according to the speaker, were inherently present in the tradition practically since its origins. In the conflict between the ideas of John Locke and John Stuart Mill, for example, we see clearly a certain pressure from within, which makes liberalism quite different from other political projects such as socialism or nationalism. The lack of a “founding father” and a set canon makes it rather difficult to present very dissimilar approaches and ideas that are labelled as “liberal” in a coherent conceptual

scheme. This problem, in a way, arises from the very nature of liberalism, as its focus on inclusivity leads to the necessity to combine a vast array of different, at times contradictory, positions. This paradoxical status of liberal theory, covered in detail by Nikolay's speech, will be addressed many times by the other speakers.

IS LIBERAL NATIONALISM POSSIBLE?

The next presentation, whose main point was to show and analyse different attempts to reconcile nationalism with liberalism, was read by KONSTATIN MOROZOV, MA in Philosophy from the MSU. The speaker considered different projects from both traditions—civic nationalism, ethnic nationalism, liberal universalism among others, in order to point to a fundamental problem that could be summed up as the “status of non-nationalists in a liberal national state.” Even if we abandon essentialist notions of nationalism (as most contemporary thinkers on this topic tend to do), what enables us to consider different identities in our state as equal citizens? We still have little to no idea of the status of cosmopolitans or other people who fundamentally refuse national (or nationalist) values. One of the main points in Konstantin's speech was the impossibility of presenting a unified liberal-nationalist theory, although the debate that followed the presentation gave us some insights on how to try to conceptualise the problem in other methods (for example, through republicanism). Moreover, the fundamental problem concerning the inevitability of liberal values and the somewhat totalitarian nature of the latter, raised both in the presentation and during the questions, remained important in the upcoming addresses and during the final discussion.

THE TYRANNY OF TRUTH AND ITS ENEMIES

The third presentation by TIKHON SHEINOV, HSE philosophy undergraduate, switched the discussion from the domain of contemporary political theory up to political philosophy and its classics: Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss and their interpretation of Plato. The latter's *Republic*, being one of the foremost texts for political philosophy throughout history, was read quite differently by the two aforementioned 20th-century theoreticians from previous interpretations. We are used to the platonic critique of democratic politics, yet taking into account the dramaturgical reading of his dialogues, we may come to the notion of politics as independent from the realm of objective Ideas, such as Justice or Truth. Thus, in very different conceptualisations by Arendt and Strauss, we see Plato as, ironically, a defender of

liberal values opposed to the source of any totalitarianism — a claim for the highest form of Truth. This totalitarian notion of politics may be found in many modern ideologies — fascism and communism being the prime examples — and, in conclusion, it is only liberalism (or, at least a quite unique variation of it) that can function without said complaint. This address, that ended the first part of the section, was successful in combining the history of political philosophy with the topics passing through the whole conference — the nature of liberal values in comparison with other approaches and their status towards those who do not agree with the will of the majority, as the agonial character of liberalism, seen through this interpretation of Plato, tries to locate liberalism in the heart of any political system and not just as a simple alternative to those totalitarian ideologies.

Agonal Liberalism and Will towards Coexistence. On the Perspectives of Leibnizian Vocabulary for the Liberal Project

After a short break, the section resumed with a presentation by ALEXANDER MELNIKOV, also a HSE Philosophy Undergraduate. His speech converged the themes of leibnizian ontology with the liberal tradition. Often unseen, this connection seems rather plausible, considering the tolerant and inclusive nature of the world Leibniz and his followers had built. Even though the argument was rather speculative, as we cannot find any clearcut association between those two spheres, this historical reconstruction enables us to see how tolerance, among many other liberal principles in the end of the XVII century, grew from a standalone idea into a practical and crucial part of a coherent philosophical project. The depth of the address impressed the public, as the following questions helped to bring together its content with several problems that arose from previous presentations, mainly those concerning the meta-status of liberal theory — in some way, locating those principles at the level of ontology and not only political reality seems like a sound solution for them.

IMAGES OF THE FUTURE IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF KANT

The next presentation by NATALIA CHEPELAYEVA, MSU Graduate Student in Philosophy, continued the theme of German political philosophy, from Leibniz to Kant. In her address, she covered an extensive body of the famous philosopher's work, from his pre-critical writings up to his well-known political texts, like the *Perpetual Peace*. It is still debatable how Kant fits into the liberal tradition, and Natalia's project showed different aspects of Kantian philosophy in relation to possible futures and the condition of

nations, states and people as political subjects in it. Although the discussion that followed was rather brief, the presentation itself enriched the field of possible inspiration for liberalism to adapt to contemporary problems that may be seen and possibly solved through the lens of Kantian legacy.

FROM MORAL EDUCATION TO PUBLIC REASON:
RAWLS AS A THEORETICIAN OF VIRTUE

The last address in the session was read by one of the organisers, TIMUR SAEV, a HSE Philosophy student. It covered one of the most important authors for contemporary political philosophy—John Rawls, and not only his famous principles, such as the veil of ignorance, but also the somewhat more obscure parts of his legacy, such as the project of moral education for the cultivation of virtue. For Rawls himself, the problem of principles that should be universal for all actors in the political sphere was one of the most crucial and debatable—thus, Rawls' answers in earlier and later stages of his work were rather different. The presentation provided us not only with the analysis of Rawlsian attempts at solutions, but also with their reconciliation as a sound and useful enterprise that should raise the interest of liberal theoreticians nowadays. During the closing questions, the participants of the discussion compared this project with other liberal traditions and approaches and, additionally, with republicanism—thus, in the end, this peculiar and often misused, at least in Russian academic field, conceptual scheme of Rawls was understood as a rather plausible alternative for all of them.

THE CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

After the plenary part, all the participants engaged in an intensive discussion that concluded the section. This debate provided an opportunity to return to themes of the first presentations and to focus not only on their philosophical aspects, but also on the primary political ones. Moreover, it connected very different addresses with the red thread of discourse about the future—that of both liberal theory and the political sphere at large. The participants also placed the discussion into a broader context—for example, by bringing up the names of Martha Nussbaum or the already-mentioned republican project of Philip Pettit. The concluding inference was that the liberal tradition, although very unique among other political projects practically since its emergence, is far from being dead and obsolete. Thus, this section, the brainchild of not only well-established academics, but

also early-career researchers, for whom it was a first attempt at discussion in an international conference, can be considered successful and fruitful, as we expect a continuation of some sort in the upcoming projects of the School of Philosophy and Cultural Studies.

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