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Speculation, Complexity and Reimagining Liber(al)ity

Interview with David Tyfield, 04/03/20

LM: A dominant theme in your work concerns the challenge of governing complexity. Before we talk about that, could you set the scene of how we've arrived to this age of complexity?

DT: Our news cycle is dominated by a very polarised politics at a national level across the world; indeed, even in the last 6 months it's got increasingly tense and scary. The way I want to think about this is the meta-problem that the whole world is facing, which is "how do we govern complex systems well?"

Where does that complexity come from? The obvious story would be that of neoliberalism, a story in which China is seemingly a bit player while it is primarily a story of re-concentration of economic power in Wall Street, and to a secondary extent the City of London. Hence, free market globalisation etc..., and then the enormous economic boom, including from the late 90s onwards, in the Global South. So the position in which we find ourselves in 2020 is with a global system of political economy which celebrates limitless markets and therefore the deliberate creation of market rule, of rule without a sovereign, of chaos basically; a world which can then be profitably exploited by those who are most "risk-taking", "entrepreneurial" etc, this being the whole process celebrated by neoliberalism. This then creates a world in which complexity is constantly overflowing itself.

In particular, when something goes wrong as a result of this political project, this is not a reason to turn in the other direction, in terms of reintroducing regulation or oversight; it is yet another opportunity for entrepreneurial activity, for the imposition of the market. This is because for neoliberalism, the market cannot be bettered, and certainly not bested. With each round of further innovation and/or further marketization, though, the world has become that bit more complex, that bit more ungovernable; which, again in turn, seems to further legitimate rule by the market over rule by (incompetent, incapable, partisan) state authorities and governments. So we have this global system of massive production of complexity and with that there is - particularly in the Global North - a polarisation of wealth in society, which then is supercharged by the 2008 crash, as that leads to the vast majority of the population picking up the bill for a system which they did not create and did not benefit from. Austerity actually just increases the division of society, which is what leads to the headlines that we have today: politics of Brexit, Trump, and the rise of the far right across Europe.

So far, then, that is all a story we can seemingly tell without China. But in fact, throughout that whole period, China has been, first, the flipside of it, and then increasingly a major player in its own right. Its own process of neoliberalism has been very different, though, which is why it's often not

told in the same story. Yet we actually can't tell the story of neoliberalism without China because in a sense the whole process of free market globalisation was dependent upon a massive exception upon which this free market was *not* imposed, which was China. So China does join the WTO in 2002 but it's never really liberalised its economy, in the way that one might have expected would have been demanded; and, indeed, *would* have been demanded for almost any other country. But its sheer size and scale means that it has become the workshop of the world, therefore creating all those cheap products which has kept the engine of debt-laden consumerism in the West afloat. And, conversely, it's been an incredibly important place to sink surplus capital as well. In short, I would argue that if China had remained communist – that is, communally organised at the level of the economy – neoliberalism wouldn't have lasted nearly as long, if it had been able to take off at all.

There is also what has happened in China itself, which is that this economic miracle has likewise created a process of massive explosion of complexity *within* China. Part of that, as is true of complexity pretty much everywhere, is a matter of the massive explosion of opportunity. So, on the one hand, we see the growth of a superrich class, but also of a much larger more prosperous 'middle class', who are now beginning to make demands on their lives for autonomy. Their increased economic autonomy has consequences for governing this enormous country. But, on the other, it's also a matter of complexity as problems. For example, the extraordinary costs that China's environment has paid, but also in terms of challenges of running a country, which one could say the coronavirus exemplifies: that we have this huge country that is also now extremely mobile and interconnected and actually, while authoritarian, lightly regulated. You could say that things in China are lightly regulated... until they are heavily regulated, in any particular instance. So it's no real surprise that in this context the treatment of livestock and wild animals, plus the density of population etc. would mean that some kind of flu virus might cross the species barrier in China in particular, and then become a problem for the world from China, because it is such a mobile place now. The complexity of the coronavirus (and I do think it is a complex issue, or at least a problem of government of complexity) is actually a good example of these dynamics coming together in China.

If we look at what this complexity (not necessarily COVID-19 itself) has meant in the US or the UK, we find that we have this polarised politics of those who are more or less enabled by this complexity against those who have been its heavy losers. In China there is likewise a similar sense of tension but again it is different in form. Here the tension is that the primary characteristic of the constitution is to support the unchallenged monopoly of power of the Communist Party; that is ultimately the *sine qua non* of any governmental decision.

But consider the challenges of keeping the Communist Party in charge of this country that has become increasingly complex, difficult to govern, facing the complex problems that the whole world is facing, that has a more-than-economic-good-seeking middle class, and with the whole issue of the internet lying on top of that and multiplying it several fold. In short, what we have in

China is a polity that is increasingly difficult to govern. Therefore, the only way to keep this one party system in charge is ironically for it to become ever more rigid, veering from authoritarian rule increasingly towards totalitarianism, not least through oversight of people's movements and lives through ubiquitous mobile telephony. In short, we have this extraordinary contrast and/or tension in China now, between a population protective of its existing autonomy and asserting itself, not least via digital technologies, being ruled by a party-state that is becoming increasingly present in their lives, not least via digital technologies.

So I want to suggest that the meta-problem we are now facing – uniting the seemingly disparate Western and Chinese cases, and elsewhere besides – is one of the government of complexity, and I'm using "government" here in the sense of Foucault's later work. This is conduct of conduct at both state and individual level, and the construction of particular institutions, protocols, ways of working and likewise of subjectivities and identities and everyday practices, respectively.

Neoliberalism sits behind this explosion of complexity and how *this* complexity begets more (of this) complexity. I think, though, that when we illustrate other examples of what this meta-problem looks like, we begin to see that this cannot carry on forever because it grows in scale and in profundity, and therefore it grows in terms of existential threat. There is only so much that the world can take of this explosive exponential growth of complexity before something has to change. Not that suddenly the world becomes less complex, certainly not that it becomes actually simple, but that a new dynamic emerges of emergent simplicity as a process, which can (begin to) be constructive rather than constantly and destructively creative. The most obvious examples of these other manifestations of the meta-problem are threefold.

First, and foremost perhaps, climate change and broader challenges to the planet, biodiversity, resource cycles etc...

Secondly, digital proliferation into everyday life. How the digital is increasingly not an online technology but interwoven seamlessly into all aspects of life including industry, with the growth of AI, robotics etc as well, big data and its privacy concerns... and all of this taking a particularly neoliberal form.

Thirdly, what may be called "cosmopolitized globalism". Increasingly, everyone is interlinked in potentially quite bodily ways. So not just in terms of global value chains, of what we consume, but our families, where we're from, where we need to travel in order to see those we know and love; and this not just as an elite phenomenon, but right down to those who are actually *fleeing* their original place of birth.

Each of these is extremely challenging to preexisting common senses about how we should run things, not least to a scientific linear process of decision making, which is why they are "challenges

of complexity”, because it is difficult for us even to define what the problems are, let alone to say what we should be doing about them.

We’re seeing in all three of those cases that it’s not that the system as a whole cannot continue – I think that’s wrong –, but that simply having a process which only compounds complexity upon complexity is leading to processes which are now beginning to pull apart at the seams, and the result of that is various forms of system collapse. Not just market failure but system failure. This is because what has held the system together through the era of neoliberalism is, on the one hand, the various forms of unification that were created *prior* to neoliberalism but which neoliberalism has itself deliberately and ruthlessly exploited and denigrated; in particular, in the Global North, from the welfare state, but also globally in terms of the Bretton Woods institutions, the UN etc, the Pax Americana. And, on the other, internally, ‘within’ ourselves and our understanding as it were, in terms of something we’ve always taken for granted – a stable planet – such that we have messed with it so much that we can *no longer* take it for granted. We have also taken for granted, for some 200-plus years, an Enlightenment conception of the human and its relationship to technology, which is also being undone. Finally, we’ve taken for granted the division of humanity into self-determining national ethnicities, and that has also been undone. And I would say in all three of those cases that it’s not that these things are happening, or will happen in the future, but that they have already happened. In the end, what “keeps things together” (i.e. keeps the *system* from disintegrating) is people and their everyday lives, and how well they can cope with the various pressures that this system is placing upon them. The recent floods we had in the UK, for example: some newspapers are asking if these are the first climate refugees in the UK. So people’s everyday lives, in increasing numbers, have been imposed upon to the point where they just cannot cope, e.g. because many are uninsured, and/or will not be insured (again) now because they live on flood plains.

What is needed is some emergent change in which we actually have different dominant dynamics of the system, which are not necessarily closing complexity down – that would be a return to something that used to exist and I don’t believe that’s possible. The question is: can new forms of working and dominant common senses across the scales of government emerge that don’t just compound complexity but maybe lead to *emergent forms of simplicity*? But this emergence – and of new *simplicity*, that is thus self-sustaining, not dependent on external ‘policing’ – presupposes free, voluntary and experimental interaction and coming together in the public sphere. This is where the key question in the first instance is a reconceptualisation, rejuvenation, transformation of what is meant by “liberty”, and in particular of, if not “liberalism”, then “liberality”. This seems to be the primarily and specifically *political* challenge of the time.

LM: What is it that makes a problem complex? Is it just the sheer scale, or are there other factors?

DT: The key aspect that makes a complex system complex is that it is multi-factorial, but also there are relations between these different factors (of the system or problem) that create forms of feedback loop; if you prod it in some way, as you might do in a lab, you don't know what reaction you are going to get, there is a disproportionate response to stimulus. An example of this might be something like a "Black Swan event"; something that seems so improbable as to be effectively impossible can actually be triggered by something relatively anodyne. Black Swan events became all the rage post-Lehman, because in fact what led to the collapse of Lehman was, in the first instance, just like catching a cold, it wasn't a big deal. But when we look at how the whole system was set up, it was primed to catch a cold *and* for that to be *catastrophic*. So we have these feedback loops that form non-linear types of causation, and non-linear causation can lead to particular forms of emergence, so system states that have never been seen before can then occur. And, crucially, they are therefore by definition unpredictable, and hence also by definition unknowable.

That in turn points to the whole issue of speculation. The understanding of these systems is one of the reasons speculative foresight becomes so important. We need to take responsibility for the future of these systems; it is the potential future states of these complex systems that we need to handle. That is a paradox again for the Enlightenment way of thinking, because we can only know what we can know, so don't suddenly place upon my shoulders the responsibility to know what we have already agreed by definition cannot be known! But there are other forms of knowing, or at least engagement with these systems, which are not definitive "knowing" in an Enlightenment sense, but are nonetheless informative forms of speculation which allow for a strategic preparedness. An important shift must take place in epistemology. In particular, for complex *social* systems we can say they are sensitive and responsive to the modes of knowing, of relating to them epistemically, that they incorporate. And, crucially, these modes are characterized not just by different definitions of what knowledge is and how best to create it, but also by what expectations about the future they embody, what relations to *each other* they enact, what collective emotions or moods they express. Indeed, these latter – and much neglected – aspects may prove more significant, especially when confronted with seemingly insuperable limits to 'knowing' according to prevailing definitions of knowledge, as, of course, is the case with our current predicament of complexity. And this takes us back to liberty and liberality.

***LM:* One of the big challenges of reconceptualising liberty it seems, is that our current liberal concepts have gone hand in hand with the neoliberal project, which surpasses any national boundary. If we are faced with the challenge of reconceptualising liberty, and it is a political challenge, to what extent does it require rethinking our economic system?**

DT: We have to look at this in terms of different temporal horizons. Part of the provocation by saying that our primary challenge is one of government and rebirthing liberty and liberalism, is not to dismiss the need to reimagine and then transform our economics, but to say that we have to do this first before we can move to that. I want to present two ways of making this argument.

The first is in terms of a direct response to the objection which might be made, which is that one of the social epidemics that we are facing at the moment is that of inequality, and this is a direct result of the neoliberal organisation of the economy. In particular, we can summarise it in terms of saying that the biggest change that happened with neoliberalism is that we stopped taxing the rich, and we started taking debt from them¹. So the rich are not giving money away, but simply investing it in others, who then pay it back with an interest rate, whereas if we tax them, then that money has left them and has been redistributed elsewhere to the public good. Do we need to address this?

Absolutely. But the question then is how can we do so? This is why I always come back to Foucault, because it is Foucault, rather than a Marxian perspective, who is much more on the ball in asking not the why question, but the how question. Part of that is understanding how this problem of inequality appeared, rather than a totalised critique of capitalism. But also, conversely, “how can we do something about it?” is a matter of thinking: what are the power/knowledge relations that are currently in place and how could they be pushed in the direction of taking on the challenge of changing the system so that it does not create more, but less, inequality?

We have to start from where we are, is another way of putting it. It seems that in this respect, the real challenge that we face is not an inequality of wealth or job opportunity, nor even of assets, though these are all important. It’s actually primarily an inequality *of power*. The way *that* has to be addressed is through addressing power directly, then. When there is movement in the direction of a recalibration of power, then there will also be the strength and intensity of demands with possibility to change the way the economy is run.

The other issue regarding needing to deal with power and liberality first is that we need to look at the political dynamics of the present, i.e. the clear and present pre-eminent threat. What is so challenging about them is that what we have seen emerge ever more clearly, in particular since 2016, is that the dominant political force around the world, not least in the Global North, is fear and mistrust. And this fear is massively fed by and fundamentally based upon being confronted with problems – existential challenges – that we don’t understand and don’t know how to defeat; and, indeed, increasingly see that we *cannot* ‘know’ or ‘understand’. But once fear and mistrust of a system is unleashed, it *itself* becomes an existential challenge for a polity. Moreover, if we don’t have some kind of constitutional order, then the prospects of any major and positive economic change strikes me as extremely slim.

The major question thus is: how do we put fear back in the bottle once it's broken out? Again, this strikes me as a question that can only be addressed by tackling it head on. In other words, what is off the table is the possibility of undermining fear by *first* getting back in control, tooling up our *knowledge* for the problems of complexity so that there are no longer any reasons to be afraid about the future. Rather, we must accept that matters must unfold the other way around, hence *first*

¹ See Kean Birch’s (2015) *We Have Never Been Neoliberal*, London, Zed Books.

dispelling our fear and *then* building the new knowledge resources and institutions that offer better government of complexity.

This is what is so important about the substance of rethinking liberalism. Liberalism has two problems today, one is called America and the other is called China; and these are problems for liberalism (and its renewal) from within and without, so to speak.

It is because of America's baleful influence on what counts as liberty that liberalism becomes so weak. Moreover, "liberalism" just means everything and nothing, because of American discourse. Liberalism can, on the one hand, be the boogie man of millennial socialists, but it can, on the other hand, be the nemesis of the Trump right. So it's utterly meaningless. The perfect example of that is the Hilary Clinton campaign in 2016, where she was simultaneously trying to appeal to the woke generation and to Wall Street bankers, as if these are the same constituency. In fact they *are*, because they are all various shades of "liberal". And this, in turn, is because in America, as the centre of neoliberalism, "neoliberalism" has become increasingly conflated with "liberalism", as a radical entitled individualism.

Meanwhile, China – and an ascendant China – is a problem for liberalism because it is fundamentally, constitutively anti-liberal. It has no freedom of press, no freedom of assembly, let alone any freedom of political voice – none of these are constitutionally guaranteed. Facing the choice between these two superpowers, then, it's no wonder liberalism seems like an unprepossessing option, even while we don't understand it.

So what can we do? The only way to face fear is to face it fully, that is, *first* to make the decision to be fearless, to be realistic but positive about the future. Once we start thinking in those terms, though, then the best definition of liberality, throughout its history, is the recognition that the only way to build a free polity is on the back of individuals who have *already* decided that they are free, that is that they are unafraid. That then manifests in all the kinds of things that we think of as the acmes of a liberal polity: e.g. freedom of speech, because the polity is not afraid of hearing unpleasant things - which of course China (or rather the Chinese party-state) is. You get locked up for saying the wrong thing in China, even if it's a true thing, like, the coronavirus has broken out. As an aside, this is one of the mistakes that people have made about China over the last 30 years. They assumed that capitalism would just bring liberalism, but in fact, if you have a system that is quintessentially anti-liberal, then there's no reason why it should ever be liberal, at least without the first step of having a polity which says it is unafraid, and China has never made that step. Fundamentally for our purposes, though, this decision manifests in a growing momentum of confidence about the future in turn feeding *positively* through complex system dynamics into emergent forms of knowledge and ways of knowing – not least *about* complexity – that, in turn, feed *back* into that confidence and fearlessness. But this positive feedback loop depends upon that first step.

So the fundamental political divide today is between those who, on the one side, are afraid and are hunkering down to defend their own position as it is; we have people in all kinds of different situations who are all existentially terrified, and are therefore determined to defend themselves against the end of the world, which seems ever more likely as a prospect because of these other problems of complexity in the background *and* the way they are themselves fed and compounded by fear. On the other side are those who are increasingly making the decision that they are not prepared to be afraid of the future, but are open and determined to *build* it. But if we make that latter decision, then we have already – *de facto* – made the decision that what we need to defend first and foremost is a liberal public sphere, a public sphere that expresses and underpins one’s refusal to be afraid. I think we can begin to spot embryonic emergence of that, but I don’t believe it’s in any sense done and dusted. The 2020s look to be an even more turbulent decade than the 2010s.² Through that, though, people will be forced to choose: are they going to be afraid, shrink back, and therefore feed collective fear, or are they going to be unafraid and therefore mitigate – and feed transcendence of – that fear? That is what I would define as a re-defined liberalism, that takes us beyond, and is also what we need to deal with, overflowing complexity.

LM: What is it that is distinct about this redefined liberty in an era of complexity, that distinguishes it from the classical conception of liberty we have been going along with since the Enlightenment?

DT: The major difference is the underlying epistemic confidence of the two ages. “Liberalism” as a term only starts to be used well into the 19th century. But you can begin to trace it already, as a doctrine which is not yet self-conscious as such, in the works of Smith in the late 18th century. Kant is also often seen as a liberal thinker, even if that would not be a word he would use to describe himself. So what’s going on in the original form of modern liberalism is the Enlightenment. The age of supreme European epistemic confidence in Reason with a capital R and Progress with a capital P, the application of that reason to the course of humanity. Therefore, the original liberalism, after the turbulence of the French Revolution, alongside the emergence of Romanticism, is one of unquestionable progress, and in that respect, quite chauvinistic in its world view. Another important aspect in the background is the tacit Christianity.

Today, everything has changed. The problems that we face are problems of complexity, not just problems of rational application of the intellect to the perennial challenges of poverty, disease etc. Now, the problems we face are complex because if we actually try to understand them with a linear Enlightenment causation or reductionistic approach, we find that we cannot do so; that we, at best, draw a blank and, at worst, unintentionally contribute to those problems of complexity. So that epistemic confidence is now lost. Also, particularly in the Global North, we are in a thoroughly secular age, which means we no longer have that moral and, indeed, transcendental compass to

² NB also that this interview took place before the coronavirus looked to be spreading into a global lockdown.

justify our supreme confidence in what we're doing as God's will, or the Gospel of Progress. Finally, the original liberalism is also the age of the birth of the individual, so part of the reason for its enormous power as a project was because people – if at least they were the “right kind” of person – discovered that they had the right to use their rational intellect to assert their individuality, and one can readily see how this is powerful, self-fulfilling process. But everybody is an individual today. That project is starting from the opposite end now and, in a sense, individualism is part of the problem, rather than part of the project, for a renewed liberalism.

If you put all these things together, then we do at least have some outlines about how a contemporary liberalism must be different from the original: that it must take for granted that our knowledge of things cannot be exhausted with the rational intellect; that we have to explore the possibilities of interconnection and interdependence rather than just individual autonomy; and that we also need as part of the project of rebirthing liberalism a new turn to a different ethical compass which is post-monotheistic.

LM: What do the kinds of changes to our thinking about liberality and complexity do for discourse, academic, political or otherwise?

DT: Usually, what we feel we need to do is rest on completely solid foundations of fact before we enter the public sphere, or else we will be shot down. But one of the challenges of complex systems is that there are no fundamental or definitive facts of the matter, even around climate change. Saying that any particular event is due to climate change is never going to be possible. The weight of evidence may point to accepting this as part of the explanation. But what we cannot do is clean up the public sphere by saying we expect it to be the arena of public discourse about facts. What this does is bring us back the challenges of liberalism, and the need to be unafraid. There is no shortcut or hack, deferring the hard work and risk elsewhere; we cannot eventually *conclude definitively* by working through factual statements that the maintenance of an open public sphere is a good thing. We *first of all* have to commit to it, and *then* we have to work out and work through how to clean it up, rejuvenate it, keep it defended and keep it valued – and, indeed, then we see it as something to be valued and worthy of our commitment. This is a leap in the dark, and this is another major change in our concept of politics and of *knowledge* (and certainty) in politics. The ultimate arbiter to political arguments has supposedly been – was supposed to be – fact, that the other side is wrong. But now we are confronting the lack of that epistemic confidence; and, conversely, the fact that entirely non-epistemic or non-cognitive postures, like fear or liberality and fearlessness, are actually definitive, through complex system dynamics, of our capacity to know and hence govern well. In order to form a positive future, we must first *commit* to do so. We must first be unafraid and hence committed to the freedom of the public sphere.

COVID Coda

The discussion above took place in January 2020 (after initial discussions in summer 2019) when news of the COVID-19 outbreak in China was just making the headlines in the UK. Four months later the whole world has changed – and this has strengthened and exemplified some of the points made above, but also potentially puts a misleading gloss on some key ones that I want to clarify here. Specifically, COVID-19, as arguably the first genuinely global crisis of complexity, has precisely brought to the fore as the political rallying cry of the moment ‘fear vs. liberty’. But I want to make it absolutely clear that the resurgence of this slogan is precisely *not* what I am arguing. My argument above is about the government of complexity, hence a new and emergent challenge or condition. By contrast, the resurgent ‘fear vs. liberty’ narrative that COVID-19 has brought to light is being cast a familiar political debate.

What is the difference between these two positions? I have already alluded to this above in terms of the distinction between *liberalism* and *liberality*. Or to be more specific, between a resurgent *Liberalism* (with a capital ‘L’) – which we can now see clearly – and a post-Enlightenment *liberality*. The latter is then both new, as post-secular, and a return to a pre-modern understanding of ‘liberal’, treating *liberalism* as the historical exception it is.

So the position advocated agrees in many ways with the resurgent *Liberalism*, in terms of the central importance of renewed prioritization of concerns of liberty. But it also disagrees with it insofar as that project is only possible and to be supported to the extent this is *in parallel with a profound redefinition of what ‘liberty’ is*. And I have above set out how this is along three dimensions: from the independent, sovereign individual to the inter-dependent and mutually responsible individual; from the disinterested, rational intellect to diverse and novel ways of understanding-and-acting situated always *within* complex systems; and from an ethical compass that is at best the shrunken, neglected residues of a presupposed monotheism to a new and rejuvenated post-secular ethics.

Let’s now compare these two briefly to see the difference in position and the importance of these differences, not least in their effects. Take the resurgent *Liberalism* first. This is first characterised by a rankling against the unprecedented restrictions on liberty that have just been rushed into place, even in so-called bastions of liberal democracy; surely an appalling development. This is then compounded greatly by the Chinese source of this particular disease and how the politics of the situation is playing through a deepening tension with an increasingly authoritarian China, as emerging ‘nemesis’ of ‘liberty’. And then finally it manifests in terms of rating and ranking the diverse national responses to the pandemic using two interlocking criteria: first of all, the prioritization of individual liberty (i.e. from and against state power); and secondly, the extent to which it is a ‘sober’, ‘rational’, minimally invasive policy of disease control.

If we actually look what is happening in the world, though, we see that while this position may present itself as quintessentially liberal, it has some rather odd bed-fellows; and then not just on the fringes

but, if anything, amongst the most prominent protagonists of ‘fear vs. liberty’ slogans. Here I mean, of course, the Far and Alt Right – i.e. political constituencies that under any normal circumstance one would expect to be bitter and implacable opponents of ‘liberalism’. More importantly, though, we can see that this analysis of what needs to have happened about COVID-19 sweeps aside, through appeal to individual reason, what is really going on: namely the sheer cacophony and craziness on display in the actual diversity of mutually aggravating opinion – a *folie à plusieurs* awash with conspiracy theory and, certainly, speculation – about the disease, its source and the measures that have or should have been taken in response. The key point here is to see that, once we see this bigger picture, it is clear that we cannot just sweep this hubbub under the carpet, or claim that we are now going to manage it by rational fiat.

This then leads precisely to the complex system government diagnosis of the situation. Starting with COVID-19 itself, we see ‘merely’ a severe flu, and not the first the world has faced. So how is it having such profound systemic effects? It’s like the catastrophic cold I mentioned above. There are three key points here. First, the disease has emerged in the context of a complex, mobile, global world that has been created by neoliberalism; a regime that has also systematically denigrated public health services and deliberately dismantled civil service expertise. Secondly, COVID-19 has confronted governments with the fact that they cannot *first* diagnose the problem and *then* act, according to established, linear protocols of decision-making. And this is not least because the success of interventions depends overwhelmingly on the unpredictable response of society; and, indeed, of a society of fractious, polarized, social-media-outraged, assertive individualists. Finally, that being the case, trying to respond, as default *modus operandi*, with linear, technocratic decision-making not only is not up to the task, but actually makes things worse. Moreover, it is *seen* to fail, which then fuels further systemic distrust, which then feeds back into popular response to the policies.

So we have the self-presentation of the resurgent Liberals as the voice of cool-heads and individual liberty, i.e. Reason. But this is transparently, at best, a selective half-truth and, at worst, clearly false. Specifically, it abstracts from precisely what is most significant and novel and challenging about the COVID situation. In doing so, it also glosses over how this position is in fact just one more voice in the jostling multitude that are the *real* complex system dynamics that are shaping the pandemic. In short, COVID is so significant because it has exposed our current incapacity to do complex systems government *well*, delivering only Complexity-Originated Violently Incompetent Decision-making instead.

So the complex systems analysis offers a broader explanation and one that can situate the Liberal position, but not vice versa. But what does the former propose instead as a way forward? It agrees with the Liberal position in two key respects, but in each case seeking to push both of them further.

The first issue here is the need for a cognitive upgrading. And, indeed, we do need cool-headed learning of lessons from the COVID-19 response. But this is precisely *not* just a matter of a reassertion

of scientific reason and rational policy-making. Rather, what is needed is a more generalized upgrading of the capacity of whole citizenries for sensible, mutually responsible decision-making regarding complex system government that acknowledges there are no guarantees regarding outcomes. In other words, we need to cultivate a widespread collective *wisdom*, the only alternative being the current collective incapacity and madness.

As a complex systems approach makes plain, the limits imposed upon technical rationality in policy arise in large part because there is no real or ultimate distinction between knowledge and politics; a realization that is anathema to the Liberal. Given a public mood in which claims will be contested for political reasons, reason and ‘scientific fact’ *cannot* settle the matter and save the day, but rather may themselves become politicized arenas for further (possibly bitter) contestation and mutual disbelief and suspicion. Yet this is exactly the arena into which COVID has inserted itself – indeed, making it a complex system problem. As such, the Liberal demand for ‘Reason’ to prevail is simply shouting into the wind. Worse still, it is in fact itself a further churn of the ratchet of complexity, especially when mediated through the outraged, echo chamber dynamics of social media, since *it is itself a political*, not a purely ‘rational’, *position*.

This leads to the second point. Liberalism stands with ‘liberty’ and the need for its explicit resurgence; that there is no alternative for the shoring up of liberty than *first* to stand with it. As Benjamin Franklin’s fantastic epigram puts it, when presented the choice between liberty and security you must always choose liberty or you will end up with neither. But what is not captured by this sentiment – and certainly not reflected in the contemporary banners of ‘liberty vs. fear’ – is a similar change to that just noted above, and indeed following on from it. Because if facts cannot settle the matter, cannot bind us together into robust, resilient, equitable, convivial polities, then *we* must do that. In other words, what we need to upgrade is our character, our ethics, our relational disposition vis-à-vis each other; and with *this* lesson, if anything, primary. In particular, as discussed above, in the case of government of complex systems, a generalized climate of openness or fear will tend to incubate itself and reflect back or become manifest in positive feedback loops; of growing common purpose or deepening, fissiparous distrust respectively.

This is quite a different position to that expressed on today’s placards because it effects a necessary and consequential expansion of our conception of ‘liberty’. For the understanding of this term overwhelmingly mobilized in these protests is itself constitutively saturated with fear. This is the Enlightenment fear, implicit in the concept of the ‘rational individual’, of personal annihilation by the ‘Other’, whether non-Western or sub-altern or nature itself. And especially by a particularly hostile Other that it itself has constructed through the explosive violence and creative destruction of Modernity.

So to complete the circle, *this* (Liberal) fear is, if anything, redoubled and newly exposed in current circumstances of complex systems precisely because rational, cognitive, individual intellect

manifestly cannot master the problems. What we need instead, therefore, is not to discard the baby of individual liberty (a precious child indeed!) with the bathwater of that specific conception of Liberalism, but to upgrade our understanding of ‘liberty’ in the light of our growing understanding of the nature of complex systems. And, specifically, this is done by a rejuvenated (and personal) *affective* commitment to *liberality*, characterised by a personal magnanimity, generosity of spirit and ethical concern for *others*; embracing the inter-dependence of the individual and loosening the entitled, bristling self-assertion of neoliberal individualism (now on digital steroids), which is the Achilles heel of contemporary liberalism. This, then, is a liberality that is focused directly on the quintessential form of ‘liberty’, namely a freedom *from fear* of others or the world.

Cultivating *this* liberty (‘vs. fear’) then offers a radically different – and more promising –, if no less urgent, prospect than that proffered by the newly vociferous Liberalism. And should anyone question how high are the stakes, consider only how the new Liberalism (which I have elsewhere called “Liberalism 2.0”) spells not only deepening societal division. But also (and arguably even more scarily) a one-way ratchet of *geopolitical* fragmentation and deglobalisation as its binary worldview constructs, cheers and speeds along the ‘new Cold War’ of a ‘free’ West vs. a ‘fearful’, ‘securitised’ China; a new, divided world order in which the urgent global action needed on all the complex system problems that still lie ahead and that will dwarf COVID-19 will have become effectively unthinkable.

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