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Welcome to the liberal buffet

Free markets, free trade and personal freedoms no longer come as a packaged deal

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During the 20th century, three big stories tried to explain the whole of human history and offer a vision for the future of the world.

The fascist story explained history as a struggle among different nations, and envisioned a world dominated by one human group that violently subdues all others. The communist story explained history as a struggle among different classes, and envisioned a world in which all groups are united by a centralised social system that ensures equality even at the price of freedom.

The liberal story explained history as a struggle between liberty and tyranny, and envisioned a world in which all people co-operate freely and peacefully, with minimum central control even at the price of some inequality.

The second world war and the cold war knocked out the fascist and communist versions, leaving the liberal story as the dominant guide to the human past and the indispensable manual for the future — or so it seemed. Now populists and authoritarian regimes are challenging key elements of liberalism. Will the liberal story join fascism and communism in the dustbin of history?

As of 2019, it is hard to say. Liberalism is certainly in crisis, but few regimes are willing to completely abandon the liberal story. Rather, we are witnessing a shift from a “liberal set menu” to a “liberal buffet”. It is difficult to understand current developments partly because liberalism was never a single thing.

Liberalism cherishes liberty, but liberty has different meanings in different contexts. For one person, liberalism implies democracy and the rule of law. Another may think that it means globalisation, privatisation, small government and low taxes. A third associates liberalism with gun control and gay marriage. Is Jair Bolsonaro a liberal? You will get very different answers from an LGBT activist and a Marxist economist.

In brief, liberalism has six main components. In the economic sphere, it upholds free markets within countries, and free trade between countries. In the political sphere, liberalism supports free elections within countries, and peaceful co-operation between countries. In the private sphere, liberalism defends personal freedom within countries, and freedom of movement between countries.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, it was common to argue that there are strong and essential links between all six components. If a country wanted to enjoy one dish from the liberal set menu,

such as economic liberalisation, it had no choice but to take the other dishes too. You couldn't have one without the others, because progress in any one sphere both necessitated and stimulated progress in other spheres. Democracy was crucial for the success of free markets; personal freedom was essential for democracy; and free markets in turn fostered personal freedom.

Even though many of today's populist and authoritarian regimes throughout the world describe themselves as "anti-liberal", none of them rejects liberalism wholesale. Rather, they reject the set menu approach, and want to pick and choose their own dishes from a liberal buffet. Thus Donald Trump strongly supports free markets inside the US, while undermining global free trade. China is in favour of free trade, and its Belt and Road Initiative is one of the most ambitious global infrastructure projects ever envisioned — but it is far less enthusiastic about free elections.

The Italian government strives to close Europe's door to immigrants — while simultaneously rolling out the red carpet for the BRI. British Brexiters uphold democracy, but they distrust international co-operation. Hungary's Viktor Orban has defined his regime as an "illiberal democracy", arguing that you can have free elections while chipping away at personal freedoms.

The one dish that almost everybody wants, at least in theory, is peace. This is the chocolate cake of the liberal buffet. In contrast, the one dish that almost nobody desires — the global celery — is immigration. Even some of the staunchest supporters of democracy, multilateralism and personal freedom have become decidedly lukewarm about allowing in too many immigrants.

It remains to be seen whether the buffet approach can work. The food analogy might be misleading. In restaurants, set menus are an arbitrary assemblage of independent dishes. Yet the architects of the global liberal order always insisted that their system is a living organism made of mutually dependent organs. While you can easily separate the soup from the dessert, you cannot separate the heart from the lungs.

Can Mr Trump really promote free markets inside his country while undermining free trade on the global level? Can the Chinese Communist party continue to enjoy the fruits of economic liberalisation without making any movement towards political liberalisation? Can Hungarians have democracy without personal liberties, or is Mr Orban's "illiberal democracy" just a nicer way of saying "dictatorship"? Can international peace survive in a world of rising border walls and intensifying trade wars? The buffet approach might well result in the utter breakdown of the liberal system on both the national and international levels — and it is far from clear what might replace it.