



The False Difference Between the Right and the Left

Dr. Ofer Sitbon

Contemporary French philosopher Jean-Claude Mich a argues the need for right-wing economics, in which everything can be bought and sold, and a left-wing culture, in which everything is permissible

Jean-Claude Mich a has recently garnered unusual exposure: His book Notre ennemi, le capital (2017), made the front page of *Le Monde* on January 1. The philosopher, who was born in 1950, teaches philosophy in a high school in Montpellier, France. Despite not having had an academic career, he has become an intriguing and controversial public figure, and some have described the great enthusiasm for him among young people as the Mich a generation.

The basic thesis that is the leitmotif in his books (the first of which was published in 1995) and in interviews with him (never for television) concerns the two faces of liberalism: economic liberalism, which seeks to expand the applicability of the market to all human activity throughout the planet, and cultural liberalism, which seeks to expand the rights of the individual and lift all restrictions on human behavior.

According to Mich a — and this is his innovation — the two kinds of liberalism that put the individual at the center are inextricably knotted together, because in order to impose its vision on a society of total consumption, a rightist economy (in which everything is tradable) needs at its side and as its ally a leftist society (in which everything is permissible) that opens to the economy more and more pathways to commercializing human life: unlimited growth in a world without borders. The deep liberal logic whereby belonging that does not happen by choice (family, religion, nationality) means oppression sees an unrestricted market as the only site of socialization that accords with the individuals liberty to act without any limitations at all.

In a provocative formulation, Mich a argued that the Cannes Film Festival, which emphasizes the artistic character of the cinema, is not the opposite of the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos. Rather, both events glorify the individual with no limits. According to one epigram, Friedrich Hayek, the Austrian economist whose thinking has shaped today's liberalism, and Michel Foucault, the postmodern prophet who saw moral obligations as a manifestation of the dictatorship of the Other, are two sides of the same coin: Both are guided by the same historical and intellectual logic.

If indeed the two kinds of liberalism are intertwined, then the contradiction posited today between the right and the left is false. This is why there is hardly any difference between the economic policies of the right and the left (including in Israel), and why, in countries like Germany and Spain, the model of the unity government has taken root. In Mich a's view, we are free to criticize the movie the democratic system is screening for us but we have no

possibility — regardless of who we vote for — of altering its script. This is one of the explanations for the profound crisis of Western democracy, which is manifested in distrust of politicians, low voter turnout, the rise of anti-parties and the strengthening of the extreme right.

Last November's U.S. presidential election was a fascinating illustration of Micha's thesis. In recent decades the liberal left, led by Barack Obama and the Clintons, promoted a covenant between the two kinds of liberalism: advancing the rights of women and of minorities was accompanied by the strengthening of Wall Street and Silicon Valley by means of trade agreements, the weakening of the trade unions and the deepening of social inequality. This policy left behind many of Donald Trump's voters who experienced personally the connection between the two kinds of liberalism. Their clinging to conservative values as a way to defend themselves from the capitalist system is one of the most important explanations of the alienation that has developed in recent decades between them and the left.

For its part, the left (and again, also in Israel) fantasizes about changing the people and ignores the way cultural liberalism is undermining the safety net and the sense of meaningfulness provided by family, community and religious frameworks.

It all began with the Dreyfus affair

Micha locates the background to the melding of the two kinds of liberalism in the Dreyfus affair, in which the French left as we know it today was born as the socialists marched arm in arm with the republican-bourgeois camp against the unification of the Catholic, anti-Semitic and nationalist forces and the threat of a coup that was in the air. Thus, the achievements of the French Revolution were saved and important social victories were achieved until the final defeat of the reactionaries with the fall of the Vichy regime. Micha argues that since then, however, and especially after the civil unrest in France in May of 1968, the socialist outlook has gradually disintegrated, in particular its sharp criticism of industrial capitalism, partially as a result of labor leaders' enchantment with the development of technology and economic growth.

Thus the left gradually became a political tool that grants cultural legitimization, in the name of progress, to the spread of liberal and capitalist civilization while abandoning the weaker classes. All too rapidly, according to Micha, it is impossible to stop progress because it is impossible to stop capitalism.

He describes the left as suffering from an Orpheus complex: Its veritably religious belief in the ethos of linear and infinite progress forbids it, as in the Greek myth, to look back and feel any positive relationship toward the past. However, as Micha notes, the past has an important role since it allows us, as individuals and as collectives, to be a part of a historical continuity of traditions and loyalties and thereby escape the illusion of youth (that characterized René Descartes and, in quite a different way, the idea of the self-made man) to the effect that there exists the possibility of a zero point from which it is possible to start everything all over again, alone.

In his writing, Micha keeps returning to the thinkers who have had a profound influence on him — Karl Marx, Karl Polanyi, Guy Debord, Pier Paolo Pasolini and above all anthropologist Marcel Mauss and author George Orwell. Mauss demonstrated the social centrality of the

gift economy and the triple obligation to which it gives rise — the obligation to give, the obligation to accept and the obligation to reciprocate with another gift.

Micha explains that these obligations have a universal basis that organizes most human activity and are rooted in pre-market values like generosity, cooperation, contribution and reciprocity — all essential for the proper functioning of the market, contrary to the liberal belief emphasizing egotism and the maximization of profit.

Orwell, to whom Micha has devoted two books and in whose wake he describes himself as a conservative anarchist, has stressed in his opinion pieces the centrality of common decency, which is based on character traits (love, friendship, courage and sincerity) and everyday practices (respect, courtesy and mutual aid). Though his critics say that this is a simplification of the common man, in Micha's view this is a possible psychological basis for the development of a free, egalitarian society in which, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau put it, no one will be so poor as to have to sell himself into slavery and no one will so rich as to be able to purchase the freedom of another human being.

In his new book, Micha argues that capitalism is in its terminal phase (which could last for decades), having bumped into the wall erected against it by three major limitations: a moral limitation — the expansion of market logic to every aspect of social life (prostitution, global surrogacy, private prisons and more) is subverting humaneness and any possibility of a cooperative life. An environmental limitation — the impossibility of infinite economic growth, to which economic liberalism aspires, is becoming clear in an era of climate crisis and in a world in which the resources are finite. And a systemic limitation — the 2008 crisis manifests the low point towards which the capitalist system of production, based less and less on human labor and more and more on a pyramid of debts that will be impossible to repay, is heading. Micha warns that the alternative to capitalism is not known and that its collapse could create a new, dangerous and frightening world order.

It is possible to locate Micha in the framework of an intellectual space that has been developing in recent years, which can be called liberalism of the common good and at the base of which is the understanding that the accepted categories of political thinking are no longer applicable to the rapidly changing reality. Unlike classical liberalism, this position, which is close in spirit to communitarian approaches, holds that there are differing perceptions of good and that empathy towards universes of meaning and the people for whom these are significant is essential for a shared social existence; that the freedom of the individual, the basis for democracy, takes on meaning only within social and community contexts; that alongside the discourse of rights, consumption and legality, it is also necessary to have a moral discourse of solidarity and responsibility among citizen-partners from different identity groups; that it is necessary to restore moral discourse to an economy that has disengaged from the social reins and that it is necessary to re-think the significance of progress in a world of abundance.

In this context it is also important to mention the stream of Catholic social thought, of which the current pope is a prominent representative, that supports criticism of the consumer society, defense of human dignity and advancement of the common good. Not surprisingly, certainly in Micha's view, conservative theological-religious language can be an important locus of criticism of the existing order — think about the Sabbath or the fallow year — capable of offering a profound alternative to market logic.

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