


• ROZHovor – INTERVIEW •

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Liberalism has run out of breath? What are the social answers? Interview with Marek Hrubec

Marek Hrubec focuses on political philosophy and theory, and global studies. Since 2001, he has led research teams at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences (CAS), where he founded the Centre of Global Studies in 2006 and served as its director until 2021. He also led an interdisciplinary strategy team on global conflicts at the CAS. Meanwhile, from 2014 to 2015, he was the Rector of a new African university in a conflict zone on the borders of Burundi, Rwanda and DR Congo. He has undertaken numerous research fellowships in the EU, the USA, China, Brazil and other countries. In 2022, he was elected to the board of the Global Studies Association of North America, where he has also served as a Senior Research Fellow. Among his recent books, it is possible to mention *Basic Income in the World*, which he co-authored with M. Brabec and M. Minarova: in Spanish (Santiago de Chile: Ariadna 2024), Czech and English (Prague: EPOCHa 2022). The most recent published book is his social and political theory *Towards Justice: A Critical Theory of Global Society and Politics*, which has just been published in English (Boston and Leiden: Brill), in Spanish (Santiago de Chile: Ariadna) and in Czech (Prague: Filosofia). In this interview, we ask him in particular about his research on political theory and practice in the USA and Latin America.

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Peter Dinuš: Recently, in the bourgeois-democratic system in Western countries, we have encountered problems leading to greater political polarization. What are the causes of these tensions which result in heated political campaigns and increased support for violence?

Marek Hrubec: Many citizens, politicians and political analysts today speak of a crisis of liberalism. While liberalism also had its historical periods when it was the movement for partial emancipatory interests, further developments have made more emancipatory alternatives possible. The current problems of liberalism are not just its external manifestations but lie in the very

foundations of the liberal system which was created for different, earlier needs and interests. And as people within its framework are unable to resolve their problems, the contradictions deepen and mass political polarization escalates, leading to heated disputes, manipulative populism, reactions in forms of repression and sanctions, conflict, militarization as well as contraction. However, if we want to understand these changes better, they also need to be reflected more deeply in political philosophy and theory.

In your scholarly work, you critically engage with liberalism, especially as given by John Rawls, for more than half a century the most influential political philosopher in Western countries. You point out that while his earlier liberal theory partly attempted to supplement its emphasis on the value of liberty with some consideration of the value of social security for citizens, his later political liberalism did not require social justice. What do you make of this?

After the Second World War, there was an interest in Western countries to redress the hardships of the war, to compete with political alternatives, and, therefore, to develop the welfare state. However, liberal theory was not able to offer an influential normative social alternative to the mainstream of the time. It was not until the early 1970s that John Rawls, in his book *A Theory of Justice*, formulated a normative liberal theory that had to respond, at least in part, to the demand for a welfare state at that time. Therefore, he incorporated partial social considerations into his theory by defining in his principle of difference what social inequalities could still be justified and what could not.

However, after the advent of neoliberal practice, especially from the 1980s onwards, social issues began to gradually recede into the background again and the asocial model became dominant. In this environment, Rawls reformulated his theory after two decades in the 1990s and made his social principle marginal in his second book, *Political Liberalism*. In this sense, his liberalism effectively shares the same basic elements as right-wing libertarianism, i.e. a largely political-philosophical version of neoliberalism in practice, if I explain it simply even if there are many details there. It was a representative demonstration of what was the core of liberal theory and what was merely a temporary addition. However, we can also see in public discourse that people often associate with liberalism only its non-essential supplements now. But political correctness or culture wars are rather just its superficial coat of paint.

Rawls argues that his works want to discuss the most reasonable legitimate conception of justice for a “liberal democratic” society within the framework of the nation-state. In doing so, the nature of this “liberal-democratic” society is overlooked; the reality of the class antagonism of capitalist society is largely ignored. Does such an ideological view not suit the social, economic and political interests of the ruling capitalist class?

For many centuries, of course, social and political groups have formed political ideologies and theories that directly or indirectly serve to legitimize their interests and practical economic and political arrangements. Rawls's theory is part of a family of liberal theories that correspond to the interests of the bourgeoisie, which several hundred years ago began to advocate the establishment of a new, capitalist order in an era of the exhaustion of the feudal order. Contemporary

liberal theorists have continued this project, although over that time there has been a transformation from classical liberalism through other versions to its various contemporary forms, as the interests of the producers of this ideological current have evolved over the centuries.

It is noteworthy that liberal theory does not reflect this development and is mostly conceived as ahistorical. Neither Rawls nor most liberal theorists have any way of conceptualizing the transformation of political interests and principles over time. This renders liberal theory incapable of responding to development. His recent reformulations have effectively only reified the foundations of liberal theory, rendered it transparently obsolete, and opened the door to other, alternative theories. Since the nineteenth century, group interests of workers have gradually taken shape in trade union activities, social democratic and socialist movements, etc., which transcend the liberal perspective and also have their theoretical expression. By definition, social issues can only ever play a minor role in liberalism, since liberty must always be a priority in this current. In the contemporary period of renewed crisis of liberalism, we can observe an increased interest in both social conservative and socialist theories in various versions.

Thus, Rawls, Nozick and other theorists of liberalism and libertarianism are reincarnating elements of old social thought from the days of earlier capitalism into the conditions of the 20th and 21st centuries (Locke, the concept of the social contract, natural rights, etc.). They also assume a free and equal relationship between persons, i.e. a contract of employment on free and equal terms.

Liberal authors still think of freedom and equality basically in terms of that specific social group that originally pushed liberalism centuries ago. Simply put, the labor contract is about freedom and equality from the point of view of the owners of companies and their managers. Employer and employee are not on equal footing. The unequal position shows an unequal relationship in the conclusion of an employment contract that favors the employer who owns the company and makes decisions in his favor. However, when entering into a contract, employees usually have not only an interest in earning money in general but also another interest that is a priority for them, which is ignored in liberal theory, i.e. the interest in their social security, in securing their basic living costs. Employers already usually secured this interest for themselves and, therefore, it is not reflected in the foundations of liberal practice and theory.

This problem is already in the foundations of Rawls's theory in the formulation of the social contract from which the principles of justice are supposed to stem. This fictitious liberal social contract between people does not take into account the real difficulties that people face and does not provide them with the opportunity to engage in a discussion about what principles of justice should be chosen. Instead of allowing for an open critique of injustices, the contract hides these problems behind a concept Rawls calls the veil of ignorance, which aims to eliminate social and economic problems by remaining unrecognized. But the problems cannot be solved by ignoring them. In practice, Rawls replaces the reasoning and decision-making of individuals with his own liberal reflections on his issues. In doing so, he overlooks social and economic inequalities, cultural discrimination, and other issues that would otherwise be debated. A more appropriate approach would involve launching a reflective critique of the real needs and interests that social groups and individuals have. On this basis, it would be possible to formulate the key issues that

need to be addressed and to seek principles for addressing them.

This is closely related to the methodological problem of why the ideological institution of the contract, which was originally brought into the political sphere from the commercial, economic sphere by the bourgeoisie, should be the basis. It would be more appropriate to begin with a historical and contemporary intersubjective reflection on real social and economic contradictions and proposals for ways out of them.

However, liberalism is incapable of doing this because of its ahistoricism and, moreover, it would put itself in the position of a kind of critical theory in relation to capitalism, which it certainly does not want. Its role is the opposite - to legitimize it. Hence the attempt of liberal philosophy and theory to conceive of man as an overly individualized being?

Yes, the liberal emphasis on an overly strong individualistic approach to decision-making, which in effect transforms the social contract into a non-social contract, i.e. a fictitious contract with a lack of social dimension, as abstract individuals make decisions in isolation without taking into account the needs and interests of others, raises doubts. The existence of differently socially situated persons is not at all assumed in the construction of the social contract, as if it were assumed to be the decision of only one person, the liberal Rawls.

This approach, which fragments society and isolates the individual, is contrary to the long history of humanity in which people have lived in a traditional community in which they have been intertwined with each other by conservative customs and institutions. Liberalism is, therefore, criticized by conservatives, especially social conservatives. In this aspect, they agree with socialists, who also call for the interconnection of individuals in a community and society. However, socialists differ from conservatives in that they emphasize emancipatory relations and institutions of solidarity and social justice rather than conservative relations, which require individuals to follow strictly traditional family and social ties that deliberately limit the scope for free and egalitarian action by individuals and social groups.

But this is not just an ideological dispute between liberals, conservatives, and socialists; it is also a deeper philosophical dispute. As early as the beginnings of philosophy, Aristotle and Confucius, for example, conceived of human beings as social beings defined by the relations between people in a community. Other philosophical perspectives in other parts of the world articulated similar intersubjective conceptions of human beings, in Africa for example, via a concept of ubuntu. Pre-philosophical interpretations in all world civilizations did likewise. In the long history of humanity, liberal philosophy that has emerged in Western countries in just the last few centuries has in fact become the great exception, for it interprets human beings in such an extremely individualistic and alienated way from other people and their community.

You come to the conclusion that individualism in the form of the uprooting of human beings, the isolationist way of life, the technocratic and aggressive approach to human beings, alienation, too abstract conception of the individual, lead to a resignation to meaningful politics, to passivity, to consumerism, which eliminates the possibility of freely and equally influencing political events. Citizens cease to identify with the political community, to take an interest in public life and in their participation in it. But is not the bourgeois promotion

of the isolated interests of citizens and the privatization of their lives the hidden purpose of liberalism? You state that the subject of Rawls's theory is the largely passive and isolated individualist individual who has little opportunity to participate in public life and is subject to the instrumental reason of proceduralist tendencies. It is this conception of the individual and this conception of political procedures that Rawls envisages in his liberal theory of public reason. Is this a coincidence?

I suspect that the original intention of the emphasis on the individual was the intention of the bourgeoisie to assert their own economic interests actively, to pick up on my previous answers. They promoted their own individual private enterprises which were in market competition with each other in these individualist projects. They sought to establish these interests, this ideological vision of the world, as a general view and to intervene with it among other social groups, classes.

However, this liberal, excessively individualistic, isolationist view is not adequate for other social groups because it does not reflect their needs and interests. The majority of citizens are not individual business owners but collectives of employees and unemployed who have mainly group, collectivist interests. Therefore, they feel alienated within the liberal view of the world and politics and are mostly uninterested in political participation, losing interest in democratic participation. The result is an ideological control of citizens that is hidden and reinforced apparently by a technocratic, proceduralist system.

Nevertheless, when economic, social, political and cultural inequalities and injustices escalate over time, subjects under repression become active again. Mass polarization of society, however, may not have productive consequences, since instead of communicating real needs and interests and of emancipatory populism, media manipulative populism may take over, leading to the channeling of interests, to proxy fabricated problems, such as culture wars and xenophobia, often resulting in civil conflicts, militarization, and wars.

You write that it must be acknowledged that this is not a case of democracy but only of oligarchy, supplemented by occasional media-manipulated elections. Thus, the application of liberal and libertarian ideas in practice has, in your view, the unfortunate consequence of strengthening the oligarchy. Is the aim of this oligarchy merely to seek acceptance of the existing order in the eyes of the majority of the population by providing only the basic means for their survival and providing consumerist supplements for individuals?

The primary interest of the oligarchy is not to provide for the needs of the citizens, rather this is just a concession that is a tax for the existence of the oligarchic system. In this case, plutocratic interest groups use an ideology based on libertarianism, for example, which is coupled with an emphasis on exacerbated individualism with its effects in the form of social fragmentation, which undermines civil rights that people sometimes willingly trade for consumerist convenience. Already Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out that moderate despotism is often accepted if it promises a less laborious standard of living. This phenomenon enables an oligarchy of the rich, supported by media-influenced elections, and thus creates an electoral plutocracy. Various, even mainstream, analyses have already documented that political practice in the US conforms to the theory of domination by the economically most powerful groups, while democratic majority

theories are not confirmed. The 2020 US presidential election was historically the most expensive and heavily influenced by corporations and wealthy individuals. I haven't yet read the final financial tally of the 2024 election but it certainly won't be small.

Specifically, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* legalized unlimited campaign financing by corporations and individuals, reinforcing the plutocratic system. Much of this influence is in the hands of the military-industrial complex, which supports foreign intervention and arms exports. However, in some European countries, for example, similar plutocratic corruption is illegal.

As one of the possible scenarios for the near future, you suggest that the resolution of global tensions is being delayed, which, in your view, may result in more widespread conflicts in the coming period of the late 1920s or 1930s than have occurred between the Second World War and the present. In particular, you mention more intense and more extensive wars or a world war. Do you foresee a similar scenario to that of the economic crisis of the 1930s leading to the Second World War?

Yes, the unresolved problems and conflicts of the oligarchic system could lead citizens to accept or even favor the quick pseudo-solutions offered by the authoritarian political leaders known to us mainly from the 1930s. Unfortunately, soon after the 2008 financial and economic crisis, attempts to revitalize them began, and we have recently been facing the consequences.

The military sector, more than other sectors, is based on national strategic interests but this does not mean isolation. When it comes to production, services, imports and exports, and armed conflict, members of the military collaborate internationally and transnationally and often form the same segment of the transnational capitalist class. The transnational characteristics of the military-industrial sector also develop through the privatization of military services. The private military sector serves by offering personnel and equipment to various military partners abroad as well. It also includes foreign military occupations and wars to support destruction and, by doing that, creating space for subsequent construction by development corporations. These generate large profits and develop an entire war economy based on a transnational military and security industrial complex linked to the financial sector.

You conclude that after this conflicted period in the next era, there could be an opportunity for the establishment of a new structural and perhaps even deeper systemic change that would bring about the basic framework of a socially just order within a national, regional, and global framework. You place the potential origins of a new social justice system from the local to the higher planes in the 2030s and 2040s. Is a social or socialist, or as you write, neo-socialist alternative, then, waiting yet for a larger crisis of its competitors, after which it could once again offer its newly articulated starting points in a number of nation-states, in some regions and macro-regions, and, with a larger planetary consensus, also on the global plane?

The US and other Western countries still have a relatively large influence in the world, and therefore, changes there could also be reflected in other parts of the world, especially by eliminating negative Western interventions. I think that one of the scenarios for future developments in Western countries is an extrapolation of previous trajectories based on a dialectical cycle of

changing underlying ideological structures, including the political theories associated with them.

After the conservative nationalist and conflictual tendencies before and during the Second World War, three decades of development of the welfare state followed. From the early 1980s, however, a change came in Western countries, and corporate capitalism began to assert itself in its neoliberal form over the next three decades until its 2008 crisis. The failure of neoliberalism in this crisis first led to ordo-neoliberalism, where the state, the state order, was partly revitalized due to the bailout of private banks and other failed companies. Since this was not enough, the proponents of the old order began to try to maintain the dysfunctional system by force by imposing neoconservative structures, which now take precedence over the neoliberal ones that have been relegated to a secondary role. The US and Western countries are losing economic and political influence in the world, especially vis-à-vis the BRICS+ countries, and are trying to reverse or at least slow down and delay this development. In these decades, the neoconservative emphasis on national interests (America First, MAGA), the reintroduction of tariffs, militarization and wars is a priority in most Western countries.

Just as the accommodating part of the left in the neoliberal period tried to assert itself at least as a liberal left, in the current neoconservative period, the moderate part of the left is trying to accommodate itself as a conservative left, in collaboration with right-wing social conservatives. For now, it seems that only a larger conflict will bring about a turn to a larger transformation, a new structural change.

In the century-long dialectical cycle in the West, it is clear that after the conservative period, there has been a succession of social or socialist, neoliberal, and neoconservative periods, after which, from a prognostic point of view, a socially or socialist, or neo-socialist, period could come again. Whether this will be some form of democratic socialism, socialist democracy or some other version is, of course, a matter for more detailed discussion. Overall, this cycle is about developments in Western countries but with significant implications in other parts of the world, the bad and potentially the good. Changes in the global center, or more precisely in the receding center, may provide further impetus in former and current semiperipheries and peripheries to reinforce the transformation to a more established multipolar and multilateral order.

In your view, is this a fundamental change, or is it rather only the usual cyclical development tendencies within one system in the medium term and only after a potential subsequent change of the whole system in the long term can come?

Prognostic research does not consider only one scenario that would be the most desirable (it would be wishful thinking, although research on the most adequate normativity is also valuable), but works with several scenarios. If the current dialectical cyclical development continues, after the period of contemporary disputes and subsequent conflicts in the years to come, there could be at least a structural change within the system, i.e. similar to the period when the welfare state and socialist tendencies established themselves within the capitalist system under the Second World War. This time, however, it would be on a qualitatively higher, neo-socialist level, reflecting new technological, economic, political and cultural structures. This is the first scenario.

The second scenario could indeed be a fundamental change in the form of replacing the entire capitalist system with a new one. No system in history is forever. Systemic change will come in

the longer term at the latest, but I expect it in the medium term, not tomorrow.

The third scenario is a combined scenario, where there would be only structural change in some countries or regions or macro-regions, while in others, there would be fundamental, systemic change. Revitalized countries could cooperate with the countries in other parts of the world where systems of social justice already work.

It is not possible to assume a scenario in which no further developments would take place and the future would look like today (business-as-usual scenario). However, it is not deterministically defined that the dialectical cyclical development I have described so far will continue, although I consider a continuation to be likely. Potentially, after today's and following conflicts, a temporary regression to previous stages (backsliding scenario) is also a possible option, and not only to the previous structural forms I discussed in my previous answer. This would be a fourth scenario, which would probably involve increased right-wing authoritarianism.

A fifth trajectory (grey swan scenario) could involve a demand for greater adaptation or homogenization in some areas of the world, which could include larger military conflicts or wars, such as limited nuclear war, large-scale biological or chemical warfare, "star wars" with the destruction of satellites, or new forms of conflict through mass robotization, automation, and AI, could mean an even deeper regression. Even these developments, however, might not have prevented the subsequent neo-socialist development, which would have been further reinforced by the social deprivation of many people during the war.

The ultimate possibility, the sixth scenario (black swan), remains, of course, an unpredictable development that could lead to a world war, including a nuclear one (doomsday scenario). All these scenarios can also be linked to the degree of environmental degradation, depending on their degree of destructiveness.

Do you think that developments could lead to a world war with a nuclear apocalypse? Having been involved in global studies for a long time, both individually and as part of your research teams, and having met many researchers from Western and non-Western countries, you have insight into these dangers of the current global tensions.

I would not yet overestimate the global apocalypse, although it remains a possibility. The scenario of nuclear deterrence through the doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD) belongs primarily to the historical Cold War era between the US and the Soviet Union. Since then, the development of new technologies has advanced, and with it the possibility of controlling the use of nuclear weapons, which need not escalate uncontrollably to the stage of mass use and global apocalypse. So much for optimistic hope.

However, the use of nuclear weapons is now far more likely than before. It is precisely the possibility of greater technological control that makes them usable in a similar way to conventional weapons. Unfortunately, the doctrine of *limited nuclear war*, in which the rivals drop several nuclear weapons on each other and do not proceed to world catastrophe, is a realistic scenario that the major nuclear powers have been considering in their strategic materials of late. Moreover, of course, major powers are not the only ones with nuclear weapons. It should also be added that even the use of today's so-called small nuclear weapons would mean similar weapons to those dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War. And

there could be more of these bombs this time than then, even in the limited nuclear war option, with drastic consequences in terms of loss of life, destruction of infrastructure, devastation of the environment, and the infliction of collective post-traumatic shock from such a landmark in human history. Therefore, it is necessary to look for ways out.

Let's get to the ways out of the problems. For both liberalism and conservatism, you appreciate some of their selected partial dimensions. In the long run, therefore, you expect the new socialism to take the positive elements of the past, update and complement them in a new version of its system. Could you explain this further to the readers?

People can always learn from past social, political, economic, and other trends. I will expand on what I have already stated. For example, to remain competitive with alternative projects, capitalism was able to partially adapt and develop into the welfare state after the Second World War. Similarly, a democratic neo-socialist model might in the future incorporate some elements of its liberal and conservative alternatives.

However, it may not be just this pragmatic, unwanted temporary adaptation, but deeper continuities arising from the long-term historical process of development of successive systems. In this sense, then, it is not just about conservative, liberal, and social/socialist structures within a single system but about conservative (feudal), liberal (capitalist), and socialist systems themselves in their long-term historical development. Each of these systems has produced some new elements that have been an advance over the previous system. At the same time, however, they have introduced other problematic aspects.

Liberalism emphasized freedom and individual rights, a contribution that can be used in other structures and systems as long as it is not conceived in its exacerbated form, alienated from the mutual relationships between individuals in the community of solidarity, and is not seen as dominant. Similarly, the conservative emphasis on the social ties of individuals in the community can be appreciated, but only if these ties are not conceived in their strained form that binds individuals and social groups in a rigid, authoritarian tradition. In the new system, mere traditional charity could be transformed into institutionally developed solidarity, and the rights of individuals could be integrated into a broader framework of solidarity rights in the just community and society.

Let us move on to specify the normative model that might be desirable. You have been doing research on emancipatory tendencies in Latin America in recent years, although I know you started researching there almost 20 years ago. The focus of research on political practice and theory has undoubtedly been two waves of the left.

Yes, since 1999, in most countries in South America, and since 2018 in Latin America in general, there has been a gradual development of greater democratic participation of the population with a concern for the elimination of economic and social inequalities and injustices. Building on this participation and social movement, governments there have pushed through significant social programs to benefit the lower and middle classes over the past quarter century, regulated market speculation, and created more publicly owned enterprises at the local and national levels, even though private ownership prevails in most countries. However, what they consider essen-

tial there is not the quantity but the quality of public ownership, specifically, they are trying to introduce more and more strategic planning and strategic public ownership, which is linked to the critical infrastructure necessary to meet the basic needs of the population.

However, the developments in these two waves have not been and are not unidirectional, and there has been a temporary regression in several countries, especially between the first and second left-wing waves between 2016 and 2018. Currently, within Latin America, the biggest excess is the asocial libertarian development in Argentina. And the US tries to take over the Panama Canal and gain control in some countries to renew the Monroe Doctrine in strategic areas there now.

The main alternative dynamics of current interactions may be influenced by the model of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” in conjunction with other countries. Do you think that the new social alternative will be a kind of hybrid of the Chinese and Western models?

In its model of socialism, China advocates a combination of strategic planning and regulated markets, as well as a combination of public and private ownership of enterprises. Since this model has brought economic and social development, lifting almost 800 million people out of poverty, and since it is the world's second largest economy in terms of GDP and the first in terms of purchasing power parity, elements of this model are becoming an inspiration in many countries, especially in the developing countries of the Global South. Meanwhile, new technologies associated with automation, robotics, and AI are enabling a far greater strategic planning and public element than ever before.

At the same time, some of these elements mentioned above are also increasingly being applied in Western countries that are taking inspiration from abroad. In the wake of floods, the COVID-19 pandemic, investments in armed foreign conflicts and other disasters, countries are emphasizing the necessity of their greater autonomy or strategic sovereignty so that they are not dependent on other countries with whom they compete or rival at critical moments. Greater emphasis on public ownership of strategic, critical infrastructure and on strategic planning is no longer just a left-wing agenda but also the agenda of some right-wing politicians, especially social conservatives. To what extent they will use them for social and economic development and to what extent exploit them for securitization and militarization against competitors is still an open question.

Although most people see only economic and political disputes between Western countries and countries with alternative systems today, there has been a not insignificant convergence in the emphasis on strategic sovereignty and public control of strategic infrastructure over the past decade. These are elements that now point to overlaps between agendas across the political spectrum in Western countries as well as across political systems in different countries and civilizations. It remains to be seen whether they will prevail and become the basis of future mainstream developments. Maybe there will be significant changes unseen in a century. However, the ongoing conflicting convergence is a process in which Western countries are adapting to current global trends rather than a hybrid. These remarkable analyses are still a matter of future research in their details by a number of scholars in many countries.

Thank you for the interview!